Telecommuting & E-Business in Rural & Regional Victoria
Submission by Infoxchange representing The Teleworkforce Participation & Social Inclusion Network
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Opportunities for people to use telecommuting and e-business to work remotely in rural and regional Victoria.

Response submitted Infoxchange representing the Teleworkforce Participation and Social Inclusion Network.

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Introduction

Infoxchange is leading this submission on behalf of the Teleworkforce Participation and Social Inclusion Network. The Teleworkforce Participation and Social Inclusion Network is one of the four strategic stakeholder networks informing the work of the Telework Section of the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy (DBCDE). We would look forward to any opportunity to discuss this response with the Committee.

About Infoxchange

Infoxchange is a national not-for-profit that delivers technology for social justice. We work to strengthen communities and organisations, using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as the primary tool to create positive social change.

Our mission is to create social equality and opportunity by empowering people through access to information technology. We are working towards achieving this through:

» increasing digital inclusion by assisting all those in our communities to access and efficiently use ICT

» raising the level of digital proficiency and improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the community focused sector through ICT

» advocating for and showcasing the benefits of digital empowerment in our communities.

Infoxchange has been part of the community services sector since 1988 and currently employs over 80 people based in Melbourne with an office in Brisbane.

Telework Strategic Stakeholder Networks

The Telework Strategic Stakeholder Networks focus on the main drivers and barriers to the uptake of telework in Australia. They include Telework Partner organisations (www.telework.gov.au/partners) and other key influencers and stakeholders, many of whom have reach and vested interest in Victorian Rural and regional areas successfully implementing telework.

Each network is coordinated by a member of a Telework Partner organisation, and supported by staff of the Telework Section, Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy.

» Telework Leadership and Management Network (TLMN) is identifying the core management capabilities to manage an increasingly virtualizing workforce, and the education and training program and providers needed to develop these capabilities in the Australian management workforce. This network is being coordinated by Emma Dawson, Director, Institute for a Broadband Enabled Society (IBES), University of Melbourne.

» The Teleworkforce Participation and Social Inclusion Network (TPSIN) will encourage increased workforce opportunities and social inclusion through telework opportunities, particularly among groups disadvantaged by location, disability and carer responsibilities. This network is being coordinated by Peter Walton, CEO of Infoxchange Australia

» The Sustainable Digital Cities Network (SDCN) will seek to work with urban and transport policy and planning professionals to explore the contribution of telework and anywhere working to overcoming the time, stress and cost of daily commuting, reduce urban congestion, and reduce pressure on transport systems at peak commuting times in our major cities. This network is being coordinated by A/Professor Damien Giurco of the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney.
The Australia Anywhere Working Research Network (AAWRN) was launched last November during National Telework Week 2012. It aims to provide a framework for collaborative national and international research around flexible working practices that include telework, to support evidence-based policy in the public and private sectors. This network is being coordinated by Dr Yvette Blount, Centre for Workforce Futures, Macquarie University. The AAWRN held its first national conference in Sydney on Monday 17 June 2013.

The Telework Strategic Stakeholder Networks are creating a robust research and resource base for successful design and implementation of telework. We would strongly recommend that the Victorian government look to and engage the Telework Strategic Stakeholder Networks in the development of any policy and/or strategic telework initiatives.

Benefits of increased telework for rural and regional Victoria

Telework can be generally defined as the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to conduct work at home or any other place that is removed from the physical infrastructure, colleagues, clients and the employer.

However it is important to note that telework and associated approaches to telework are emerging. As such, we should be careful about limiting the prospect, and possibly the uptake of “working at distance” by confining ourselves to one definition. It is important we maximise the possibilities rather than restrict approaches to telework and this is particularly the case for rural settings where new and creative variations could and should be successfully developed.

The rollout of Australia’s National Broadband Network (NBN) holds great promise in terms of flexible work arrangements and practices. With the federal government’s aim to double the number of people working away from the physical office in Australia by 2020 it is clear that opportunities are emerging for rural and regional Victoria.

The potential benefits for rural and regional Victoria of increasing telework opportunities accrue to employers, employees, the communities they live in and the broader society.

