

People first: meeting the ICT needs of socially excluded customers

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Samantha is the author of the recent Fabian Society Report, Beyond Access: ICT and Social Inclusion. Her interest in the role of ICT in promoting social inclusion began when she joined IBM in 1994 as Community Programmes Manager. Prior to that she had worked for seven years in the voluntary sector as Head of Communications at the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) and prior to that, as Communications Manager at Barnardo's.

At IBM she developed a model of promoting employee volunteering through the use of technology to match employees' interests with local volunteering opportunities. She then became a member of the INSINC Working Party set up by IBM and the Community Development Foundation (CDF), the first national working party to look at the impact of the emerging information society and its potential for creating a more inclusive society. She has since taken responsibility for delivering a number of projects that used technology to combat exclusion, including the production of a CD-ROM that won the first BAFTA for interactive digital educational material in 1998. During her final year at IBM, Samantha was seconded part time to Communities Online to help set up the organisation.

Samantha was a guest lecturer at City University on ICT and social inclusion and a member of the PAT 15 team until she left IBM to set up IS Communications, and now works on a variety of projects, which focus on how to use ICT with hard to reach groups.

During the course of my research for the Fabian Society I interviewed a German professor of psychiatry who was involved in setting up a web site based learning organisation for professionals and users of mental health services. Towards the end of the interview we discussed the poor state of the NHS and he told me that if his children needed medical treatment, he took them back to Germany. Interested in a European's perspective on how we can improve our public services, I asked him what needed to change in the UK health service.

By way of an example, the professor stated that the previous week he had been to Moorfields Eye Hospital for an examination. When he arrived he was given

an eyewash, at the same time as everyone else with an appointment for that afternoon's clinic. This prevented him and everyone else from being able to read while they waited for up to two hours to be seen. The point of the wash was that it enabled the doctor to examine the eye better. There was no reason to give it until just before those waiting were due to see the doctor, but it suited the clinic to give it to everyone at once. A very small example, but no doubt it is this sort of scenario Alan Milburn has in mind when he exhorts the health service to become more customer focused. While the main difference between UK and German health provision is the level of funding, it is the transformation to a customer-led service that will determine whether we ever have a world-class service.

The concept of a socially excluded person being a customer is even further from informing the delivery of projects designed to impact upon regeneration and social exclusion. There are two reasons for this: firstly, those who design and implement projects are end users themselves of complex, incoherent and demanding funding systems that result in focusing on the funder as customer, not the service user. Secondly, many professionals involved in the business of overcoming social exclusion have had a different life experience from their customers. This means that they often do not understand what motivates a socially excluded person to use a service and how he or she might want to access it. Too often, projects are designed from the perspective of what would work for the provider, not the customer.

The existence of a digital divide has been well documented and government funds have been allocated to bridge it, principally through UK Online Centres, learndirect and the Wired up Communities programme, which is piloting home access. The purpose of this paper is to look at what we need to do to ensure that funding makes a real difference to help deprived communities cross over to the right side of the digital divide: the one awash with opportunity for economic gain and improved life chances. It draws on our experience as a company working with regeneration partnerships who are looking at ways to address the digital divide. It further develops ideas that came out of research for the Fabian Society¹, which specifically focused on the experience and views of the most socially excluded people and asked the following questions: How do young people leaving care or leaving prison think that ICT can help? What motivates Muslim women to use ICT and how do they want to access it? What information do people living on deprived estates want available on line?

In order to meet the ICT needs of these and other excluded people, we must start from the proposition that socially excluded customers are our most valued customers. In short, we have to see the world through the eyes of our socially excluded customers. Projects that aspire to provide ICT learning opportunities to their target group of customers must meet their real needs, as opposed to professionals' perception of their needs, in terms of access, content and support. We need to take a marketing approach: find out what people want, how they want it delivered and what price they are prepared to pay. Of course tackling social exclusion is more complicated than launching even the most sophisticated service in the private sector. Success is about decreasing, rather than increasing, your customer base. The customers themselves are often very fragile and have complex problems. Revenue comes not from keeping customers happy (few can afford to pay anything for the service) but from managing relationships with funding bodies whose hard output-driven culture does not adequately measure or reflect the qualitative, subtle changes in a person's perception of themselves and their place in the world. As one tutor at an ICT centre on a deprived estate in the North East said:

