

KEEPING UP WITH THE INTERNET

Although this newspaper remains a traditional source of information for many prospective homebuyers, the internet has become increasingly popular for many of us, especially the younger generation. Master Builders director Michael McLean reports on the 'digital divide' in our community.

RECENTLY attended a breakfast function in Perth hosted by the Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC). It was at this function that BCEC released its latest research report, which explored which households had access to the internet and which sections of our population were missing out on the opportunity to remain connected.

One of the authors of this report, Professor Alan Duncan, concluded that geography, poverty, age and a lack of digital infrastructure created a risk of a divided society between those who are connected and those who are not. This has relevance to such things as being able to readily access information about builders, new home offers, the range of building products and where to go to get help or purchase these things.

According to the BCEC report, those most at risk of falling through the net in Western Australia and becoming increasingly disconnected from society include those living in remote areas, families experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, older persons and low-income families.

The report also mentions that micro and small businesses are affected by the digital divide, which prevents many of them from maximising the opportunities those new technologies offer. Bridging such divides would lead to productivity growth, greater efficiencies and innovation, which inevitably leads to increased value and lower costs.

Key findings of the BCEC report, which is entitled *Falling Through the Net*, include:

- 90 per cent of Australian households had access to the internet in 2016, up from 71 per cent in 2006.
- Levels of internet access are higher in the major cities and inner-regional areas relative to more remote areas.
- Older age groups are less likely to access the internet. In WA, over 60 per cent of those aged 65-plus access the internet.
- There has been a sizeable improvement in internet access for those in the lowest income quintile in WA, increasing from 59 per cent in 2012-13 to 74 per cent in 2016-17.
- Banking (80 per cent), social networking (80 per cent), entertainment (79 per cent) and purchasing of goods and services (73 per cent) are the most popular reasons cited for accessing the internet.
- Access to the internet will become increasingly important for older people as more services go online.
- In WA, the main reason for not having internet at home is a perceived lack of need (56 per cent).
- 74 per cent of the people in WA without



internet do not find it easy to get useful information on the internet.

- Average digital expenditure has increased substantially in WA from 2003-04 to 2009-10 and declined to 2015-16. Recent falls in digital prices have been driven both by product innovation and increased competition.
- ICT products and services are becoming ever more a necessity as society adapts to the digital future.
- 95.4 per cent of all businesses reported having internet access in 2016-17.
- The primary activity on social media for businesses of all sizes is to develop the company image or to market products.
- The volume of data downloaded by Australians has increased by more than 500 per cent in five years.
- Data downloaded over wireless devices grew by 97.4 per cent between December 2016 and December 2017.

Helping to provide greater access to the internet for all sectors of our society has become an important role for our state and federal governments. Educating our students and apprentices is the starting point, but ensuring our older generations who are living and working longer have the digital connectivity skills is just as important. Master Builders and other organisations provide a range of training courses to help job seekers and employees keep up with IT advancements. Prospective homebuyers also need to keep abreast of the enormous sources of information available to them to make the choice of their next builder a good one. A copy of the report can be obtained via www.bcec.edu.au/publications/falling-through-the-net.