Chapter XV
Delivering More Effective Community Consultation and Support for Regional ICT Programs

Lynne De Weaver
Southern Cross University, Australia

Allan H. Ellis
Southern Cross University, Australia

ABSTRACT

This chapter looks at the role of language and the community consultation process in overcoming the digital divide by facilitating the uptake of information and communications technologies (ICT) in small regional communities in Australia. It focuses on one of the 'telecentre' programs funded by State and Federal governments in Australia—the Community Technology Centre at New South Wales (CTC@ NSW) program.The authors look at some of the key issues that emerged in communities that applied for CTC@NSW grants when a more culturally relevant consultation process, based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, was developed and implemented. This consultation process was successfully used in targeted regional communities to build social capital, facilitate regional economic development, and empower communities through the use of ICT. The chapter also includes projects that demonstrate the diversity of ICT usage in the communities that received funding to establish a CTC.

INTRODUCTION

Federally funded programs in Australia, such as Networking the Nation, have provided millions of dollars to Australian regional communities to help them gain access to a range of ICT products and services. The Community Technology Centre at New South Wales (CTC@NSW) was one such program, with grant funding being made available to communities in partnership with the NSW State Government. A new consultation model was developed by De Weaver in order to increase the understanding and uptake of information and communications technology (ICT) products and services in small regional communities in New South Wales. Using the CTC@NSW program as a case study, the chapter will focus on this consultation process and how it was used to achieve successful outcomes for some of the communities that participated in the program. It will also highlight underlying language and technology issues that arose when small rural and regional NSW communities applied for CTC@NSW grants.

One of the major challenges of facilitating effective community consultation at a statewide level was in presenting information about the benefits of ICT products and services in a way that was relevant to all communities. In many instances, 'Communities don't know what they don't know'. This proved to be the case in many of the communities that sought grant funding through the CTC@NSW program. A recent report from a regional research forum (2004, p. 8) stated, "…regional development policy in Australia is 80 years old, but despite this, and the research issues in the last 40 years in particular, what we know is substantially less than what we don't know." Hearn et al. (2004, p. 7) identified lack of ICT knowledge in regional Australia as a further complicating factor and states, "Advocates of ICT projects can mis-specify and under resource the social and human infrastructure required. It is necessary that citizens are able to not only access that technology but that they also possess the skills to use and the resources to access them."

Finally, the chapter looks at the consultation process and methodology used by De Weaver, in her role as regional coordinator for the CTC@NSW program, in achieving successful ICT strategies and outcomes for the regional communities in which she worked. It also highlights the importance of using 'plain English' in the consultation process and in dealing with the underlying resentment that may exist in various stakeholder groups when their needs are misunderstood or inadequately addressed.

BACKGROUND

The CTC@NSW began its operational phase in March 2001. Its original charter, as shown on its Web site (July 20, 2004), was "…to establish up to 55 Community Technology Centres (CTCs) in regional NSW communities, with populations of less than 3000, to help them gain access to a range of technology services for local businesses, students, community organizations, individuals, and identified special groups within these communities." The specific goals of the CTC@NSW program were to:

1. Assist local communities to establish a network of sustainable CTCs across rural and remote NSW
2. Promote community development and networks of interests in rural and remote NSW
3. Encourage community demand for information technology (IT) services in rural and remote communities
4. Encourage existing telecentres to join the CTC support network

By June 2003, the CTC@NSW program had achieved its goals with a total of 83 fully funded CTCs serving over 100 NSW communities. The

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