"We know that self-worth is more valuable than anything, but you don't get a certificate for that. I cannot give them a piece of paper at the end that says, 'My

God, Tracey, you've really enriched your life in the past year and I can see a huge difference in you'. How can you quantify that, unless you listen to people like me?"²

People first – the barriers

Let us take a closer look at the barriers that get in the way of putting the needs of socially excluded customers at the forefront of ICT service delivery. There are four main barriers: those relating to the structures people work in; those relating to issues of access and content and those relating to the mindsets which professionals bring to their work.

We have touched on some of the structural issues that mitigate against people being able to bring about customer-led services, principally that it is the funder that is perceived to be the customer. Therefore the wider framework in which both funders and projects operate needs a radical overhaul to support a customer-led approach.

A report commissioned by the Digital Divide Group at the DfES³, highlights issues we have found working with clients:

- There is often no clear strategy and leadership at regional level
- There are poor linkages between strategy and delivery
- There is little knowledge of what already exists and a mess of unrelated projects at local level
- There is confusion about the different digital divide 'brands'.

¹ *Beyond Access: ICT and social inclusion*, Samantha Hellawell, Fabian Society, 2001

² *Beyond Access*, p. 57

³ The Group's remit was to assess and advise on significant gaps in the Government's digital divide strategy and look at the impact current initiatives set up to address the divide were having. The aim of the research was to carry out an audit of ICT access and learning for adults; to look at the coherence of that provision and barriers to take-up. A series of nine audits were carried out in different areas.

As the report by Hall and Aitken⁴ says:

There is no consistent delivery or co-ordination of strategy for tackling the digital divide at a regional level. This is partly because the digital divide overlaps between the learning and skills agenda, the more broad ICT access agenda and the over-arching regeneration agenda. Lack of strategic consistency is also weakened by the plethora of organisation and partnerships, which seek to influence ICT and learning strategy.

In other words, no body is accountable but everyone wants a place at the table, certainly a scenario not unique to delivery of digital divide strategies. The authors also comment:

The poor linkages between the strategic partnerships and local delivery partnerships would appear to be one of the fundamental issues emerging from the regional audits. The range of funding sources can often lead to new, localised delivery partnerships which do not link to any over-arching strategy.

Clearly the Regional Development Agencies (RDA) must take responsibility for developing an ICT strategy for the region that underpins its economic aspirations and which addresses the exact nature of the digital divide in that region. Local audits should be carried out to map existing and planned ICT provision to the opinions and needs of excluded people, particularly those not using any existing services. Paper exercises are not enough. There may be ICT access on or near a deprived estate but it may not be meeting the needs of some of the most excluded people on that estate, for example those who are unable to get out of the house because of mental or physical disability. Seeking out people who aren't using a local ICT centre and asking them why not, can be an extremely valuable exercise.

Once a clear map exists and barriers facing existing and potential customers are documented, hard decisions can be made about how to rationalise provision, since there will almost certainly be overlap and gaps. The local driver partnership, most probably the local strategic partnership,

should be responsible for local delivery. For this reason, it is important that members of the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) understand the potential of ICT to contribute to improving their neighbourhood. Time should be set aside to help educate them about how technology is helping residents in other areas to better communicate, develop skills, improve health, engage disaffected youth and so on. LSP members could start by setting up their own electronic network to e-mail and discuss issues with each other. The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit should encourage ICT know-how in LSPs by making ICT a key strand in its skills and knowledge programme and showcasing best practice.

Formal vs. informal: getting the right mix

Barriers relating to access have been well documented by think tanks, academics and by the government's own research and policy initiatives. Key recommendations include providing comfortable, non-threatening environments, starting with people's own interests and relevant content. Child care provision is crucial to engage many women. However, as Liff and Steward note⁵ in their analysis of advice given about providing ICT learning opportunities:

In the light of prevalence of such well grounded advice it is surprising that the main activity of e-gateways with respect to new users is provision of relatively formal learning opportunities.

