

 **ELECTRONIC COMMERCE
AND SMALL AUSTRALIAN
ENTERPRISES**

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Abstract

In Australia there has been comparatively little research into the effect of electronic commerce on small businesses. Electronic commerce (EC) comprises several different technologies (especially those associated with the Internet); this paper investigates the use and utility of these technologies in small Australian businesses. The technologies are differently associated with intermediate variables such as the attraction of new customers and the ability to participate in overseas markets. The statistical evidence that e-commerce is positively correlated with some intermediate variables is overwhelming. We consider the statistical relationships between intermediate variables and final variables (revenues, costs and competitive advantage). There are significant correlations between some sets of intermediate and final variables; most of these correlations had plausible explanations and suggest what EC techniques are most fruitful. There are clear implications for small businesses, for example, the Internet allows them to maintain a low-cost foreign presence but it allows foreign firms to compete (at marginal cost) in Australia.



ELECTRONIC COMMERCE AND SMALL AUSTRALIAN ENTERPRISES

Electronic commerce (EC) is defined by Electronic Commerce Australia (1995) (http://www-cec.buseco.monash.edu.au/links/ec_def.htm) as “the process of electronically conducting all forms of business between entities in order to achieve the organisation’s objectives.” It comprises technologies such as electronic data interchange (EDI), electronic funds transfer (EFT), electronic mail, Internet activities (such as web pages, FAQ pages, online catalogues, on-line ordering, order tracking, tendering, on line interaction exemplified by booking and banking services) and electronic data transmission. Much electronic commerce (EC) takes place on the World Wide Web (WWW), a technology remarkably easy to access and use.

Electronic commerce is well established in some sectors of the Australian economy. Perhaps 40% of shares are bought on-line and an increasing proportion of Australians bank and pay bills on-line. The many e-commerce possibilities are reflected in myriad stock exchange floats and numerous conventional businesses now advertise and take orders (for goods, shares, aircraft seats, theatre seats and classified advertisements) through web pages as well as over the phone. The threat of web-based competition from overseas suppliers such as Amazon.com is a powerful driver for Australian firms. Although reliable figures are elusive, it is estimated that, in 1998, \$1.6 trillion worth of electronic transactions were conducted in Australia, mostly between businesses. 11% of all businesses had a web presence and 35% of these claimed that the Internet was significant to their business (Marzbani 1998). The figures in Table 1 were obtained from a survey of 9552 Australian businesses (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999).

Table 1: Use of Internet by Australian Businesses

Proportion of businesses with internet access	20.5%
Proportion of businesses that use the internet to:	
Purchase	0.4%
Sell	0.6%
Market or advertise	4.6%
Gather information	19.5%
Voice/video communication	0.1%
Email	19.9%
Data transfer	7.9%
Some other purpose	0.1%

THE IMPACT OF E-COMMERCE

EC has myriad effects on individuals and organisations. Evans and Wurster (2000) opine that EC will challenge conventional businesses because it allows firms to reach more potential customers and provide them with a richer experience. Amazon.com can reach anyone in the world with web access: its reach is greater than any conventional business. It can provide a rich experience: users can access 2.5 million books by author, title or subject; read extracts and reviews and receive recommendations based on analysis of users’ past purchases. There are many other implications; existing assets (bricks and mortar) may become valueless, supply chains may change, highly profitable “slivers” of business (exemplified by classified advertisements migrating to the web) may be exposed to competition and customers may be better able to compare competitors’ offers.

We note some other effects of E-commerce and relevant references.

Abolition of Distance and Time

Prior to the Internet a major obstacle to an Australian business entering international markets was isolation and the impracticability of maintaining an overseas or even interstate presence (Anonymous 1997). A web page is a cheap and flexible alternative to an agent (Ehrhart 1997; Clayton 1998; Karakaya and Karakaya 1998; McCollum 1998).

