

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the opportunities for people to use telecommuting and e-business to work remotely in rural and regional Victoria

Traralgon — 11 September 2013

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Ms S. Watson, proprietor, On Time Typing.

The CHAIR — Welcome to the public hearings of the Rural and Regional Committee inquiry into the opportunities for people to use telecommuting and e-business to work remotely in rural and regional Victoria. I hereby advise that all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided under relevant Australian law. I also advise that any comments made outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. For the benefit of Hansard, could you give your name and business address?

Ms WATSON — Sally-Anne Watson, On Time Typing, 4 Rubery Street, Moe.

The CHAIR — Would you like questions at the end of your presentation or as you go?

Ms WATSON — As I go, if you like. I am happy with that.

The CHAIR — That will be fine. All right, you lead off.

Ms WATSON — Okay. I just had a look at the terms of reference and sort of loosely based something around them. As for my own e-business, I will just talk for myself.

Mr HOWARD — Yes, tell us a bit about it.

Ms WATSON — I do not know a lot of other e-businesses — I do not know them well, I should say. I can only talk for myself. It relies on the shopfront. My shopfront is a website; that is what it is. I started my business in Darwin, actually, and moved down here in 2006. In Darwin I started in 2002, as a bit of background. It was more on site, running around transcribing meetings and transcribing this and that. I used my home; it was a home-based business. But there was a lot of support at that time for small businesses up there, including a home-based business network. That is one of the things I will be talking about here today because I thought it was a brilliant idea, and that inspired, or encouraged, me to get my shopfront — get the website. By the time I moved to Victoria four years after that and decided to move to Moe for family reasons — very little population, but very few clients close by — I had to switch to what I could do well and could do remotely. I had already been doing some remote work — as in audio transcription — up there, so I basically shifted everything to remote. The shopfront — the website — has been integral from the very beginning, and of course that has only increased more and more over the last years because everybody uses the internet now.

I actually have two branches of my business. One branch is not reliant on the internet at all; it is all word of mouth. That is all of my NT government clients. The other branch of my work is audio transcription. It completely relies on the internet for clients — or mostly for clients — and their word of mouth, but it completely relies on the internet for transport of my audio files here and there. Clients send me their audio files. I send them to my contractors. Everything is done via email and via the internet. We do not have high-speed broadband, but it used to be worse. Basically still, though, if I have got 3 hours of audio files coming via the forwarding website — I just heard the last guy say sometimes he will be getting on at night, and I will get up during the night or in the morning and turn the computer off, and if it has not gone out, that big audio file they send — most of my audio files are smaller and they only take half an hour or something to send, but I am sort of looking to the future too and thinking, 'I don't know how fast fast is, but if it can only get better and better, that only makes business better and better'.

Another thing I just heard the other guy talking about that made me think of mine is my contractors. I really encourage rural people; I have got one in Paynesville, I have got one in Morwell and I have got one in Melbourne and one in Adelaide. These are my typists. I have got one in Darwin. But when I am encouraging these rural people, they have to have really good internet, so that is really important. I would love to get people in really little towns. Moe is fairly small, but what about Tanjil and here and there, which just cannot do it? When we were looking for a place to live, we would have loved to live in Hill End, but we could not; it does not have the internet. If the internet could be expanded to everywhere, that would be the best from my point of view, because then I could be employing more local people in places where there are not jobs.

Mr TREZISE — So do you have room for more contractors? Could you expand your business?

Ms WATSON — Yes. I am actually always expanding the contractors — they do come and go a bit — because I need really good, very accurate typists. I used to do Hansard myself, and that is where I honed my skills. A lot of people are not accurate enough — not for what I need, because I have money-back guarantees of accuracy and that sort of thing. On the internet, on Google — I google quite well because of the way I am

always honing the website. Keywords are really important. It googles quite well. I do not compare on price; I compare on quality and reliability and confidentiality and the fact that all my contractors are in Australia. A lot of audio transcription companies actually outsource to different countries, so you are not only losing quality, you are losing your privacy and all of that sort of business.

The CHAIR — Do you do work for other countries as well?

Ms WATSON — I have only done that once before, and that was for England. This is another of my points, because I had to charge them GST — that is what I was advised — because the service is provided in Australia, and I thought, ‘Oh, gee’, you know? I have never bothered to try to market overseas, so I do not know why she picked me — whether it was through the UK people or the people were UK people; she must have had some connection. I would be very interested in doing that in countries where it was going to make sense. Obviously they are not going to pay for me if they can get it done a hell of a lot cheaper in their own country. That was probably three years ago now.

