

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

Wodonga — 23 October 2013

Members

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Witnesses

Mr J. Gibbons, business performance manager, The Personnel Group; and
Mr M. Poppins, barber shop owner, Stanley Street, Wodonga.

The CHAIR — Welcome to the Parliament of Victoria 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, can you give your names and business addresses, please?

Mr GIBBONS — I will struggle to give my business address, to be honest. My name is John Gibbons. I work for The Personnel Group, which is an employment company here in Wodonga. We are positioned on High Street in Wodonga.

Mr POPPINS — My name is Mathew Poppins. I have a barber shop in Stanley Street in Wodonga.

The CHAIR — As members of the Wodonga Chamber of Commerce, could you explain what the chamber does here and what opportunities it sees in teleworking and e-business?

Mr POPPINS — Support of local businesses in every aspect possible, support through and as a conduit to the council, and arranging workshops for the improvement of businesses through e-commerce and the like to benefit the members — not just the members but the business community of Wodonga — to grow and improve, to be as good as we can throughout Victoria and Australia.

The CHAIR — Have some of the workshops you have had been in the field of IT, and was there great uptake?

Mr POPPINS — There has been some. Just getting into that now, there has been a growth in the IT field of expertise because a lot of our newer members are in the IT field and as a consequence are looking to the chamber for support and for growth.

Mr TREZISE — Our notes talk about recent projects organised by the Wodonga Chamber of Commerce, including an IT expo and a digital marketing masterclass. Are you able to tell us about that?

Mr POPPINS — I have not attended that class. It was probably best explained by Matt Taylor this morning. A lot of the stuff that he has done, we have done with him. He has given a presentation about how they see the growth of IT and the incidence within the area through all the facets of communication — websites, Facebook, Twitter and the like, using all those facets. I know there have been at least three of those workshops run, and from the communications I have read through the chamber committee itself, they have been quite well taken up. They seem to be, as are most things in a growth industry, for people to grab onto and get more information.

The CHAIR — In your own business, Matt, the barber shop, do you have Facebook for the barber shop? Online bookings?

Mr POPPINS — No, I do not. One of the quandaries about me being here is that because my business does not take bookings, either by phone or internet, I do not have a website or a Facebook page, but I can see the benefit for the general community. So as a chamber member I am here simply to support the growth and whatever can be done to improve the services. I do have a Facebook page as a bit of fun for the shop, but it is more, unfortunately, part of my own humour. It is nothing more than just a chance for —

The CHAIR — A barber with humour.

Mr POPPINS — Yes, tonsorial experts at our best! We are quite often bombarded with emails about setting up websites and stuff like that, but our particular business does not run that way. People who are interested will walk in and get the best service. But there are plenty of people who have come into my shop and talked about what they do on the internet, so I am looking for the improvement of that.

The CHAIR — How many turned up to the expo that the chamber of commerce had?

Mr POPPINS — I cannot say, sorry, not having attended.

The CHAIR — Neither of you were there; you have not had reports.

Mr POPPINS — Yes.

The CHAIR — The chamber sees a big opportunity for businesses, but does it see a big opportunity for growth of employment in this area?

Mr POPPINS — The surveys that have been run through the chamber certainly show an ever-so-slight increase over the last couple of years they have been running the business surveys. The businesses themselves are fairly confident in the way the economy is going, with the hiring of people, if not now certainly soon in the future. From some of the business surveys about what sort of technology they are planning to use they have shown a great interest in the majority of social media and websites in general for the self-selling of their business, yes.

Mr GIBBONS — I would say that certainly within my business we have had a significant amount of growth in our business in the last few years. We were traditionally an Albury-Wodonga-based business, but it is now covering most of New South Wales and Victoria. Probably one of the biggest challenges for us during that time has been communication and connectiveness to the 150-odd staff who are scattered around that footprint. Improvements in technology and the ability to use the tools that are available have been pretty central to our ability to grow, but they have also been barriers at times.

