

Physical Disability Australia Ltd
P O Box 38
Willawarrin NSW
Australia 2440.
Phone: 02 6567 1500
Fax: 02 6567 1500
Email: pda@pda.org.au
Website: www.pda.org.au



ABN: 79 081 345 164

Submission

To

**The inquiry into the role and potential of the
National Broadband Network (NBN).**

25th February 2011.

Physical Disability Australia Ltd (PDA) is the national peak disability organisation representing the interests and views of people with physical disability across Australia. As a national peak we are funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Families and Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA).

PDA offers this submission primarily from the perspective of people with physical disability, with some reference to all people with disabilities.

PDA supports a National Broadband Network that is:

- Reliable and cost effective;
- Reaches remote and rural areas of Australia already missing out;
- Is free from censoring;
- Is available to all people who want it;
- Remains in government hands.

“Computer technology and the Internet have a tremendous potential to broaden the lives and increase the independence of people with disabilities. Those who have difficulty leaving their homes can now log in and order groceries, shop for appliances research health questions, participate in online discussions, catch up with friends, or make new ones. Blind people, who used to wait months, or years for the information they needed to be made available in Braille or on audiotape, can now access the very same news stories, magazine articles, government reports, and information on consumer products at the very same time it becomes available to the sighted population. People who have difficulty holding a pen or using a keyboard can use the latest speech recognition software to write letters, pay their bills, or perform work-related tasks.” (Kaye, 2000)

People with disabilities in Australia, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2009 number 6.5% of the population of Australia. This section of the population experience Musculo Skeletal disorders which result in permanent impairment of mobility, independence or communication and many other areas of life that are taken for granted by the general population. ⁱ

People with disability repeatedly experience isolation as many are unable to leave their own home due to the restrictions of their disability or need assistance to leave their houses. This issue alone will affect the ability to be employed in traditional work or to circulate in their own community.

Technological advancements as a result of the Internet has meant that the world has exploded on our doorstep and opened up to people with disabilities in a way never before experienced.

These technologies include:

- alternative keyboards or switches
- Blow tubes for operation
- Head sticks for operation
- braille and refreshable braille
- scanning software
- screen magnifiers
- screen readers
- speech recognition

- speech synthesis
- tabbing through structural elements
- text browsers
- visual notification
- voice browsers

People in general and those with disabilities in particular, and more increasingly the ageing sector use the Internet for many reasons, some of these reasons for people with disability are stated below:

- Shopping online
- Banking online
- Communicating with one another, friends, families and business as well as health professionals;
- Obtaining relevant information on disability
- Volunteering
- Employment
- Education and learning, particularly University
- People who are deaf communicate easily using Internet and email
- Those who are blind or vision impaired are now able to 'read' the same information
- The ageing sector are realising the benefits of Internet and email
- Security measures for people with disabilities and their families.

Users of the Internet:

- At the end of June 2010, there were 9.6 million active internet subscribers in Australia.
- The phasing out of dial-up internet connections continued with nearly 92% of internet connections now being non dial-up. Australians also continued to access increasingly faster download speeds, with 71% of access connections offering a download speed of 1.5Mbps or greater.
- Digital subscriber line (DSL) continued to be the major technology for connections, accounting for 44% of the total internet connections. However, this percentage share has decreased since December 2009 when DSL represented 47% of the total connections.
- Mobile wireless (excluding mobile handset connections) was the fastest growing technology in internet access, increasing to 3.5 million in June 2010. This represents a 21.7% increase from December 2009.ⁱⁱ

Of this number, many will be people with disabilities, who have found accessing the Internet in general and World Wide Web when accessible has opened the world community in many ways which will be covered by answering the questions below:

The questions:**a) the delivery of government services and programs;**

The Australian Government has adopted (amongst others) the practice of advertising their services and programs in order to inform all of their customers. In this way, everyone receives the same information. People with disabilities can access information on benefits, services and programs, emergency information and where to go to find assistance from the Internet.

In the human services world, not for profit organisations and other service providers are able to

advertise their presence and services to people with disabilities who would otherwise miss this vital source of information.

b) achieving health outcomes;

People with disabilities are able to gather vital health information from a preventative view through to accessing medical care, addresses and type of care available, costs associated with such care and more.

For instance, some health professionals advertise on the Internet. This includes dentists, physiotherapy, dieticians, clinics and many others. This also means that the individual is able to telephone beforehand to determine whether the premises are wheelchair accessible, have parking, meet their needs, and determine costs and treatment before leaving their home.

PDA also believes that online medical information will be advantageous for treatment, medication and preventative health reasons, with the potential to eliminate much paper work in the long term. a) the delivery of government services and programs;

c) improving the educational resources and training available for teachers and students;

Many people with disability experience discrimination at learning institutions such as lack of accessible premises, not being able to travel to and from learning institutions because of costs and lack of accessible public transport as well as time factors.

Learning online has become the way of the future, and through the Internet, people with disabilities are able to access education and vocational opportunities that would otherwise not be available, therefore increasing employment opportunities for the future.

d) the management of Australia's built and natural resources and environmental sustainability;

PDA is not qualified to offer comment on this area, other than people are more aware of the legislative requirements for access to premises, and the latest moves by government and the business world to improve these areas, which in turn will improved education and employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

e) impacting regional economic growth and employment opportunities;

As PDA is located in a regional area of NSW, we have experienced the difficulties of accessing a reliable and fast Broadband connection for day to day communication reasons. This has meant that a Satellite link is the only way for access to the Internet. This connection is neither fast nor cost effective and is continually affected by cloud cover. We would welcome a NBN that is reliable, fast and cost effective.

Employment using the Internet is in our belief an untapped area of Labour potential for people with disabilities who experience any number of difficulties in employment outside the home. PDA has for 15 years employed staff to work from home using Internet, email and telephone and this has worked to our satisfaction without impacting on the disability of the staff.

f) impacting business efficiencies and revenues, particularly for small and medium business, and Australia's export market;

As a small business and a not for profit organisation, PDA has been able to take advantage of

the Internet and email. The major communication method used to contact members is through email and our website and the newer social media such as Facebook and Twitter, which have become popular ways to receive information for people with disabilities.

We are able to get information of relevance and importance to our members at one touch rather than having to wait days for mail to reach the recipients. In addition the social media outlets have proven to be most reliable in distributing news during recent disasters across Australia and New Zealand and the rest of the world.

g) interaction with research and development and related innovation investments;

Research and development on the Internet is still in its infancy and has the potential to be a tremendous source of learning and education as well as information sharing.

Already PDA uses the Internet to access overseas research and findings on matters of importance for people with disability and it is the quickest and most reliable way of finding out what is happening overseas.

The internet is already seen as a tool for the Academic and Education sector.

h) facilitating community and social benefits; and

The social benefits of the Internet and a National Broadband Network that is cost effective for people with disability (especially those on a benefit of some kind) will include:

- Communication with the outside world, if 'shut in'
- Safety and emergency contact when needed
- A source of pleasure and information'
- A source of employment or education
- A resource to share information with the world

i) the optimal capacity and technological requirements of a network to deliver these outcomes.

PDA believes this is not our area of expertise.

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ⁱ 4430.0 – ABS Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2009 .

ⁱⁱ 8153.0 – ABS Internet Activity, Australia, Jun 2010

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