

The Walcha Telecottage
An Australian Telecentre Success
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The small country town of Walcha is situated 90kms north east of Tamworth in northern NSW. The town exists as a service centre for the rich grazing properties and the timber industry. Armidale, only 70 kms to the north offers excellent educational facilities and a wide range of retail and government services.

Walcha has a local government population of 3,208 people with approximately 1,800 living in the town. There is no technical college and in fact no Federal Government services at all. It does have a central school which provides K-Y12 public education, post office and police station and there is a good community health service and hospital, although State Government funding priorities threaten the future of this service.

The Walcha Technology Co-operative Limited, trading as The Walcha Telecottage has nine voluntary directors, a full time co-ordinator and two assistants. Additional staff (up to 20) are available on-call, as the need arises. The co-operative's primary objectives are to operate the Telecottage using technology to improve the opportunity for employment, economic and social growth for the local rural community.

The Telecottage began its operation in July 1992 with seed funding from the Department of Primary Industries and Energy (Rural Access Program) and some cash assistance from Telecom Australia now Telstra. The Telecottage intended to replicate the European models and commenced a campaign to attract data entry work from the major cities, mainly Sydney and Melbourne. Progress was initially slow however jobs were eventually found and successfully completed.

The Telecottage boasts a very well equipped training facility and office including a network of ten Wintel PC's, four Macs, a Risograph printing machine, a plain paper photocopier, colour copier, laser printer, digital and video camera, player and editing suite, colour scanner, modems.

Full public access to the facility is available, including low cost Internet access, secretarial services etc. Training continues to be an important part of the operation. Although not very important as a source of income, it acts to satisfy one of the primary objectives ie; giving the community access to and training in technology. Over 500 people have undergone computer based training, which represents over 15% of the local population.

The printing machine is mainly used for the production of The Apsley Advocate, a 16 page A4 format community newspaper. With a circulation of 1200 copies per week the paper is produced entirely in house. The printing machine also generates a significant amount of income from general small print jobs.

In 1995 the Walcha Shire Council contracted the Telecottage to provide tourism information and promotion services. Under this agreement they have conducted art, movie, sporting and craft festivals, art workshops and many other cultural activities.

This has culminated in the establishment of the "Old Primary School Gallery" and eventually the Walcha Arts Council, which operates under Telecottage patronage.

The Telecottage has been successful in obtaining substantial income from the provision of data entry, secretarial, survey and other services. The majority of data entry work is sourced from Sydney, with some work coming from Melbourne and even New Zealand. The Telecottage also provides secretarial, desktop publishing and image processing to regional clients mainly from Armidale.

The NCLS Project

In 1995, the Telecottage was invited to quote for the data entry of the National Church Life Survey. This quadrennial event involves a detailed survey of over 350,000 Protestant churchgoers in Australia. The client greeted the initial quote with considerable scepticism, as it was far too cheap. After explaining the very low overheads of the organisation and the efficiencies associated with rural teleworking the quotation was accepted.

The actual work commenced in October 1996 and employed, to various degrees, 34 people for up to 5 months. The majority of people worked from home picking up boxes of forms and returning data on floppy disks. The contract stated that 15% of all the data had to be verified and maintain a minimum standard of 98% accuracy. Furthermore the Telecottage had to guarantee a peak delivery of 50,000 cases per week. The Telecottage completed the job on time, at the price and with an accuracy rate of 99% plus. Two years later the satisfied client continues to use the Telecottage services.

The Telecottage would like to expand this area of the business, however Walcha lacks the marketing resources required to develop a range of clients who can provide a constant work flow. The sporadic nature of the work makes it difficult to maintain a regular workforce thus impacting on recruitment and training costs.

Despite these obstacles, The Walcha Telecottage has succeeded in establishing itself as a quality provider of a wide range of services and has been operating as a fully financially viable organisation, independent of outside funding for over three years.

Australia currently has over 100 rural telecentres each with a wide diversity of philosophies and functions. The North East Telecentre based in Wangaratta in Victoria and the Bega Valley Telecottage on the south coast of NSW have established themselves as major ISP providers for their immediate and wider communities. The West Australian Telecentres are a well organised and very structured group who benefit from substantial State Government financial and administrative support. These centres are more occupied with the provision of services such as distance education and other government access services.

However the story hasn't all been rosie. A significant number of telecentres have failed to function past their initial funding period. It is interesting that Australia's second telecentre in Byron Bay, home of the rich and famous (Paul Hogan et al) was the first close. Poor management, conflicting interests and too many ego's made a sure recipe for failure. Basically the success of a telecentre is dependent on the ability of the co-ordinator and the support of the management committee.

The original Federal Telecentres program only allowed for up to two years operational funding. Whereas the West Australian State Government provides on-going salary support for their telecentres co-ordinators. Two years is not much time to get a business up and running. Many telecentres spent this time looking for alternative avenues for funding, those that succeeded continued, those that failed to find more funds were left with no core business and soon folded. Access to funding can be a two edged sword. In many cases it creates a funding dependent mentality, where the core business may not be really viable. For these operations the crunch will come when the funding eventually runs out.

The Australian Federal Government has allocated \$250 million dollars from the part sale of Telstra to the Networking the Nation program. This program has funded a number of new telecentres throughout regional Australia.

While Walcha has been somewhat successful, outsourcing work has only recently become an accepted management practice. The reasons for the delay in implementing outsourcing were not technological but structural and attitudinal. Until recently management has measured performance by attendance rather than productivity.

By virtue of the significantly lower overhead costs and the trade off of income against lifestyle, rural teleworkers can offer a competitive alternative to city based workers. However the perceived need for control, remains a barrier with many managers. Also the need for face to face contact, at least at the time of initial negotiations and work planning, remains a psychological prop which few decision makers are ready to abandon. This places rural teleworkers at an enormous disadvantage and clearly demonstrates the urgent need for a coordinated approach to develop rural teleworking opportunities.

And so TeleTask was formed as a non profit company with assistance from the Federal Government's Networking the Nation program to recruit rural teleworkers, assess and certify their capabilities and find regular work.

Although the project was initially intended to develop work for telecentres it was soon realised that there was an enormous number of people out there who did not have access to a telecentre, but they do have skills, initiative and a burning desire to take advantage of new opportunities. Only a small percentage of Australian family farms can survive today without off-farm income. And yet many farms have an office, a computer, fax and most importantly an experienced operator. This person is usually the farm wife.

In my experience, rural women are very well educated. By virtue of their isolation, a high proportion have had private boarding school education and a large proportion

have gone on to university or other further study. What's more these people are very independent, motivated and committed. They don't see technology as a threat but rather they see it for what is, an opportunity to overcome that single major barrier....isolation. Unlike the city corporate teleworker who according to the experts needs time to interact face to face with their colleagues. Rural teleworkers use their telework as an opportunity to interact.

Rural teleworking has the potential to provide much needed opportunity for employment and off-farm income for rural Australians. Unfortunately there are barriers most of which are attitudinal rather than technological.

Andrew Hunter was the founding co-ordinator of the Walcha Telecottage. He is the President of the Australian Rural Telecentres Association and a member of the Dept of Primary Industries & Energy Rural Communities Program. Andrew is currently the Chief Executive of TeleTask a new national rural teleworking initiative.