Chapter 92

Planning Reform as a Catalyst to Advance E-Planning

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ABSTRACT

The limited research on e-Planning in Australia, a perceived slow take up of e-Planning in the New South Wales (NSW), planning system and the release of a set of e-Planning recommendations as part of planning reform packages in 2007 and 2012 are the main reasons for conducting this research. The aim of this chapter is to determine the current attitude of planners towards e-Planning. To achieve this, the authors undertook to discover the attitudes of planners towards e-Planning. An online survey of planning staff was conducted in 2008. The survey results confirmed that planners in the NSW planning system are using a wide variety of IT applications. Participants demonstrated a strong understanding of e-Planning tools and the wider implications for the planning system. Overall, this research found the attitude of planners to be supportive of new technologies and of the use of e-Planning.

INTRODUCTION

Computers have crept into most aspects of our daily lives. It is difficult to name an industry that is not computerised to some extent and taking full advantage of the Internet to conduct 24 hour a day, 7 days per week communication with their customers. Industries such as banking, finance, insurance, retail and telecommunications, to name just a few, have all moved into major e-business modes; however, it appears the Australian planning industry has not taken up technology at quite the same rate as others.

The justification for conducting this research is to expand the relatively small amount of research that has been undertaken in the area of Information Technology (IT) and Town Planning from an Australian perspective. The New South Wales (NSW) Department of Urban Affairs and Planning released the *PlanFIRST* planning reforms in 2001 (Department of Urban Affairs and Planning, 2001), the *Improving NSW Planning System* discussion paper in 2007 (Department of Planning, 2007) and the *New*

Planning System for NSW discussion paper in 2012 (Department of Planning and Infrastructure, 2012), all of which had entire sections devoted to the implementation of e-Planning. This chapter examines the current and future use of electronic planning (e-Planning) in NSW from a practitioner's point of view.

The objective of this chapter is to gain an insight into the current attitudes towards IT by planners in the NSW planning system. This research strives to answer the following questions;

- What IT tools are planners using in their daily work?
- What are planners' attitudes towards using IT?
- Do planners understand the e-Planning recommendations within planning reform?
- Do planners think the e-Planning recommendations will improve the planning system?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Australia made an early start to computers in planning research, with Newton (1986) publishing a book devoted to the use of computers in land use planning and transport. This book was among the first to be published internationally on the topic. The same year (1986) a special edition of the *Journal of the Royal Australian Planning Institute* contained articles on the application of computers in planning practice, with articles describing the implementation of computers in local government in Adelaide and Sydney. Since this early start, research into computers in planning in Australia has been somewhat intermittent. However, the growth of the Internet, and the emergence of *e-government* has created an area of planning research and practice, locally referred to as e-Planning.

E-government is defined as the automation or computerisation of existing paper-based procedures that will prompt new styles of leadership, new ways of debating and deciding strategies, new ways of transacting business, new ways of listening to citizens and communities, and new ways of organising and delivering information (Pascual, 2003). E-Planning can be described as the e-government concept applied to urban and regional planning. More specifically, it is the widespread use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), especially the Internet, in a planning system (Silva, 2007). The aims of e-Planning are directly aligned with the components of e-government (Pascual, 2003), which are to provide better public services, more efficiently, with lower costs and, at the same time, to do that through more participative, transparent and more accountable decision making processes (Silva, 2007).

E-Planning allows planning agencies to implement existing procedures in a new form, due to geographical information systems (GIS), computer aided design, database systems, Internet browsers and communication technology (Budthimedhee, Li & Varkki George, 2002; Campagna & Deplano, 2004; Harrison & Haklay, 2002). It is also expected to provide access to online planning services covering all stages of the development control process, including pre-application advice, submission of applications, consultation, public exhibition submissions, petitions, commentaries, complaints and planning decisions (Parsol, 2004).

The use of e-Planning is most commonly associated with the transfer of paper-based processes to an electronic urban management system. However, one should be aware that e-Planning is more than simply transferring a paper form to a computer system, as there are requirements for the business process mapping of existing procedures, reengineering of procedures and the development of integrated back office systems (Parsol, 2004).

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