

Inter-Governmental Relations in the Provision of Local E-Services

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INTRODUCTION

Australia is a nation of 20 million citizens occupying approximately the same land mass as the continental U.S. More than 80% of the population lives in the state capitals where the majority of state and federal government offices and employees are based. The heavily populated areas on the Eastern seaboard, including all of the six state capitals have advanced ICT capability and infrastructure and Australians readily adopt new technologies. However, there is recognition of a digital divide which corresponds with the “great dividing” mountain range separating the sparsely populated arid interior from the populated coastal regions (Trebeck, 2000). A common theme in political commentary is that Australians are “over-governed” with three levels of government, federal, state, and local. Many of the citizens living in isolated regions would say “over-governed” and “underserved.” Most of the state and local governments, “... have experienced difficulties in managing the relative dis-economies of scale associated with their small and often scattered populations.” Rural and isolated regions are the first to suffer cutbacks in government services in periods of economic stringency. (O’Faircheallaigh, Wanna, & Weller, 1999, p. 98). Australia has, in addition to the Commonwealth government in Canberra, two territory governments, six state governments, and about 700 local governments. All three levels of government, federal, state, and local, have employed ICTs to address the “tyranny of distance” (Blainey, 1967), a term modified and used for nearly 40 years to describe the isolation and disadvantage experienced by residents in remote and regional Australia. While the three levels of Australian governments have been working co-operatively since federation in 1901 with the federal government progressively increasing its power over that time, their agencies and departments generally maintain high levels of separation; the Queensland Government Agent Program is the exception.

BACKGROUND

Competition between the levels of government and between departments, driven largely by economic rational-

ism and corporatisation of government, has increasingly focused on the efficient delivery of services and this is where the influence of ICTs has been most noticeable. In the words of the current federal auditor-general:

[T]he necessary closer links brought about by technology, and the immediacy demanded by the public for delivery of services irrespective of which government is responsible, bring into sharper focus the need for better project governance and accountability. Particular emphases are being placed on responsiveness of service delivery and overall performance of government. (Barrett, 2003)

While providing the means of reducing costs and equalising the service delivery opportunities across the nation, the use of ICTs are challenging the established structures of government institutions, agencies, and their bureaucratic procedures by opening them up to interdepartmental and private sector competition. The improvements in communications have led to changing community expectations of government, described by Botsman and Latham (2000) as “the enabling state, people before bureaucracy.”

The state of Queensland covers an area of 1.7 million square kilometres accounting for almost 25% of the total land area of the Australian continent; it is seven times the area of the United Kingdom, more than twice the size of Texas and five times larger than Japan. With 3.8 million residents, and more than 35% of the population living outside the State’s southeast corner, Queensland is the fastest growing and most decentralised state in Australia (Pop. 20 million). The distance between the state capital Brisbane and the northern boundary in the Torres Strait is more than 2000km. Providing government services in the sparsely populated remote regions is expensive, many have only been retained due to adaptation and technological innovation. Examples starting from 1929 include the pedal-powered short-wave radio and the Flying Doctor service, the high-frequency radio School of the Air, 1951, and the introduction of an integrated whole of government Intranet using 16 bit processor and satellite technology in the early 1980s.

QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT AGENT PROGRAM

Current ICT innovations can be found in two Queensland government initiatives. The Queensland Government Agent Program (QGAP), uses a “one-stop-shop” approach to provide a wide range of services for client populations dispersed over vast rural and remote areas (Kelso & Shepherd, 2002), and the Smartservices Queensland project provides “...anywhere, anytime access to government services” (Queensland Government, 2004). At its inception there were similarities between the QGAP model in Queensland and a similar scheme in Nebraska. In a time of rural downturn, government partnered with primary industry support networks to retain services in rural communities (Arber, 2005). QGAP combines a variety of service delivery models, the most recent of which is called Smart Services. The Smart Services program uses ICTs to, “... provide Queenslanders with a “front door” to government transactions, information, and referrals through the internet, phone, and face-to-face customer service.” (ibid). Smart Services caters for the whole of Queensland, metropolitan, regional, and remote. The Smart Services program was developed out of an earlier initiative called Access Queensland. A strategy statement for that earlier program (Access Queensland, 2000) describes a range of applications including:

- A farmer west of Longreach accessing information relating to salinity of property and booking an inspection from local inspectors in one interaction
- An Aboriginal artist in Cape York through one point of contact and one interaction being able to register her business access her business “start-up” kit and enroll for an upcoming business training course
- A householder paying ambulance subscription; car registration; and housing repayments in one interaction at one location
- A New York resident booking a permit for a Fraser Island camping holiday
- A retiree registering for a seniors card and associated government concessions

The examples previously used focus upon bridging significant distances; Longreach is more than 700km from the coast while Cape York is more than 2000 kilometres from the capital city. The facility provides the ability to make multiple transactions across a single counter. However, it is probable that the New York resident would have faster access to the Web site than a remote Queenslanders, as the level of service can be diminished in remote areas because of the lower download speeds of the existing copper wire telephone network (the current legislated

minimum is 26.4 kpbs). Metropolitan and high-density population centres enjoy higher service levels through broadband, wireless, ISDN, and cable services. In many remote areas, one of the few high speed public access points to the Smart Services Web sites are available through the QGAP office with its dedicated data connection.

QGAP agencies are one-stop shops managed under a state government program where people can conduct all government business or obtain information. The largest QGAP outlets offer in excess of 400 specific services covering all three tiers of government. ICTs are central to this availability of services in providing internet and intranet access across the normally restricted internal and external boundaries dividing Federal, State and Local Governments and their departments. QGAP officers can facilitate a range of services including vehicle registrations, wills, estate matters, rent collection, birth, death, and marriage certificates, wildlife and environmental permits, liquor permits, insurance and ambulance subscriptions, and workplace health and safety issues. In many ways, this single shop-front approach offers the same level of service access afforded to city people. In some ways it is a superior service because it can be delivered across a single counter rather than having to visit each separate department or agency. QGAP staff are selected for and supported in delivering customer focussed service and will generally provide assistance or advice on virtually any government problem or query, even in cases where it is not a paid service function. The Queensland Transport Department has been the greatest user of the service accounting for about 70% of all work but all departments have benefited by being able to provide greater access to their services in remote communities. An example of the benefit is provided by Police and other emergency Services which are often single officer stations in remote locations. The obvious problem is that time spent in the field is time away from the front counter. The introduction of a QGAP allows the officer a release from clerical duties to spend more time on operational matters.

General QGAP enquiries account for 30% of activities, transactional services such as licences and permits 60% and other services the remaining 10%. Common requests for federal government information include immigration, taxation, and Medicare and both state and local government provide information on counselling services, tourist information, commercial advice, and wildlife management. As the federal government does not maintain service centres outside of the state capitals or provincial cities the QGAP is often the only official presence representing the federal government in many isolated regions of the state. QGAP has achieved high community support through its convenience in transacting government business and the

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