



Australian Government

Department of Finance and Deregulation

Australian Government Information Management Office

Public Submissions to the Australian Government Consultation Blog Discussion Paper



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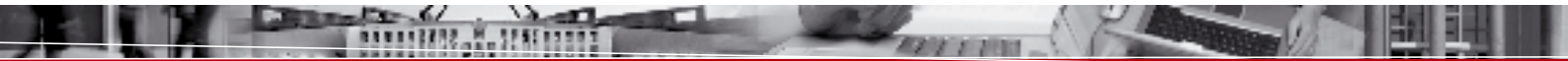
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one Overview



one

Overview

The Australian Government Consultation Blog discussion paper was released for public consultation from 24 September 2007 to 1 December 2007. The public were invited to provide feedback on a discussion paper regarding the possible functionality and operation of an Australian Government Consultation Blog.

The paper was available from the Australian Government website www.agimo.gov.au. The paper sought views on a range of topics including features, user expectations and registration for participation and posting information, moderation, privacy and security issues.

The proposed functionality preceded a list of questions people were invited to consider as the basis of a submission. Most submissions provided answers to the questions suggested. Some submissions provided additional insights gained from experience in using, designing, developing and managing online consultation forums and blogs.

The report provides a summary of the submissions received by the Department of Finance and Deregulation's Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO). This report will be used in conjunction with the results of offline consultation reports, surveys and focus groups to assess the public interest in consulting with government and to identify the requirements and challenges for an Australian Government consultation website.

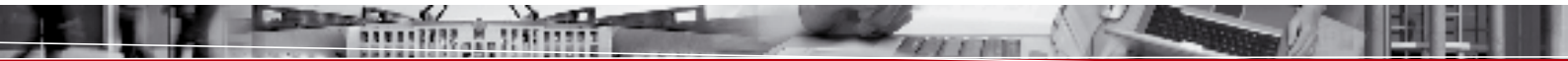
Submissions received

A total of twenty submissions were received in response to the Australian Government Consultation Blog discussion paper. Fourteen of the submissions were received from individuals within the community, three submissions were received on behalf of non-government organisations and three submissions were received from government organisations

Author Origin	Number
Individual	14
Non government organisations	3
Government organisations	3
Total	20

In accordance with the discussion paper, unless submissions were made in confidence, a list of the individuals and organisations that made a submission to the discussion paper would be made available. These are at Appendix 1.

two Executive Summary



two

Executive Summary

Overall, respondents indicated support for an Australian Government Consultation Blog, noting it would be a welcome step in public policy development in Australia.

Many respondents acknowledged that online consultations are an effective way to encourage the free and frank expression of opinion across social and economic divides. In particular, online communication can be empowering for many young people compared to conventional mechanisms of public consultation. Blogs and discussion forums could be used in conjunction with traditional consultation methods, to encourage participation by Gen X, Y and V¹, who are already using this type of technology as a means of communication.

Respondents indicated they would register to participate in, and tell their friends about, government discussion forums relevant to their areas of interest. Receiving an appreciative acknowledgment or reply, where appropriate, would encourage them to continue to participate in an open dialogue with government. As online discussion forums provide exposure to the views of others, respondents pointed out that submissions made via such a forum are likely to be thoughtful and include a broad range of perspectives.

Online consultation approaches, however, raise issues about credibility and representation, which are critical to participation. Respondents expected that discussions and consultations with government would be moderated to ensure that discussion was open and frank yet free of racial vilification, offensive language and inflammatory comments. Respondents also expected that government consultation forums would be safe to use from a security and privacy perspective.

Respondents suggested that the overall success of a government discussion forum will depend on the skill and expertise of the people managing and contributing to discussion. Moderators, either government officers or members of the community of interest, must be able to convey government policy clearly but not stifle or steer discussion away from sensitive issues. That capacity requires openness, honesty and skill.

In conclusion, online consultation mechanisms should be supplementary to existing processes rather than replacements and to encourage maximum participation, respondents required that they should be clearly and widely publicised. Mechanisms that assist a participant to find, and to tell others about consultations of interest to them are supported. The concept of a 'one-stop-shop' for consultation is important and has the potential to facilitate much greater citizen engagement.

