



CHAPTER 2

THE WESTERN AUSTRALIA TELECENTRE NETWORK

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LOCATION AND CONTEXT

Western Australia is Australia's largest state, covering about one-third of the country's 7,682,300 square kilometres. It is also one of the least populated, with 1.7 million people, predominantly clustered around the state capital Perth and 11 major towns. The 200 other communities, ranging from the small settlements scattered across the spectacularly rugged Kimberley region more than 3,000 kilometres north of Perth to the coastal towns of the Great Southern region 500 kilometres south of Perth, have a total population of only 200,000. It is these remote and rural communities that the Western Australia (WA) Telecentre Network (currently made up of 76 centres, but planned to increase to 100) aims to serve.

HISTORY

The WA Telecentre Network had its origins in a request by the WA Office of Higher Education to the author, then one of its senior research officers, to explore ways of improving access and support for those wishing to pursue post-compulsory studies in remote and rural Western Australia. The author's research led her to suggest that the answer could lie in technology and she requested a review of delivery modes be undertaken. The subsequent consultants' report (Latchem and McGregor 1991) recommended the establishment of a WA Learning Network. A subsequent survey conducted in the remote northern Kimberley region provided strong support for the idea of a trial being conducted in that region (McGregor 1992).

The National Board of Education, Employment and Training agreed to provide priority funding for the first two years of the trial. The WA Office of Higher Education appointed the author as support officer for the trial stage. Murdoch University provided free accommodation for the co-ordinating office. The director of the inter-university WA Distance Education Consortium was asked to oversee the project. And three prototype centres were established, equipped with basic technology (computers, a facsimile machine, photocopier, modems).

Within months it became evident that such a network could not only address educational needs, but provide a technology hub for a wide range of government and community services and programmes in regional Western Australia which was, in its own words, “doing it tough” — suffering a declining rural economy and the downsizing and re-locating of services to the major centres.

AFFILIATES/STRATEGIC ALLIANCES

Early in 1993, there was a name change to the WA Telecentre Network, emphasising the shift from an exclusively educational focus to educational, community and labour market programmes. At that time, federal Department of Primary Industry and Energy, keen to promote the “Nordic telecottages” concept, was making monies available for pilot telecentre programmes. Western Australia was able to avail itself of these funds and quickly increased the number of centres to 18. And, as the Network grew, so did the opportunities.

In mid-1993, the Network moved from being under the aegis of the WA Office of Higher Education to come under the WA Department of Employment, Vocational Education and Training (DEVET). The Department of Primary Industry and Energy had agreed to fund 13 of the telecentres for a period of two years, and DEVET agreed to provide funding for the other telecentres for three years and to pick up the costs of the federally funded telecentres in the third year. A four-person Support Unit was established and the WA telecentres were connected into the state government-funded satellite Westlink system to receive the live and pre-recorded school- and tertiary-level educational TV programmes transmitted from the DEVET Media Network studios.

The Network then went on to grow to 38 state-funded centres that became study and work places for 120 unemployed persons in the government’s Jobskill scheme, enabled 3,000 student units to be taken by learners, and started to produce community newspapers, provide desktop publishing services and offer bookkeeping and other services to small businesses.

In 1996, the host organisation, DEVET, was restructured and the Network was evaluated (Oliver 1996). The Network was found to be operating and managed effectively, but it was recommended that it should encompass a full range of government and non-government services and that the Management Advisory Committee should be reconstituted to be more representative of business and enterprise. In light of these developments, it was deemed appropriate that the more generic WA Telecentre Network should come under the WA Department of Commerce and Trade (Regional Development Division). This move was effected in May 1997. Since then, there has been exponential growth in the Network, its programmes and services, and a building up of “networks upon networks.” Extension of the Network to 100 centres is now planned. Some centres are developing into telehubs, and the rollout of telecentre access points for communities of 80 – 200 persons is well under way.

AFFILIATIONS AND STRATEGIC ALLIANCES

The Network now provides a comprehensive range of services throughout the state. Some or all of the telecentres offer or support the following functions:

- *Internet-related services* — Providing Internet/Web access (all centres), Internet Service Provider/point of presence (POP), e-mail post office, Web page design, chat groups, special events such as Internet Olympathon, Online Australian Day.

