

Submission to ATAC Telework Consultation

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DRAFT - for comment by Pam & Reg.

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Introduction

This submission draws on points raised at a consultation organised by Coutts Communications in Adelaide on 25 May 2005. The consultation drew heavily on experience gained in a research project on teleworkers with disabilities which had been conducted in 1999-2000.

This work is referred to here as 'the research project'.

Benefits

More Employment for Previously Excluded Target Groups

Teleworking offers individuals with disabilities opportunities for a better life that have been unavailable to many of us in conventional work places.

Unemployment is much higher and labour market participation much lower among people with disabilities than the general population. Unemployment produces poverty. Poverty has many negative impacts on the individuals who experience it in areas such as health, life opportunities, social and cultural participation. It also has impacts on the society in which they live in areas such as government spending on income support and services, and on tax revenue.

Welfare Reform and Teleworking

Unemployment among people with disabilities is an important national policy issue, as has been clearly recognised by the Federal government in its prominent efforts to move disability pensioners and others into the labour market.

Teleworking offers the Commonwealth government part of the solution to the very real barriers to success faced by its welfare to work initiative.

Teleworking goes around barriers such as

- inaccessible work places and other public buildings (estimated to require a net \$13 billion to fix over 30 years)
- inaccessible public transport (estimated to require a net \$1.1 billion dollars to fix and not due for completion until approximately 2025)
- inflexible work schedules which do not accommodate the needs of people who cannot work a full day, cannot work consistently week by week, have unreliable care workers or unreliable transport.
- financial costs of participating in work as a person with a disability, such as the cost of taxis or equipment only needed for work:
- reluctance on the part of employers to modify work places or work practices, usually arising from ignorance of how to proceed and an over-estimation of the costs of doing so:

- and manager's concerns about negative public reaction to people who are not 'presentable'.

Disability Discrimination Act and Teleworking

The Disability Discrimination Act (Clth 1992) s.15 to s.21 makes it unlawful to discriminate in employment. Teleworking provides an option for employers who may wish to modify their practices in relation to a particular employee. It also provides an option for employers who, with record low unemployment, may wish to gain access to the pool of potential employees represented by people with disabilities.

In considering its own involvement in fostering teleworking, the Commonwealth must be mindful of the fact that the Disability Discrimination Act at s.29 applies to the operation of government laws and programs. It should also be noted that s.43 of makes it unlawful to incite discrimination. Actions taken by the Commonwealth to develop teleworking which do not take into account the needs of people with disabilities may well be unlawful under a Commonwealth Act.

Costs

Potential for Isolation

Participants in the research project identified isolation as an important issue, as many others have also done.

Some experienced telework as isolating in itself - a criticism often raised by other commentators. However, for some participants, telework did not increase the isolation they were already experiencing simply because of living in an inaccessible and unsupportive world with their disabilities. For others, teleworking even provided some connections to others that served to relieve isolation a little.

Barriers & Enablers

Need to See Workers At Work

The consultants reported that their research to date has shown that many managers feel uncomfortable about having workers out of their sight. We agree with the consultants that some form of education might reduce this concern. We suggest that, if the anxiety is about performance, one aspect of education may be around suitable performance indicators for workers who are not on the same site as the manager. These might include keystroke counters, units of work delivered, sales figures.

This has implications for the tasks that might be suitable for telework. They should be capable of measurement by such performance indicators.

Perceived Difficulties of Implementing Teleworking

The consultants noted that they had often encountered the view that it was simply too hard or expensive to put reliable, secure teleworking infrastructure into

place. This view, they said, was especially prevalent in small to medium enterprises.

A similar issue has long contributed to the exclusion of people with disabilities from conventional work places. Managers do not feel able to deal with the perceived complexities or cost of making their work places and practices accessible to a diverse range of people with disabilities. I will return to this later. Participants believe that solutions for teleworking infrastructure are more readily available and costs are lower than managers appear to expect.

We believe there is great value in making practical problem solving expertise readily available. It can serve to make the pathway from ignorance to implementation look much smoother, so that managers will begin to travel down it rather than halting at the first hurdle.

In the case of teleworking infrastructure, there may be two ways to go.

- Set up centres along the lines of existing small business advisory centres, or perhaps assist them in extending their role
- Work with the I.C.T. industry to encourage businesses to seek opportunities as advisors and problem solvers for small to medium enterprises considering teleworking.

The second model is already showing some potential.

One participant in the consultation (Bob Ross) is already running a successful small business which assisted teleworkers in the research project. There are also quite a number of small businesses operating in a somewhat similar area - conducting physical access audits of buildings and advising their owners as to how they might be made accessible to people with disabilities.

Participants in the consultation noted that, if the research project were to be repeated today, it would be much easier because there is far better 'off the shelf' technology available than 5 years ago. For example, one might go down the path of 'thick pipes, thin clients'. In-home computers would be far simpler and less prone to difficulties. A central server would provide shared software and data storage. Central software and - when necessary for support, home computers - would be under direct control of technical staff. The links would rely on broadband connections and the many collaborative software tools available today.

Perceived Difficulties in Accommodating Workers with Disabilities

In the case of accommodations for workers who have disabilities, we suggest that there is a much clearer role for government. Experience has shown that small to medium enterprises are somewhat resistant to confronting the perceived complexities and costs of accommodating workers with disabilities. It is therefore reasonable to believe that they will not readily pay for advice on such matters. A free and well publicised information service will be essential, possibly augmented by profit - making consultants. Both could provide employment opportunities for people with disabilities in themselves, let alone the opportunities they may facilitate in other businesses.

We urge a close examination of a United States model - the Jobs Accommodation Network.

The Job Accommodation Network is a free service of the [Office of Disability Employment Policy](#) of the [U.S. Department of Labor](#). JAN's mission is to facilitate the employment and retention of workers with disabilities by providing employers, employment providers, people with disabilities, their family members and other interested parties with information on job accommodations, self-employment and small business opportunities and related subjects. JAN's efforts are in support of the employment, including self-employment and small business ownership, of people with disabilities. JAN represents the most comprehensive resource for job accommodations available.

Match Between Task, Telework and Workers

This topic was touched on earlier in the discussion about performance indicators, where it was suggested that tasks suitable for telework should be capable of being measured remotely by managers.

However, the telework research project also showed that it is important to match the worker to the task in telework as much as in any other job.

The task in the telework research project was to catalogue and clean up many thousands of maps and photographs so that they could be entered into a large database. The work was very repetitive and required attention to detail.

It was ideal for telework in that

- the images could be sent back and forth on CD (or nowadays by broadband connection)
- timing and co-ordination issues were not involved because the production process did not rely on collaboration among workers
- performance was readily measurable by the number of images returned and the objective quality of work.

However, reactions to the task varied widely among the participants.

One participant found that repetition posed no problem: "Just put on the cans, turn up the music and get going". Another became bored and frustrated. He wanted a greater intellectual challenge. Yet another participant lacked the self discipline to sustain the work in an environment where there was little structure imposed externally.

Acknowledgements

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