Internet and PC usage in Victorian public libraries

Effective participation in contemporary society is increasingly reliant on an individual's capacity to communicate, access information, access government and business services, and learn – online. If you need a Centrelink form, you go to their website. To find out when the next train arrives, you download the app. The line at the box office is a thing of the past – now you go online to buy tickets to the theatre, the cricket and your child's school play. Classified advertising lives online, not in the daily newspapers.

This is fine if you are tech savvy and you own a smartphone or a laptop. But while the latest ABS data shows an increasing proportion of Victorians have a computer and the internet at home, 21% of Victorians aged 15 years and over (just under one million people) did not access the internet in 2010–11, with this group having a disproportionate number of people who are older, unemployed, retired, lacking post-school qualifications, born in countries where English is not the main language, and on low incomes. A further 12%, or more than 400,000 Victorians aged 15 or older, accessed the internet at a public library.

The Annual Survey of Victorian Public Libraries 2010–11 reports that at 30 June 2011 there were 2599 public-access computers in Victoria's 44 public library services (not including the State Library of Victoria), or 3.6 PCs for every 10,000 people. In 2010–11, public library users booked 3.2 million computer sessions and spent 3.5 million hours using the library's fixed or wireless internet services – the equivalent of over 260 years online. Why do so many people go to the library to use the computer and the internet?

Based on the 2010 US study Opportunity for all, the Internet and PC usage in Victorian public libraries study undertook surveys and interviews with nearly 4000 users of libraries' computer and internet services. It found that, in a world where it is becoming harder for people of all ages to get by without reliable internet access and good computer and information skills, public libraries play a critical and unique role in society:

• They provide free access to computers and the internet for those who cannot afford internet access – people for whom the cost of connection is a discretionary item to be considered only when the rent and energy and food bills have been paid, and for whom this cost could only be found by going without.

• They provide internet access for those whose internet access is unreliable or drops out, especially those in rural and remote areas.

• They provide a safe, convenient and comfortable environment in which all people can access computers and the internet for study, employment, wellbeing, information, service and recreation purposes.

• They provide access to library staff who support people who are not confident in their ability to use computers, search for information or transact online.

• They aggregate demand for specialist authoritative information (e.g. library and genealogical databases, service portals) to make it accessible and affordable for people to use.

Without free access to computers and the internet at public libraries, hundreds of thousands of Victorians would be less connected with society and their families, have less access to education and employment opportunities, and have poorer and less enjoyable lives.
The study found that Gillian (see box) and other library users don’t want to do anything on the internet that the majority of the population aren’t already doing on their home or work PC, their tablet or their mobile phone: checking out information, connecting with Facebook friends, studying online, looking for jobs, reading the news, submitting government forms or footy tips, joining a club, running a small business, and Skyping their family and friends overseas. It’s hard to do this if you can’t afford a computer or monthly internet fees, if the internet keeps dropping out at home, or in the face of family, work and home commitments. And it’s hard to do if you don’t have the confidence or skills to turn the computer on and find your way around the digital world.

Only 55% of library users of internet services had access to the internet at home (compared with 79% of the Victorian population), and only 67% of children aged 8 to 14 had home access (compared with 93% of the Victorian population). One in four felt that the internet at the library was their only point of access: not home, work, an internet cafe or a friend’s house – just the library. All users talked about the difference that access to computers and the internet made to them by allowing them to be better connected and more actively engaged with their community, be better informed and able to make better choices in relation to family, work and health, and have more control over their lives.

The study found that the strongest advocates for public provision of computer and internet access – the people most supportive of the role of libraries in the digital age – were not those who don’t have or can’t afford internet access: it was those who do and can, the highest earning and the highest educated – those who know how important it is for everyone to be able to access the internet.

**Recommendations**

Maintaining and strengthening the capacity of Victoria’s public libraries to provide computer and internet services that benefit those at risk of being marginalised from society without this access will require continued and increased investment in public libraries. Five priority areas have been identified:

1. universal access to high-speed internet connections at all public library sites (with consideration given to extended provision outside of library opening hours)

2. spaces within public libraries that are conducive to effective and engaged use of computers and the internet by different user groups

3. good-quality up-to-date and well-supported devices (PCs, laptops and/or tablets) and printers running current software

4. staff capacity to efficiently support computer and internet users when required

5. cost-effective access to specialist information, databases and resources.

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**Gillian’s story**

Gillian moved from the country to Melbourne to study at university. She was tech savvy, but didn’t have access to the internet. Using the internet at the library until she had an internet connection set up at home, she managed to find a house, a removalist and work, get organised for uni, pick her courses and begin her studies. She still goes to the library more than once a week to study, where she uses the computers and accesses the wireless internet on her laptop.

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**David's story**

David is 80 years old. He lives on a farm 20 km from the nearest town in Gippsland. He has the internet at home, but the speed is atrocious and the line keeps dropping out. There are 14 houses on his road, and nearly all the occupants of those houses use the internet at the library because it is more reliable. Instead of getting up at midnight when the speed is ‘less slow’ at home, he goes to the library during the day to research farm activities, order equipment and Skype with his children interstate and overseas.

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The *Internet and PC usage in Victorian public libraries* study was conducted for the State Library of Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network by I & J Management Services. Find out more about the study by visiting plvn.net.au.