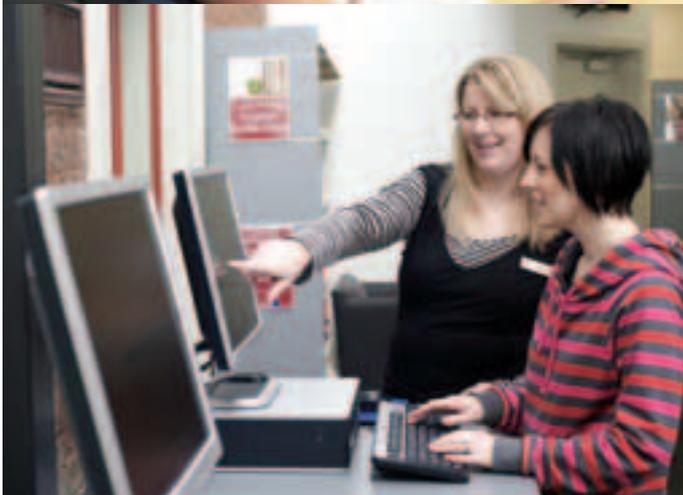




Internet and PC usage in Victorian public libraries

Summary report



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Internet and PC usage in Victorian public libraries

Summary

In 2010 a US study, called *Opportunity for all: how the American public benefits from internet access at US libraries*, examined who uses the internet and personal computers (PCs) in public libraries, what tasks they perform, and the benefits of free access to computers, the internet and related services. Inspired by this study, the State Library of Victoria (SLV) and Public Libraries Victoria Network (PLVN) undertook a similar but smaller study of internet and PC usage in Victorian public libraries.

The *Internet and PC usage in Victorian public libraries* study found that effective participation in contemporary society is increasingly reliant on an individual's capacity to communicate, access information, access government and business services, and learn – online. For people of all ages, it is becoming harder to get by without reliable internet access and good computer and information skills.

Public libraries play a critical and unique role in supporting citizens in the 21st century:

- They provide free access to computers and the internet for those who cannot afford it themselves – people who are at risk of being marginalised from society without this access.
- They provide internet access for those who do not currently have access to reliable internet services, especially those in rural and remote areas.
- They provide a safe, convenient and comfortable environment in which all people can access computers and the internet for study, employment, wellbeing, information, service and recreation purposes.
- They provide access to library staff who can support people who are not confident in their ability to use computers, search for online information or transact online.

- They aggregate demand for specialist authoritative information (e.g. library and genealogical databases, service portals) to make it accessible and affordable for people to use.

In 2010–11, users of public libraries in Victoria spent around 3.5 million hours using their libraries' public access computers and fixed or wireless internet services. Without this, they would have been less connected with society and their families, would have had less access to education and employment opportunities, and would have had poorer and less enjoyable lives.

The *Internet and PC usage in Victorian public libraries* study was conducted for the State Library of Victoria and the Public Libraries Victoria Network by I & J Management Services.

This summary report presents the main findings from the research. It has been produced to support public libraries in their endeavours to advocate for sustained capacity to meet the evolving needs of library users and the community for access to high-quality, high-speed computer and internet services.

This summary report is informed and supplemented by detailed information collected and compiled through a literature review, desktop analysis of statistical data, surveys of nearly 4000 users of libraries' computer and internet services, and interviews with library users to discuss the unique role of public libraries in computer and internet provision. This supporting information is presented in the accompanying technical report, available at plvn.net.au.

Technology access and skills are essential for survival

If you want to get a form from Centrelink or the tax office, you're told to go to their website. To find out when the next train is coming, you download the PTV app. The line at the box office is a thing of the past: you now go online to book tickets to the theatre, the cricket, your child's school play or parent-teacher interviews. In 2010-11, 61% of Victorians paid bills or did their banking online.¹ Encyclopedias are no longer a primary source for research information. Cheques will soon be obsolete. Classified advertising now lives online, not in the daily newspapers. You don't write 25 words or less to win a promotional offer – you scan and send a QR code or enter the special code inside the packet on the website to enter the prize draw.

