

Chapter 5.4

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 Victo-

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-026-4.ch069

ria, 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 Main-Street 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,

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