- *Computer-based services* — Providing sales and service, training, design of conference/seminar presentation material, etc.
- *Resource centre services* — Providing desktop publishing, printing, laminating, photocopying, facsimile services, secretarial services and administrative support for meetings (all centres).
- *Social activities* — Supporting TeleYouth, KidsClub, TeleSenior and BushNet networks, technology information evenings, etc.
- *Government services* — Providing federal government, state government and local government information services.
- *Labour market programmes* — Supporting the current Coalition Government's Centrelink scheme, the former Labour Government's Joblink scheme and Work for the Dole schemes (all centres), providing training via satellite, providing local access to work experience and placement programmes, enabling the long-term unemployed to re-enter the workforce, etc.
- *Community programmes* — Producing community newspapers (50% of all centres); providing tourist information, heritage information, information radio, Satellite Shopping Channel, library services, book exchange and community craft shop outlets; organising community projects and activities such as fun runs and vintage car trials.
- *Local enterprise* — Providing landcare and imaging services; accommodating agribusiness centres; supporting Women in Agriculture, and organising Field Days, New Enterprise Initiative Scheme (assisting with new business development) and the establishment of telework, tele-accounting and e-commerce. Communities are also investigating the establishment of Transaction Centres (acting as community banks, Medicare Easy Claim offices and post offices) and other ways in which local commercial activities can be managed through the telecentre system.
- *General* — Selling tickets for theatrical and sporting events in Perth and other major centres; providing payroll services, telephone answering services, art and craft outlets, engraving services, trophy sales, inventory services, security services, video libraries and grant-writing assistance; acting as cyber cafés, advertising distribution points, bus stopover and ticket sales points, and accommodation and equipment rental locations.
- *Post-compulsory education* — Providing for tele-education; enrolling and supporting vocational education and training students (in eight years, enrolments have risen from 640 to 2,500 – 3,000 student units per year); providing rooms, supervisors and technical support for off-campus tertiary examinations (all centres); operating as university "campuses" (two centres). Before the Network was established, 80% of the people enrolled in distance education in the areas covered by the centres were male; two years later, 80% were female.
- *Lifelong learning* — Providing short courses on demand for local communities, training for seniors and others in uses of information and communications technology (ICT), administering Scitech programmes (science/technology activities for children), etc.

As well, a number of other functions for the Network are currently being tested or are envisioned for the future:

- *Telehealth* — At the time of writing, telehealth programmes were being tested in hospitals, health centres and telecentres to determine where future programmes might be best located.

- *Telelaw* — At the time of writing, telelaw programmes were being tested in 12 sites with a view to extending this service in 2001.
- *Other services planned*— Australian Country Information Service, On-Line WA (distribution of all government information), and community radio stations.

COSTS AND FUNDING

Worldwide, many telecentres have come and gone, some because they were only established to provide a training ground for computerisation, and others because they lacked long-term financial support once the seed monies were exhausted. In the case of the WA Telecentre Network, however, close attention was paid to sustainability from the very outset.

In 1993, it was agreed that each newly established telecentre would be granted Aus\$20,000 per annum (at the time of writing, the Aus\$ = US\$0.59) subject to its meeting quality standards and the requirements of a Memorandum of Understanding and Resource and Performance Agreement. The telecentres could also ask the Support Unit to negotiate on their behalf for new programmes, services and monies. Thus, for example, the Support Unit brokered an agreement with the WA Lotteries Commission which enabled each telecentre to apply for up to Aus\$20,000 for additional equipment after three years of successful operation.

The Support Unit administers a Project Initiatives Fund to help telecentres establish new programmes or services. This has enabled numerous small initiatives to come to fruition. The telecentres themselves have also become more and more successful in obtaining large and small grants, not only for their own operations but also for other groups and activities within their communities.

Between 1991 and 2000, the Support Unit succeeded in obtaining Aus\$27 million in grants and other external funding. In 1997, it was successful in accessing Aus\$4.9 million from the federal government's Networking the Nation Fund to increase the Network from 38 to 100 centres, establish 100 telecentre access points for communities smaller than 200, build eight portable telecentres for isolated communities at least 500 kilometres from Perth, and install compressed digital videoconferencing facilities in all centres. Additional monies have been gained for the TeleYouth, TeleSenior and other initiatives.

The new millennium has seen the state government recognise the WA Telecentre Network as "core government business" and allocate it its own annual budget.

ACCOMMODATION

The Support Unit requires any community seeking to establish a telecentre to provide rent- and maintenance-free accommodation. In the early days of the Network, two rooms and an office and storeroom would suffice for a telecentre. Today, as the telecentres evolve into fully fledged multipurpose community centres, more than half of them have moved into much larger premises, often re-locating from edge-of-town or sidestreet sites into higher profile accommodation on the main street. It is not uncommon for telecentres to move into banks closing as a result of "rationalisation," and to maintain these services alongside all the other more longstanding services. Other telecentres co-locate with state government libraries, Business Enterprise Centres, Community Development Offices, Aboriginal Economic Development Offices,

Community Youth Offices, arts and craft groups, or Community Agriculture Centres. Others co-provide with universities, technical and further education institutions, childcare groups, and various state government departments and agencies.