Depending on where you go within our footprint, there are some places where internet coverage and facilities to be able to communicate via videoconferencing and things like that are very good. Around Wodonga they are quite good. If you go out into some of the rural and regional areas, they are quite poor. I think there has been some coverage recently around here about Beechworth. It has been brought up in the news recently. Some of the IT connectiveness up there is quite poor, which is obviously quite a big barrier to business.

Mr POPPINS — They have also been told that they will not have any new connections until there is a much better spread of the NBN into that area. That is how it has been reported. I am not saying that is the actual case, but that is certainly how it has been reported.

The CHAIR — John, what is your business?

Mr GIBBONS — We are an employment service for people with disabilities.

The CHAIR — For what areas of New South Wales — regional areas?

Mr GIBBONS — We go as far north as Hay. We go across to Deniliquin, Griffith and Wagga, and extend down to the outskirts of Melbourne in Victoria and across to Shepparton, Echuca — up through that area.

Mr TREZISE — As part of your everyday operations I guess you have field officers, people out in the field?

Mr GIBBONS — Yes.

Mr TREZISE — They are using IC technology?

Mr GIBBONS — Yes. We are attempting to embrace it as much as possible. Our intention is to have field officers out there with iPads and iPhones, being able to connect up with centralised pods. But it depends on where you go; as I say, in some places the connectivity is really good and in other places you are better off with a pen and paper.

The CHAIR — With customer relationships and management, do you use Facebook, Matt?

Mr POPPINS — It is a very small part of what happens. It is certainly not done as a means of contacting customers. We do not use it as a means of contacting customers; it is just something that the shop does for a bit of fun. There is the potential for that, but in fairness to the general demographic of my customers, it is not something that they would do — to use the internet to contact me to come for a haircut. But there is the potential there, and a lot of businesses I have spoken to, through my shop, certainly want to grab that as best they can. They can really see the potential.

There is so much of a push for people to do stuff online. People are very interested in websites and website design; it is the speed of the information they can get. Anyone who has an old person — a grandma or a mum — who is not good on a computer will understand that teaching them to click once and wait, rather than

click, click, click, knows that the speed of things happening is getting better. It is a reference to my mum; she says, 'Hurry up, I want it faster'. I say, 'It'll get here; you've just got to wait another second'. The speed of these things coming back is the issue. The faster the better.

The CHAIR — John, do you have teleworkers in your organisation?

Mr GIBBONS — Teleworkers as in — —

The CHAIR — They are not necessarily based at a desk. They may work from home.

Mr GIBBONS — Every one of our staff has an office, but there would be people who would not be in their office for a week or a couple of weeks at a time. We have a couple of roles where the expectation is that they are out in the public for a majority of the time and only connecting back with the office for meetings and things like that.

The CHAIR — In the employment service you are running, of the jobs being offered to people with disabilities, is teleworking an option for them?

Mr GIBBONS — Yes, we have some people working in that field. As we were saying prior to the session, one of the things that is emerging for us is an opportunity for some of our people to work even internationally without being limited. We work with people in wheelchairs and people who have fairly significant barriers to employment, and being able to work from home is a significant benefit to them.

Mr TREZISE — Does the use of ICT open up the workforce for people with disabilities?

Mr GIBBONS — Absolutely. I suppose it opens up the marketplace. Around here there is not a large amount of work for somebody who has those skills but who does not have the ability to get into a workplace. There are different services online where people can do piecework and things like that remotely, and we have had some reasonable success with that.

Mr TREZISE — That is interesting.

The CHAIR — You say they are working internationally. What sorts of roles are they performing internationally?

Mr GIBBONS — Generally stuff like website design. We even have people who do administrative tasks. It is generally around Australia, but some of it is international. I would not want to paint the picture that it is the largest thing we do, but we would have a handful of people who are — —

The CHAIR — It is possible.

Mr GIBBONS — Yes, it is definitely possible.

The CHAIR — Has the chamber of commerce seen a growth in this area?

Mr POPPINS — The chamber of commerce through its website quite often runs surveys to gauge people's perception of things that are going on, and the responses have been quite positive in the use of electronic media and reaching out to customers in that sense. That is from the feedback the chamber is getting.

