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# **BROADBAND TODAY: THE ROLE OF AUSTRALIAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The paper seeks to clarify the role of Local Government Authorities in facilitating the Australian digital economy. It does this by analysing responses to the *2012 BTA, NBN and Digital Economy Survey*. This reveals the level of recognition by LGAs of relevant issues; their level of use of federal, state and other programs designed to enable end user engagement; and other actions LGAs are undertaking to enable their regional digital economies. The analysis reinforces the significant role of LGAs in the future of Australia's digital economy and identifies areas where assistance may be required.

## **KEYWORDS**

Access, high-speed broadband, Broadband Today Alliance

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Only 11.6 million of Australia's 21 million+ population (ABS, 2012) have internet access. Of these, 96% use broadband but 473,000, including businesses, rely on dial-up access. (ABS, 2011) In the digital economy ('DE') dial-up or slow-speed broadband is not a suitable means of access. (Craddock, 2011) Ubiquitous high-speed broadband ('HSB') is required. Increased awareness of services will stimulate adoption, so the private sector and NBN Co are conducting advertising campaigns to capture the minds, and custom, of consumers. Governments provide programs geared toward enabling HSB adoption, facilitating infrastructure rollout and enabling engagement but more is needed to enable end users. Local Governments Authorities ('LGA') are uniquely positioned. Their close connection with their regions, means their potential to enable the DE is significant. LGAs can facilitate rollout of relevant infrastructure and HSB adoption; and enable engagement by end users. A role LGAs recognise and, mainly, have capacity to embrace.

The paper presents findings from the *2012 BTA, NBN and Digital Economy Survey* ('Survey'). The paper commences by introducing the Broadband Today Alliance ('BTA') and providing the context for the research. It then identifies the methodology used and examines responses to select Survey questions in order to determine LGAs' level of understanding of relevant issues and their involvement in enabling their regional DEs. It concludes by identifying matters requiring further consideration and future areas of research.

The paper does not address issues such as access costs (Choice, 2012); skills acquisition (Craddock, 2012a); or property use. (Craddock, 2012) Nor does it address other issues such as what legislative and/or policy solutions the federal government could adopt to facilitate the DE and individual end users' engagement in it. (Craddock, 2011) The paper's aim is to identify LGAs' understanding; their options; and assistance they may require as they work to enable their regional DEs and by extension the Australian DE.

## **2. BROADBAND TODAY ALLIANCE**

Maximum participation in the DE requires businesses to successfully transition from existing infrastructure and methods of service delivery. This is important for the ongoing success of the DE. However, moving to HSB will be a lengthy and costly process and this needs to be planned for. (Craddock, 2011) Addressing issues for regional Australia is essential. The BTA was established to create "*a collaborative apolitical*

*information sharing officer level organisation to assist regions and councils adapt and facilitate the transition to a digital economy based on NBN and non NBN digital infrastructure.” (BTA, 2012a)*

The BTA is a collaboration of LGAs, organisations and individuals focussed on developing the Australian DE. It has 120 financial members and over 50 affiliate members, including universities, telecommunications organisations, property developers and individuals. The BTA represents more than six million Australians. It regularly engages with members and facilitates forums and engagement with service providers and the community. It has open and members-only web sites via which it shares program information; government initiatives; policy developments; and news items. The common goal is enabling broadband engagement today not sitting back and waiting for someone else to (eventually) provide ubiquity.

### **3. RESEARCH CONTEXT**

Businesses’ ability to engage in any economic activity is dependent upon appropriately skilled employees. In the DE this requires employees with capacity to engage with consumers and other businesses via the WWW and internet. The more employees engage, the better businesses’ engagement will be. The less employees engage the less likely a business is to engage. This means it is essential that individuals have the capacity to engage with the DE and participate in it. (Craddock, 2011)

Although many DE activities will have a clear real-world connection and/or delivery point, arriving there occurs in a manner unlike previous methods of economic activity. (Sadeh *et al*, 2001) A fundamental difference between real-world economic activity and DE activity lies in the increased ability of the internet to enable the leveraging of knowledge; collaborations; and understanding consumers’ demands and requirements. (Mandorf, 2008) DE activity has an appreciable impact on the physical economy. (Barua *et al*, 1999) However, unlike a physical economy driven by specialised industries that does not require an individual to understand how industries operate; (Burcham, 2008) the DE is dependent on the engagement *and* understanding of individual end users. (Kellerman, 2004) DE activity therefore requires both engaged employees and engaged consumers. So that individuals may engage in the DE, they require certainty and ease of access to infrastructure, content and services. (Craddock, 2011) They also must know what they are doing.

