

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

Joint UNECE/EUROSTAT Work Session on Electronic Data Reporting
(Geneva, Switzerland, 13-15 February 2002)

Topic (i): Management, organisational and policy issues

**OVERVIEW OF AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT POLICIES CONCERNING ELECTRONIC
TRANSACTIONS AND SECURITY**

Submitted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics¹

Contributed paper

I. AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT POLICY

1. Australia is well placed to take advantage of the many benefits offered by the information economy. International research by the US - based Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) has ranked Australia second to the US in terms of providing a conducive environment for the development of e-business opportunities, ahead of UK and Canada. As Australia's Internet take-up rates increase, so too will expectations that government information and services will be available.

2. In December 1997, Australia's Prime Minister, John Howard, announced the "Investing for Growth" statement, the Commonwealth Government's commitment to putting all appropriate Government services online by 2001. The Prime Minister's policy statement outlined the importance of the information age for national prosperity, and the ways in which the Government is promoting and supporting the uptake of the online environment, through:

- strong leadership;
- encouraging business and consumer confidence;
- getting key Australian sectors online; and
- fostering the development of the information industries.

3. The Government has a key leadership role in providing people with confidence in, and understanding of, the online environment. A major strategy is to lead by example and make the online transition itself. Specific commitments were made to:

- deliver all appropriate Commonwealth services electronically on the Internet by 2001 (complementing, rather than replacing, existing written, telephone, fax and counter services);
- establish a Government Information Centre through the Office for Government Online as a main point of access to information about government services;
- establish electronic payment as the normal means for Commonwealth payments by 2000; and
- establish a government-wide intranet for secure online communication.

4. A Strategic Framework for the Information Economy, released in December 1998, outlined the Government's ten key strategic priorities for the information economy together with associated key action

¹ Prepared by Merry Branson.

areas, covering areas such as skills, infrastructure, electronic commerce, industry development, health, culture, and regulation.

II. GOVERNMENT ONLINE

5. The Government Online strategy released in April 2000 has a clear plan and timetable for 130 Federal Government agencies. Within this strategy is a policy directive to ensure that online services are citizen focused rather than structured around government and available through a single point of access.

6. Government Online will remove the need for clients of government to understand the structure of the Commonwealth Government and the distinction between it and other tiers of government. Business in particular has had to navigate the complex structure of government to gain the necessary information or service, often having to deal with more than one government agency or jurisdiction to resolve a business issue.

7. The Business Entry Point (designed to be a one stop shop for business) is one example of a cooperative initiative of the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments that brings together business information and services at a single point. It allows business to access current information on a wide range of government assistance programs and services; make initial business registrations online and undertake a number of transactions; and submit tenders for government contracts.

8. Government Online will continue to provide opportunities to reduce the costs to business and government of interacting with each other. A key element of the introduction of taxation reform is the opportunity for businesses (and for larger businesses a requirement) to deal electronically with the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) to reduce compliance costs. Similar opportunities are also being provided to individuals, with the introduction of direct electronic lodgement of personal taxation returns.

III. THE ELECTRONIC TRANSACTION ACT (ETA)

9. From 1 July 2001 The Electronic Transaction Act 1999 (ETA) applies to all Australian Commonwealth entities. The ETA is part of the Government's strategic framework for the development of the information economy in Australia. The strategic framework reflects the Government's commitment to ensuring that Australians enjoy the social and economic benefits offered by the growth of the information economy.

10. The Attorney General introduced the Electronic Transactions Bill into Parliament on 30 June 1999. The Bill was passed by the House of Representatives on 30 September 1999, introduced into the Senate on 12 October 1999 and passed on 25 November 1999. It received Royal Assent on 10 December 1999. The Act had a two-step implementation process. Prior to 1 July 2001 the Act only applied to laws of the Commonwealth specified in the regulations. After that date the Act applies to all laws of the Commonwealth unless they have been specifically excluded from the application of the Act.

11. The Act facilitates the development of electronic commerce in Australia by broadly removing existing legal impediments that may prevent a person using electronic communications to satisfy obligations under Commonwealth law. The Act generally gives business and the community the option of using electronic communications when dealing with Government agencies. Where a law requires the production of a paper document the Act allows a person to produce a document in the form of an electronic communication. However, a Commonwealth agency can determine the form in which electronic data is received i.e. particular information technology requirements, together with methods of verification for electronic communication, which the business or community will have to meet.

IV. GATEKEEPER GOVERNMENT PUBLIC KEY INFRASTRUCTURE (GPKI)

12. Many transactions and services require the authenticity of the other party to be established and the security of the transaction to be assured. The Government has created the Gatekeeper Government Public Key Infrastructure (GPKI) framework to allow for the accreditation of certification authority service providers and their public key technology products, which provide this surety.

13. Arising from the rollout of the Australian Business Number (ABN) to Australian business, as part of the implementation of taxation reform, the Government has announced a specific public key digital signature process the ABN-DSC able to be used by Australian businesses. This online digital signature certificate, which authenticates the identity of each business, will be linked to the ABN. Only Certification Authorities that have been accredited by the Commonwealth under its Gatekeeper Public Key Infrastructure framework will be able to issue an ABN-DSC.

14. The four major Australian banks have been investigating ways to develop effective ABN-DSC electronic trust and payment services in Australia for business e-commerce. The digital certificate schemes being implemented by the banks will exist within the global Identrus electronic trust and payments scheme. Specific implementation is an issue for each bank, but it is envisaged that the banks will begin to issue ABN-DSCs late 2001 early 2002. E-commerce in Australia will be simplified by allowing businesses to use one digital certificate to carry out online transactions with banks, trading partners and government agencies.

V. AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT LOCATOR SERVICE (AGLS)

15. Another common enabler is the ability to easily find and navigate information across a number of agencies. Together with the States and Territories, the Commonwealth Government has been developing a standard technique, the Australian Government Locator Service (AGLS), for describing and labeling information and services. AGLS will enable users to easily find what they want, without unduly constraining agencies in the way that they develop their online applications.

16. The Australian Government Locator Service (AGLS) has been developed over the last few years by the National Archives of Australia (NAA), in consultation with Commonwealth, State and Territory agencies, as such a metadata standard. It is a set of 19 descriptive elements which government departments and agencies can use to improve the visibility and accessibility of their information and services. AGLS has been developed cooperatively by all Australian government jurisdictions and is based upon the leading international online resource discovery metadata standard, the Dublin Core standard.

VI. RESPONSE TO THE ETA AND GOVERNMENT ONLINE

17. The most significant endeavor into EDR by any Australian Government agency in recent times has been that undertaken by the Australian Taxation Office (ATO). With the recent introduction of a Goods and Services Tax for the first time in Australia, the ATO has made this into an opportunity to extend electronic reporting options for businesses, using Public Key Infrastructure (PKI) based security. At the same time it has made electronic reporting options for personal income tax returns (without PKI) available to the whole population.

18. The ATO has learned significantly from this process with the key issues being:

- providing an application that runs in the provider's environment and that handles distribution and display of forms as well as the transfer and confidentiality of data has the effect of simplifying what the end user needs to know, in particular in relation to the security aspects of the application;

- help desk support - in attempting to provide electronic certificates to enable secure data transmission the ATO's help desk was flooded (average of 3 calls per client for a very large business population);
- set-up costs are extremely high - particularly for a large scale roll-out where security requirements include Public Key Infrastructure;
- email addresses change regularly or are incorrectly transcribed - ATO uses email notifications but have had to invest heavily in maintenance of email addresses for businesses.

19. The other major agency to actively pursue online solutions is the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business (DEWRSB) particularly in some of its employment and business information services.

VII. ABS RESPONSE TO THE ETA AND GOVERNMENT ONLINE

20. In the short term the ABS has implemented a cost effective but strictly controlled solution to allow the expected small number of providers who insist on providing information electronically to supply their information. To minimise costs and to ensure control, all requests are handled centrally in a 'just in time' manner. By doing this it is ensured that ABS policies are followed and that individual subject matter areas are not separately developing electronic collection vehicles and instruments. The 'interim' collection instruments are being developed in Excel and are relatively easy to produce.

21. We expected to see an increased demand for electronic data reporting post the introduction of the ETA but this has not occurred. Providers' expectations may shift over the next six to eighteen months once the banks start to issue ABN-DSCs. The ABS will measure any marked increase in interest which may indicate that it is time for us to seriously consider the business case for offering electronic data capture to providers on a larger scale.

22. In the longer term the ABS vision for Data Capture is that providers can adopt their "mode of choice" when responding to ABS requests. Requests and interactions with providers are framed and managed in the context of an understanding of the total relationship we have with the provider (e.g. we know which surveys they are in), the preferences the provider has (e.g. who, when, and how we should contact them), the data we have previously gathered, and the systems and data sources available to the provider. Our processing systems will support "mode of choice" in a seamless and cost-effective way. The impact of different modes on quality is both understood and managed. In our contact with providers we will promote understanding of the value of their contribution.

23. The benefits that this vision may deliver include:

- high levels of provider goodwill and responsiveness
- reduced provider load
- improved data quality
- improved data integration

VIII. CONCLUSION

24. It will take some time to achieve this vision and a key issue for the ABS is the pace at which we move to realise it and the costs we feel can be justified. The reporting modes we offer will be constrained by the costs we can incur in developing and supporting additional capture modes, the security that can be provided, and the impact (and our understanding of it) of different collection modes on statistical data quality. These are the barriers we must work to overcome over the next few years.

25. Longer-term drivers are the Government push for delivery of "appropriate" on-line services, the 2006 Census and community expectations as to how we should do our business. In responding to the Government On-Line policy the ABS has been cautious, we have defined electronic data capture as only

appropriate where we can adequately address the barriers and we have indicated that this will take some time.

26. The ABS does not expect to undertake any large scale electronic data reporting or major multi-modal development in the foreseeable future and until, ideally, we have reorganised more along functional lines with the data capture process undertaken in a more centralised manner. Critical mass and take-up rates will differ for different EDR technologies and modes. The business case for any significant EDR investment now is not viable. Our current investment is in research and development with longer-term gains in mind.

27. An important distinction to make in regard to EDR is that there are a wide range of possibilities, from data collection using an 'e-form' right through to electronic data extraction from providers' systems/web sites. In the short term, the R & D provides a means for us to gain practical knowledge about the opportunities, benefits and pitfalls of collecting data electronically. This includes organisational, technological and methodological perspectives.

28. Regardless of ABS strategies or preferences, provider expectations, and eventually, external pressures are likely to drive some forms of EDR. The well-known history of rapid take-up of new technologies in Australia suggests that demand for EDR will not be linear. We need to be positioned to respond quite rapidly, as the indicators show rising expectations and acceptance as use of online technology achieves a critical mass.