⁴ *Mapping the Digital Divide*, Hall and Aitken, DfES, 2001

⁵ 'Communities and Community – egateways: Networking for Social Inclusion', in Keeble, L. and Loader, B. (eds), *Community Informatics: Community Development through the use of Information and Communication Technologies*, Routledge, 2001

This conclusion is supported by the DfES' own research⁶:

In some areas it is clear that there needs to be more emphasis on basic access without any explicit learning component. Funding regimes need to be geared towards this form of provision as well as more formal learning provision.

Unfortunately it is still the case that most public access is delivered by educational bodies that are more familiar with formal, classroom-based, qualification-led, learning. People who have had a bad experience of school are often not motivated to take up formal courses. They can perceive learning delivered at the local college, for example, as simply 'not for people like us'. Indeed among socially excluded customers there is often a profound and hostile reaction against, 'some guy in a suit standing at the front telling us what to do'.⁷ One way of confronting this persistent negative self-image is to introduce peer-led training. I once asked someone why it was important to him that the learning assistant in his local ICT centre was someone who lived on his estate. He replied: "Cos I thought if that thick beggar can do it, then so can I".

The University of Teesside is recruiting learning ambassadors from within its communities to promote and deliver ICT learning at community-based centres. Deputy vice-chancellor Helen Pickering says that the university has had to abandon the traditional 'campus' model of marketing and delivering courses, based on prospectuses and formal teaching, to reach out to people living in Middlesbrough's deprived communities.

"What you deliver has to be at the same level and of the same quality but you have to deliver it in a different way. The market appears in a quite different context from traditional students. For example people come to courses through word of mouth and want short bites of learning. Most of our community programmes have been run three or four times a year.

You have to address the whole question about what your learning strategy is in terms of people who often have had a bad experience of learning and who are actually being quite courageous to re-engage."

What is needed is the most appropriate mix of informal and formal learning opportunities, based on customers' preferences. Some people are happy to embark on formal courses and are motivated by getting a certificate at the end of it. Cultural issues also need to be taken into consideration; for example, it can be difficult for Muslim women to take up mixed-sex learning opportunities.

ABC only

While much of the debate about the digital divide has focused on access, issues relating to content also pose barriers. It is clear that the Internet, driven by commercial interests, is aimed at consumers in socio-economic groups ABC1. The point of portals is that you sell products through them. I find it useful to be able to click on a map of the UK and select a suitable hotel for business or a weekend away. It is impossible for a homeless person to do the same and find a list of hostels in her or his home town.

The Government's own portal to its own services, UK online, reinforces excluded people's feelings of alienation by almost completely ignoring the life episodes that many excluded people experience: losing a job, becoming mentally ill, being a refugee. The re-launched and improved site now contains information for young people leaving care but it is difficult to find. There is a life episode entitled 'looking after someone' and from there you can find information for young carers, and from a section on emotional support, you can link to information about leaving care. Government portals that are life episode

⁶ *Mapping the Digital Divide*, Hall and Aitken, DfES, 2001

⁷ Comment made by male interviewee at Ragworth Neighbourhood Centre, Stockton on Tees, during research for the Fabian Society

led should normalise the full range of life experiences by including where to go for help if you are a victim of domestic violence or racist abuse.

The Children's Partnership, a US not-for-profit organisation, surveyed 1000 relevant web sites⁸ and found that:

- 6% or less of on-line content was the local information users want and need
- 1% of on-line content was developed for adults with limited literacy
- 1% of on-line content was created in a culturally relevant manner, and
- 2% of sites made information available in a variety of languages.

Contentbank.org: Content-Building for and by Local Communities, Laurie Lipper and Francisco More⁹, state:

The research also found that these types of information were precisely what low income and under-served users were often looking for to meet their daily needs.

As a response, the Children's Partnership is creating a 'Community Contentbank' to stimulate content development within deprived communities.

Contentbank.org is envisioned as a community space that will provide an ongoing process for users to develop materials themselves, alongside experts who help quantify and analyse what users need and want. The results will be shared on Contentbank.org with the broader community of those interested in local content and with policy makers, funders, the media and the Internet industry.

Giving them what they want?