Access has a variety of meanings depending on the author and their field. (Peña-López, 2009) For the purpose of the paper ‘access’ means access to appropriate infrastructure and services *and* to the skills necessary to enable full engagement. Access can be influenced by a variety of criteria ranging from “*physical access to technology ... [to] ... political will and public support*”. (Peña-López, 2009, 69) All levels of government need to focus on citizen needs and better service delivery. (Strieb & Navarro, 2008) As Purser (2011) observes, LGAs are beginning to realize the benefit of using social media in their communication strategies. In order to use social media, however, residents need to be engaged in the services of the internet. It cannot be presumed that such of a level of engagement exists. (Craddock, 2012a) Achieving full engagement in the DE requires government encouragement. (Plum & Zafir, 2009) It is in this context that LGAs must act to enable business and consumer engagement by means of enabling appropriate access.

### **4. METHODOLOGY**

The paper is an analysis of the results of the Survey, which was conducted by the BTA between 29 March and 27 April 2012 using *Survey Monkey*. Its purpose was to “*capture and gauge the extent of NBN and [DE] readiness in local government and regional areas of Australia.*” (BTA, 2012) Some questions required a selection between pre-determined answers, with others enabling more detailed responses. Regional Development Authorities (RDAs), LGAs and other regional organisations were invited to participate. By analysing responses to select questions, the paper’s aim is to identify LGAs’ current readiness for their role as enablers of the DE. The analysis focuses on questions designed to identify LGAs’ level of awareness of relevant issues; the programs being accessed, or proposed to support their regions; and other actions LGAs are taking to facilitate end user access and engagement. As an Affiliate Member, the author is working with the BTA Executive to disseminate Survey data to alert BTA members and others regarding the role, and importance, of LGAs in ensuring the future DE. The analysis highlights areas where further assistance may be beneficial. The Survey is unique because, through the BTA, it was undertaken by LGAs of themselves.

## 4.1 Limitations

Four limitations arise. First, the paper is not able to present all Survey data and only presents an analysis of select data. Second, the Survey was intended to be completed by all Australian LGAs, RDAs and other regional organisations. This did not occur. Third, not all responders answered every question. This affects the validity of the available data as a method for determining true LGA support of the DE. However, results can provide guidance to the BTA as to future initiatives as well as providing insight into LGA engagement with the DE. Fourth, confidentiality issues prevent a full discussion of all responses. Prior to participating, the BTA advised all potential responders their individual responses would be kept confidential, and shared only among the BTA Executive. To enable data analysis, the BTA shared full Survey data with the author on the understanding that any responses from which a responder could be identified would not be reported. This impacts the author's ability to discuss some responses but does not detract from the need for this discussion.

## 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The paper considers responses to 13 of the 58 Survey questions. These are detailed in Table 1.

**Table 1. BTA, NBN and Digital Economy Survey. Number of responses to selected questions**

	<i>Question</i>	<i>Response</i>	<i>No response</i>
3	State or Territory of Australia	110	4
4	Can you nominate which type of area your region best fits? (For Non Queensland Councils/Regions/RDAs)	87	27
5	Can you nominate which type of area your region best fits? Only for Queensland Councils/Regions/RDAs	57	57
7	How are you managing your region's partnership with NBN Co to support the implementation of the NBN?	75	39
9	Has there been implemented a 'single point of contact' or dedicated point of contact for engagement with NBN Co?	96	18
17	Do you have a knowledge of fixed broadband service 'blackspots' within your local region?	96	18
25	Do you know your NBN Co New Developments Territory or Accounts Manager?	88	26
32	3G & 4G Mobile Network. Do you have knowledge of the mobile phone/broadband black spots in your region?	79	35
33	Do you need assistance to complete this assessment? [ref. to Q. 32]	79	35
39	Does your Council/region/RDA currently access any federal or state funded programs designed to educate or train end users regarding the use of the internet and/or broadband or to raise consumer awareness levels of the services and/or benefits that broadband access enables?	77	37
40	In addition to any federal and/or state funded programs accessed by your Council/s, does your Council/s have or is it in the process of implementing or planning to implement any programs designed to engage/upskill otherwise educate consumers regarding the use of the internet and/or broadband or to raise consumer awareness levels of the services and/or benefits that broadband access enables?	73	41
41	How well does your region rate in terms of encouraging household on-line uptake?	72	42
42	How well does your region rate in terms of encouraging business on-line uptake?	70	44

The 114 responders are representative of Australian regional organisations. They come from Queensland (39), Western Australia (22), Victoria (19), South Australia (14), New South Wales (13), Tasmania (1), Northern Territory(1) and the ACT(1). [Q.3] From outside Queensland, these were divided between regional areas (27), regional city (18), rural (16), capital city (12), urban city (8) and remote (6). [Q.4] In Queensland, responders represented LGAs (44), RDAs (9) and regional groups (4). [Q.5] Responders were to answer either Question 4 or Question 5. Some, however, answered both. While not impacting upon the results, this indicates a need to review the structure of future surveys to ensure no misunderstandings arise.

