

BUSINESS IN THE BUSH: ADVANCING THE AGENDA QUT – Brisbane Nov 2000

When Lyn Simpson asked me to come up for a session on “Attracting Big Business”, I thought to myself, GREAT I might learn something. Then I discovered that I am supposed to be telling you how its done.

Well I suppose that we have had some success, but no where near what we hoped. I better explain a little bit about myself and TeleTask.

My Backround

Most of you will be familiar with the term “*telecentre*”. However many people confuse this term with *call centres* and particularly *telemarketing*. In Australia telecentres are usually small community owned multi purpose centres that provide access to and training in the use of computers and technology. Telecentres go by a variety of other names, community access centres, community technology centres and to some extents rural transaction centres and of course the original term “*telecottage*”.

In 1992 I was appointed as the founding co-ordinator of the Walcha Telecottage, Australia’s first telecentre. Walcha was also the first community telecentre to achieve financial viability. We achieved this by a number of means but the most important of these was our ability, over a six year period, to attract significant paid telework. By significant I mean that at times we were able to employ up to 30 people for up to three months. At those times we were the second biggest employer in town and that is significant. We shared our experience with new telecentres as they opened, however few if any were successful in attracting paid work from outside of their community. In 1998 I decided to try and apply the experience I had gained in Walcha and by acting as a broker, find work for the other telecentres. And so TeleTask was formed as a non-profit company with assistance from the Federal Government’s Networking the Nation program.

Before I explain further explain TeleTask, I better explain my definition of telework. And what better place to look for a definition than in my very own Australian Guide to Telework. The British TCA Handbook defines it as "working at a distance from the people who pay you, either at home, on the road, or at a locally based telecentre. Teleworkers use email, phone and fax to keep in touch with their employers or customers".

I am comfortable with this definition however, I would like to clarify my own use of the terms telework and telecommute. In many circumstances the terms are interchangeable however, for the purpose of today’s discussions, we will use the term telecommute to describe workers who are employed by one employer and who spend a significant amount of time actually working at their employer's premises. Then on one, two or maybe three days per week the individuals perform their jobs by working in a remote office. Either at

home or at a local telecentre. In other words these people are using telework as a means to reduce the need to commute, thus telecommute.

My definition of a teleworker is an individual who probably works for more than one "client", maybe on short term contracts and uses their own office or telecentre as their primary work place.

Another regularly confused term is "telemarketer". When we started the TeleTask project in 1998 we advertised for an administration assistant and stated in the advert that "teleworking was a job option". Of the thirty two applicants for the position, twenty declared their "telemarketing" experience and eleven declared their lack of "telemarketing" experience and only one applicant stated that she had a full equipped home office and would jump at the opportunity to utilise it. No points for guessing who got the job.

Now that's not to say that some telemarketers are not also teleworking.. I will talk more about call centres later

Although TeleTask was initially intended to develop work for telecentres we very quickly recognised that there exists an enormous resource of skilled and educated individuals throughout regional Australia.

In our experience, rural women are well educated. There are also a large number of professionally skilled people who have opted for lifestyle over income and settled in the bush. What's more these people are often very independent, motivated and committed. I think its interesting that for Urban Telecommuters – teleworking is the issue and isolation is a problem. Whereas for rural teleworkers isolation is the issue and teleworking is a solution.

TeleTask was intended to function as a broker or as an outsourcing contractor between the teleworkers and the client. Our Teletaskers provide their own office, computer and communications, including internet access. This allows us to offer clients a reliable service with no setup costs. Now you might think that this exploitation. However consider it this way. The average urban worker has to provide for their own transport to and from work. In Sydney alone commuters in the northern suburbs pay \$45 per month just to cross the Harbour Bridge. For a teletasker using communications and its cost is their way of getting to work.

We currently have 250 people on our database. The range of the services that TeleTask offers are a reflection of the skills of the people that we have already recruited. These skills include

- Secretarial and personal assistant
- Internet design, hosting and site management
- Graphic design and desktop publishing
- Systems analysis and development

Database design, data entry and analysis

Survey design and performance

Proof reading

Writing both technical and creative

And Call Centres, with a particular emphasis on Virtual Call Centres.

One of our best examples of “making a difference” is with a teletasker called Malcolm Murray. Malcolm was a senior science teacher but following a series of strokes, four years ago and a resultant two years in an institution being rehabilitated, Malcolm now describes himself as "a functional quadriplegic". On his return home, his students, their parents and his colleagues bought him a computer armed with access programs plus specialised hardware which enables him to be productive again.

He participated in a research project conducted by the Centre for Telecommunications Information Networking at the University of Adelaide, on the development of work opportunities for people with disabilities in rural areas. Malcolm gained invaluable experience in data entry work.

When Dr. Julie Summers of GrantSearch approached TeleTask for a web researcher with a tertiary or scientific background and data entry experience. It was hardly surprising that Malcolm's name came at the top of the list. The job has been going for twelve months now and in Malcolm's own words "having a job means I and others perceive me in a more positive light. We look beyond my disability and see a worker. Somebody who can pay taxes and make a financial contribution to his family and community. In truth, whether we like it or not, in our society, we are mainly judged and valued on an economic basis. Our worth and self image are in accord with this. I sign myself Malcolm Murray - Teleworker, and it feels just great".

Now much of what I have said has been in the past tense. Because as with any business much has changed in our markets and in the way we operate. Initially we contacted every big business we could find and we got wonderful moral support, but you can't bank morals. Its just too hard a concept to handle and despite the enormous potential for positive press coverage, the banks and Telstra can't seem to find anything worthwhile for us to do.