Local authorities need to be more creative in the use of content to deliver e-government to excluded customers. So far, the majority of councils have developed web sites which seem to be driven more by 'giving' citizens the information the council wants to give them, than by producing content that makes their site a likely 'favourite' amongst users. It is a very different approach from consumer portals where the objective is to:

Create a community that returns regularly and has a sense of belonging that reaches 'tribal' levels. The critical issues here is to capture customer data and use it to increase sales.¹⁰

Councils would have a far better chance of capturing the attention of many customers if they offered their services via a community portal that offered a lively, local and interactive front end that was not branded 'Council', or 'Health Authority', or any other public body, but which all public bodies could stream their information and services into. Information could be presented in life episode format and draw on the complete range of services available in the locality, but accessed via a neutral site. Success would be dependent on designing a portal that would be interesting and interactive enough to become a person's home page or at least one of their top ten favourite sites.

In its report, which sought to define how e-government might be rolled out in the UK, the government envisaged a mixed economy of portals through which the citizen can access government services:

The key point is that sites should be built to serve customer needs, and this will almost certainly mean a diversity of entry points.¹¹

Simply put, wherever the 'cyber citizen' is most likely to go, government services should be accessible to her or him. Councils need to consider the best channels for providing a contact point to excluded citizens. If public bodies are not able or

⁸ Online content for Low-Income and Under-served communities: the Digital Divide's New Frontier (2000)

⁹ www.comtechreview.org/article_body_print.asp?article_id=97

¹⁰ *Ecosystem, living the 12 principles of networked business*, Thomas Power and George Jerjian, FT.com

¹¹ *e.gov Electronic Government Services for the 21st Century*, Performance and Innovation Unit, Cabinet Office, 2000

willing to get together to develop a first class community portal through which all can stream services, but which is perceived as 'neutral' and therefore trusted, then they should consider working with agencies that have a track record of reaching excluded groups.

In its recent report on e-government¹² the Foundation for Information Technology in Local Government (FITLOG) asks:

In the case of the socially disadvantaged groups, we may often have to accept that they should be hearing and learning about technology from other intermediaries. If so, how far are we willing to relinquish control and to trust these other organisations – local community groups for example – to deliver on our behalf?

We're all middle class – aren't we?

We have looked at some of the barriers of structure, access and content, all of which reflect to some extent the lack of professionals' ability to see the world through the eyes of their socially excluded customers. In the world of social exclusion there are two distinct sets of actors: professionals charged with either development of strategy or delivery of services, and people who are experiencing social exclusion, many of whom have been excluded for most of their lives.

It is a lack of understanding of the life experiences of excluded people and the difference in their values, particularly in respect of education, that results in professionals sometimes assuming that what has worked for them will work for their socially excluded customers. The perception, for example, that people want and value formal, qualification-led courses that lead directly to employment, is a norm amongst middle-class professionals. It is not, however, always shared by people who have had a poor experience of education and for whom there are few jobs in their locality. Unfortunately, social inclusion is a messy business that often requires a different approach, one that is informed by what socially excluded customers actually want, rather than by a well trod formula that will only work for the most able. Doing unto others as we would

wish to be done unto seems to be the prevailing view amongst some professionals. Another view, as a member of a community ICT project explains, is treating socially excluded people as people whom things should be done for:

It never occurs to the Council that people want to do something for themselves. It's like an adult/child relationship with the Council viewing its customers as 'those people on the estate we have to deliver services to.'¹³

One of the key points of the national strategy for neighbourhood renewal is that the way things have been done in the past has not worked. It points out that one of the reasons for this is that communities have not had control over deciding what needs to be done and how to do it. By the time funding reaches a deprived neighbourhood, having gone through a layer of number crunchers, it has, in the words of one activist, "turned to dust at pavement level".

Perhaps it is time to take seriously the needs of excluded customers and ensure that ICT learning initiatives, with their enormous scope to help transform lives, are customer led. If not, we can look forward to having little impact on a set of customers and more wastage of public funds.

Michael Mulquin, co-director of IS Communications, deputised for Samantha in presenting this paper. Since 1995 his work has focused on helping to develop a socially inclusive information society, looking at the impact of new technologies on local communities.

¹² *Electronic Local Government: A Framework for Action*, FITLOG, 2001, www.fitlog.com

¹³ *Beyond Access*, p. 60