

Vocus helps remote workers stay connected

WITH 30,000 KILOMETRES OF HIGH-CAPACITY TERRESTRIAL FIBRE BETWEEN ALL MAINLAND CAPITALS AND REGIONAL CENTRES IN AUSTRALIA, THE NEED FOR MINING COMPANIES TO MOVE TO REMOTE OPERATIONS HAS DRIVEN HIGH DEMAND FOR VOCUS' SERVICES.

The importance of staying connected cannot be understated, especially during the past two years as the COVID-19 pandemic has forced both international and interstate borders to be closed.

For those working on remote sites, a strong internet connection allows people to stay in touch with family and friends, which can be vital during long swings away.

Leading specialist fibre and network solutions provider Vocus continues to connect Australia's mining industry.

In August, the company announced it will deliver a new Darwin-Jakarta-Singapore cable (DJSC), a \$500 million system of high-capacity cables to enhance connectivity to the Pilbara mining region.

This followed its announcement of Project Horizon in May, which will deliver fibre infrastructure from Geraldton to Port Hedland, and then on to Singapore via the Darwin-Jakarta-Singapore Cable.

Vocus enterprise and government chief executive Andrew Wildblood says the global COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the importance of staying connected.

"We are all aware of the crucial role the internet plays in our business and home environments," Wildblood says.

"But throw a global pandemic into the mix, and it's become crystal-clear why having a stable, reliable connection in remote regions is critical to maintaining employee productivity, and also mental health and wellbeing during downtime.

"COVID-19 has been one of the most significant disruptors to business in recent memory; in order to stay safe, we've had to remain apart.

"For employees in the mining industry, that's meant extended time away from their loved ones and uncertainty around travel. It can make for a lonely time, ultimately affecting workers' mental health, particularly when working in isolated areas."

In addition to the mental health benefits, technology and the connectivity underpinning it offers on-the-job advantages for mining employees.

Equipment such as connected helmets with augmented reality or video streaming to off-site expert assistance can enable workers to repair and upgrade systems more accurately and efficiently.

In vehicles, image recognition is enabling the detection of driver fatigue

and sounding alarms when a driver closes their eyes for a longer than normal period.

With employee wellbeing in mind, Northern Minerals reached out to Vocus to explore getting one of its worksites connected.

The company's Browns Range Pilot Plant is located in northern Western Australia, 160 kilometres to the south east of Halls Creek. Operating in such an isolated location makes attracting and retaining employees a key challenge for the business.

At Browns Range, where a small team of about 55 people are on site at any one time, the internet is their connection to the rest of the world.

In remote areas of Australia, delivering connectivity is easier said than done. At Browns Range, telecommunications coverage is limited and hasn't been consistent in the past, presenting challenges for Northern Minerals to improve services for employees.

Wildblood says having consistent connectivity provides a lifeline for FIFO workers and can help overcome the strains of living in a remote environment.

"Far more than just an enabler for a mine's operational productivity,

dependable and high-speed connectivity can keep employees, particularly those in isolated locations, connect with loved ones, partners, family and friends, as well as what's happening in the world around them," he says.

"Mining companies building comfortable living accommodation also factor in the need for high-speed connectivity.

"It's often said by fly-in fly-out mining employees that the two key things they look for in a prospective employer are the quality of the food and availability of entertainment, such as services like Netflix, to enjoy downtime between shifts.

"That's why high-speed internet on-site is no longer a 'nice to have.' It's an invaluable must-have for companies who want to attract top talent and look after their mental health."

Vocus was initially recommended to Northern Minerals by the company's IT service provider. Because of the site's location, Vocus suggested business nbn Satellite Service (BSS) for internet access.

This service allows retail service providers like Vocus to offer regional and remote businesses outside of



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nbn's fixed line network the ability to experience business-grade network services via satellite.

During a trial period, Northern Minerals tested out the satellite solution to see how it performed against the incumbent satellite service. Right away, the benefits were clear.

"There was an immediate improvement in internet service quality at Browns Range when the nbn satellite

service came online and morale increased," Northern Minerals chief operating officer Robin Jones says.


"Being able to keep in contact with people at home is hugely important to all employees. The ability to reliably use internet-based applications or bring your own content via streaming services makes a huge difference in a remote location like ours.

"Our employees are able to FaceTime and talk to loved ones without the service dropping out or being overloaded by volume."

Jones says productivity had also improved on site.

"Remote systems including our data historian and accounting package work quite well over the new satellite service – it's a significant improvement over the previous service we had," he says.

Wildblood says as resources companies look to the future, they can now factor in reliable high-speed connectivity as a part of any plan to cater for employee wellbeing.

"And while the threat of COVID-19 will eventually pass over time, the need to be connected is here to stay," Wildblood concludes. 

Northern Minerals has benefitted from Vocus' satellite solutions.

