3 June 2013

Mr Paul Weller MP
Chairman
Rural and Regional Committee
Parliament House
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Dear Mr Weller

Re: Inquiry into the Opportunities for People to Use Telecommuting and E-Business to Work Remotely in Rural and Regional Victoria

The Victorian Employers' Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VECCI) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to this inquiry. VECCI is the peak body for employers in Victoria, supporting and servicing more than 15,000 members, customers and clients across the state.

In making this submission, we have drawn on the views and experience of a number of our regional and rural members, highlighting the benefits and challenges they face in seeking to use telecommuting and e-business in their day-to-day business operations.

Potential benefits to business from telecommuting and e-business

Conceptually, telecommuting and e-business can provide benefits to the customer, the employee and the organisation. Business engagement with customers and suppliers can be improved, along with greater organisational efficiency and employee satisfaction.

Much of this is driven by the ability to meet with customers at their own premises, supported with technology that enables instant access to information, without having to return to an office and follow-up at a later date.

Teleconferencing or remote working can save time and money by reducing the need for unnecessary travel, improving workforce productivity. More widespread use of this technology can also lead to reduced strain on already stretched physical infrastructure, such as road and rail transportation.

The use of technology to support remote working can also deliver benefits to employees who wish to return to work after an extended absence. For example, staff members returning from maternity leave or illness/injury may find that, through working remotely, they are able to return to work sooner than they otherwise would.

Another benefit for regional and rural communities is the contribution that telecommuting makes to the attraction and retention of skilled workers. A lesser requirement to be

physically located in a 'bricks and mortar' office means that people with Melbourne-based jobs can increasingly live in regional and rural Victoria, as the travel commitment required in these circumstances is reduced.

Adequate information technology infrastructure can also support participation in alternative forms of training (e.g. webinars, e-learning), providing additional cost-effective methods of improving the skills and professional development of rural and regional employees.

While telecommuting and e-business can bring considerable advantages to regional and rural businesses, it is VECCI's experience that many small businesses are unaware of the potential benefits that such technology can provide. Subject to further research, there may well be a case for greater promotion and training to assist small business to become more e-business savvy. It must be said, however, that telecommuting will not suit every business and it is only viable when both businesses and the employees benefit.

Infrastructure suitability and reliability

While the potential benefits of telecommuting and e-business are seemingly apparent, in practice there remains a number of barriers to regional and rural small businesses making effective use of such technology.

One of the key barriers identified by VECCI members is the speed and reliability of telecommunications infrastructure in regional and rural Victoria.

Telecommunications infrastructure must have the capacity to reliably handle large amounts of data at an acceptable speed. A number of VECCI members have indicated that they often experience 'drop-outs' in telephone or internet coverage while in transit, including on major train lines and when driving along major highways. This leads to lost time, lost productivity and staff and customer frustration.

Similarly, slow internet connectivity can limit the ability of employees outside their workplace to access relevant information and make use of facilities such as teleconferencing, thereby impacting productivity. While the National Broadband Network should remedy many of these concerns, the expected roll-out dates for parts of Victoria remain well into the future.

If businesses are not confident in the reliability of the necessary infrastructure, opportunities for telecommuting and e-business will be limited. Improved distribution of mobile phone towers to support continuity of coverage, and better access to high-speed internet connections would help to improve the current experience of many regional and rural businesses.

Legislative requirements

VECCI members reported a great deal of uncertainty around the impact of legislation, in particular occupational health and safety laws, on employer responsibility for employees undertaking work remotely or from home.

The 'red tape' involved in allowing a staff member to work from home, including OH&S audits, and reviewing and updating HR policies, is viewed as excessive, particularly for small business owners.

Many VECCI members cited examples where employers have been held responsible for incidents occurring within an employee's home. This causes apprehension and concern about the associated risks, obligations and liabilities facing a business should an incident

occur, and has even caused some businesses to reconsider their internal policies and discourage working from home.

One such case was reported by VECCI in June 2011, where an employer in Queensland was found liable for an injury suffered by an employee working from home and ordered to pay compensation, even though the injury occurred outside their designated home workstation.

There is therefore a need for greater clarity and practicability to be applied in the operation of occupational health and safety laws if telecommuting is to be encouraged. This is particularly the case where an employee is working from home and is therefore in a work environment that the employer, in actuality, has limited ability to monitor or control.

Conclusion

Based on the views and experiences of VECCI's regional and rural members, the key issues that must be addressed to ensure opportunities for telecommuting and e-business are maximised are:

- The need to better inform businesses of the opportunities and benefits of telecommuting and e-business, along with suitable training.

- The need to ensure regional telecommunications infrastructure is cost-effective, secure and reliable. Victoria's regions must be given priority in the rollout of the National Broadband Network.

- The need to provide greater clarity and certainty for business in respect of the interaction of remote working and existing state and federal occupational health and safety laws.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues with you in further detail if required.

Yours sincerely

Richard Clancy
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Industry Policy and Workplace Relations Services