

Chapter 9

Success Factors for Public Access Computing: Beyond Anecdotes of Success

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ABSTRACT

Throughout this book, we have detailed the profile of a public access venue user, discussed the role of venue staff in public access venues, identified the critical role that trust plays in use of public access venues, and demonstrated some barriers to use of venues, as well as explored how gender is situated in the ICT world. In this chapter, we will explore and seek to answer the question: what are the common factors that contribute to the success of public access ICT centers, especially in underserved communities?

INTRODUCTION

Throughout this book, we have detailed the profile of a public access venue user, discussed the role of venue staff in public access venues, identified the critical role that trust plays in use of public access venues, and demonstrated some barriers to use of venues, as well as explored how gender is situated in the ICT world. In this chapter, we will explore and seek to answer the question:

what are the common factors that contribute to the success of public access ICT centers, especially in underserved communities?

To discover the success factors of public access venues, we conducted a detailed analysis of the common factors that contribute to the success of public access ICT centers in 25 developing countries. We devoted special attention to libraries and telecenters for our analysis of success factors, since these venues generally intend to contribute to

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public well-being and development. Nonetheless, we also include a smaller section on cybercafés in the analysis of success factors as well.

For this discussion of success factors, it is important to clarify what constitutes success. Each community and each type of venue defines “success” its own way; one person’s failure may be another person’s success. What constitutes success can also change over time. Richard Heeks analyzes total failures, partial failures, and successes of information systems for developing countries, and defines “success” as instances where “most stakeholder groups attain their major goals and do not experience significant undesirable outcomes.” He also notes that it is difficult to assess success or failure of ICT initiatives for development because of a lack of literature in general, a lack of evaluation in particular, and an excessive focus on case studies (Heeks, 2002, p. 102). David Gichoya analyzes factors for successful implementation of ICT projects in government and points out that success factors are “occurrences whose presence or absence determines the success of an ICT project. They can be drivers or enablers [...] Their absence can cause failure and their presence can cause success” (Gichoya, 2005, p. 179). Based on the definitions offered above by key scholars in the ICT field, we identify and discuss the factors that contribute to equitable access and meaningful use of ICT through public access venues by underserved sectors of the population in the developing countries we studied. “The evidence to date suggests that although ICTs can make a significant difference to the lives of poor and marginalized communities, many well-intentioned projects have failed” (Unwin, 2009, p. 26). By offering a better understanding of success factors across three types of public access centers in 25 countries, rather than just one type of centre in one country or region, this chapter can help policy and decision-makers to focus their efforts on issues that make a difference and avoid the failures, partial or total, of past public access to ICT initiatives in developing countries. This study provides strong

validation for these factors as critical variables in policy decision-making, funding allocations, and program implementation aimed at strengthening public access computing and its contribution to community development.

The recommendations from each country were combined and then grouped into five common themes identified as the most salient and common factors that enhance the success of public access venues, with a particular focus on meeting the needs of underserved communities:

1. Understand and take care of local needs first
2. Build alliances with other venues
3. Collaborate with other media and community services
4. Strengthen sustainability
5. Train infomediaries and users

We describe and illustrate each success theme throughout this chapter with examples from the study of libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés in all 25 countries. All detailed country reports are publicly available at <http://tascha.uw.edu/research/landscape-study/>. We refer to them here by country to simplify the reading.

UNDERSTAND AND TAKE CARE OF LOCAL NEEDS FIRST

Our first discovery about what constitutes a success factor is that successful implementation and maintenance of public-access-computing initiatives require a solid understanding of the information needs and resources of the communities the venues intend to serve. Most successful initiatives typically offer concrete solutions for specific issues of local contexts – such as a community’s specific information needs and their ability to build on existing practices in these communities. Community-needs assessment and social-development orientation are especially im-

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