

E-Commerce and community networks - the impact on businesses, local communities and social inclusion.

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Working Title

The working title for this research project proposal is:

E-Commerce and community networks - the impact on businesses, local communities and social inclusion.

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to present a project proposal for a dissertation to be undertaken as part of the MSc Information Science course at City University. The project proposal introduces the subject, the aims and objectives of the dissertation, and the proposed methodologies and planning for conducting the research.

The main research problem is to investigate the impact of e-commerce on community networks, focusing on local business (local to the particular community networks) and issues of social inclusion. The general use of Internet technologies to assist local businesses will be considered, as well as specific examples of e-commerce. Community networks describe a range of services that are available to local people, usually provided by one particular organisation. The research is to have a quantitative approach, with some qualitative aspects. No hypotheses are being put forward in this research, but findings will be required for a series of objectives.

The main aims of the research will be:

- ◆ Investigate how community networks can support and develop local economies through the development of e-commerce and Internet technology by local businesses.
- ◆ Investigate how local businesses use web based technology, and how this usage can be developed.
- ◆ Assess whether the development of web based business technology by community networks promotes social inclusion.

The objectives are described in greater detail in the following section.

Aims and objectives

The first aim of the research is to investigate how community networks can support and develop local economies through the development of e-commerce and Internet technology by local businesses.

The objectives are to:

- ◆ Evaluate the types of business support and advice provided on community network web sites.
- ◆ Establishing how the support is presented and how useful businesses find the information.
- ◆ Establish what benefits local businesses derive, in terms of customer response, and business to business use.
- ◆ Establish extent to which e-commerce is operating, and look at other types of web usage by businesses (such as advertising on a community network).

The second aim of the research is to investigate how local businesses use web based technology, and how this usage can be developed.

The objectives are to:

- ◆ Establish what other locally focused business initiatives are available, and how local businesses compare these to community networks.
- ◆ Following the above objective, are there any ideas that can be transferred to community networks?
- ◆ Investigate local businesses' perception of web technologies, such as the usefulness of community networks, revenue they receive as a result of using the community networks and general usage of the Internet.
- ◆ From this conclude how other local businesses can be encouraged to use the Internet.

The third aim is to assess whether the development of web based business technology by community networks promotes social inclusion.

The objectives are to:

- ◆ Investigate how users of community networks perceive business provision on the web.
- ◆ Describe factors that contribute to social exclusion, and assess whether local business use of Internet Technology can help to reduce these factors.

The research will largely be conducted through questionnaires and interviews (see methodology section) which will provide primary information to support findings for the above objectives.

Scope and definition.

In order to ensure that the dissertation remains focused on the aims and objectives set out above, it has been necessary to limit the scope in some areas. Whilst background information, literature reviews and some theoretical issues will draw on the experiences of community networks on an international scale, the actual research, questionnaires and interviews will be based on selected community networks.

IBM defines e-commerce as the ability to offer goods and services over the web. As yet the exact level of use of e-commerce in this full sense (for example the facilities to order goods over the Internet) has not been established amongst businesses on community networks. So the research will also look at other web based business tools, such as advertising, provision of contact details, links to web pages and the availability of e-business advice to local businesses.

The impact of the use of e-commerce by national and international businesses is not considered. Although it is possible that this could effect local communities and increase divisions between those with access to IT, and those excluded from use of IT (which is one aspect of social exclusion), it is not possible to consider this aspect within the scope and time constraints of the research.

Methodology

The main method that will be used is sampling, by interviews and questionnaires to produce answers to the questions laid out in the objective section.

♦ Web Based Search

Some community networks are accessible to all on the Internet, others are protected by a password to restrict entry. The first stage will be to conduct a web based search to establish how many community networks are available on the web and also to look at commercial, locally focused web sites. By drawing up a framework to allow comparisons between web sites, this exercise will provide useful background information. It will allow basic benchmarking of the types of services offered both to and by businesses on local sites, and the degree to which local businesses use e-commerce.

♦ Preliminary Interviews and Questionnaire design and distribution

The next stage will be to conduct interviews with the organisers of two networks (Brixton and Newham, initially). This will allow background to be built up on how the community network has been developed, information on the local community, public access points, how it is funded, future funding and the services offered to businesses, and any feedback they have received. The interview will be fully prepared beforehand to cover questions raised during the web search and literature review. It is anticipated that the interview will be a mix of open questions and specific questions. It will be seen as a preliminary interview, as one further interview is planned. An important part of the interview will be to obtain the contact details of businesses where possible. Some of these may be accessed from the web, but it will be useful to obtain details from the network organisers as they may have the names of the most useful people to contact for interviews and surveys.

The next stage will be to arrange interviews with two London based businesses, selected using the community network managers knowledge of a 'typical business'. These interviews will be short and relatively unstructured (although prepared) and will be used to get a feel for the types of issues and questions to be covered in the questionnaire.

The questionnaires will then be designed, with care taken to ensure the questionnaire is straightforward to complete, due to the anticipated time constraints of small businesses. It is anticipated that techniques such as lists, categories, ranking, scales and quantities will be used to optimise the usefulness of the responses.

- ◆ Sample size

The exact number of business on the community networks is not known, and the sample size will have to be decided on when more information has been gathered from speaking to the community network organisers.

Selection will be every n *th* business to ensure the sample is random.

- ◆ Questionnaire Analysis and Follow Up Interviews

The survey results will then be analysed.

Follow up interviews will be conducted with a sample of business (at this stage it is anticipated these will be from Newham, Brixton and Salford) to obtain further information, which will be decided on when the analysis of the questionnaires has been completed.

This will then be followed up with interviews with the network organisers, and it is anticipated that these interviews will be slightly less structured, although they will be based on the questionnaire findings.

Work Plan

Week	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUGUST	SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER
1		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Literature review.</i> <i>Review of methodology - look at questionnaire and interview design.</i> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Preliminary interviews with 2 businesses, evaluation of results. <i>Begin questionnaire design.</i> <i>Literature review</i> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Analyse questionnaire responses. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Begin to assess and evaluate results - begin drafting 	Time available to make amendments, correct errors, tidy up presentation
2		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>As above</i> Web based searching 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Complete questionnaire design</i> Select sample for questionnaire distribution. Issue questionnaire 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Plan follow up interviews with businesses. Conduct interviews with businesses 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Write up results and findings 	Aim to submit final dissertation, 3 laser printed copies, and disc version on word.
3		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Web based search <i>Literature review</i> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Literature review (if still to complete)</i> <i>Finish web based search (if still to complete)</i> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Finish conducting interviews with businesses and evaluate results. Plan follow up interviews with network managers. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Write up conclusion Appendices 	
4	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Contact community network organisers to arrange preliminary meetings. Begin web search 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Literature review</i> <i>Plan preliminary interviews with network managers</i> Conduct preliminary interviews and evaluate results. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Begin writing - introduction.</i> <p>Questionnaire/interviews</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct interviews with network managers. Evaluate results. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Proof read and check referencing Complete draft by 30 September 	
5		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Literature review</i> <i>Assess findings from interviews.</i> Conduct preliminary interviews with 2 London businesses. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Begin writing -Literature review</i> <p>questionnaire/interviews</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Begin writing- methodology section of dissertation</i> 		

The italicised items are library based research, background work and the drafting of the findings and results.