The audience I am targeting with my website is Australian. A branch of my business transcribes interview reports, which I used to do on site. When I moved here, after six months of my clients still asking for me, I got a really good phone and started transcribing via telephone — that is, landline. So it probably does not really apply here, because just about everybody has a landline. My landline runs on the internet too — you know, VOIP. The wing of my business that I do myself also relies on the internet, because that is my phone connections and stuff. Then of course there is all-email. That side, which I do myself, I am not seeking new clients for. I cannot expand and I cannot outsource that work. I have never found anyone else who can do it to the quality that I need, so that is very limited, because it is all my time that has to be spent on it.

With the audio transcription, that is limitless, basically. I can always seek and find more contractors. People are always asking me, and it is just a case of getting good-quality contractors. If I had twice as much audio transcription work, I could always find the typists to do that. That is only limited, I suppose, by pushing the presence of internet. If I put more time into pushing it on the internet, I would be able to continue to expand that. Back to your point about overseas, that is where I may be able to expand.

Mr HOWARD — You are saying that your business is expanding gently. How many typists did you say you have?

Ms WATSON — It does fluctuate a bit. I would be keeping one just about full-time. I tend to try to employ mothers, like myself. I have a five-year-old. There are two reasons: one is because I like doing it, and the other reason is that they are not going to go off and get another job as soon as I have trained them up. It takes a few months to train somebody. Another thing is that I will employ someone who has their own business, like the Adelaide woman I put on recently. She is really good. She has her own business; therefore she can do part-time work. I like these part-time ones. I have a part-time one in Morwell, who I keep very busy with as much work as she can handle; she is a mum. The one in Adelaide, it is as much as she can handle. The one in Pakenham is full-time. The one in Paynesville — I have not got her working at the moment. That is not because there is not work that someone could do; it is because she is not quite good enough. The Darwin one I only give work to when the Darwin work comes in, which I want a local to do.

Mr HOWARD — So is most of the work Victorian work, or does it come from across Australia?

Ms WATSON — Yes, from across Australia: Queensland, Sydney, quite a lot from Melbourne and a heap from the local university. They started using me a few years ago. They wanted to use a local, so I get quite a lot of work through them from Tasmania, Canberra University — and there is a lot of work from Darwin. I specialise in Indigenous accents, people who do not speak very good English and multicultural sort of accents. I am really good at that. I am training my typists to be so as well. Plus I have the contacts in the NT. I get a fair bit of government work as well from the NT, as well as my interview report writing work that only I can do.

Mr HOWARD — You said you have to train your staff. How do you do the training for your staff?

Ms WATSON — This is the fast way: if they say that they are good, I will send them a test, a recording and a perfect transcript, and say, ‘Have a go at it and test yourself. If you reckon you’re good enough, I’ll test you’. If I am flat out at the time, which often happens, I will say, ‘You do this one. It’s a test’, and I will pay them a dollar an audio minute. I will not go into the prices, because that probably makes it harder. I will pay them a

training rate, as I call it, because I know I have to proofread it, whether it is great or not. There are always holes in the first ones, because I have a certain style. Everyone has to have exactly the same style. We do it all via email — a bit of telephone. I do make an effort with the phone, because it is very easy to slip into just emails. I send the audio files around via the internet, of course, by this forwarding website that I use.

The really good ones, like a couple that I have, only took about three tries to get that style consistent, because they had the accuracy, whereas others may not have learnt how to do apostrophes at school, or they are not perfect enough spellers or whatever. I do persevere with them a bit, but they are usually the ones who go, ‘This isn’t really working, is it?’. Probably half the contractors I do put on do not work; they are not good enough. They might have the education but not the life experience. I try to get the more mature ones. On the other hand, I do give the younger ones a chance. I have someone who is in her 30s, and she has a huge vocabulary; I do not know how. I am 49 myself, and I have been good since I was in my late 30s, I suppose, vocabulary wise, but that was because of Hansard, which really honed that.

Mr TREZISE — So, Sally-Anne, is your business home based? You do not work from an office?