Supply Chain Management

E-commerce can change relationships in the physical supply chain (Benjamin and Wigand 1995; Ghosh 1998). A mundane effect is reduction of costs across the whole supply chain (Flaherty 1995, chapter 4).

Process Acceleration and Automation

The Internet facilitates shortening product development cycles, simplifying the ordering process, shrinking inventory (a cost of poor information) (Banaghan and Bryant 1998; Margherio 1998) and implementing Time Based Competition (TBC) (Carter, Melnyk et al. 1995).

Marketing and Promotion

A Web page containing an order form is available worldwide and it is easy to measure the page's impact. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) pages help develop and maintain customer relationships (Burgess and Coopers 1998).

PAST WORK

Research into Australian e-commerce is exemplified by Poon & Swatman (1996; 1997; 1997; 1998) who conducted a longitudinal study of small Australian businesses' expectations of Internet commerce. Phase one of the research comprised a survey and case studies; phase two was a follow-up survey. The five most important drivers for adopting Internet commerce were: new advertising modes; cheap communication; easy access to potential customers; a better image; and business network enhancement (Poon and Swatman 1997).

Other EC research includes that by Kwok (1997) (values chains) Abell (1996) (New Zealand), Yellow Pages (1999) (Australia), PriceWaterhouseCoopers (1998) (Singapore), KPMG (1997), (United Kingdom) and KPMG (1998) (Europe).

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

We classified effects on businesses as either intermediate or final. Final effects comprised higher revenue, lower costs, and improved competitive advantage in both the short and long-term. Intermediate effects are (mostly intangible) effects such as better communication that are likely to generate final effects. These considerations led us to consider the following research questions:

RQ1: What elements of EC do SMEs most use?

RQ2: What are the intermediate effects of EC?

RQ3: What are the final effects of EC?

RQ4: What are the relationships between intermediate and final effects?

It was hypothesised that use of each EC technology produced intermediate effects and these produced direct effects (revenues, costs and/or strategic advantage). The EC technologies and intermediate effects considered are listed in Table 2. The final effects are listed in Table 3.

The Survey

The data were obtained by a survey (a copy of which is available from the authors) that sought demographic data; uses of electronic commerce; the intermediate effects of each aspect; and the respondent's opinion of the final effects of electronic commerce. Most data was collected using five-point Likert scales. 250 managing directors of small and medium Australian enterprises that use e-commerce were surveyed and 70 usable questionnaires returned.

ANALYSIS

Table 2 summarises questions relating to the use of EC techniques and respondents' estimates of their intermediate effects. For each question, the null hypothesis (that the EC technique had no effect at all) was very strongly rejected (the smallest p value was 0.004). The most striking intermediate effects are e-mail's ability to help stay in touch with various parties (especially customers) and EDI enabling "Increased data transfer speed". The latter refers to electronic data transfer between firms. Table 3 summarises responses to questions on final effects. For each question, the null hypothesis (that e-commerce had no final effects) was t-tested; all these hypotheses except that pertaining to short-term cost reduction ($p=0.013$) were very strongly rejected ($p<0.01$).

STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT RELATIONSHIPS

A research objective was to identify those EC components and intermediate effects (column 3 of Table 2) that had a significant impact on the final effects (revenue, costs and competitive advantage in the short and long-term). Stepwise regression was used to identify statistical relationships between EC's intermediate and final effects. We now consider whether the statistical associations found in the previous section and summarised in Table 4 are plausible and their relevance to small businesses.

Short-term new revenue is associated with attracting new customers and reduced advertising costs; both these intermediate variables are associated with having a web page. A web page gives universal visibility. Web-based advertising is cheap (the cost of establishing and maintaining the page) and much better directed than conventional advertising.

