

Section 5: Initial conclusions

DCITA's analysis strongly suggests considerable potential for increased adoption and more effective use of ICT across the nonprofit sector. There are already compelling examples of organisations both large and small using ICT to achieve operational, service delivery and community benefits.

While research on the extent of ICT adoption across the sector remains limited, there is evidence that the uneven rate of adoption has hindered achievement of its full promise.

The competitive pressures for organisations to operate and deliver services more effectively and efficiently are likely to continue to grow, driven by both the demands of clients and the wider community and by government and private sector funding providers. As is the case for the business community, there is significant potential for ICT to advance the sector's capacity to respond to these pressures.

There are substantial gains from improved ICT adoption and use not only for the sector itself but for government in its dealings with the sector and for the efficiency of the employment and community services market places. Benefits are also likely for many vulnerable and at-risk sections of the community dependent on nonprofit organisations.

The key impediments to the adoption and effective use of ICT identified in this paper are access and technical support, technological literacy, cost, the fast pace of technological change and strategic awareness. In all jurisdictions access and technical support are the critical elements for the continuing growth of ICT use in the sector.

Technological literacy is an ongoing issue for the sector, from the need for basic skills through to strategic awareness of ICT. In some instances this is compounded by a wider lack of strategic direction.

Although groups representing different parts of the sector are attempting to address these and other issues identified in this paper, significant infrastructure and support issues remain that individual organisations or parts of the sector may not have the resources to resolve.

Questions raised throughout the paper are summarised below. It is anticipated that members of the nonprofit sector, including organisations and practitioners, and government agencies will take some time to consider these in relation to their own experiences and priorities.

This paper serves as a means for DCITA to identify and consult with relevant stakeholders on these issues.

Invitation to comment

This paper raises key issues and many further questions for consideration. The questions posed at the end of each section throughout the paper are summarised below. Comment is encouraged on these issues and questions related to the social and community impacts of ICT. We would like to hear your views and your own experiences.

The period for consultation on the papers is open for several months, ending on **31 March 2005**.

This paper, the companion paper and the full set of case studies are available online (see www.dcita.gov.au/ie/community_connectivity).

The Department welcomes submissions in the form of responses to the discussion questions, comments or further information. Interested parties are encouraged to provide written submissions and comments on the papers by email to community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au.

Submissions and comments can also be made in hard copy. They should be sent to:

The Manager
Community Connectivity
Access Branch
Information Economy Division
Department of Communications, IT and the Arts
GPO Box 2154 Canberra ACT 2601

Submissions and comments can be faxed to 02 6271 1780. Please note that faxed submissions should be no more than five pages long.

Interested parties can provide verbal comments on the papers:

The role of ICT in the building communities and social capital

Please contact: Dr Deborah West,
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Tel: 02 6271 1645

ICT transforming the nonprofit sector

Please contact: Ms Mary Gorman,
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Or contact

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Summary of discussion points

The environment for uptake and use of ICT

What evidence and research is available to indicate the state of ICT readiness of the nonprofit sector in Australia?

What further work needs to be done to gain a reliable picture of the ICT capacity and ICT needs of the nonprofit sector and of nonprofit organisations?

What is the role of governments, the business sector and civil society in advancing this research?

What can Australian nonprofit organisations learn from the experience of overseas nonprofit sectors?

Do Australian nonprofit organisations face the same challenges as overseas organisations?

Are there any overseas approaches to assisting nonprofit organisations with their ICT needs that might be worth considering in Australia? How might they need to be modified?

Nonprofit organisations using ICT to build capacity and capability

What factors are restricting nonprofits' ability to use ICT to build capability and community capacity?

What barriers or impediments affect nonprofits' take-up and effective use of ICT?

What factors are important to the successful use of ICT by nonprofit organisations?

How might nonprofit organisations best identify and aggregate their needs and demand for broadband, ICT procurement, training and technical support?

What factors—such as delivering government services, government reporting requirements—drive nonprofits to adopt and use ICT?

What types of assistance do nonprofit organisations require to improve their capacity and capability to make effective use of ICT?

What role should government and the business sector play in assisting nonprofit organisations?

Is there a role for larger nonprofits fostering access to ICT and effective use of ICT for smaller organisations?

To what extent should industry (for example welfare or community arts) sectors be considered in programs to promote nonprofit adoption of ICT?

What role should government, including local government, play in developing social capital through the nonprofit sector?

How are nonprofits using ICT to build social capital for their clients and members and in the wider community? Please give specific examples.

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Glossary

ADSL	Asymmetric digital subscriber line is a digital technology that supports high speed services over conventional copper telephone lines. The service is asymmetrical because it sends a high bandwidth downstream (towards the customer) with a lower bandwidth upstream (return).
Community organisations	This term usually refers to small nonprofit or <i>third</i> sector organisations operating in a limited geographical area. They may include member-benefit and public-benefit organisations (Lyons 2001).
Community sector	An Australian term that refers to <i>nonprofit</i> organisations providing community services, plus small locally-based organisations in adjacent fields or activities such as health, legal services, employment services and the arts (Lyons 2001). It has a very specific meaning within ANZSIC which matches fairly closely to the above definition.
ICT	Information and communications technology.
Interoperability	The ability to transfer and use information in a uniform and efficient manner across multiple organisations and information technology systems. It underpins the level of benefits accruing to enterprises, government and the wider economy through e-commerce.
ISDN	The integrated services digital network has evolved from the public switched telephone network (PSTN). ISDN services enable users to send and receive information at faster speeds and with greater reliability than is possible using the standard PSTN service. ISDN services are used for the carriage of information such as voice, data, high quality sound, text, still images and video.
Nonprofit organisation	Formed to achieve a common goal or benefit, based on voluntary membership and prohibited from collecting or distributing profit.
Open source	Software that allows freely available access to source code, redistribution, modification and derived works. It may be used, studied or modified but remains under control of the licence holder.
Personal digital assistant (PDA)	Refers to a wide variety of handheld and palm-size PCs, electronic organisers, Smartphones and pagers. Files created on such a pocket-sized personal computer can be later transferred to a larger computer.

PSTN

The public switched telephone network is the standard fixed line telephone network. It is used primarily to supply long distance, fixed-to-mobile and mobile-to-fixed calls in Australia.

RSS

Really Simple Syndication or RDF Site Summary—a lightweight XML format designed for sharing headlines and other Web content.

Resource Description Framework (RDF) is a general framework for semantic description of any Internet resource.

XML

Extensible Markup Language is a flexible way to create common information formats for sharing data on the World Wide Web, Intranets, and elsewhere.