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Who wants online ADR? Report of a needs assessment in Victoria, Australia

Melissa Conley Tyler

Di Bretherton

ADR online

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The International Conflict Resolution Centre at the University of Melbourne (ICRC) has been working with the Department of Justice, Victoria to investigate the feasibility of introducing online alternative dispute resolution (online ADR) into Australia's second most populous state.

Research has involved three parts:

- An evaluation of current Australian and international online ADR schemes, including identification of best practice principles (*Exploration Report*)
- A needs assessment of likely demand focusing on potential providers and users of online ADR (*Needs Assessment Report*)
- Recommendations for proceeding or not proceeding with online ADR including cost and benefits and preferred options (*Final Report*).

The Needs Assessment conducted in May 2003 may be the first time a government has conducted a detailed study of public demand for online ADR. In order to determine the need for online ADR in Victoria, consultation with both potential agencies and potential users was required.

The ICRC used the following methodology:

- Online survey of visitors to a range of Victorian government sites
- Hard copy survey distributed to users of current Victorian government services

- Five focus groups of potential users
- Stakeholder and expert consultation through distribution of a Discussion Paper
- In-depth consultation with six Victorian government agencies

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identified as most likely to consider introducing online ADR.

Survey and focus group participants represented a broad cross-section of the community, including people who had never used computers, rural and regional participants, people from a non-English speaking background, people from a range of age groups and a person with hearing impairment.

There were three key findings from research:

1. **There is demand for online ADR among more than 70 per cent of potential users**

   Given public unfamiliarity with online ADR, there was an extraordinary level of public interest in and demand for online ADR.

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More than 70 per cent of respondents would be willing to consider online ADR both for general disputes and for disputes with an online company. Daily and weekly computer users and people who use banking and auction sites were more likely to consider online ADR. The major factors influencing choice of process were cost, speed and convenience. Focus groups

> Some concerns were also identified, including reduced communication cues, user impatience, privacy and security issues and accessibility and equity issues.

revealed that dissatisfaction with existing methods meant that most participants would consider online options.

Both focus groups and surveys revealed a smaller but significant group of people that are uncomfortable with online communication and are unlikely to use online ADR in any circumstance. Given this, online ADR should be considered as an addition rather than as a substitute for any current dispute resolution service.

2. **Five of the agencies consulted saw a fit between their current strategies and some form of online ADR**

Government agencies consulted identified a number of important advantages to online ADR, including the ability to bridge distance, to improve transfer and storage of data, to improve access to justice for some groups and offer a number of efficiency benefits. Some concerns were also identified, including reduced communication cues, user impatience, privacy and security issues and accessibility

and equity issues.

The majority of government agencies saw the benefits of online ADR and were interested in introducing some online ADR techniques as an additional service. Online ADR was not viewed as a substitute for existing services or as suitable for every case. One of the major drivers was the belief that online ADR was inevitable given changing community expectations of service delivery.

3. **Both agencies and potential users have issues and concerns that would need to be taken into account in design and implementation of any online ADR system.**

Surveys and focus groups revealed key user needs in an online ADR system, including information requirements, preferred functions, design and promotion issues. These results were found to be consistent with international research on user needs.

Agencies consulted identified a number of implications of introducing online ADR into their operations, including training, staffing, procedural and infrastructure issues.

A set of minimum requirements for any online ADR system identified through user feedback and agency consultations are included in the Needs Assessment report.

Further information on the project, including copies of the first two reports, is available at <www.justice.vic.gov.au> and <www.psych.unimelb.edu.au/icrc>. ●

Melissa Conely Tyler and Di Bretherton.

Melissa Conely Tyler and Di Bretherton are based at the International Conflict Resolution Centre at the University of Melbourne.

Melissa is a member of the UN Expert Working Group on Online Dispute Resolution and can be contacted at m.conleytyler@unimelb.edu.au.

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