Some responders have either a dedicated officer (11) or working group (28) managing the relationship with NBN Co but most include this function with other duties. [Q.7] 51 responders have a dedicated point of contact for engagement. Of concern was that ten responders identified as lacking appropriate resources. [Q.9] An issue is that 53 do not know their relevant NBN Co manager, with four clicking the option – *No need as we don't have any development that meet the criteria*. [Q.25] These responders presume there will never be relevant development in their region. In view of the need for HSB, this position is perhaps short sighted.

In order to ensure citizens have capacity to access services and infrastructure (Craddock, 2011) any problems must be identified and addressed. Less than half (38) of the responders were aware of fixed broadband service 'blackspots', with geography, i.e. hills, or distance from exchanges, identified as a reason for their existence. Most were not aware (23) or needed advice as to how to identify them.(35) [Q.17] Only a few identified as having engaged, or currently engaging, by themselves or through consultants, to identify such areas. More were aware of mobile 'blackspots'. (52) However, the more detailed answers indicate many were relying upon anecdotal evidence, or information provided by state government or other sources rather than their own inquiry. [Q.32] The majority of responders indicated they also require assistance to complete the assessment for mobile services. [29 'yes' and 21 'maybe' responders to Q.33]

LGAs (or the BTA) do not provide direct financial assistance to end users. Support programs, however, are available for their benefit, including funding programs accessible by LGAs and those providing skills to end users. Some responders currently access programs (24) but no one program stood out. [Q.39] Three responders used one program; one was used by two; and other programs used by individual responders. These numbers are too small to be representative of overall use or warrant analysis of the programs identified. Several responders indicated they are applying for federal funding without identifying the program. [Q.39] 33 identified as either implementing or planning to implement a program. [Q.40] It would be useful to seek feedback from those who responded 'no' as to why they were not accessing or planning to access or implement any program. Anecdotal comment indicates funding may be an issue. Additionally, there appears to be a perception that such programs will be delivered by, or are best left to, commercial entities.

LGA enablement of household adoption requires support. [Q.41] Most indicated their libraries offered free WiFi (45) or would soon. (5) Some indicated there was no funding; (3) or the library was too small; (3); or it was too complicated. (1) Several do not provide free WiFi (18) with others providing it in their buildings or other areas (31 currently and three soon). Most do not provide this service (34). Some indicate lack of funding (4), or size (2) as their reason. Most do not have commercial grade council sponsored or facilitated WiFi, (51) and do not provide paid digital awareness and skilling programs (49). Some provide (32) or will soon provide (6) free programs. A small number provided detail of such services provided by others (4).

Facilitation of on-line uptake by businesses also is limited. [Q.42] A small number (27) provide, or will soon provide (6), digital awareness and skilling programs. Again some indicated there was no funding; (5) or the library was too small; (1) or it was too complicated. (1) A few provide paid programs (11 currently and three soon) but most do not. (47) Issues of funding (6), size (2) and complication (1) also arose. Some identified others provided these services. (5) It would be useful to clarify why LGAs do not provide services.

## 6. CONCLUSION

LGAs are aware of the need to promote the DE and, within their capacity, are actively working to do so. This is supported through associations such as the BTA and regional and government initiatives. The provision of free WiFi was notable. Enabling access, however, requires more than just WiFi provision. Some LGAs appear to consider that the role of enabling access, by means of awareness raising and program provision, only belongs to commercial enterprises. It is not enough for LGAs to wait for someone else to take the lead. To ensure the future of their regions requires LGAs to act now to enable access by all. Wanting to act, however, is not the same as having capacity to do so.

Even with the support and collaboration enabled by groups such as the BTA, and appropriate acknowledgement within the governing body, capacity within some LGAs appears constrained. Similarly to the findings of Purser (2012) the results of the Survey indicate that barriers to the adoption, use or promotion of programs designed to facilitate access, include lack of funding. This impacts both upon financial capacity to develop and provide programs, and appointment of dedicated DE personnel. An issue is that with increasing budgetary concerns internal LGA funding may be diverted to other activities. Ensuring appropriate

funding for staff and program participation needs to be made a priority. This is particularly so in Queensland, where a number of LGAs are facing the possibility of de-amalgamation with the associated costs to be paid by the 'new' LGA.

The BTA clearly can provide assistance to LGAs in a number of areas. This includes assistance with blackspot assessments and working to overcome this issue. Future areas of research will include seeking to determine why particular programs are used by LGAs; why there is not consistency of use; and what can be done to facilitate program staging. Ensuring cost savings by making certain there is not a duplication of effort will be an important aspect of future LGA activities, as is appropriate funding. From a federal and state government perspective ensuring ongoing capacity of LGAs to develop their regional DEs is vital.

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