MANAGEMENT

Local level

The WA Network telecentres are community owned, managed and incorporated. Such an arrangement was implemented in 1993 to ensure that each community realised that it had the opportunity to shape the destiny of its own telecentre and operate it as a separate entity.

Each telecentre is managed by its own legally appointed Management Committee and, as such, has the right to establish services and programmes outside those established corporately. The Management Committee is required to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the Support Unit and to meet the requirements of a Resource and Performance Agreement, although a vital and committed Management Committee can provide an almost limitless range of services over and above those agreed to. The telecentre Co-ordinator/Manager answers directly to the local Management Committee on all issues, including staffing.

In the early days, it was not uncommon for a Management Committee to feel a little overwhelmed by the mandates, technologies, personnel matters and programmes it was called on to administer. Many members felt that the Co-ordinator knew more than they did and tended to stand back and let him or her take charge. To address this issue, the Support Unit staff visited all the telecentres to ensure that the Management Committees undertook a more proactive and critical role. A subsequent conference/workshop held for the Management Committees proved to be the turning point in the members' understanding and willingness to take on the necessary responsibilities.

The Management Committees are required to meet regularly, hold annual general meetings and ensure the democratic election of new and returning members. They are also required to maintain quality assurance procedures and to follow a mutually agreed blueprint or plan. The Management Committees have their own online chat group, hold regular regional meetings to discuss problems, plans, policies and new initiatives, and meet every second year at their own conference.

It has been found that the most effective committees are those with a diverse and representative membership, in which each member is responsible for a particular portfolio.

Regional level

Because Western Australia is so vast and diversified, programmes and services established in one region may have little application in another. Thus, the telecentres also operate on a regional basis, allowing the development of regionally focused programmes. Each of the existing four regions is overseen by a Regional Co-ordinator who supervises approximately 20 telecentres. These Regional Co-ordinators are country people residing and working within their own areas. Their role is to:

- provide day-to-day support;
- train new staff and provide ongoing training;

- run workshops for the Management Committees;
- identify the needs and opportunities for new regional programmes and services;
- seek funding for new ventures on a regional basis;
- report to, and meet with, the Support Unit on a regular basis to collectively identify new network-wide ventures, needs and sources of funding; and
- provide corporate advertising and publicity throughout their regions.

State level

Each telecentre is part of the WA Telecentre Network, supported by the Support Unit headquartered in the Department of Commerce and Trade in Perth. The Support Unit:

- lobbies government, bids on behalf of Network members for funding, tenders to provide services and programmes, organises training, and provides other support, collectively or on an individual basis;
- hires the Regional Co-ordinators;
- provides publicity and promotion on a collective basis, advertises through the media, and produces and distributes the network's magazine *Connection*;
- undertakes surveys; and
- provides executive support to the WA Telecentre Advisory Board.

The Chair and Deputy Chair of the WA Telecentre Advisory Board are appointed by the Deputy Premier and are both rural people. The Board comprises a telecentre manager and chairperson from each region, representatives of the Department of Commerce and Trade, the Deputy Premier, the Support Unit, representatives of local government, the Regional Co-ordinators and the Team Leader of the WA Telecentre Network. Other than those sitting on the Board by virtue of their position, all members are voted in by Network members in an open election. The Board must have 10 members who are living within the telecentre communities and five persons with rural and remote experience.

STAFFING

Telecentre Co-ordinators

Each telecentre has a Co-ordinator who is responsible for managing the centre on a day-to-day basis and is answerable to the Management Committee. He or she needs community knowledge, entrepreneurial flair and some business and/or professional expertise for this work. Technical knowledge is not essential, but highly desirable.

Support staff

Many telecentres prefer to employ part-timers with particular expertise. This arrangement provides local people with opportunities to combine work and family commitments and offers more flexibility in staffing. It can also encourage more enterprise. For example, people interested in desktop publishing may start working one or two days a week, but be given longer work hours if they can further develop their

skills and the market for their services. Some WA telecentres have managed to employ up to nine part-time workers. Many of the centres also make use of volunteers.

Volunteers

Telecentres provide free training to those willing to provide their time and assistance free of charge. This not only enables volunteers to carry out their duties, but gives them new skills and interests to apply in other spheres. Senior citizens and early retirees, once they become involved with telecentres and understand the technology, have been found to be more than willing to provide their time.

