Investigating the Role of Electronic Planning within Planning Reform

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ABSTRACT

The limited research on e-Planning in Australia, a perceived slow take up of e-Planning in the New South Wales (NSW) planning system, and the release of a set of e-Planning recommendations as part of a larger planning reform package in November 2007 are the three main reasons for conducting this research. The goal of this paper is to discover the attitudes of planners in the NSW planning system toward Information Technology, and secondly, what the planners understanding of the e-Planning recommendations are. An online survey of 171 planning staff working in NSW local government was conducted during August and September 2008. The survey results confirmed that planners in the NSW planning system are using a wide variety of IT applications, and that although there are frustrations, their attitude is supportive of using IT in their workplace. Participants also demonstrated a strong understanding of the e-Planning recommendations with insightful additional comments collected about the advantages of e-Planning tools and the wider implications for the planning system. Overall, this research has investigated the attitude of planners and found them to be supportive and understanding of the new technologies that are largely yet to be implemented in their workplaces.

Keywords: Attitude, Electronic Planning, E-Planning Tools, Planners, Planning Reform

INTRODUCTION

Computers have crept into most aspects of our daily lives. It is difficult to name an industry that is not computerised to some extent and taking full advantage of the Internet to conduct 24 hour a day, 7 days per week communication with their customers. Industries such as banking, finance, insurance, retail and telecommunications, to name just a few, have all moved into major e-business modes; however, it appears the Australian planning industry has not taken up technology at quite the same rate as others.

The justification for conducting this research is to expand the relatively small amount of research that has been undertaken in the area of Information Technology (IT) and Town Planning from an Australian perspective. The NSW Department of Planning (Department) released the Improving NSW Planning System Discussion Paper in November 2007 (Discussion Paper), which has an entire Chapter devoted to

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the implementation of e-Planning over the next five years. This article examines the current and future use of electronic planning (e-Planning) in NSW from a practitioner’s point of view.

The objective of this article is to gain an insight into the current attitudes towards IT by planners in the NSW planning system. This research strives to answer the following questions:

- What IT tools are planners using in their daily work?
- What are planners’ attitudes towards using IT?
- Do planners understand the e-Planning recommendations in the discussion paper?
- Do planners think the e-Planning recommendations will improve the NSW planning system?

There are two recent examples of research conducted in Australia that focuses on evaluating where councils are currently at in terms of e-Planning by Yigitcanlar et al. (2003) and Yigitcanlar (2005). Both papers are attempts to determine if the infrastructure for e-Planning is in place and how much effort Councils are making to implement e-Planning. Yigitcanlar also devotes a good percentage of both papers to the issues of digital divide.

Since 2001, the research that focuses on the issues and obstacles that impede the implementation of e-Planning are numerous. There is also a consensus that whilst e-Planning is being implemented, it is underutilised (Harris, 1989; Stillwell et al., 1999; Pettit & Pullar, 1999; Vonk, 2005). Research by Klosterman (2001) and Vonk et al. (2005) focuses more on the actual obstacles to the implementation of e-Planning by arriving at the conclusions that the problems faced by planners are difficult to solve using computer processing. Moreover, Councils are too poorly funded to develop e-Planning, current information systems are too focused on operations and administration; and, e-Planning software is too generic, inflexible and incompatible with planning tasks.

Finally, in a literature review conducted by Budthimedhee and George (2002) there are recurring themes of community participation, decision support, social aspects of technology, costs of technology and information sharing. However, no papers investigated the attitudes of planners towards any of these themes, but rather focused on the general public, community groups and the technologies being introduced.

**BACKGROUND**

This section: i) provides a summary of the current e-Planning recommendations as published in the Department’s Discussion Paper, so as to provide the reader with a background as to what the future of e-Planning may be in NSW, and ii) summarises salient submissions to the Department in response to the public exhibition of the Discussion Paper, providing a snapshot of attitudes towards e-Planning prior to the research for this article being undertaken.

The Discussion Paper recommends that technology can assist planning in several areas including (NSW Department of Planning, 2007, pp. 92-93):

- The preparation for lodgement of Development Applications
- Online Development Application Tracking
- Online provision of section 149 certificates (Planning Certificate)
- Electronic referral to State agencies during assessment
- Plan making

The objectives that the Department foresees for e-Planning are a simple experience for users of the system to obtain useful information and the streamlining of a currently complex planning system, particularly for small business.

Technologies used to provide planning information have been website based query and filtering tools, smartforms and GIS. In 2004 a $50 million fund, called the Regulation Reduction Incentive Fund (RRIF), was established by the Commonwealth Government to reduce red tape for small business (NSW Department of Planning, 2007, p. 86). A number of councils
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