Chapter VII
Managing Cybercafés:
Achieving Mutual Benefit through Partnership

Darlington Onojaefe
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, South Africa

Marcus Leaning
University of Wales, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter offers an alternate perspective upon issues of management and security in cybercafés. Here attention is placed upon the wider social environment in which the cybercafé operates and the development of 'soft' skills in cybercafé management in order to mitigate security risks. Three key arguments are made: first, it is noted that cybercafés offer a key means by which small business may access ICT. Second, that the relationships that cybercafés may foster are beneficial to all parties and that such relationships bring additional benefits in terms of trust and social capital. Third, that in order to develop such partnerships, new skill sets may be required.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter departs from the usual approach to the study of the management and security of cybercafés and we explore a somewhat neglected area. We take as our starting point two interlinked ideas: first that security measures need to be not only conceptualised and executed through the technological infrastructure of a cybercafé but also through the social and 'soft' components of management; second that in addition to internal operational issues, management should look further and recognise that cybercafés do not exist in isolation, rather they may be part of larger networks of commercial and social practice. This is an issue increasingly recognised in management

in other areas of business practice (Street & Cameron, 2007) and it is believed that such an approach would certainly assist in developing solutions to numerous management questions (Mason, 2007) and certainly questions of security. We argue therefore for an externally orientated approach to management—one that sees engagement with external entities as a benefit, but also one that needs to be managed. To do this, cybercafés must be understood as integral to larger business and social networks. We have sought to show how an appreciation of a wider viewpoint may be of use in the management of cybercafés and consequently how issues such as security may be addressed from such a wider perspective.

Cybercafés play an important part in accessing information and communications technology (ICT) particularly in regions of economic deprivation or low infrastructural development (Haseloff, 2005). Most often run on a for-profit basis, cybercafés provide ready access to high level ICT at marginal cost. Moreover, as cybercafés provide ready access points to any and all users, requiring minimal financial expenditure, they have been understood as key means of deploying ICT at a community level (Haseloff, 2005). In terms of their use by small businesses, cybercafés offer a means by which the non-technically orientated organisation can avail themselves of certain benefits of high technology without extensive overheads. Cybercafés offer, therefore, a useful service through which small businesses can participate in new communicative spheres and activities.

In relation to cybercafé's security from an externally orientated point of view and given their commercial nature, it is not surprising that there is a considerable academic literature concerning cybercafés from a business perspective. These include: texts on how cybercafés have developed, their current state (Goodwin, 1997; Mutula, 2003; Houle 2004), integration with other businesses (Arnold, 2001; Rasco, 2000), and/or how they facilitate other businesses (Bellman, 2006). A second area where cybercafés is mentioned is the political sphere and its relationships with both freedoms of speech and the anonymity of use. While the use of Internet connection in a home or business setting may be monitored or at least attributable to a specific individual, cybercafés offer the user the ability to use the Internet anonymously. Such usage has attracted the attention of law enforcement or other sanction (Beech, 2002; Gruenwald, 2001; Yesil, 2003).

From a socio-economic perspective, cybercafés can be understood from a different academic field such as the *Community Informatics*. Gurstein (1999) describes this field as—"the social appropriation of information technology for local benefits." He advocates association of community development initiatives with the opportunities offered by information and communication technologies. Much research in the field of CI proposes such close linkages between socio-economic security objectives of local communities and the use of ICT. Through the use of ICT, community initiatives may seek to locally resolve issues of communication and physical security for improved socio-economic conditions. Community informatics advocates a direct, practice-orientated approach to the use of ICT in communities. Much research in the field of community informatics identifies close linkages between community goals and the way ICT is used and deployed. As noted, cybercafés could be understood as a means of accessing ICT to improve socio-economic activities of local communities. Such 'empowerment' is widely regarded as a more sustainable pathway to development than top-down, universal technological 'fixes'—and is a route widely advocated by academics in the field (Selwyn & Gorrard, 2002). A well managed cybercafé can play a leading role in socio-economic development and contribute meaningfully to community empowerment where everyone who can afford the service fees are not restricted irrespective of age, gender, ethnicity, religion, or income" (Haseloff, 2005).