Building Local Capacity via Scaleable Web-Based Services

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INTRODUCTION

Information communications technology (ICT) has been identified as a key enabler in the achievement of regional and rural success, particularly in terms of economic and business development. The potential of achieving equity of service through improved communications infrastructure and enhanced access to government, health, education, and other services has been identified. ICT has also been linked to the aspiration of community empowerment, where dimensions include revitalizing a sense of community, building regional capacity, enhancing democracy, and increasing social capital.

In Australia, there has been a vision for online services to be used to open up regional communities to the rest of the world. Government support has been seen "as enhancing the competence levels of local economies and communities so they become strong enough to deal equitably in an increasingly open marketplace" (McGrath & More, 2002, p. 40). In a regional and rural context, the availability of practical assistance is often limited. Identification of the most appropriate online services for a particular community is sometimes difficult (Ashford, 1999; Papandrea & Wade, 2000; Pattulock & Albury Wodonga Area Consultative Committee, 2000). Calls, however, continue for regional communities to join the globalized, online world. These are supported by the view that success today is based less and less on natural resource wealth, labor costs, and relative exchange rates, and more and more on individual knowledge, skills, and innovation. But how can regional communities "grab their share of this wealth" and use it to strengthen local communities (Simpson 1999, p. 6)? Should communities be moving, as Porter (2001, p. 18) recommends (for business), away from the rhetoric about "Internet industries," "e-business strategies," and the "new economy," to see the Internet as "an enabling technology—a powerful set of tools that can be used, wisely or unwisely, in almost any industry and as part of almost any strategy?"

Recent Australian literature (particularly government literature) does indeed demonstrate somewhat of a shift in terms of the expectations of ICT and e-commerce (National Office for the Information Economy, 2001; Multimedia Victoria, 2002; National Office for the Information Economy, 2002). Consistent with reflections on international industry experience, there is now a greater emphasis on identifying locally appropriate initiatives, exploring opportunities for improving existing communication and service quality, and for using the Internet and ICT to support more efficient community processes and relationships (Hunter, 1999; Municipal Association of Victoria and ETC Electronic Trading Concepts Pty Ltd., 2000; National Office for the Information Economy, 2002).

The objective of this article is to explore whether well-developed and well-implemented online services can make a positive contribution to the future of regional and rural communities. This will be achieved by disseminating some of the learning from the implementation of the MainStreet Regional Portal project (www.mainstreet.net.au). To provide a context for this case study, the next section introduces some theory relevant to virtual communities and portals. The concept of *online communities* is introduced and then literature is reviewed to identify factors that have been acknowledged as important in the success of online community and portal initiatives.

BACKGROUND

In regional Australia, many Web-based initiatives have been premised on fear of external electronic commerce ventures adversely affecting local industry (McGrath & More, 2002, p. 50). Media and government reports have reinforced notions that those who ignore the adoption of electronic commerce will do so at their peril (Department of Communications Information Technology and the Arts, 2000). Recent research however identifies a movement beyond the "starry-eyed fascination with, and high expectations of, technology per se," with the focus now more pragmatically on how ICT can enable enhanced business and community processes and more effective organizational relationships (More & McGrath, 2003).

The term *online community* means different things to different people (Preece, 2000). In early definitions, the term described communication facilitated through bulletin boards (Rheingold, 1994, pp. 57-58). More recent definitions reflect the expansion of Web-based technologies and often link online communities with concepts of regional communities and local strengths (Keeble & Loader, 2001).

In Australia the terms *online community*, *regional portal*, *Web portal,* and *community portal* are often used more or less interchangeably. Web portals "provide focal points on the Web, places to start, places to go to find things" (Gronlund, 2001, p. 88). They have been identified as one strategy for encouraging regional participation in the information economy. For example, according to the Department of Communications Information Technology and the Arts (2001), a regional portal can achieve the online aggregation of potential and existing regional presence into a comprehensive portal, gateway, or regional Web site. In funding initiatives, preference has been given to projects that offer inclusive regional aggregation of business, government, and community services, and which provide interactive services to clients both in and external to the region.

Some definitions of online communities capture the concepts of both *communities of interest* and *communities of location,* and identify the role of encouraging communication and information sharing among members as important (McGrath & More, 2002). Australia's largest telecommunications provider describes online communities as providing a focal point for the provision of local regional information. In terms of functionality, these community portals generally incorporate local news services, local weather reports, a directory of community organizations, and features such as bulletin boards, discussion forums, a calendar of events, and transaction services (Telstra Country Wide, 2002).

To achieve optimum online collaboration, various issues require consideration. These include notions of community, trust and commitment, processes and structure, knowledge management, learning, and collaboration (More & McGrath, 2003). Some further factors more specific to the success of online community or portal initiatives are considered in the next section.

In forging and managing online collaboration, people issues rather than technological ones have been identified as the most challenging. "Certainly across a broad range of projects, many have come to realize that managing people, relationships, and business processes is harder than managing technology" (McGrath & More, 2002, p. 66). It is easy to underestimate the amount of planning and effort that is needed to build and sustain an online community; therefore care should be taken to avoid miscalculations. In particular, "overlooking the key role of the human facilitator is perhaps the greatest reason that online communities fail to meet the expectations of their designers" (Bernal, 2000, p. 4).

For many projects, collaboration is the key to survival, renewal, and growth, especially in regional areas "where the threat of global competitive dynamics often drove alliances" (McGrath & More, 2002, p. 67). Initiatives, however, with a broad geographical focus, can "encounter difficulties in establishing and maintaining cooperative relationships across multiple communities in their regions" (Simpson, 2002, p. 8).

"Many projects that have adopted a 'build it and they will come' approach have been doomed to early failure" (Simpson, 2002, p. 4). Developers need to work with community members to ensure that the goals of the site owner and the needs of community members are met (Preece, 2000). Good online services provide multiple levels of entry, many-to-many relationships, and rapid movement between the services and content of disparate providers (Local Government Association of Tasmania and Trinitas Pty Ltd., 2001).

Community members also need compelling reasons to use and return to an online community again and again. There will be a need to balance supply-side investment (access, technical platforms) and demand-side investment (content and services) (Local Government Association of Tasmania and Trinitas Pty Ltd., 2001).

"If you get this right—if you can identify and fill a need in the lives of your community members—you can go a long way on very little technology. If you miss this, no amount of technology is going to make you successful as an online community." (Kim, cited in Bernal, 2000, p. 3)

Engaging and relevant content are vital to increase uptake and sustained use of the Internet. Portal content management strategies should be *bottom-up* in their approach. This can be achieved by providing multiple opportunities for interaction and by providing permission-based access to software that allows members to produce content for their online community (Brumby, 2001; Telstra Country Wide, 2002).

Soft technologies are also essential in building user confidence and comfort with new technology. "Individualized awareness raising…training activities, and learner support are key elements in creating within the community the desire, motivation, and enthusiasm to trial and take up the technology" (Simpson, 2002, p. 7).

This review has highlighted a number of factors which can impact the success or otherwise of portal type initiatives. This background information provides a context for introducing the MainStreet case study in the next section.

MAIN THRUST OF ARTICLE

In May 1999 a collective of regional stakeholder organizations engaged the University of Ballarat to research the requirements and make recommendations on how the Central Highlands and Wimmera regions of Victoria could capture greater advantages from new information and communications technologies.

The research, documented in *Victoria's Golden West Portal Project Business Case* (Thompson, 1999), involved a number of different stages. These included confirming existing regional Web content, examining community portal