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## Strengthening the Commonwealth Advantage

We are living in uncertain and challenging times; politically, economically, environmentally and from a societal perspective as we recover from a global pandemic that has touched every corner of the world. Profound changes continue to unfold across the global landscape. These changes impact the technology, data, legal governance and ethics that underpin the goods, services and digital marketplace that we both consume and trade in.

The dynamic and competitive global marketplace presents every nation with domestic challenges, as well as opportunities. The open-minded and expansive thinker appreciates that trading creates value and stimulus for communities, opens up opportunities on larger scale, and spreads the risk of an over-reliance on the performance of just one market. As a mid-sized business, we assessed our export markets options strategically based on how culturally compatible and accessible each market was, as well as the scale of opportunity. We joined a number of very well organised trade missions facilitated by UK Trade and Investment (now the Department of International Trade), the Australian British Chamber of Commerce and the Australia-UK Chamber. Being part of a trade delegation as a way to do reconnaissance missions enabled us to genuinely appreciate the scale, compatibility and accessibility of the opportunities offered by the Commonwealth. We subsequently set-up and are growing a successful and increasingly well-regarded digital transformation and solutions business in Australia where from offices in the UK and Australia, we can serve clients in more than 40 countries, underpinned by a 24/7 follow-the-sun operation.

This 'Commonwealth advantage' is rooted in the historical fabric of shared history, values, language, legal, institutional and government ties that influence commerce, trade and investment. Traders and investors benefit from familiar legal and administrative systems, as well as similarities in business, commercial and legislative practice. This cultural congruence extends to sporting rivalry and even to the family ties that have resulted from generations of intra-Commonwealth immigration.

In 2018, the UK's trade in goods and services with the Commonwealth was valued at £56.3 billion – (Australia accounted for £21.4bn) the highest level on record. The Commonwealth clearly has an appetite for trading and there is a real demand for the quality and dependability of UK goods and services. The opportunity to export and set up an international operation not only helps with our revenue growth but has additional and far-reaching benefits from an organisational perspective. Our business operations have matured and evolved; we've gained greater cultural and capability diversity, that is attractive to our global private sector clients; there is access to a wider pool of people, skills and alliance partners; and we deliver a bigger, broader range of services without adding significant additional burdens on our staff. Many of these advantages weren't immediately evident at the start of our international journey.

## **Everyone's A Winner**

To successfully grow as an exporting business, we wanted to explain the clear benefits for each country that we do business with. It started with investing time and effort in better distilling and articulating Informed Solutions' purpose and mission as a business, beyond making a profit. So, now we explain that our aim is to create economic and social value by helping to build a more inclusive, fair and safe society through ethical use of technology and data, and investing in people by building up their digital and IT skills. One of our super-powers as a business is the planning and successful execution of large scale, digital transformation projects. However, the reason why we have won numerous UK, Australian and international awards, is not just because we do a great job professionally, but also because we contribute to up-skilling young people, creating social and economic value, and minimising our environmental footprint, as a consequence of how we chose to do sustainable business.

Working across different markets has also strengthened our corporate culture and governance; matured and made more resilient our operating model; challenged us to become more adaptable and flexible in how we think, design and build solutions; and it has very significantly developed our people. Our entrepreneurial approach has been strengthened by our people's understanding of the differences in societal and business culture, embracing new opportunities for innovation, different forms of partnering, and appreciating alternative ways of delivering to different types of customers and marketplaces.

Since opening our Australian office seven years ago, we've developed an international placement programme that gives our young people opportunities to develop world-class skills and experience, and an international business mind-set. Our seasoned people also get to stretch themselves by experiencing the challenges and rewards of developing streamlined business processes and investing in digital platforms and tools that support a seamless, global operation. This has enabled our growing, diverse and internationally distributed teams, to explore, develop, de-risk and deliver ground breaking solutions and services that help us be more cost-effective and competitive.

## **Supporting Ambitious UK Companies**

For aspiring UK businesses, there's a lot of support that can help you assess, launch and grow your trading capabilities. I've focused on our experiences around the UK – Australian markets, where the [Department for International Trade](#) (DIT) and the Northern Powerhouse has helped create a formidable launch pad for our export efforts, whilst [Austrade](#) and DIT have been invaluable in helping us land and develop the Australian side of the business. We have found both DIT and Austrade to be incredibly well connected, supportive, generous in effecting high quality introductions and very active in promoting, fostering and furthering trade and investment activities between Australia, the United Kingdom and other Commonwealth nations.

We have also formed a beneficial partnership with the [Australian British Chamber of Commerce](#), an AUS-based membership organisation that connects the UK business community and professionals with investments and opportunities in Australia. The [Australia – UK Chambers of Commerce](#) provides a similarly helpful membership service for Australian businesses and professionals in the United Kingdom. With large and diverse memberships and access to formidable, trusted business networks, they offer member services into industry intelligence, audiences and commercial opportunities.

Alongside these connectors, we also joined the leading industry associations for the IT and Digital sectors that we work within; [techUK](#) and the Digital Leaders Network in the UK, and the [Australian Information Industry Association](#) (AIIA) in Australia. These industry bodies offer established networks for marketplace intelligence and support, as well as rich insights and practical recommendations on market access for the IT and digital sectors.

### **Accelerating the Commonwealth advantage – Skilled Worker Visa**

For all the advantages that working into Commonwealth countries offers, operating across national boundaries can sometimes be constrained by practical barriers, such as government policy and processes. It's advisable to be wise to these frustrations and well prepared.

With similarities in the standard of the education systems, professional qualifications and diligence employed in security vetting processes in both the UK and Australia, there is an opportunity to reduce existing barriers in having them recognised across both nations. It would be a gift if governments could agree on how to standardise the skilled worker visa system, make it safe and secure but simple, easy and efficient for business and government to manage. Certainly for the fast growing digital sector, the ANZSCO list remains out-of-date. Many of the job roles that exist today include skillsets that didn't exist when the ANZSCO list was devised ten years ago; for example, Agile software development, machine learning, AI and big data management. I would encourage companies that want to move their people across national boundaries to employ a specialist immigration and work visa processing lawyer. Yes, there is a cost attached to this, however, your people (including their families) are better supported; the company has greater confidence in understanding what appear to be ever-changing visa categories, criteria and processes; and you frequently are able to achieve quicker and more favourable business outcomes.

In November 2019, Australia's Global Talent Independent Programme (GTIP) was set up to overcome some of these challenges, in a bid to maintain Australia's competitiveness. Through a newly established fast-track permanent migration scheme for up to 5,000 highly-skilled and highly paid technologists, Australia is targeting world-class talent from "future-focused fields", including cyber security, fin-tech and quantum computing. The scheme aims to position Australia at the forefront of major growth trends in the world economy.

As we approach the final negotiation stages for what will hopefully be a modern trading partnership between Australia and the United Kingdom that places digital and skills at its heart, we look forward to a Free Trade Agreement that allows for greater movement of talent between countries. This would allow us greater freedom to invest in local capabilities and skills without the substantial time delay, cost, effort, and uncertainty that growing digital companies have faced in the past.

### **Diversity and Global Investment in Local**

My final contribution to the very big topic of trading is that it benefits everyone in the ecosystem. To be successful, a 'trader' will bring something new, innovative and wanted to the table; their proposition will create value to the local market in some meaningful way; and they will contribute to a more diverse, vibrant and competitive marketplace. These are the building blocks of creating greater investment opportunities, more entrepreneurial and responsive suppliers, the creation of new skilled local jobs, better products and services, and more energy and stimulus to what may be at risk of becoming a complacent and stagnant marketplace.