Engagement and Action in the Internet Age

A regular observation from those involved in thinking deeply about, and planning for, the future is that there are frequently two substantial drivers operating in opposite directions. While the drivers can be fairly easily identified, the interaction between the two, and which one might dominate, is almost impossible to establish *a priori*. 

As an example, the world of the internet is allowing unparalleled connectivity between people who share some sort of interest. But there is strong evidence that our capacity to engage in long-term committed thought and action to address a major challenge has been reduced, at least in comparison with that of small discrete communities of the past.

The ageing of our population (and each one of us) presents just such a challenge. The extraordinary success of our longevity extension, with average age advancing in front of us at a rate of three months a year, is challenging the foundations of all the institutions whose design to care for this sector of the population is based on rapidly out-dated assumptions.

Health costs are escalating. Our hospital systems are in huge disarray. The availability of, and level of care in, facilities for the aged – no matter how well managed and intentioned – are far less than desirable, and for many a source of considerable distress

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The Emerging Assistive and Medical Technologies Network (EAMTN) proposed by the Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering (ATSE) is an attempt to harness the power of technology and connectivity to provide the basis for “building a healthier and more fulfilling life for present and future Australians”. <http://www.atse.org.au/Documents/Publications/Reports/Health%20&%20Tech/ATSE_EAMT_COMMUNIQUE_201112.pdf>

The needs and opportunities identified through the recent ATSE health technology Workshop, based on the long experience of a wide range of people associated with services to the aged and disability sectors were:

* facilitating connections and information flow between the many players in aged/disability care;
* enhancing the awareness of relevant government agencies of the learning occurring in the industry and opportunities for new approaches;
* building the capacity for coordinated cross-sector initiatives;
* informing researchers of the real issues that assistive technology needs to address; and
* ensuring more effective translation of relevant research into practical service delivery.

For our traditional forms of organisation, and systems of governance, designing and delivering such a capability is a substantial challenge. But with the tools of social networking to hand, and with the enthusiasm of those wishing to see significant changes in the experience of ageing – “Australia leading the world in the way it provides care and

opportunity for all its citizens” – it is possible to think of new ways to connect and empower. This can be achieved without loss of accountability, but also without the dead hand of excessive bureaucratic control.

The network will be designed to:

* be open, inclusive and user-focused;
* act as a ready source of authoritative information on which to base practice and policy;
* operate as an independent, influential driver of change towards fulfilled ageing for all;
* provide opportunities for trialling new approaches and technologies; and
* facilitate community engagement in improving aged/disability care

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This is a new kind of initiative from ATSE. But it has become apparent that while continued support for research and technology development is imperative, the far more important and difficult task is ensuring that the technology is in a form that is easily accessible and can meet the needs of those it is designed to assist.

Published in Focus, Number 176, February 2013