Our initial market analysis was based on US and European experience. In most technology areas we lag about eighteen months behind the US and we naively expected the booming acceptance of telework in the US to be mirrored here. Unfortunately we did not allow for the great inhibiting factor “Chronic Organisational Attitude Inertia”.

Many of our best economists have struggled to explain the demise of the Australian dollar. I can explain it with that one phrase. Let me give you a shining example.

Global e-commerce is destined to dwarf even the largest national economies and already Australian services are going off-shore at an alarming rate. The implications for our balance of trade and directly for employment opportunities in Australia are very

disturbing. Many of Australia's leading companies are more than willing to contribute to this.

A few months ago I contacted Elders in Adelaide in the hope of being able to offer them the services of some of our experienced IT people. After all, I explained, it's quite conceivable that our teletaskers could also be Elders clients. I was disappointed but not surprised to be told that although all of their internet system was currently done locally. They were concerned that locals would not be able to handle the growth and they had engaged an American consultancy firm and now planned to shift their entire internet service system to IBM or similar. Of course IBM's e-commerce business is based in Chicago.

I am sure that Elders management consider their IT to be state of the art. But in many ways information technology is just like food. You don't get rich by eating it. Many would argue that you don't get rich by producing it and lets face it Bill Gates is a shining example that its how you serve it up that counts. Being satisfied with just being end users of IT is one of the main reasons we are considered an "OLD" economy and our dollar reflects this.

Having said all of this, we are slowly starting to make some important break throughs. And wouldn't you know it, after spending years explaining to people that teleworking has nothing to do with call centres....you guessed it, Virtual call centres look like becoming our most important market segment.

Two years ago I was making a presentation in Albury and one of the other panelists was a fellow named Bruce Windzar from Ballarat. Bruce was basically responsible for developing call centre business opportunities in the town. In case you don't know, customer service (ie: call centre) business is growing at enormous rate with an expected 250,000 people employed in the industry by 2005. After our presentation Bruce came up to me and suggested that what we at TeleTask were trying to do would probably become the natural method of operation of future call centres.

This planted the seed and I started looking into the concept. Traditional call centre management has evolved into an entirely new area of speciality and the "management" is arguably as important as the actual service delivery.

Conventional theory is based on a need for¹ ;

- High volume operation
- Quality Assurance with "minute by minute" focus on all aspects of delivery
- Very high attention to detail, with constant assessment of process variations and distributions.

In this examples, there is a clear emphasis on BIG and "instant" or "constant". They have to know how many rings before you answered the phone, how many breaths you took before explaining the delay and how many toilet breaks you had this week, which was

¹ Peter Walker – Telstra , Principles of Call Centre Management Presentation Nov 1998

probably 1.78% over the average. It's not surprising that these environments often have a high staff turnover or "churn rate". In fact the "stable" employment base of regional communities (reads: no other job opportunities) is one of the main attractions in establishing call centres in regional areas.

But not all customer service requires this big is best solution. Many customer service propositions require only a few seats. Some require outgoing calls rather than incoming. Outgoing calls don't require expensive Automated Call Distribution or Interactive Voice Response systems. Even for incoming calls, I was amazed to find that for a number of service applications the required technology was already in place. The existing Telstra network was more than capable of providing call distribution and sophisticated reporting.

Training and support are important but not always to the extent that a supervisor must be physically on hand. Why not set people up in their own homes or at their local telecentre. Give them the training and software which covers most requirements and have backup support person available either online or by phone.

The benefits

- Dynamic staffing – remote agents are not required to travel to and from a fixed location..
- Minimal infrastructure costs –
- Few recurrent costs.
- Highly scalable – new agents or new telecentre groups can be brought on-line with little additional infrastructure costs.

I tried but just couldn't sell this idea and so shelved it. A few months ago a couple of young guys in Sydney found it on the TeleTask web site and decided that it fitted very well with their business model. Now TeleTask and Unity4 are working together to provide high quality customer service and we currently employ 20 people with immediate plans to expand significantly.

Just want to send you a quick note about how my calling is going.

I've been on the phones for approximately 4 weeks now, and am scratching my head about why I have never done this before.

Not only am I enjoying the freedom of working from home, and making GREAT money, but 98% of the people I talk to are really lovely.

I just want to thank you and Max for putting up with my initial endeavors of resending my work. I am a bit of a slow learner when it comes to attaching files to emails. But now, I feel like a professional.

My husband tells me I'd talk the 'legs of a donkey', but he being male and all, tends to exaggerate. But I do love having a chat. When I'm running a bit low, he threatens to tie me to my phone chair, as he has really enjoyed seeing me earn a great income and doing it from home, so I can still cook him his dinners and clean the house etc, etc.

If you need more staff and they are a bit apprehensive about working from home, please by all means give them my telephone number and email, and I would be more than happy to let them know how I find my new career. I am in awe that you have devised such a workable business system that works so well.

So thanks Simon, and thanks Max and keep up the good work and keep those money transfers coming.

Sincerely all my best wishes and thanks on your success, because that leads to mine.
Di Hair

I am also happy to say that the NSW State Government have done an about turn, in their call centre strategy and agreed to establish a virtual call centre pilot within their new Community Technology Centre program. With the hope that this will establish a business model that will provide an ongoing financial viability solution to the 50 plus regional community technology centres.

We continue to offer all of our other services, but there is no doubt that virtual call centres offer an outstanding opportunity for employment in regional areas.

I used to think that TeleTask was about trying to sell services but its not. Its about trying to change attitudes.