Ms WATSON — I have an office in my home. I have always had the office in the home. I have a slight gripe. I have a printout. One of my sisters, who is outside of Bendigo is starting to work — she has got the ABN, and she is just starting out. She asked me for some advice, of course. I jumped on a website and sent her a couple of links, because when I was starting out I got an awful lot of help. There was a course that taught me all of these things about starting up my own business, particularly marketing — just the real basics. When I was looking around in the Bendigo one, there was a home-based business section on a website; I am not sure which website it was. There was a specific Bendigo one. I had a look around here, and I went, ‘There’s nothing like that for this area, unfortunately’.

Then on the government business website, there was other stuff that I sent her. It has this section about home-based businesses. One section of it talks about moving your business into an office as it grows; they used to talk about this years ago. I have always had a bit of a gripe about that. I could be hiring 20 or 30 contractors, and my office could still easily be in the home. If you have a virtual business, your shopfront is actually your website, and you may not want a shopfront. I did consider it when I came to Moe. Someone actually offered me a partnership in an office. I had a bit of a think about it, and it was not just because I was planning to have a child or whatever; it was also, ‘Why? Why would you do it if you know for a fact that your Joe Blows off the street are not going to be your main thing?’. Business to business or business to university — PhD students — are my main clients. Why would you expand your business in that way? It does not make sense. On the website, they still have something called ‘Grow your business’. I do not think it is relevant at all.

The CHAIR — Some people might say that there is crosspollination of ideas; if you were in an office where other businesses were running, you could pick up ideas about growing your business or innovations you could use in your business.

Ms WATSON — That would be good. I would like a networking group to do that. I would like an opportunity to do that. I like having the office in the home. I started off like that, obviously, for financial reasons. I considered expanding even up in Darwin, and I went, ‘Why? It doesn’t make sense’. I had the networks there; I had the home-based business network. This is something I would love to see locally. I know there are quite a lot of meetings on the internet — of people.

The CHAIR — They call them chat rooms or something, do they?

Ms WATSON — Yes, there is that sort of stuff. I have not really been into that.

One thing is that I am really starving for face-to-face contact with people. Up north I was not, because I was running around transcribing on site and dealing with people all the time. Since I have been down here I have been starving for it, and probably not only for work but for professionalism. Yes, I am very professional and very articulate on the phone and in emails and writing, but I lost a little bit of the face-to-face confidence from what I used to be. Do you know what I mean?

There are some networky things around here with businesses, but I had a child five years ago, so I kind of put everything on hold when it came to face-to-face things and just ran the business more from home. I have probably been more lacking since that. Recently because of the awards I went to the breakfast, and it probably

took the whole morning to get my confidence back — ‘Oh! That’s right; I can do this’. It was because I did not know anyone and everyone else did, because I have been out of the picture.

I suppose what I am trying to say is that that breakfast and other breakfasts were not very good for networking. Yes, you would go along and there was a presentation, and the people who knew each other would talk to each other. You could talk to people, but up north the home-based business network which BEC used to run — the Business Enterprise Centre — was really good. It was quite a regular meeting — every week or two weeks or something — and people would get a chance to get up and have a little presentation about their business, or several people would. People did not all know each other from the start; it was a new-kids-on-the-block sort of thing. I have noticed here that, even though I have been here for a while, I felt like a new kid on the block the other day, and it was as though everyone knew everyone else. For the new businesses, that is not very helpful. It certainly was not helpful, because I did not know who was who. There was a thing at the business awards that had a quick film of every business. They showed that at the breakfast. With some of them I was, ‘Yes, great! Who is this?’, but I did not know whose businesses they were. Do you know what I mean? There was not any help for the newcomers.

Mr HOWARD — How do you get your work-life balance sorted around your five-year-old?

Ms WATSON — Luckily my partner does not work, however, there are some big scribbles here somewhere about work-life balance. That has been a really hard one, and I say it is hard for anyone with a home-based business particularly, I say, because if your business is in a separate office, sure you have got extra costs and all that other stuff that comes with that, which I have never wanted, but if it is at home, you have to have a door. I used to have a door in Darwin that you could lock. Obviously you have to have a door that you can shut and be really strict — so work time is work time. My child is often being minded in the same house. It was pretty tricky when he was young, but I just used every sleeping moment of his to work.

It was pretty hard when he was very little, but these days he is five years older, and he has started going to kinder. My partner, who had been minding him a lot during the days, minds him less now. I was thinking, ‘Okay. Now I’m going to pull back and not work six or seven nights a week’. But of course what has happened is that I have ended up taking on more work. It has been like that all year, and the end of the year is creeping up. He will be going to school next year. Since I had him I had not realised that all my priorities would completely change, and to me family is now more important than work.