Respondents indicated their desire to widen the scope of the proposed consultation blog and discussion forum from government initiated topics to include topics suggested by the public. Enabling the general public to suggest and initiate discussion topics would provide true collaboration where citizens have the opportunity to actively shape policy.

¹ Generation X and Y are terms used to describe particular age cohorts. Gen X refers to those born during the 1960s and 1970s, Gen Y refer to those born in the 1980's and 1990's. The term Generation V (for Virtual) is used to describe those who prefer to obtain information and communicate through digital methods. Members of Generation V are not usually defined in terms of a particular age, sex, race or location.

Summary of responses to questions

Terminology

A few submissions highlighted the need for consistent terminology in describing new communications media. It cited confusion in the terms used in the discussion paper where the term 'blog' and 'discussion forum' were used interchangeably when they serve different purposes.

For clarification, a '**blog**' is a website entry made by an individual and is available for others to post their individual opinions.

A '**discussion forum**' is a defined area on a website made available specifically for a multi-person discussion to take place, similar to a 'town hall' meeting. It may have one single topic focus or be the subject of multiple topics of discussion. Discussion forums allow people to make comments or post messages for a defined period of time.

Attention was also drawn to the need to be concise about the use of the terminology describing the way people use these different technologies. For example:

- discussion forums generally use 'topic', 'thread', 'post' or 'reply' in inviting responses; and
- blogs generally use 'blog post', 'blog entry', 'comment' or 'reply' in inviting responses.

Purpose of use

A non-government submission made reference to the intended use of the specific technologies addressed in the discussion paper. It proposed the first principle for consideration in any consultation using information and communication technologies (ICT) should be the intent or 'purpose' of the consultation.

The submission proposed there are two general purposes for using ICT's in the consultation process and they are to:

- 1 generate discussion around the subject of the policy or service delivery, where the purpose might be to acquire a general knowledge base that may inform the process; or
- 2 generate ideas to inform the shaping of policy or service delivery by having users provide their ideas in response to an artefact.

Depending on the proposed intent of the consultation a discussion forum may be better suited to generating discussion around a topic, it might include an online facilitator that supports and encourages discussion, responds to postings and provides simple moderation. A blog may be better suited to a policy consultation seeking specific views; it may include a set of blog posts in any format, a set of formal terms of use, the capacity for tagging (labelling information) and a method of moderation.

Providing information about and responding to a consultation

Q. Would you respond to a government online consultation of interest to you, if you were aware of it and would you read the views of people published in the public discussion forum?

Most respondents indicated they would respond to a government consultation online if it were relevant to them. Some indicated they would be more likely to respond if they were to receive an appreciative reply and updates on the status of their contributions. Respondents were also unanimously receptive to reading the views of others. Some indicated they would do this before posting their own comments to avoid duplication. Others proposed a 'thumbs up' endorsement system for comments that encapsulated their own opinions that they could simply agree with.

Q. Would you post your views in a public discussion associated with an online consultation and what proposed features of the discussion forum do you like or dislike?

Most respondents said they would participate in a discussion forum associated with an online consultation. Others preferred to simply post a comment on a blog rather than enter a discussion forum. Respondents generally agreed with the proposed features of the discussion forum. Almost all respondents made the point that discussion forums must include government officials that monitor and contribute to discussions in order to clarify points of fact and to fully engage with the process.

Q. Would you participate in a notification system that allowed you to be informed when reports and policies developed as part of the consultation process were made available?

Respondents indicated their desire to be kept informed of developments occurring in government discussion forums and consultation blogs whether they made submissions or not. A system that allowed the user to customise alerts, via email, for items or topics of relevance was the preferred method of notification.

A range of additional ideas for consideration were also proposed, these included;

- intuitive design and possible operation in 3D environments;
- ability for citizens to create new topics for discussion.

Expectations

Q. Would you expect to see other responses (submitted via, email post, or survey) published on the consultation blog website and published in full in a consultation report?