TRAINING MANAGERS, STAFF AND USERS

As shown above, it is policy that training be provided for the Management Committees, the telecentre Co-ordinators, and the support staff and volunteers.

The WA telecentres are also charged with providing lifelong learning for the communities they serve. This covers everything from promoting and supporting tertiary studies to providing basic training in understanding and using computers and associated equipment, using credit cards at petrol pumps, using automated bank machines, and even programming microwave ovens. New needs are constantly arising, for example, Y2K compliance (at the beginning of 2000) and use of e-cards were hot topics. Flexibility and evolution are two words used frequently within the Network as it helps remote and rural communities adapt to a changing world.

PUBLICITY

The WA Telecentre Network has a distinctive logo and makes use of print, radio and television advertising, leaflets, audiovisual packages and the Internet/Web to make its presence and services known. In its first year of operation, the Support Unit produced a simple newsletter to share information between telecentres. This has now grown into a quarterly coloured glossy magazine, *Connection*, which goes all over the world and has a readership of more than 2,500. Speaking engagements by Network staff are undertaken locally, nationally and overseas, and the Network's numerous awards have also given it a high profile. A 1999 telephone survey indicated that 85% of persons surveyed in each community served by a telecentre knew what a telecentre was and where their local centre was situated.

ACCESS

Telecentres are required to be open 20 hours a week to qualify for grants towards salaries, but the actual opening hours are determined by local Management Committees and in accord with community needs. Many centres offer 24-hour access, with approved individuals using security numbers or swipe card systems (the latter being found to be more reliable and secure).

During the nine years of the Network's operation there have been very few break-ins or thefts. One can only presume that the centres, being community-owned and -managed and playing such a vital part in the life of the communities, are generally regarded as inviolable places and that any act of theft or destruction would bring swift retribution to the person or persons involved.

TECHNOLOGY

The WA telecentres are hubs in a Network that brings into the regional communities those technologies and services not previously available, and restores or revives those programmes and services that have been withdrawn or down-sized. Each telecentre in Western Australia has:

- Internet access at local call cost;
- TV and one-way video/two-way audio (through Westlink);
- access to a purpose-built extranet;
- the latest computing facilities and software; and
- ICT support equipment.

Two-way compressed digital videoconferencing is currently being installed in all centres, opening up possibilities for tutorials, training, telelaw, telehealth and telebanking (with one bank manager serving all telecentre banks and communicating with customers by videoconference as well as via the Internet).

In 1994, when DEVET began its satellite “talk-back TV” to the then-18 telecentres, it was projected that 300 students would enrol in its courses. In fact, 640 students enrolled for TV-based studies and a further 300 enrolled through the Network to take the courses face-to-face. Talk-back TV is still the cheapest means of reaching the whole of remote Western Australia and allowing all parties to participate. The dishes and decoders, which are provided by Westlink, cost only Aus\$1,500 per site. However, over the years the users have tended to move away from the live “lock step” interactive teleclasses, preferring to take home the videos or enrol in the courses actually provided in the telecentres.

It is interesting to reflect that when the Network started, fax was not available in homes, computers often did not have hard drives and photocopiers did not have collators. The challenge to the Network has always been to stay one step ahead in the game of providing technology and technology-based services.

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

There have been two formal evaluations of the Network: a preliminary formative evaluation, *Networks on Trial* (McGregor 1992); and a later review, *Networks into the 21st Century* (Oliver 1996). The Network has also been included in a number of federal and state government reviews. What these have shown is that the WA telecentres have become focal points in their communities, and that they benefit not only individuals, but whole communities, helping to stem rural decline, raising self-esteem, improving communications, providing jobs, and retaining and generating many millions of dollars in regional Australia.

In providing ongoing funding for the Network, the state government clearly judges the system to have economic, political and social value. Another measure of success is that, with the exception of two centres forced to close by a combination of poor management and declining community numbers, and two centres having to re-locate, the WA telecentres have shown themselves to be sustainable. In the same period, 78% of the telecentres in the eastern states of Australia have been forced to close.

The telecentres operate in accord with a rigorous accountability and quality system that includes:

- a Telecentre Starter Kit which includes FAQs (frequently asked questions) and answers;
- an Expression of Interest form that an applying community must complete and submit to the Support Unit to determine whether the community should proceed to completing a full application and business plan;
- a Tool Kit to help communities through the application and business plan process;
- a Resource and Performance Agreement against which centres are measured for ongoing grants;
- a Memorandum of Understanding that defines the mandate and performance of all centres within the Network;
- a Quality Assurance document that measures success;
- a Roles Manual that defines the tasks of telecentre managers and staff and the criteria for selecting these;
- a Code of Ethics;
- a Confidentiality Agreement;
- an annual reporting scheme (for programme and activity information on other than that required under the Resource and Performance Agreement); and
- the annual collection and collation of usage and performance data.

