

Overcoming the barriers to ICT access

Samantha Hellowell, author of the Fabian Society's Report into ICT and social exclusion, talks about how to overcome the barriers

Community groups hoping to use technology to engage people have to deal with the reality that many people do not even have access to ICT, especially the most excluded groups such as the homeless or those leaving prison. Despite the Government's aim to set up 6,000 UK online centres by 2005 (providing internet access to anyone who wants it) there are still glaring barriers to access.

The Fabian Society report, *Beyond Access: ICT and social inclusion* (2001), highlighted some of the hurdles excluded groups face. Fear of the formal settings of much ICT provision, lack of relevant and engaging content and lack of childcare were all cited as key barriers. Here, the author of the report, Samantha Hellowell, talks about how these barriers might be overcome.

What are the main barriers to engaging communities using ICT?

One of the key barriers is physical access. The Government has focused on addressing this through UK Online ICT Centres and the Wired up Communities Programme, which is piloting home access to ICT in the most disadvantaged communities. The key recommendation from much research - including mine - is that in order to reach the most excluded customers, ICT learning should take place in comfortable, 'home from home' surroundings.

Unfortunately, public access is delivered by educational bodies that are more familiar with formal, qualification-led, learning. Many people who have had a bad experience of school are not motivated to take up formal courses. They often see it as 'not for people like them.' My own parents, who left school without qualifications, felt exactly like this and nothing I ever said could shift them in their view of themselves. The only way is to support people to learn about ICT in very informal, peer-led environments, starting with their interests to provide a tour of the web.

I once asked someone why it was important to him that the learning assistant in the ICT drop-in centre was someone he knew who lived on his estate, he said: 'cos I thought if that thick beggar can do it then so can I'.

Is lack of childcare provision is also a key issue?

Definitely. Parents with young children simply cannot learn about ICT unless they have childcare. Childcare is often an 'add-on' rather than being a starting point. And yet many mothers with young children in my experience are really keen to have training and get back to work.

You also emphasise the lack of relevant content available for excluded groups...

The Internet is geared towards ABC1 users with money to spend. Portals are designed to promote sales and customer loyalty. But what if you are leaving care or leaving prison, where do you find advice about local support services on the net? What if you are homeless - there's no facility to tap in your location and get details of hostel accommodation in the same way the

affluent customer can find a hotel online. The key message of my report was that funding should reach excluded people and the organisations that work with them to enable them to become content developers themselves.

In order to get people communicating and using your website you have to find out what they want on the website and how they want it to look. It's amazing how organisations seem to assume they 'know' what people want and then 'give' it to them.

The report features eight ICT community projects that are successfully engaging excluded people. These include Redbricks Online which links residents on a Manchester estate through an intranet and Tees Valley Communities Online which connects 7 ex-steel communities in Teesside.

Why are projects like Redbricks successful?

The main strength was in focusing on the needs of their customers and learning from their mistakes. Unfortunately the culture in this country is not one which sees not getting it right the first time as a great opportunity to make sure we get it right second time round.

Finally, what changes would you like to see to improve access to ICT?

I think the Government should be given credit (since we are always keen to criticise!) for improving access through the initiatives I mentioned before. The main thing they need to do now is ensure that central funds that have kick-started access have maximum impact locally.

Research has shown that there is usually no clear strategy about how to address the digital divide at regional level and very little co-ordination of delivery at local level. Regions and sub-regions need a clear strategy which relates to their economic strengths and aspirations. At the local level, the driver partnership - for example the Local Strategic Partnership - should be responsible for auditing local provision of ICT learning opportunities. This will show overlap and gaps. A strategy should then be developed which will ensure excluded groups in each neighbourhood have access to ICT learning in a format that they will engage with.

We all have to develop a mindset that is much more customer focused. We should treat socially excluded people as our most valued customers. If we did, we would make sure we really understood their needs before trying to impose solutions that might work for middle class professionals ie, formal learning, but will not work for people with different life experiences.

Tips

1. Engage people who are already part of the group first

First of all start with engaging the people that are already part of the community group with ICT. For example if it's a tenants and residents' group get them to put some info on a web page for tenants (or whatever it is they want to start by doing). If it's a pensioners' group they might want to set up a basic web site that's useful for pensioners in their neighbourhood/start using the web to contact other pensioners' groups etc.

Set up some email discussion lists on topical local issues etc. The thing is to start with something that's quick and easy and gets people started using ICT and gives them something to show for their efforts.

2. Find other people in the community who are interested in ICT to get involved

For example get the local newsagent to put a flyer into computing magazines they sell about what you're trying to do and ask for help - you might want to ask if there are any young people for example who can come and help the pensioners' group do the web page. You could also put similar notices in local shops and get the local paper to do a story about what you are doing.

3. Extend the project to getting other people in the neighbourhood involved

Find out what people want to use ICT for. Since some people won't be familiar with what ICT can do you have to find ways around this - for example we play a game with groups using cards which help people to make connections between problems in their neighbourhood and how ICT can help.

4. Give tuition

You could run a web design day whereby over the course of a couple of days people build a basic web site for their neighbourhood.

5. Use people's interests as a starting point

Always start with what people are interested in doing and take it from there!

Samantha Hellawell is director of IS Communications, a company that gives advice on how best to use ICT for economic regeneration and social inclusion.