For the first few years I was juggling a baby on my hip and the phone at my other ear. I tried not to, but there are patches when there is less work. When plenty of work is flying around, I switch off the phone. Then I pick up my messages, and everything is all professional, but when there is not a lot of work, I think, ‘I had better take that call’. It is really not professional, but my clients have just got to deal with how I am, and that is how it was. Now it is back to the professional time again.

Mr HOWARD — Very good.

Ms WATSON — I got off the track a bit in some of this. I do not know if all of what I have said is relevant. I have one point: all the black spots with no mobile coverage. I do go to Melbourne fairly regularly.

The CHAIR — On the train?

Ms WATSON — Yes. I meet up with my typists sometimes too — my contractors. I like to do it, but it is good for the business as well. When you go to Melbourne, you know where we are, and you know all the black holes along the way. It is ridiculous — absolutely ridiculous. I have family in Bendigo, so I go there quite often as well. I have been trying to get a good typist. I have got an ad in Bendigo — I have been trying to branch out into Bendigo. I got a typist in Bendigo, and then she ran a business and got busy with her own business. I am still trying to branch into Bendigo, because I have got family and contacts there. That is the main reason. There are quite a few black spots between Melbourne and Bendigo too, but between Melbourne and here is just atrocious. That means less productivity and less work.

Social media: I do not use it intuitively. Every year I hear some story — not normally from a business, although there have been those. There is always some story of some abuse of Facebook that has left somebody in tears. I have never even had any interest in joining it, even though everyone is always encouraging you to. It might be good for the business, and it might be really bad for the business if you got a client — once every couple of

years I get a messy client, as they call them, or a dodgy client who is never going to be happy at the end of a job. What if they jumped on Facebook and badmouthed you? You would be stuffed. Anyway my main reason is an intuitive dislike of the whole idea of it; it is not based on evidence, really.

I have written down some of the things I rely on less but would like to rely on more. One is face-to-face networking. I would quite like to be involved in a home-based business network, if there was one. Moe has the Moe Traders Association, and there are different ones in Morwell and Traralgon — like businesses. The issues are really different for a home-based business. I would quite love a Latrobe Valley group or something like that. I would be quite involved in that sort of thing. I do not know if there is a need for it or not from the other little businesses, because there is no communication between the home-based businesses. If there was a bit of communication, I think it might actually — up north it did. I know it was a city, but it was a real thing; it was a real force in itself.

The CHAIR — You have got about 2 minutes left.

Ms WATSON — There are a lot of websites and the internet to exploit. There is always more to exploit on the internet, and I have only done as much as I have done because of time constraints.

There is also the issue of being rural and remote. I am talking remote, I suppose, only because of my Darwin — there are a lot of remote places in Australia. You would not call it remote around Gippsland, but towards the mountains. If we had internet and stuff up there — I did make the point that we do not have the population face to face, just as I found when I came to Moe. We do not have the face-to-face population, but we have a limitless population on the internet. You have got people who just browse the internet, so you have almost got a captive audience on the internet. That is the main thing for me I suppose.

There were some other points. The potential benefit is employment, in a nutshell — as in employment not only of people running their own businesses but of contractors and typists and all that sort of thing, from my point of view. With best practice, I do not really quite know what that means, so I did not get into that. With legislative impediments, there is the GST federally; it would be nice to get rid of that for certain things when you are selling overseas.

The CHAIR — That is a big call.

Ms WATSON — Yes, it would be nice to get rid of it completely. As far as I know there is no tax; I do not think there are any problems there. With workplace relations or OHS, for all people who run their own business from home at least basically it is just up to you if you do not have the public coming in much. Every now and then I have the public coming in or a contractor or whatever, so I do not really want laws to be enforced on me. But it is probably a bit of an area where there should be some laws, because as far as I know you could have people running their own little business from home and not doing anything. Maybe there are laws. I do not know of them anyway. I guess that is one of these things. If there was more education about certain things, that would be really helpful, particularly for home-based businesses. That will do. There are a few more points on the back of that bit of paper.

The CHAIR — Patrick has that, which is good. Sally-Anne, thank you very much for taking time out of your busy schedule to come in and give us some of your valuable time.

Ms WATSON — You are welcome.

The CHAIR — In approximately 14 days time you will receive a draft copy of the Hansard transcript. You will be able to make corrections to obvious errors, but other than that it will be as it is. Once again, thank you very much and all the best with On Time Typing.

Ms WATSON — Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.