ICT NETWORKING EVENT

11 February 2014

AIM: To showcase what ICT initiatives have been employed by public and private sector organisations to streamline internal processes, to gain more organisational efficiencies and to create social, educational and economic benefits for the people of the Cook Islands

PARTICIPANTS: The Chamber of Commerce, NGOs (non-government organisations), and heads of government departments and agencies have been invited to participate in this event. Any displays will primarily be donor-funded projects that have enabled innovation to take place and have provided ICT-capable Cook Islanders to demonstrate what could be possible if the government was to consider ICT technology as a sustainable investment, not only in enhancing its services, but also in engaging its customers – citizens and businesses – through these improvements. So far, registrations for this event have come from The Chamber of Commerce, Bank of the Cook Islands, Civil Society representatives, the Seabed Mining Authority, the Financial Supervisory Commission and the ministries of Health and Education.

Background

In 2008-2009, the Cook Islands Government in collaboration with UNDP (United Nations Development Program) implemented the eGovernment project. The objective was to digitise government information services to enable closer delivery of these services to the public. Initially this was via an individual ministry website with a view of developing a co-ordinating e-portal to enable public access to all government services. Despite the lack of a co-ordinating internet governance organisation and policies that would co-ordinate future internet development in the Cook Islands, many government departments have continued to maintain their websites and are working steadily towards a process of public delivery of services, mostly through the individual efforts of those who recognise the importance of including ICT technology to enhance their overall quality of service.

The Cook Islands National Sustainable Development Plan (NSDP) states eGovernment as a key objective, however, the distribution of its resources do not include funding for ICT initiatives. Innovative departmental heads often attempt to incorporate an ICT component into development initiatives, although some ministries are able to capitalise on their internal capacity more successfully than others. Ad hoc requests are frequently made to donors to meet singular ICT needs that could be more effectively implemented through a more co-ordinated national approach to the delivery of ICT and telecommunication services in consultation with the end-users of these services. Donor funding is often used to import ICT expertise who leave little in the way of sustainable on-going support. The focus is more on fixing a particular problem, rather than incorporating and taking advantage in

the first instance of the talents and skills of our own home-grown technical experts, especially USP (University of the South Pacific) graduates whose commitment is to living and working in the Cook Islands.

Despite the recognition of the importance of ICT in the NSDP, Government departmental budgets generally relegate their ICT units to maintenance tasks with no policy guidance or authority. Government services would benefit more from valuing its ICT personnel and encouraging opportunities to improve internal processes and enhance organisational potential. The introduction of O3B, as a private sector initiative, will boost the operational capacity of both government and business sectors, securing a more enabling environment and increasing economic opportunities.

ICT in the Cook Islands

There is widespread recognition that ICT is a valuable tool for improving the delivery of online services.

The National Sustainable Development Plan focuses on improving governance; strengthening law and order; and building people's resilience to the threats of disaster. All these are possible with ICT. In summary, the NSDP:

1. States under Governance that ICT is to be *"used to better deliver public services by strengthening eGovernment",* a key ingredient to streamlining Government processes, subsequently promoting efficiency and effectiveness.
2. Recognises the *strengthening of local capacity through vocational education and training* to ensure local skills are secured for ICT development projects.
3. Supports *quality policing services for sustainable communities that are safe, secure and stable*, especially with the threat of cybercrime.
4. Ensures *the Pa Enua receive its equitable share of development* through improved telecommunications implementations (among other developments such as transportation).
5. Encourages *partnership with the private sector, civil society and development partners to improve our capacity to deliver,* stressing that *"government will re-engineer its role in the economy to one which supports rather than competes with the private sector by outsourcing functions which could be better performed by the private sector, and entering into public private partnerships where efficiency and service satisfaction gains can be made".* Clearly a strategy that will stimulate the economy with a managed tendering and bidding system for ICT goods and services.

It is essential that the distribution of resources within both government and private organisations align with the objects stipulated in the NSDP. With a more co-ordinated national approach, ICT needs could be better and effectively implemented including utilising the abilities, skills and talents of Cook Islanders themselves. Government will be able to move more steadily towards strengthening eGovernment objectives and to ultimately bring information and communication benefits to the people of our country, enabling them to explore and interact more with the global community.