- For the employer benefits identified include increased productivity; cost savings relating to office space and utilities expenses; business resilience as well as human resources benefits such as better recruitment and retention and reduced absenteeism.  
- For the employee the benefits include better work/life balance; increased job satisfaction as well as cost savings related to not having to commute and greater sense of achievements.
- The broader community benefits through reduced traffic congestion and less stress on transport infrastructure. This combined with the benefits around work/life balance and increased productivity presents a real development opportunity for regional Victoria. The community strengthening aspects associated with people working in the rural and regional communities in which they live needs to be further understood as a benefit.

Additionally, Infoxchange sees telework in rural and regional Victoria as a way of bringing into the workforce those that may currently be unable to, or have limited workforce participation including older workers, women, single parents, carers as well as indigenous Australians. There is also the potential that home-based telework may help to integrate a large community of disabled workers and carers into the workforce.

“Anywhere working” offers rural and regional Victoria the possibility of attracting new industries that are currently not strongly represented in rural communities. Industries such as software

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1 Bosua, Rachelle et al, Telework Productivity and Wellbeing. Institute for a Broadband enabled society IBES Melbourne November 2012
development, advertising and creative industries will need to be supported to make the necessary workforce changes that comes with such a transition.

An overarching Victorian teleworking strategy needs to be developed that ensures both corporate and government investments in teleworking are maximised. This should include exploring the feasibility and sustainability of developing “Anywhere work” hubs in places suitable public buildings such as libraries, shopping centres, railway stations and community centres. Investments such as the recently announced $4.4 million for the Ballarat CBD should form part of a whole of state plan and not be stand-alone investments.

An overarching Victorian teleworking strategy should also take into account what types of industries best match telework with certain locations. Currently there are a growing number of Arts, creative and IT related activities in peri-urban areas such as Castlemaine, Daylesford, and Woodend. We see a need to explore whether some regions may be able to develop particular telework characteristics. For example, could the Wimmera become a place where expertise in agricultural use of ICT is centred?

Consideration should also be given to how teleworking could benefit smaller regional centres and those communities further away from larger metropolitan centres. Locations such as Hamilton and Horsham could well be places where new understandings and models of telework could emerge. For a town such as Hamilton and Warrnambool with relatively large “travel through workforces” this may include the development of rural work anywhere hubs that would support these workers on the road as accommodation occupancy is dominated by the business market during the week.

This could include the creation of dedicated telework towns as part of a rural renewal strategy. This would further develop and grow a telework economy which would include rural locations hosting workers from metropolitan areas for one or more weeks building local economies in a range of areas as well as establishing telework specific businesses.

Best practice in e-business and remote working policy

In creating a best practice approach, organisations, teleworkers and managers need new skills and business tools and equipment that support telework implementation. Central to this is the shared understanding that best practice is measured by and based upon outputs not time in the office.

Evidence from a recent study revealed that successful telework is contingent on a number of factors, including the following:

» Telework requires a different management style based on trust and management of clearly defined individual and team deliverables based on shorter (or day-to-day) time frames.

» Trust from a management and worker perspective is important to foster a productive work environment.

» Specific collaborative IT tools are required to enable teleworkers to work seamlessly from anywhere, and contribute to individual and team productivity.  

The processes and thinking in developing a telework business case and identifying clearly what roles and who is best suited to telework are vital to success. This touches upon the need for additional skill development and understandings for managers overseeing telework.

A well-planned and implemented digital literacy program supporting both the employer and employee are important elements in developing best practice approaches.

Additionally, for rural areas reliance on mobile technologies and associated wireless networks is high and there remains a need to continue improving coverage.

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3 Bosua, Rachelle et al, Telework Productivity and Wellbeing. Institute for a Broadband enabled society IBES Melbourne November 2012
Opportunities for governments to work in concert with each other and lead in the adoption of best practice telework need to be explored. As a starting point we would recommend that governments at all levels begin identifying roles that suit a telework option and incorporate that in the advertising of those roles. It is critical to success that government lead the way in modifying the way jobs are recruited by having jobs labelled as teleworkable from the outset.

Additionally for best practice to exist work needs to be done to promote dialogue about telework and its challenges, benefits and solutions. This should include industry, NFP and government forums both online and face to face. Infoxchange has established and facilitated an open LinkedIn Group at: http://www.linkedin.com/groups/Workforce-Participation-Social-Inclusion-Network-4952615

A similar such discussion group for rural and regional partners interested in developing best practice could easily be established.

Legislative impediments at a state, federal or local government level

The legislative barriers at the state, federal or local government levels are currently around occupational Health and Safety and how those laws relate to working from home or other “Anywhere working” places such telework hubs.

