

Chapter 3.2

The Nearest Some of Us Will Ever Come to Information Heaven

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the needs for a community computer centre (telecentre) for the community of Emkhambathini. This study was part of the information systems research exercise that was conducted by students. The problem that the researcher experienced was that Emkhambathini has no access to information and a need exists to ensure that this community joins the 21st century. The telecentre will also serve as a community upliftment tool. The data was collected using a questionnaire, it was collated and analysed using SPSS. The conclusion was that gender or employment does not play a role when there is a real need to access information.

INTRODUCTION

Advancements in information technology (IT) throughout the world have had an impact on the way people live their lives, communicate, and even on the way they do business. These developments have become part of people's daily lives and it has become important for everyone to embrace technology and all that comes with it. Unfortunately for rural communities, the advantages of using technology have not been utilized to their best advantage. This has encouraged researchers (i.e., Campbell, 1995; Etta, 2004; Sayed, 2003) in many parts of the world to focus their attention in finding ways in which technology can be used in the development of rural areas.

THE PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although there has been some progress on the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) as previously mentioned, rural people are still falling behind in these developments. The lack of progress is due to the lack of infrastructure and finance that has led to a situation where there are not enough computers in rural areas. Rural people do not have computer skills and the cost of computer equipment is high for people in rural communities. Previous studies (e.g., Benjamin, 2000; Fuchs, 2000; Richardson, 1998) have focused on the use of computers neglecting the benefits that can be obtained in the use of other technologies. This caused the government and private sector to intervene by providing shared facilities such as telecentres. The study will uncover other services that can be offered to rural areas in addition to computing.

The spread of ICTs in the last few decades has had an impact on work, leisure, culture, and social interaction (Sayed, 2003). The modern world is undergoing a fundamental transformation as the industrial society of the 20th century rapidly gives way to the information society of the 21st century. This dynamic process promises a fundamental change in all aspects of people's lives, including knowledge dissemination, social interaction, business practices, political engagement, media, education, health, leisure, and entertainment. The speed of global technological and economic transformation demands urgent action to turn the present digital divide into digital opportunities for all (Ryan, 2004).

ICTs can be used as tools to provide access to information to the underprivileged people in the rural areas. Given the characteristics of rural women and men, such as having little or no schooling, speaking only the local language, among others, they are among the last to reap any benefits. This calls for more creative and innovative ways to enable the use of ICTs in rural environments (Epodoi, 2002).

There have been many examples in recent years of the applications of distance-shrinking effects of ICT. These technologies have been used in the United States and other parts of the world as an aid to economic or community development in rural areas (Campbell, 1995). The fact that more than 2.5 billion people (over 40% of the planet's population) live in rural and remote areas of developing countries has encouraged researchers to look into ways that telecommunications can help improve the lives of these communities (ITU, 2003). In Africa alone, over 70% of people live in rural areas, and there is limited access to telephony outside of cities. Telecentre projects have strung up throughout Africa in an effort to provide access to telephony and other ICTs in the content with the lowest access to these systems (Castells, 1998). Telecentres offer a promising route for rural communities of the developing world to break out of their isolation (Fuchs, 2000).

Definitions

Benjamin (2000) defines a telecentre as an organization offering telecommunication and other information services to a disadvantaged community. Etta (2004) defines a telecentre as a place whose primary goal is the public provision of tools to enhance communication and the sharing of information.

Chapman and Slaymaker (2003) define ICTs as those technologies that can be used to inter-link IT devices such as personal computers with communication technologies such as telephones and their telecommunication networks. Campbell (1995) defines a telecentre as a central location within a rural community or region equipped with computer and telecommunication equipment and services shared by users from a variety of sectors; the services are usually superior to those that the users often have themselves. It provides hardware, software, and support to a group of individuals and organizations that alone might

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