The CHAIR — That is good. Do you have any programs you would like to suggest we could recommend the government runs to help the growth especially when the NBN is going to be here at the end of 2016?

Mr GIBBONS — I am not sure in terms of specific programs. I know there are a handful of employers in our town that are using the internet really effectively to grow their businesses throughout Australia and internationally, but there would also be a large number that are not accessing it at all and are limiting their market by doing that. As a chamber we have attempted to put some things in place to try to assist with the knowledge thing there, but it is a big gap if you have done business a certain way for a period of time. Sometimes it is hard to get that shift. We are limited to the number of people who are members of the chamber and who ask for that type of service, but I guess you do not know what you do not know.

Mr POPPINS — One of the problems we face as a chamber is that we have 350 or 400 members, but such a wide range of retail, heavy industry, manufacturing and service industries. Knowing what systems to put in place for what people is quite a challenge. I know that is being worked through currently to try to separate those groups. One of the quite common themes coming through is about growing your business both physically and electronically. I have seen plenty of small groups and workshops being run on that sort of stuff. But getting out to people to explain how to better use the systems we have is quite a challenge, as John said. ‘I have been doing my business that way for 22 years. I have never needed it before, so why do I need it now?’. That is not a good attitude, because certainly there must be something I can embrace that would assist me somehow — even a small amount. I am a guy who does things physically. People who are on the internet all the time just need to understand that there is a lot more available.

I would suggest workshops to explain to people how to better use what they have and to understand they are using probably 5 per cent or 10 per cent of what they have got. Let us go another 20 per cent or 30 per cent at least to grow what they have got, if you are going to get the government to do something.

Mr GIBBONS — In our business we use social media and technology fairly extensively, but there are plenty in our space who do not use it at all. I think of it almost as the Google generation in a way. These days you do not look in the *Yellow Pages* anymore; you just Google whatever, and so you want to be the first name that comes up in a search. But there are lots of businesses we compete with directly that do not have an internet presence at all. Obviously that is good for us, but it is not good for their business and for this town.

Mr POPPINS — Trust in the system is probably a big one. Security, whether it be with your wallet or what you do with the information you put out there, is quite often a big one. There has been quite a lot in the media recently about people putting too much information out there and understanding the difference between what is enough for their business to grow and what is too much. Are they starting to give away too much intellectual property when they start talking about things like that? They are the concerns that a lot of people seem to talk about. They say, ‘I don’t want to touch it. I don’t want to do internet banking because it scares me’, in being against going fully online. They are some of the differences of opinion we hear on a regular basis about that stuff. Security is the big one. It is understanding that your information is still yours. ‘Is it safe to go to the cloud that you are talking about?’. ‘If my computer goes down, can I retrieve the information safely and securely without losing it?’. ‘Can someone else get into the cloud and take my stuff, wherever that cloud may be?’.

The CHAIR — John or Matt, do you have any pearls of wisdom that you would like to impart?

Mr POPPINS — I have lots of pearls of wisdom in my head. Talking about working from home, a couple of years ago a gentleman moved up from Melbourne to the Indigo Valley. He was part of the sponsorship group — a loose term — with Melbourne Zoo. He worked a lot of time at home on the internet chasing sponsorship. He used the internet quite heavily for that part of his job. He was probably one of the first people I met who telecommuted. He was 250 kilometres away and working for the zoo. It was fantastic. That is my pearl of wisdom.

The CHAIR — That is a very good example, Matt.

Mr POPPINS — Obviously we are talking about big stuff, but in his own little sphere he was doing amazing stuff.

The CHAIR — John and Matt, thank you very much for your contribution today. It has been very much appreciated.

Mr POPPINS — Thank you.

The CHAIR — A copy of the transcript will come to you in about a fortnight’s time. 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 your endeavours in the barber’s shop and your employment services.

Mr GIBBONS — Thank you.

Mr POPPINS — Thank you very much for your time.

Witnesses withdrew.