Most respondents expected to see, in summary format on the consultation web page, the views of submissions made via other channels (email, via post or survey) provided they were clearly identified. The overall consensus was that a website should act as an integration point for a public consultation and provide an overview of the entire consultation process, whether conducted online or via a more traditional method.

Q. If your response to an online consultation affected the policy outcome would you expect to be recognised?

Respondents were equally divided in their expectations about being formally acknowledged if they responded to a government consultation. Some respondents suggested that those people who expected a formal response should make a formal submission to a consultation using a more traditional channel, for example mail. Other respondents indicated they would not expect their contributions to be recognised if they participated in a discussion forum, but would like to be recognised or acknowledged, for example via a thank you letter, for their contribution to policy consultation, especially if their ideas or suggestions were adopted by government.

Other expectations raised by people included:

- that evidence would be available to indicate that government was addressing issues that were raised on blogs and in discussion forums; and

- that agencies and departments would feedback how forum and discussion input would be used following an online consultation; and
- that there would be some kind of acknowledgement of significant contributions made.

People telling others

Q. Would you 'tell a friend' about consultations or comments posted to an online consultation forum of interest to you?

Respondents were supportive of mechanisms that assisted them to 'tell a friend' about consultations or comments of relevance. Submissions from the non-government sector supported a range of social networking functions that could support the dissemination of information about consultations. They included 'book marking' like del.icio.us², the ability to invite others to join the consultation, and the use of syndication services which would allow information about the consultation to be relayed to other websites with large audiences.

Finding a consultation

Q. Would you add your own classification, labels or tags to online consultations using descriptive words that are meaningful to you?

Respondents agreed on the need for a clear and concise classification system for consultations to enable easy search and location. Some respondents indicated they would like the ability to 'tag' comments and posts with their own data. One submission suggested providing multiple pathways to consultations to assist people in locating a consultation of interest to them. They supported simple search using keywords, a search by agency and/or topic and the use of tags.

Posting and registering

Q. Would you register to participate in the consultation blog forum? If you registered, would you provide your real contact information?

Respondents were divided on the need to register to participate in a government online consultation. Those who supported registration indicated that they would provide their real contact information; however the provision of contact information would depend on privacy rules and statements made on the website about how the information was to be displayed and used. Some respondents proposed restricting the participation ability of people who did not wish to identify themselves by registering, for example provide access to read information only, not to contribute. Respondents generally assumed that people who did not wish to register and provide their real identity may limit the quality of the discussion.

Other suggestions concerning posting and registering included that registration for online consultation processes should be the same as the registration or identification procedure for all submissions, regardless of its channel. Further suggestions were made around the quality of the submission being enhanced by requiring that participants be registered and validated, but always allowing participants to select whether they wish to be identified or not.

² Del.icio.us is a social book marking web service. Social book marking is a way for Internet users to store, organise, search, and manage bookmarks of web pages.

A concern was raised about the number of comments that could be made per individual. It suggested that requiring a registration process would limit the number of posts a person could make to a blog to avoid duplicate 'lobbying' that might give the impression that the opinion is shared by a larger number of people. If participants are not required to be registered it may impact on the degree of genuineness of each post or the validity of the consultation process overall. Requiring registration may limit malicious misuse.

A few respondents indicated they would not register to participate in a consultation blog or forum. If it were a requirement for participation they would prefer to provide submissions via email and identify themselves with an email address only.

Q. Should people be required to register to recommend consultations and posts to the consultation blog forum?

Respondents generally did not support any requirement that people be registered in order to recommend consultations and forums to others.

Q. Is the ability to discuss the consultation in the forum a feature you would use?

In answering this question respondents replied that a discussion forum should be a central feature of any consultation website.

Q. What content would you consider to be inappropriate if posted to the consultation blog forum?

Respondents were unanimous in their opinion regarding inappropriate posts and comments in forums and blogs. Off topic discussions, personal attacks on individuals, content inconsistent with privacy principles, offensive language, sexual content, racial vilification and advertising or commercial 'plugs' were all cited as inappropriate.

Moderation

Q. Should posts to the consultation blog discussion forum be moderated before they are published? And is it important that posts to the discussion forum are published as quickly as possible?

