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Teleworking – An example of policy flying blind?

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At last, the focus on the NBN is shifting from supply -“When and what will we get?”- to demand -“How will we use it?”. The benefits of broadband are derived from how it is used; not just having access. While the supply plan is well-developed, there is no execution plan yet to ensure that faster broadband is fully exploited. Without an action plan that engages end-users directly, the expected benefits of broadband will not be realised.

Let's take telework as an example. It is an obvious application for fast broadband and we have known about that for a long time. To his credit, Senator Conroy has set some quantitative targets to be reached by 2020 for the eight goals of the National Digital Economy Strategy. In the case of telework, the goal is to “double the level of teleworking so that at least 12% of Australian employees may work away from the traditional workplace”. That implies it is about 6% now – right?

Wrong. The latest figure we have is indeed 6% but it comes from an ABS Time Use Survey conducted in 2006 – the figure is 5 years old! Worse, the next survey will not be conducted until 2013 with results not available until 2014. The hard 12% target may not be so hard to get - I suspect that with the changes in broadband availability over the last 5 years, we may already be at 12%.

My point is that if you cannot measure it, you cannot manage it. We have a strategy and goals but no framework for execution that provides better information on where we currently are. Furthermore, we do not have actionable intelligence on barriers to adoption and gaps that will need to be addressed.

It is not difficult to fix; although I should declare an interest in the proposed solution.

The Government's 12% target for telework may have been inspired by the reference in the NDES document to 11% of US employees teleworking at least 1 day a month. That must be an old figure. Last year, the Strategic Networks Group (SNG) found that 18.9% on average (25.6% in metro areas) teleworked in North Carolina; with about half of these reporting that they telework more than 3 days a week!

What we need is e-solutions benchmarking data gathered directly from organisations and households that not only provides more current data of progress towards NDES goals, but also maps drivers and barriers to utilisation and captures the benefits. In the case of telework, for example, comparisons for the same type of organisation across different regions would point to where non-users could usefully be educated about the benefits. The framework that SNG uses also allows individual respondents to compare themselves with their peers.

Case studies like those to be presented at the DBCDE-AIIA teleworking forum on the 3rd of August are fine. But there is no reason to expect that preaching the virtues will be any more successful than it has been to-date. We need an execution framework that engages end-users directly, which in itself promotes awareness and drives utilisation of broadband-enabled solutions.

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Note: The 6% figure is used in the ABS Household Use of Information Technology, Australia, 2007-08, Cat No 8146.0, 18 December 2008