The world has changed, and it keeps changing at an ever-increasing rate. Technology is now a core part of many aspects of everyday life. And in more and more cases it is an essential part of everyday life. For example, in January 2011, the US Internal Revenue Service (IRS) announced that it would no longer mail out tax forms. The forms could be downloaded from the IRS website or collected (subject to availability) from an IRS office, the locations of which were listed ... on the website. It is becoming harder to access a manual, physical or hard-copy option as more and more government organisations and businesses expect people (including their employees) to access information and transact online.

This is fine if you are tech savvy and have a smartphone or a laptop. The latest data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) shows that in 2010-11, 82% of all Victorian households had a computer (up from 69% in 2005-06) and 79% of persons aged 15 years and over accessed the internet during the year.² But what of the 21% who did not access the internet at any time during the year? Who are they? And how do they survive?

The answer is that the 21% are not a simple cross-section of the Victorian population. In 2010-11, of all Victorians aged 15 years and over:

- 63% of people aged 65 years and over did not access the internet, and nor did 29% of those aged 55-64 years
- 40% of people who were not employed did not access the internet (predominantly unemployed and retired people)
- 30% of people with a highest educational qualification at or below Year 12 or equivalent did not access the internet
- 29% of people born in countries where English is not the main language did not access the internet
- 28% of people on personal incomes less than \$40,000 did not access the internet.

These people will survive because they will continue to seek out the 'old ways' of doing things for as long as they can. They will survive because a family member or friend will help them out. They will survive if they can go to their local public library – a safe, convenient and comfortable community location – and access the internet. And when they go the library they will be able to get help from library staff or attend a training course on how to use a computer, how to log on to the internet, and how to search for information.

¹ Household use of information technology, Australia 2010-11, ABS, Cat. No. 8146.0.
² *ibid.*

Gillian's story

Gillian moved from the country to Melbourne to study at university. She was tech savvy, but didn't have access to the internet. Using the internet at the library until she had an internet connection set up at home, she managed to find a house, find a removalist, find work, get organised for uni, pick her courses and begin her studies. She still goes to the library more than once a week to study using the library computers and the wireless internet on her laptop.



'I just want to be able to do what everyone else does'

The *Internet and PC usage in Victorian public libraries* study found that libraries are a vital safety net in providing universal access to computers and the internet. While libraries currently represent an untapped resource for the 21% of the population who do not access the internet, 12% of the Victorians who did access the internet in 2010–11 – or more than 400,000 people aged 15 years and over – did so at a public library. For the most part these people did not go to the library so that they could access specialist information or databases. They used the internet and computers to do exactly the sort of things that most Victorians do every day.

The survey of internet and PC users found that 68% of people who used these library services did so for recreation and entertainment

