

Electronic Commerce Developments within Australia

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I. Introduction

1. The Australian Head of Delegation submits this paper to CEFACT to provide a summary of electronic commerce initiatives by the Australian Government.
2. The Australian Government recognises the importance of electronic commerce developments on the economy and international trade in goods and services. Electronic Commerce will effect all spheres of commerce such as organisations, consumers and government. To address the effects and to utilise the potential benefits of electronic commerce, Australia has initiated a number of projects, working groups and policies.

II. On-Line Policy Issues

3. Consultations are currently taking place on Australia's On-Line Trade Strategy for release in June 1998. The Strategy focuses on the Internet and the World Wide Web, reflecting their increased presence in the marketplace, their low cost in providing key information, services and business tools to help companies' international competitive advantage, and the significant new policy challenges they present. See www.dfat.gov.au/nsr. The Strategy will analyse the effects of the Internet on jobs, exports, and competitiveness for Australian firms, as well as gaining insights into the effect of these issues in different economies.
4. Three input streams will be used to develop the Strategy, each of which are intended to stand as documents in their own right. These include:
 - detailed case studies of 50 Australian Companies using electronic commerce technologies;
 - a national survey of current and expected use of electronic commerce by Australian business; and
 - a detailed analysis of the international electronic commerce policy environment. A thorough analysis on on-line trading policies being adopted by Australia's trading partners will form a key element of the Australian Government's response to electronic commerce
5. The Strategy follows a publication titled "Putting Australia on the New Silk Road: The Role of Trade Policy in Advancing Electronic Commerce" which outlined some possible domestic and international elements of an on-line trade strategy. This report also examined the emerging potential of Internet Commerce to transform world trade, especially in services, and underlines the economic benefits for Australia moving quickly to develop an internationally competitive environment which encourages on-line business.

III. APEC and Electronic Commerce

6. Australia is taking a lead role in both raising electronic commerce to the attention of APEC Leaders and Ministers in Vancouver last year, and in responding to their call for an APEC work program on electronic commerce. At a recent meeting in Penang, agreement was reached on the establishment of a Task Force to manage work on Electronic Commerce leading up to the November Leaders' meeting as proposed by Australia. It was also agreed that the first part of the work program will concentrate on improving understanding of Electronic Commerce issues among APEC countries. Economies have been asked to volunteer issues papers for discussion which will be put on web site www.dfat.gov.au/nsr. Australia's proposed approach to electronic commerce in APEC is based on the premise that increasing understanding of and confidence in electronic commerce will lead to greater use in the region; and that doing so in the context of a forum such as APEC will lead to a more convergent regulatory and legal approach, both in the region, and between the region and the rest of the world. It is recognised that Electronic Commerce can be used to further strengthen trading relationships between APEC members.

IV. National Office for Information Economy

7. The Australian Commonwealth Government has established a National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE) to ensure an integrated approach is taken to delivery of online policy. NOIE will develop, coordinate and overview broad on-line policy issues relating to the regulatory, legal and physical infrastructure environment for online services, including facilitating electronic commerce.

8. NOIE will work closely with a new Ministerial Council with responsibilities for a whole of government action agenda, consulting as appropriate with the States and Territories. NOIE will implement an Online Awareness Program to promote case studies and will also sponsor a national Information Economy Day to lift Australians' awareness of the tremendous practical value of the Internet, electronic commerce and new technologies.

9. A national summit on electronic commerce, 'E-Commerce Enabling Australia' will be hosted by NOIE on 16-17 April 1998 and will bring together senior leaders of government, business, industry, service industries, regulatory bodies and consumer groups. The summit aims to encourage Australia's business leaders and the Government to work together in embracing the economic opportunities presented by the rapidly evolving technological and electronic environment.

V. Commonwealth Government Initiatives

10. A number of government initiatives for future Internet/OnLine use are underway. These are:

establishment of a Commonwealth Information Centre by end 1998.
provision of appropriate Government services on the Internet by 2001
establishment of a whole of government Intranet by end 1998
development of a Commonwealth Government strategy for consistency in the use of digital signatures by March 1998.

11. An Interagency Steering Committee (ISC) has been established to oversee the initiatives. The end product resulting from the above initiatives will be a change in the way the Australian Commonwealth Government conducts its business.

12. The Commonwealth Government Information Centre (CIC) will act as the principal entry point to Government information. The service will operate using a number of client interfaces, such as Internet, phones, fax, and Call Centres. The CIC will work cooperatively with other Entry Points managed by lead agencies to either facilitate direct access to the services provided by individual agencies or it will act as a service broker for diverse agencies.

13. All Commonwealth Government agencies are to ensure that appropriate service delivery systems are Internet enabled by 2001. It is seen that agency business and corporate service applications will need to be similarly enabled if they are to take full advantage of Internet service delivery. Service delivery via the Internet will complement existing agency services which provide access by telephone, facsimile, mail and counter service. It will also draw on the expertise already in place from agencies already using the Internet.

14. The Secure whole of government Intranet will have live applications and will provide a online environment for the Commonwealth Government for intra-government communications, including voice, data, TV, multimedia and electronic business transactions.

15. The Australian Commonwealth Government is developing whole of government requirements for the use of public key technology to provide secure online transactions. These requirements were to be finalised by March 1998 and will be used to develop a national strategy known as the Public Key Authentication Framework.

VI. Tax Implications from the Internet

16. The Australian Government is committed to exempting goods delivered via the Internet from new taxes. The Prime Minister, Mr John Howard, in December 1997 that his Government will not introduce a tax on Internet usage as part of industry policy.

17. A review was conducted during 1997 to investigate the impact of the Internet, electronic commerce and cybercash on domestic industry and government revenue. As part of this review a survey was conducted on postal and air articles to measure the effect of increased low value imports on government revenue. Preliminary indications showed very little influence on either industry or revenue, indeed, no significance from a direct marketing perspective was detected at all. Developments will be monitored to assess future level of impact.

VII. Other Implications

18. A number of Australian Government working groups are examining the implications of electronic commerce on law enforcement, money laundering, copyright policy and legislation, online content regulation, privacy legislation, intellectual property and cryptography policy. These issues are being considered in light of international developments

VIII. Australian CEFACT Management Committee

19. As previously advised, the Australia/New Zealand EDIFACT Board was disbanded in 1997. It's work has been taken up by the Australian CEFACT Management Committee. This committee is Chaired by Mr. Barry Keogh of Tradegate ECA (who is also the Australian Head of Delegation to CEFACT) and is comprised of representatives of various industry strategy groups established by Tradegate Australia (Australia's peak body for electronic commerce). Also the committee includes the EDIFACT Rapporteur (Mr H Bates), the Technical Advisor (Mr D Dobbing) and a representative of the Technical Assessment Group.

IX. TRADEGATE ECA

In addition to it's work on providing concise, harmonised implementation guidelines Tradegate ECA has established a World Wide Web E-Forms Bureau service which may be accessed at the Tradegate ECA website (www.tradegate.org.au). At the present time there are two services in production with more planned in 1998.