The network has received a number of national and state awards:

- 1995 Adult Learners Week National Award for Innovation in Open Learning
- 1996 Australian National Training Authority National Best Practice in Training Delivery Award
- 1997 Western Australian Premiers Award for Service to Rural Western Australia
- 1997 Royal Agriculture Society Rural Achievers Award
- 2000 Government Technology Productivity Silver Award (recognizing use of technology to provide better service and improved technology for regional communities)

As well, the federal government's 1995 National Board of Employment and Training report, *Converging Technology, Work and Learning*, made the following recommendation: "Advise the Minister for Primary Industries and Energy of the important education and training role played by the telecentres and support their strengthening and extension along the lines of the Western Australian Telecentre Network in the current review of their operations."

Applying for such awards has been found to be well worth the time invested. The resultant recognition has proven to be highly motivating for the Management Committees and the telecentre staff and volunteers and has lifted the national and the international profile of the Network, adding to its credibility.

Informal feedback is equally encouraging. The Chief Executive Officer of the local council in a remote community reports:

I was against the establishment of a telecentre in this community —
I felt it would damage the way of life we currently enjoy and love.

I was wrong, what has happened is that the telecentre has established a “pipe to the world” which will enable us to continue to live and enjoy the life we know in this community, while also having access to programmes and services we never dreamt of.

A student writes:

I want to express my appreciation for the very enjoyable and informative classes you have presented. I have learnt so much and it has made me feel a lot more confident in using my computer.

This past few months, being able to study a computer course via satellite, while living “out in the sticks,” has been a wonderful experience because we seem to miss out on so many opportunities when living so far from a town or city.

A woman on the Work for the Dole programme who worked as a volunteer in a telecentre says:

I used to watch television 18 hours a day . . . then I began participating in the Work for the Dole programme run at our local telecentre. My life has completely changed. I now work at the telecentre every day. When the Co-ordinator discovered my interest in the history of our town, she encouraged me to publish my findings which I have now done.... I have to say that the telecentre has changed my life. I have discovered a whole new world and have learned so much. Today I only watch television three hours a day!

And reports like the following are received:

A phone call to a centre by the Support Unit was replied to by a tearful Co-ordinator. When questioned as to what was the problem the reply came: “I have been working with a cerebral palsy child for some months as he has never been able to communicate with his parents. He has just typed his first message to his parents and there is not a dry eye in the place.”

Another telecentre had commenced a community newspaper and required a journalist. A young lass in a wheelchair was identified and she became a familiar figure as she visited numerous people in the community collecting stories on her dictaphone. Today, this young lady is a journalist in the city.

CONCLUSIONS

Numerous lessons have been learned over the past nine years of the WA Telecentre Network. The Australian experience has shown that telecentres established on an ad hoc basis have difficulty surviving. Establishing a network of telecentres may seem ambitious, but it appears to be more sustainable because government departments and private enterprise can see the benefits in regional as well as community service. There are also great advantages in the centres being able to operate and contract to provide services individually, in a cluster or on a regional basis, or as part of the overall network.

It is essential that some form of central support unit be available from day one. Such a unit is needed to provide a central focus, lobby for facilities and negotiate opportunities for the network as a whole. Ongoing funding in return for performance and quality is another must. While the WA Network's funding only pays for 20 hours per week of each telecentre's operation, this has been found to be enough to keep the ball rolling, particularly in the remote and severely disadvantaged areas. Distributing the same amount uniformly across the network helps to make all involved feel they have an equal share. Making the telecentres community-owned and community-managed is empowering and encourages local enterprise.

The future of the WA Telecentre Network appears bright. The telecentres are part of the state government's core business and have their own ongoing budget. They also have guaranteed funding for extension to a 100-site Network, an additional 100 telenodes (access booths) and further technology upgrades, and they have a project fund to foster new initiatives. With the structure in place, it is now necessary for the Network to continue evolving and to stay one step ahead of the technology available in people's homes.

In conclusion, as the WA Telecentre Network experience shows, the key components for a successful telecentre are:

- a high-profile, main street location;
- a Co-ordinator who is entrepreneurial and a "people person," not a technologist;
- an active, influential committee;
- a supportive community;
- a support network and central support unit;
- access to ongoing funding measured against some form of resource and performance agreement; and
- strict quality control.

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