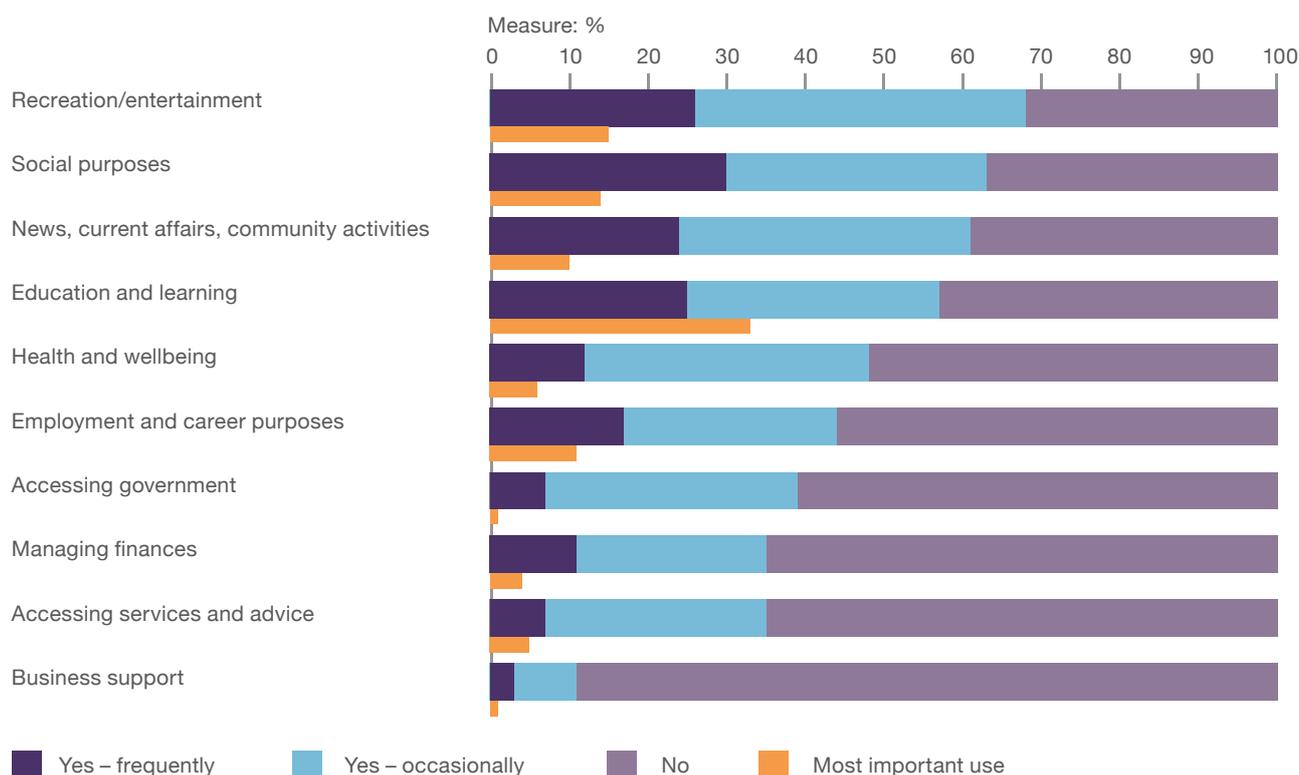
purposes: undertaking personal research, surfing the internet, pursuing hobbies and playing games. Sixty-three per cent undertook social activities, such as emailing family and friends (nearby, interstate or overseas) or accessing social-networking sites (e.g. Facebook). Sixty-one per cent used their library's internet services to access news and current affairs at home or abroad, or to get information about local community activities. On average, survey respondents said that in the past 12 months they had undertaken activities in four to five of the ten activity groups mentioned in the survey.

Interestingly, when asked to rate which of these ten activities was the most important to them, 33% of respondents nominated activities related to education and

learning – even though education was not the most frequently undertaken pursuit. Students of all ages – from primary school to university to vocational education and the University of the Third Age (U3A) – use the computers and internet at their public library to access and undertake education and learning programs. They check out schools, apply for training courses, do their homework, access online courses and undertake research to further their knowledge.

Education, recreation, socialisation, information. Outside the workplace, this is the stuff of everyday internet use – or it would be if everyone had reliable access to the internet and support at home. But they don't, which is why people go to the library.

Use of computer and internet services



‘I go to the library because I don’t have the internet at home’

Public libraries provide free access to computers and the internet for those who cannot afford it themselves. The unemployed, pensioners, tertiary students and other people on low incomes have to carefully decide where to spend their money, especially when the cost of living is ever increasing. For many of the library users interviewed in this study, a computer, software, a broadband plan, a printer and ink cartridges are all discretionary items to be considered only when the rent and the energy and food bills

have been paid. As much as they would like to have internet access at home, the reality is that the total cost of connection is prohibitive and could only be found by going without. There is nothing that these library users see as changing in the foreseeable future (e.g. the National Broadband Network, faster download speeds) that will make the cost of entry into the digital age any more affordable than it is now.

Only 55% of survey respondents had access to the internet at home,

compared with 79% of the Victorian population. Sixty-seven per cent had a computer at home, compared with 82% of the Victorian population. Among children aged 8–14, only 69% had access to computers and the internet at home, compared with 93% of Victorian children. One in four survey respondents felt that the internet at the library was their only point of access: not home, work, an internet cafe or a friend’s house – just the library.

Aaron’s story

Aaron is an artist and student who lives in a share house. He lives off his art, doing part-time jobs when he can, but he has a limited budget and low discretionary income. If he paid to have the internet at home there would be less left over for art supplies and learning. So Aaron chooses to go to his local library three or four times a week to use the free internet – to research painting and artists, study, find jobs, email friends and stay connected via Facebook.

‘I go to the library because my internet service is unreliable’

For other people who use the internet and computers at the library, access is not the issue. They have internet access at home, but it is unreliable and slow and keeps dropping out. This is most notable among library users in rural and regional areas, although there are also some newer suburbs in outer metropolitan areas that currently have limited access to the internet. High-speed broadband may be part of Australia’s future, but for those living in the present it is not always available.

