

Australian *Flexible Learning* Framework

Supporting Flexible Learning Opportunities

E-learning in Queensland Visitor Information Centres: Barriers, Facilitators and Communities of Practice

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Executive Summary

Visitor Information Centres are located in urban, rural and remote areas throughout Queensland. Staff working in these centres are primarily responsible for providing visitors with travel advice; interpreting the local region; collecting visitor data; and making accommodation, tour and transport bookings. The highly competitive nature of the tourism industry and the increasing sophistication of the travelling public have placed considerable pressure on Visitor Information Centres to provide quality, relevant and up-to-date tourist information. This is not an easy task in an industry that is highly fragmented – many staff work on a casual or part-time basis; some are retired or have little, if any, work experience; skills and tourism knowledge varies widely; there is a high turn-over rate; and few staff have professional qualifications. In addition, many centres are located in regional areas where access to training and opportunities to view examples of 'best practice' are limited.

The professional isolation experienced by Visitor Information Centre staff is exacerbated by the fact that there is considerable variation in terms of each centre's functions, operational procedures and role within the community. While there is some online communication amongst managers located in the same tourism region, State-wide dissemination of tourism information and exchange of ideas between Visitor Information Centres remains limited. Rather, many centres operate in isolation, and as a result, there is considerable variation in the design, operational procedures and standards of customer service offered. Accordingly, this research was conducted to examine the potential of e-learning to enhance the professional development of Visitor Information Centre staff and ensure a high standard of customer service is delivered by all Queensland centres.

In particular, this project was designed to

- examine how Visitor Information Centres currently access tourist information;
- explore the challenges faced by centre staff;
- identify staff training needs;
- document the type of information that would facilitate the delivery of visitor information;
- identify factors that would facilitate the uptake of e-learning within the industry; and

- explore the potential of e-learning and the development of Community of Practice to enhance the delivery and sharing of information and ideas.

The project design involved collecting qualitative and quantitative data as follows:

- a literature review informed the design of an e-learning questionnaire that was distributed to managers and staff of Visitor Information Centres throughout Queensland.
- questionnaire responses were used to guide interviews with managers of nine Visitor Information Centres in North and Outback Queensland.

The research revealed substantial differences between centres in terms of funding, training opportunities, staffing resources and computer facilities. It also identified considerable variation within centres between paid and volunteer staff in relation to skills, work tasks, qualifications and access to workplace computers. The main barriers preventing staff accessing e-learning were lack of time; insufficient computer resources; and lack of computing skills. For volunteer staff, lack of computer skills was generally rated as the top barrier whereas for paid staff, lack of time was regarded as the main impediment.

Both volunteer and paid staff strongly supported the introduction of e-learning, provided it was delivered in a blended format that enabled them to access materials outside work hours and/or at home. There was also overwhelming support for the development of an online Community of Practice, as staff felt this would enable them to keep abreast of events, attractions and tourism developments in their own and adjoining regions.

Recommendations

- visitors expect a high level of service regardless of whether staff are voluntary or paid, therefore *all* staff should be given comprehensive training, not only on local tourism products, but also in areas such as customer service, itinerary planning, computer skills and online tourist information retrieval.
- it is important that the visitor information industry builds a culture which values and acknowledges the role of self-directed learning. The provision of computer facilities, access to computers and the internet, and opportunities to engage in e-learning is an essential component of this process.
- a high proportion of Visitor Information Centre staff is volunteers and/or older adults. Accordingly, computer training may be required prior to the introduction of e-learning.
- in some Visitor Information Centres the introduction of online training may require a review of policies and procedures for allowing volunteers to access workplace computers and professional development materials and courses.
- training materials and approaches need to be designed to overcome resistance to training common in volunteer workforces. The introduction of incentive schemes; flexible learning materials (eg. CD-ROM, videos); short modules; educational methods that cater for a wide range of learning

preferences and abilities; and a reduced fee structure for volunteers are recommended.

- online training materials need to be simple enough to ensure that constant technical support is not required. This is particularly important for centres located in remote and rural areas where access to technical and learning support is limited.
- due to the diverse nature of the industry in terms of staffing, tourism products, operational procedures and funding, materials need to be presented in a format that can be customised to suit the training needs of individual centres.
- Community of Practice ‘champions’ need to be identified early and asked to take on the responsibility of promoting the benefits of belonging to the network. These ‘champions’ will be responsible for encouraging member participation, ensuring topics of communication are appropriate and relevant, and building a culture of online communication within and between Visitor Information Centres.