Table 2: Intermediate Effects Summary Statistics

EC technique	Number using	Intermediate effects	No. using	Mean response	Standard deviation
Web page	66	Attract new customers	66	2.95	1.25
		Expand local markets	65	2.63	1.28
Have an FAQ page	14	Tailor product/services to customers	13	2.62	1.61
		Stay in touch with customers	13	3.00	1.35
		Receive timely feedback	13	2.46	1.56
Advertise on the Internet	39	Reduce advertising cost	39	2.15	1.33
Use the Internet	59	Expand products/services	56	2.48	1.48
		Alternative supplies	55	2.38	1.38
		Enter overseas markets	56	2.45	1.55
		Overseas competitors into Australian market	53	3.00	1.49
		Bypass traditional supplier	56	2.21	1.45
		Sell direct to customer	54	2.20	1.50
Use Internet EDI	15	Cut order & delivery time	15	2.93	1.58
		Reduce data entry cost	14	2.43	1.45
		Increase data transfer speed	14	3.50	1.56
		Reduce data entry errors	14	2.57	1.45
		Hold less inventory	13	1.54	1.13
E-mail	62	Stay in touch with customers	62	3.45	1.34
		Stay in touch with suppliers	57	2.95	1.57
		Stay in touch with partners	57	3.19	1.55
		Stay in touch with employees	55	2.53	1.65

Table 3: Final Effects Summary Statistics

Final effects	No. using	Mean response	Standard deviation
Short term new revenue	43	1.77	1.09
Long term new revenue	60	2.62	1.40
Short term costs reduced	14	1.93	1.21
Long term costs reduced	25	2.32	1.63
Short term competitive advantage	40	2.13	1.34
Long term competitive advantage	44	2.55	1.39

Long-term new revenue is associated with attracting new customers; reduced advertising costs; staying in touch with customers; expanding the product and/or service range and entering overseas markets. All these intermediate variables are associated with using the Web except that "staying in touch with customers" was also associated with e-mail use. Web pages (especially FAQ pages) can provide actual and potential customers with relevant information on products, services, availability, delivery arrangements and prices. Web pages can collect demographic data from and about potential customers and orders. Customers' comments can uncover market gaps and suggest product improvements.

Long-term costs are associated with staying in touch with employees (associated with using email), entry of overseas competitors and identifying alternative suppliers (both with Internet use). This strong relationship ($p = 0.006$) with "staying in touch with employees by email" is counter-intuitive (email has very small marginal costs); perhaps respondents associated this with the cost of hardware.

Table 4: Statistical Relationships Between Intermediate and Final Factors

Dependent variable	No.	R-sq	Independent variable	Standardised beta	Significance
Short-term new revenue	43	0.120	Web page attracts more customers	0.415	0.021
	27	0.189	The web helps us reduce advertising cost	0.488	0.021
Long-term new revenue	59	0.183	Having a web page helps us attract new customers	0.557	0.001
	34	0.384	The web helps us reduce advertising cost	0.758	0.000
	51	0.211	E-mail helps us stay in touch with customers	0.578	0.000
	49	0.417	The Web has helped us expand products/services	0.512	0.000
			The Web has helped us enter overseas markets	0.316	0.019
Long-term costs	26	0.269	E-mail helps us stay in touch with employees	0.638	0.006
	25	0.485	The Web helps foreigners enter Australian markets	1.143	0.000
			The Web has helped us identify alternative suppliers	0.614	0.031
Short-term competitive advantage	45	0.088	Web pages have helped us expand local markets	0.431	0.045
	36	0.231	The Web helps foreigners enter Australian markets	-0.600	0.003
Long-term competitive advantage	50	0.099	Web pages have helped us expand local markets	0.40	0.025
	40	0.211	The Web has helped us expand products/services	0.557	0.003

Short-term competitive advantage was associated with expansion of local markets and the entry of overseas competitors into Australian markets. The latter is implausible but may be explained by Internet-competent firms profiting at the expense of incompetents or that, although foreign firms have web sites accessible by Australians, they are disadvantaged by higher delivery costs and longer delivery times.

Long-term competitive advantage was associated with expansion of local markets (web pages) and expansion of the range of products and/or services offered (Internet). A web page makes information on the firm's products available throughout Australia (and the world).

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