There is also a broader access issue in households where there is only one computer. Children compete with one another to access the computer and the internet to do their homework, and when the homework is done there is competition for Facebook or game time. Their broadband plan has monthly download limits, the computer might be five years old and still using Office 2003, and the graphics card won’t run the new computer games.

For people in these situations, the fact that the library provides free internet access is not the primary drawcard: it is the fact that the library provides reliable internet access (and even in areas where the library’s internet speed is not as good as it might be, it is usually superior to that which many users experience). They can book a computer, or even bring their own device, and know that they will be able to get online and do what they need and want to do, quickly and efficiently.

David’s story

David is 80 years old. He lives on a farm 20 km from the nearest town in Gippsland. He has the internet at home, but the speed is atrocious and the line keeps dropping out. There are 14 houses on his road, and nearly all occupants of those houses use the internet at the library because it is more reliable. Instead of getting up at midnight when the speed is ‘less slow’ at home, he goes to the library during the day to research farm activities, order equipment and Skype with his children interstate and overseas.



ancestry
library
edition

‘My library is close to home and free from distractions’

The third major reason survey respondents identified for coming to the library to use the computer and internet services was not about the cost of or access to technology. It was about the library being a safe, convenient and comfortable place in which all people can access computers and the internet for study, employment, wellbeing, information, service and recreation purposes.

What was most interesting about the people who raised this issue was that they covered the full range of demographic categories. The children’s survey found the library to be a safe place where kids could come after school to do their homework, alone or with their

friends, but better than being home alone. Older school-age students also used the library computers for homework, recreational and social purposes. Some tertiary students loved being able to use the internet at their local library as it saved them an hour each way travelling in and out of the city to study at their campus library (and was quieter than their shared accommodation). Mature-age students studying prior to re-entering the workforce and employees doing further study to upgrade their skills found the library to be a place where they could work in peace in the library’s quiet areas, focused on their study away from other distractions. With the increased emphasis on e-learning

across all levels of education and training, public libraries uniquely combine accessible online connectivity with an environment conducive to study.

Self-employed people running micro-businesses that take them from place to place can drop in at a library between appointments to prepare and send invoices and research potential customers. Parents feel comfortable dropping their teenager at the library for an hour to access a fan-fiction website. And everyone is welcome to use the internet at the library, without fear of exclusion or discrimination.

Gayle’s story

Gayle works full time, but her employer gives her one day off a week to study and improve her qualifications and skills. She has the internet at home and can afford to use it, but a new baby and the distractions of housework affect her ability to focus. She goes to the library and hides up the back with her laptop, where for the whole day her main and only focus is her online study. With that done, she can spend her time at home ‘just being Mum’.

‘The library staff help me out when I get stuck’

Public libraries offer something that many people lacking confidence or skills in using computers cannot find in other places where they might access the internet: library staff who will help you if you need support in using computers, searching for online information or transacting online. For 47% of survey respondents (especially people aged 55 years or older and those living alone) this was one of the special advantages of using the computers

or internet at the library. When they asked a question at the library, of a staff member or the person sitting at the next computer, they got an answer that helped them out and didn’t make them feel inadequate.

The survey of libraries conducted for this study found that every library service in Victoria offered informal and/or formal assistance to library users accessing the computers and internet, with more than two-thirds

offering training programs to help people build their confidence and skills.

‘Computer savvy seniors’, ‘How to surf the internet’, cybersafety programs, ‘Appy hour’ (for the iPad) and PC training for groups in foreign languages are just some of the programs that libraries run to help people bridge the digital divide.

Jean’s story

Jean is a disability pensioner with limited mobility and limited income. She has no computer or internet at home, so she rides her scooter to the library a few blocks away. With the large-print screen, an adjustable table and a chair with arms, the library is a comfortable place – Jean has arthritis in her arms and joints. The library staff are always helpful, having taught her how to use Excel, how to use the internet and how to save documents to a flash drive. Jean lives alone, so she enjoys the interaction with other people when she goes to the library.

