

Outback tracking



An IT solution could help remote settlements manage their affairs.

Photo: *Robert Rough*

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A new system is managing paperwork for remote communities. By Simon Sharwood.

AS DEBATE rages over Aboriginal communities, and the level to which residents can control their own destiny, a pilot IT project in Broome aims to drastically simplify community administration and even raise the quality of life in the outback.

Perth entrepreneur Patrick Higgins has formed a partnership with a Sydney software developer and Broome's Mamabulanjin Aboriginal Corporation that he hopes can become part of the solution to the many challenges faced by remote Aboriginal communities.

A recurring problem is keeping on top of the management and governance requirements of the typical community.

"When you have poor management and governance, all the other social problems follow," says Mr Higgins.

"Aboriginal communities are given all this money, but they are not given the training and the tools to use it effectively. There is a perception that the money going in to these organisations is being spent on grog when it's not.

"But it's difficult at the moment to keep track of exactly where it is going. I thought that if there was software available to help communities prove that

they are spending grants responsibly, it would promote trust between the government and the communities." Communities can even be penalised if the federal government is not satisfied that grants are being spent on projects and services outlined in tenders for the funds.

Mr Higgins believed an IT solution could help remote settlements manage their affairs. Simple forms could handle the many compliance tasks required when applying for and using government grants to build and operate infrastructure.

His ideas have been fleshed out by working with Mamabulanjin, a Broome-based organisation with \$14 million in assets that provides power generation, sewerage and water services, waste management, public buses and housing rentals to the 72 remote communities that fall under its jurisdiction.

The corporation also operates a construction company, an architectural design company and works with local Aboriginal businesses to help develop tourism across the vast area of north-west West Australia it serves.

The corporation admits its own management systems are not particularly efficient - many documents are stored in a shipping container. "Our paper trail management systems are fairly archaic," says Neil Gower, CEO of Mamabulanjin. "We're working towards building a system which will make our operation a lot more efficient."

MR HIGGINS and Mr Gower are old school mates and when the former learned of the document management challenges Mamabulanjin faces, he came up with the idea of a software solution.

The pair formed a company called Global Recording Solutions to develop the new application. Mr Higgins turned to Sydney IT company Business Back Office, whose director, Ian Parisi, decided that the most effective system would be web-based software.

Data entry templates would enable the remote communities to meet their compliance chores without having to wade through forms or enter data several times for different purposes.

"We want to eliminate duplication of records," Mr Parisi said. "If a community buys a bulldozer, for example, they would have to create one record for insurance, one for registration, record the purchase in their accounting software and that information has to be filtered back to the government and then integrated with the community's risk solution.

"We have designed a single-fronted application which will enable Mamabulanjin to address the array of risks and compliance issues they have. The system will manage the back office functions for them and allow one single point of input."

Mr Parisi says the beauty of the web-based solution is the ability for remote communities and government stakeholders to access the data. Instead of compiling different reports for each government agency, the system designers intend to streamline this process, with reports available from the browser.

The web interface will also allow disparate remote communities to share information and hold remote interactive workshops.

"There might be 10 indigenous communities who are all involved in power distribution. The software we are creating will create an environment where

management issues can be brought to the table and discussed among all those communities so they are not constantly reinventing the wheel," says Mr Parisi.

Mamabulanjin and Mr Gower are working with Mr Parisi to define the functions that will be needed to make it useful for remote communities.

Mr Higgins says their efforts are expected to result in an alpha version of the application. He has had informal discussions about the software with state governments, describing their response as sufficiently enthusiastic that he now plans to greenlight the development of a formal beta that he hopes will become available in March 2008.

Mr Gower, meanwhile, is excited about the knowledge-sharing aspect of the project, which he sees as complementing Mamabulanjin's efforts to scan all of its documents into an online archive.

"The people of the West Kimberley use us as a resource centre," says Mr Gower, adding that Mamabulanjin's digitisation efforts are designed to make it easier for anyone to access information from its archives. "Health professionals and contractors dealing with employment and training come to us needing historical information about the communities. This system will be a resource for all those people."

Although privately funded at present, Mr Higgins is hopeful that the potential of the system will be quickly recognised by investors.

"This system will give remote Aboriginal communities access to their information. In future they won't have to wait around for someone else to tell them how to run their businesses - the information will be available for them to see and use."

"We hope what we are doing will have a positive benefit and that more dollars will hit the ground instead of what is currently happening in remote communities."

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