Two such laws that are of note are the Fair Work Act and the Work Health and Safety Act. The Fair Work Act has some limitations in relation to the right to request flexible hours. Currently, this is limited to a parent with responsibility for a school age child or a child with a disability. This would need to be broadened to incorporate an expanded view of telework, especially if the opportunities for people with a disability. Work Health and Safety laws may have a restrictive affect in that the same requirements that apply to a remote telework workplace apply in the employer’s home/office or other place of work.

If one of the opportunities is to use telework as a means of bringing people with disabilities and carers into the workforce, consideration may need to be given to how disability or welfare related legislation may impact upon successful telework implementation.

Workplace relations, or occupational health and safety issues that need to be addressed

Much, if not all, of the rules and laws that are relevant to telework have been written with a workplace or traditional office in mind. Any review of workplace laws and rules should seek to encourage effective and successful telework through clarity of meaning and ease of implementation. In addition, consideration needs to be given to ease of implementation from both employer and employee perspectives.

As well determining potential workplace relations and/or occupational health and safety issues that would need to be addressed is something that crosses a number of jurisdictions and therefore a holistic approach needs to be adopted.

Productivity, infrastructure or other savings associated with fewer employers and employees needing travel to and from work each day

Telework is a viable alternative to face-to-face work that can yield productive outcomes for both employers and employees. Recent evidence reveals to continuing growth in more micro businesses using the internet to let people work from home or other locations - up 8% over the past 2 years.4

These figures are even stronger for larger businesses where more than three quarters have the facility for staff to use the internet to work from home. Whilst this does not consider the rural and regional situation it does reveal a trend that must be impacting on country Victoria

At a global scale research into the Internet economies of the G-8 nations as well as Brazil, China, India, South Korea, and Sweden finds that the web accounts for a significant and growing portion of global GDP. It is clear from this that the Internet is a catalyst for both productivity growth and job creation. With this trend in mind establishing potential productivity, infrastructure or other savings associated should be a priority for Victoria in growing its economy. As Victoria moves to a more digitally driven economy we need to better understand how the metrics around these productivity gains for all of the Victorian economy can be recognised in economic data analysis and accounts. In addition, governments, federal state and local are major employers in rural and regional Victoria and as such can have a major impact and leverage on the positive uptake of telework. Including the 48 rural shires and ten regional cities local government in Victoria collectively employs over 42,500 staff. We would recommend that government departments and agencies develop strategies that increase the uptake of telework in rural and regional Victoria with clear focus on how productivity and associated cost/benefits can be measured.

Conclusion
The Internet, and access to it, is now deemed a Human Right by the UN. Given that the Internet is also fast becoming the engine room for the modern global economy, all jurisdictions need to take a planned and strategic approach to all matters associated and this includes telework. Telework is increasingly becoming one of the critical means by which that economy operates.

Telework for the rural and regional Victoria provides many positive benefits that go beyond the economic realm. Telework can also support many positive social outcomes. The opportunity for rural and regional Victoria to use telework to develop more inclusive, sustainable and cohesive communities is something that should be a priority for all levels of government for the next decade.

Recommendations
Infoxchange representing The Teleworkforce Participation and Social Inclusion Network recommends that the Victorian Government:

» Engage the Telework Strategic Stakeholder Networks in the development of any policy and/or strategic telework initiatives.

» Develop an overarching telework strategy with a focus on rural and regional Victoria.

» Invest in projects that accelerate the uptake of Telework in Rural and regional Victoria.

» Invest in projects that increase the digital literacy skills of employers and employees undertaking Telework in Rural and regional Victoria.

» Fund research to identify the benefits and economic value of telework in Victorian communities especially as it relates to those not in the workforce such as people with a disability.

» Investigate the feasibility of developing dedicated telework towns as part of developing a telework economic development focus for rural and regional Victoria.

» Lead the way by modifying the way jobs are recruited by having jobs labelled as teleworkable from the outset.

» Develop strategies to promote dialogue about telework and its challenges, benefits and solutions.


6 MAV Jobs in Victorian Government May 2012

» Fund research to better understand the productivity gains and future trends for rural and regional Victoria.

» Encourage government departments and agencies to develop strategies that increase the uptake of telework in rural and regional Victoria with clear focus on how productivity can be measured.