'I can't afford to subscribe to my favourite database'

The final reason why people chose to go to the library to access computers and the internet is somewhat different to the first four reasons. When libraries provide free, reliable, convenient internet access and support, they do so without regard to what the user wants to do online (as long as this activity does not breach the library's conditions of use). However, some people use library computers because they want to access specific information or databases that are more easily, more cheaply or only accessible through the library.

The most common example of this is the genealogist – a library user

well known to staff in all public libraries. The cost for an individual to purchase basic access to genealogical databases such as Ancestry.com starts from around \$200 per year. Then there is the cost of additional software and, potentially, access to more specialised information. For hobbyists wanting to find out more about their family tree, the costs can quickly add up. Through library subscriptions to these databases, many people get the opportunity to access this information for free.

Similarly, there are other specialist online databases and resources (e.g. online language courses) that libraries are aware of and can

access that are out of reach of the ordinary citizen. Being information professionals, some Victorian public libraries have produced their own information packages on topics of interest (e.g. local history, culture) to make it easier for people to access.

Libraries are unique in that they have the skills and capacity to aggregate demand for specialist information (e.g. library and genealogical databases, service portals) to make that information more accessible and affordable for most people to use.

Mary's story

Mary is retired and uses the library to access two subscription-only genealogical databases – Ancestry.com and Findmypast. She also accesses the library's Digger indexes, census records and parish records as she researches her family tree. She thinks the library is very generous in allowing her free access to the genealogy databases so that she doesn't have to pay the 'expensive' subscription prices.



Libraries: investing in a better life for people in their community

The internet provides up-to-date information (on most websites), and it is crucial for us to have this important service. The public needs it because the whole world now operates on the internet.
– Alison, library user

By providing free access to computers and the internet, public libraries provide a mechanism for all Victorians to stay connected – to one another, to education and employment, to government and service providers, to news and current affairs, and to the information that drives contemporary society. Without library access to the internet there are groups in the community (e.g. the elderly, the unemployed, people on low incomes) who are at risk of being further marginalised than they already are.

For the most part, the study found that Gillian, David, Jean (see boxed text) and other library users don't want to do anything on the internet that the majority of the population aren't already doing on their home or work PC, their tablet or their mobile phone. Checking out information, Facebooking friends, studying online, looking for jobs, reading the news, submitting government forms or footy tips, joining a club, running

a small business, Skyping family and friends overseas – it's hard to do these things if you can't afford a computer or the monthly cost of the internet. They are hard to do if the internet keeps dropping out, or in the face of the distractions of busy family, work and home commitments. And they are hard to do if you do not have the confidence or skills to turn the computer on, connect to the internet and find your way around the digital world.

Libraries help to keep hundreds of thousands of Victorians connected every year. During the *Internet and PC usage in Victorian public libraries* study, interviewees talked about the difference that library access to computers and the internet made to them by:

- being better connected and more actively engaged with their community
- being better informed and able to make better choices in relation to family, work and health
- having more control over their lives.

Fifty-three per cent of people who participated in the survey of library users accessing computer and internet

services said that these library services were 'very important' to them personally, with a further 26% saying that they were 'important'. However, an even greater proportion of survey respondents (68%) said that it was 'very important' that others in the community had access to library computers and the internet, with another 22% saying this was an 'important' community service. The population groups that were the strongest advocates for libraries providing computer and internet access to the community were those earning \$60,000 or more (77% rating this as 'very important') and those with their highest level of education being a degree or higher degree (76%). That is, the people most supportive of the role of libraries in the digital age are not those who don't have or can't afford internet access – it is those who do and can, and who know how important it is that the entire community be able to access the internet.

Recommendations

Maintaining and strengthening the capacity of Victoria's public libraries to provide computer and internet services that benefit those who are in greatest need will require continued and increased investment in public libraries. Five priority areas have been identified:

1. universal access to high-speed internet connections at all public library sites (as far as possible, consideration should also be given to extending provision outside of library opening hours)
2. spaces within public libraries that are conducive to effective and engaged use of computers and the internet by different user groups (this could include spaces for homework, group study and quiet study, relaxed use of wireless devices for people of different ages, and access for people with a disability or mobility requirements)
3. good-quality, up-to-date and well-supported devices (PCs, laptops and/or tablets) and printers running current software
4. staff capacity to efficiently support computer and internet users when required
5. cost-effective access to specialist information, databases and resources.