Most respondents supported the moderation of content in general. Dependant on the purpose of the consultation or discussion it was noted that moderation can often inhibit discussion if the time taken to moderate comments is too long. An acceptable timeframe for moderation was not specified.

Some respondents suggested introducing a 'merit' system of moderation that recognised a participant's level of use, for example they were frequent contributors to government consultations. If their use was in line with the websites proposed moderation guidelines over a set number of comments or posts, then they would no longer be moderated.

Some respondents suggest that any moderation guidelines, for blogs or discussion forums, need to be supported by a policy framework which includes a content policy, take down policy and grievance procedure. Some respondents indicated they would support moderation by invited participants, if appropriate, providing there was an avenue for appeal. Invited participants would apply moderation guidelines in accordance with the stated policy.

Q. Would you accept posts being automatically scanned for malicious or inappropriate content?

All respondents expected that automatic scanning would take place against a set of published rules for participation.

Q. Are the moderation guidelines at Appendix A suitable to use to moderate the forum?

Respondents agreed that the moderation guidelines that were proposed with the discussion paper were adequate. One respondent disagreed with the prohibition of website links and suggested that this should be relaxed as long as website links are not off-topic and are not posted for commercial reasons.

Other points on moderation included;

- that new participants to any government forum should first be placed on a 'moderated status' to ensure that they complied with the guidelines of the consultation. This moderated status could be relaxed once the participant had posted comments compliant with the guidelines;
- that the agency or department conducting the consultation or discussion should be responsible for the moderation as they would have the expertise to address the issues raised; and
- the importance of a positive note applying to any forum where the moderator engages with participants and challenges them to address issues in a reasoned and deliberative fashion.

Privacy

Q. Would concerns about your privacy prevent you from using the consultation blog discussion forum?

Respondents indicated that privacy concerns would not prevent them from using the consultation blog, but some respondents would like to have the ability to hide their real identity if they choose. Respondents indicated that Privacy rules that were reviewed by an independent body (for example the Privacy Commissioner) would provide them with greater confidence in the stated privacy principles.

Other issues raised around privacy concerns included:

- that some contributions, dependant on topic, may require greater privacy assurance than others and may prompt users to make anonymous contributions; and
- that contributions to the consultation process might be encouraged by ensuring participants have the ability to:
 - specify privacy of some or all of their identifying information,
 - specify that any or all of their information is not supplied with comments, and
 - remove or delete information about themselves once a consultation is closed.

Security

Q. Would concerns about security prevent you from using the consultation blog discussion forum?

Generally respondents were not overly concerned about security when using an official government consultation website blog or discussion forum. Some respondents noted that where the nature of the consultation might be around security issues, some consultations might require additional security measures like encryption.

It should be noted that the discussion paper did not seek to explore the reasons or nature of security concerns, rather it simply asked whether concerns about security would 'prevent' them from using a government online consultation forum.

The main concern of respondents in respect to security issues is the misuse of information or their personal data being used for commercial purposes. Respondents also indicated the need to ensure that all messages and artefacts associated with the consultation are free from malicious code and that the technical environment needs to be able to cope with high and sudden levels of usage, spamming and denial of service attacks.

Appendix A Public Submissions



A

Public Submissions

Individuals	14
Mr David Bath	
Mr Alan Biggs	
Mr Jacques Chester	
Mr Andrew Donnellan	
Ms Karen Fainges	
Mr Fraser Henderson	
Mr Garth Holmes	
Mr Matthew Links	
Mr Jeremy Malcolm	
Mr Robert Merkel	
Other submissions were not for publication	
Non-government organisations	3
Mr Guy Carvalho for BrandAide Communications	
Ms Sarah Wilson for Consumers' Telecommunications Network	
Mr Greg Black for education.au limited ³	
Government organisations	3
Centrelink – Indigenous Services Branch	
Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations	
Other submissions were not for publication	
Total Submissions	20

³ education.au limited is a not-for-profit ministerially owned agency, governed through a Board by nominees from the Australian Government, higher education, school education and vocational education and training sectors.

