

Applying for Government Grants for ICT in Australia

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BACKGROUND

The legend on the CTC@NSW Web site, <http://www.ctc.nsw.gov.au/about/>, defines Community Technology Centres (CTCs) as “computer enabled multi-purpose facilities based in the Main Street or main centre of a town. They provide access to Internet-connected computers as well as provide printers, video and teleconferencing facilities, business equipment, and e-commerce incubator facilities. CTCs are owned and managed by a non-profit group, such as an incorporated association, co-operative, or local government committee. There are a number of titles that have been used to date to describe CTCs including Telecentres and Telecottages.”

The CTC@NSW program was established to build capacity and deliver a range of nominated services to communities with populations of less than 3,000 through the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs). Each applicant community had to develop its own business plan to meet the identified needs of their community. Successful applicants received grants of between \$150,000 and \$200,000. These funds were to be used as seed money to establish a community owned and operated business.

The NSW State Government and Commonwealth Government jointly funded this program to run from early 2000 to June 30, 2004. During this period, over 60 new Community Technology Centres (CTCs) were funded in small, regional communities throughout NSW. Unfortunately, towards the conclusion of the funding period, those communities who had been funded in later rounds had to do without the support, resources and assistance provided by the CTC@NSW Support Unit because the funding for this part of the program concluded on June 30th. Only the CTCs that had been funded in earlier rounds would be the full beneficiaries of this aspect of the program.

In order to be eligible for funding under the CTC@NSW program, interested communities had to first complete an Expression of Interest and demonstrate that they met the program's specific eligibility criteria. If they made it through this “hoop,” they then had to complete a complex application form, which

required them to develop a comprehensive business plan, which included technology and marketing plans in addition to annual cash-flow projections for the first three years of operation. Applicant communities had to demonstrate how they could establish and maintain viable businesses within their communities during the three-year period of funding as well as how they planned to make their CTC viable after all grant funding had been expended.

However, it was through working on the CTC@NSW program, as well as several other ICT programs, that the author came to grips with many of the issues that make economic development in regional Australia so problematic. Her findings were, in many ways, similar to those of Wolstenhome's (1995) who stated, “The continued application of inappropriate models may arise out of difficulties in communication between government representatives and members of community groups during the consultation and planning process. Such difficulties may be due to a lack of understanding about the ways in which rural communities work” (p.1). In particular, some of the difficulties with communications were often exacerbated by the bureaucratic language used in the information packs supplied by the funding bodies as well as in the actual applications themselves.

While it is perhaps easier to have a relatively esoteric discussion about regional economic development, perhaps the single most important asset that is often overlooked or marginalized in these discussions, is the people who actually live and work in regional communities *and* apply for grant funding. It is important to note that while the levels of formal education of these people may not be as high as those living in major urban centres, this does not mean they are not as capable of successfully administering grant funds, but rather they are not familiar, or comfortable with, the phraseology and business-oriented buzzwords that proliferate in the documentation of government funding programs.

Shepherd (1998) noted that, “Rural development, like other creatures of the ‘development industry’...is prone to jargon and the extensive use of buzzwords. Sustainable development, sustainable agriculture, participation, women's involvement, indigenous knowledge, integration, are all examples of phrases which are uttered ritualistically when the need arises” (p. 19).

It is also worth noting that during the period of time the author worked with small communities in the Northern Rivers to help them gain access to a range of ICT services, she drew many of the same conclusions about the nature of the people who lived in regional communities as did Plowman, Ashkanasy, Gardner, and Letts (2003). They stated, “Innovative towns were perceived to have these characteristics in greater abundance: administrative and managerial capacity to run and promote the town...availability of a variety of experts to provide the breadth of services that the residents expected...managerial attitude towards change...a higher proportion of residents who had lived elsewhere, a higher proportion of residents working in the so-called creative-class” (p. 2).

Over the course of her work with regional communities, the author developed a methodology for the process of applying for grant funding which helped to increase the “success rate” for applicant communities. This is not to say that all of the communities and grant applications she worked with were successful, but rather the communities that used this methodology, and had more of the characteristics mentioned earlier, tended to be more successful with their applications for funding.

A STAGED APPROACH TO THE TASK

Stage 1: Getting Started

In order to better understand the nature of the grant for which they were applying, communities first had to determine:

- Who is offering the grant, e.g., the State or the Federal Government?
- What does the government expect to achieve through offering the grant?
- What is the grant expected to achieve for the applicant communities, e.g., what are the expected outcomes?
- Which region(s) is the grant supposed to benefit?
- Is there a time span involved? (Many government grants have specific periods of availability, e.g., funding rounds as well as closing dates.)

Communities also had to consider that there may be political implications or other issues regarding the particular program for which they were applying. They also needed to look at it from the government’s perspective because in their eyes, a successful grant program is

expected to generate a high level of interest from potential applicants. This means that government agencies actively seek to encourage as many applications as possible in the belief that this will help them direct their funds to the most promising projects. (It is worth noting, that the most deserving communities might not be the ones most able to prepare and submit the “best” application.) Additionally, applicant communities must make sure that their funding objectives match those of the grant program’s so that the collective time and energy of the people involved in the process isn’t wasted.

However, the first step in the process is to acquire the program’s information pack and read it carefully. Much of this information is also available on the relevant agencies’ Web site, <http://www.grantslink.gov.au>, is an excellent reference site for communities to explore as it takes a whole-of-government approach to funding.

Good “grant information packs” should be comprehensive and include such things as:

- A clear statement of the funding program’s objectives;
- A list of the criteria against which the application will be assessed;
- Information regarding the supporting documentation that might be required;
- The contact details of the people who may be able to assist communities with their applications;
- Information regarding any other resources that might be available;
- Any specifics that pertain to a particular program; and
- Information as to the number of funding rounds and their closing dates or, if it’s a one off program, the actual closing date.

Applicant communities also need to be aware that government-funding programs are usually created in response to policy decisions and often focus on a particular issue or range of issues that the government of the day has decided to address. Applicant communities must determine, at the very onset of the process, whether some of the funding program’s objectives or criteria have greater weight than others. This is often the case in regional Australia, and that’s why it is a good idea to establish a good working relationship with the program’s administrators.

Jargon and three letter acronyms (TLAs) are often the hallmark of grant programs and applicant communities need to familiarize themselves with the “language of the grant” before proceeding. They also need to understand all of the requirements at each step in the

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