

ICT in Small Enterprise Development (SED) and Business Projects

Major businesses around the world today can hardly function without extensive use of ICT. In the communities where Volunteers are engaged, however, there is often little access to, or use of, computer technology or communications to strengthen small enterprise development (SED). As a result, Volunteers form an important link between people whose lives can be improved through the expanded use of technology and the resources that can be applied to meet those needs. In nearly every case, this work requires careful planning and collaboration with community leaders, financing sources, NGOs, or government agencies. In this section you will read how Internet research broadcast on radio programs helps farmers address marketing and other challenges, how Volunteers manage the start-up of computer training classes and cybercafes, and how Internet shopping helps quilt makers market their products to a worldwide audience and helps trainees gain confidence in surfing the Net.



In Lithuania, Volunteers collaborated with their nongovernmental organization (NGO) counterparts to write articles for national business newspapers promoting community awareness. In Slovakia, Volunteers helped their agencies prepare informational materials for TV, radio, and print media. In

Kazakhstan, Volunteers reach students and young professionals through popular TV shows about business English.



SED and Radio



The following vignette comes from a Volunteer in Kenya:

Working with a local Sayare radio station, I assisted with the planning of a radio-browsing project. The project attempts to address some of the problems facing small farmers in the Eldoret area, such as inefficient cultivation techniques and hard-to-market crops, by providing mediated access to the Internet's wealth of farming and agricultural information. The Ministry of Agriculture, the Kenya Agriculture Commodity Exchange (KACE), and Sayare Radio produce a weekly radio show on farming issues using Internet research. Listeners submit agricultural and farming-related questions (either by post or in person), and members of the project's production team retrieve answers/information from the Internet and configure it so that it is useful and appropriate to the target audience. During the weekly program, the presenter(s) broadcast the information in the local language (Kalenjin), with some explanation of the retrieval process (to build awareness and understanding of the Internet among the target audience. Topics include alternative crops and livestock, methods to improve yield and reduce input cost, and so forth. If time and programming permit, the program may also broadcast current market price information.

The program is expected to air in a 30-minute weekly time slot, operating on an entirely donated or voluntary basis. The project is an outgrowth of rural farmer training seminars we have organized with the location chief and agricultural officer. Sayare Radio has supplied the radio time for the program, while the agricultural officer and the local manager of KACE act as content advisors and presenters. All parties are enthusiastic about the idea of rural Kenyans having access to the Internet's farming information in a way that overcomes some of the barriers to rural Internet use. While the majority of small farmers may never sit at a computer, virtually all Kenyan families own a small radio and will be exposed to information that can improve their businesses.



SED and Television



A SED Volunteer in Lesotho, who was assigned to the media department of the adult continuing education division of the university, produced and hosted a weekly television talk show for Lesotho television called “We Mean Business.”

The Volunteer and her counterpart developed the show concept and presented it to Lesotho Television (which is owned and operated by the Lesotho government) as a means of boosting local television programming and promoting local businesses. The television station agreed to the concept and lent the camera equipment and use of its studio and editing facilities (until the university acquired its own). The Volunteer’s counterpart was the director and camera operator.

The team developed a list of topics for the season (13 episodes) at the beginning of each year and then booked show guests (local entrepreneurs) accordingly. Topics ranged from “Women-Owned Businesses” to “What’s a Bar-Code Scanner and How Can It Help Your Business?” to “Promoting Goods and Services Outside of Lesotho.”

The Volunteer and her counterpart persuaded local clothing stores to provide the host’s wardrobe and a local furniture store to provide seating arrangements and other set furnishings in exchange for commercials promoting their businesses.



Using video during Take Our Daughters to Work Day.



SED and Computers



The following was adapted from a Volunteer-written article, “Bridging the Digital Divide: Tips, Traps, and Triumphs” that appeared in Peace Corps/Senegal’s newsletter, *The Squeaky Wheel*. The article described computer literacy training conducted by Volunteers.

What Volunteers Did

- Started a word-processing class at a reduced price.
- Organized two groups of participants that received four hours of training per week and a one-hour self-directed workshop.
- To deal with capacity constraints, allowed only three or four people per computer.

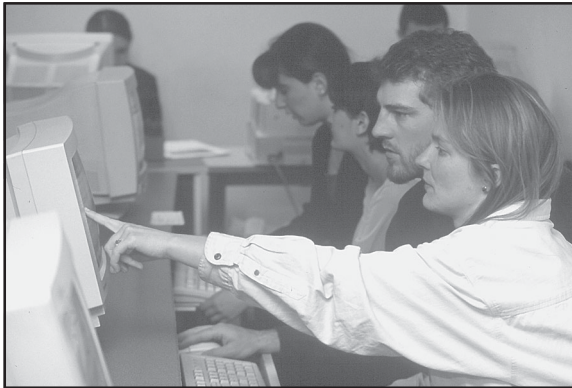
Problems Encountered

- Collecting payments in a timely fashion and outstanding payments. Volunteers dealt with this by emphasizing a moral contract with participants and their financial contract with other parties.
- Price enforcement. It was difficult, but essential, to remain firm on the price because some students were friends of the Volunteers.
- Marketing. People were initially hesitant but started coming when they saw lots of other people signing up.
- High turnover among clients. Volunteers worked to improve class structure and better address the needs of the students.

Possibilities

- Summer school courses. In the summer the town swells with students who live in larger towns during the school year.
- Night school. There are classes with 20 students for four hours per week. Most students work during the day.

- Professional courses. Office support courses can be offered to students seeking competitive internships at local businesses and organizations.
- Tutoring/immersion.
- Students. Over 30 students study two hours per week for a monthly fee. Volunteers also tried to engage the support of schools to recruit 300 students in exchange for a computer and printer. They were unsuccessful at meeting their objectives. The assumption was that the first month's tuition would be used to pay for the computer and printer, and subsequent monthly payments would eventually cover the costs.



Using computers for interactive learning.

Problems With Managing Cybercafes (Internet Cafes)

- Exploitation by computer repair people. People may take financial advantage when equipment needs to be repaired. It would be ideal if one of the investors were trained in computer troubleshooting.
- Maintenance of computers. Computers malfunction and break down all the time. To help reduce problems with breakdown, Volunteers have restricted access to their hardware, allowing access only to hired personnel.

Concluding Remarks

Local work partners should be responsible for researching the costs and creating a business strategy appropriate to their environment. Volunteers in Senegal have learned the following lessons:

- ▶ Investors in the computer project should be familiar with computers. Lack of technical expertise made Volunteers vulnerable to exploitation.
- ▶ The threat of losing money breaks cultural habits and makes rigorous management stick in practice, not just in words. Subsidies may jeopardize this learning process.
- ▶ Volunteers who have knowledge of basic software programs can work as “experts” in some rural areas. It is possible to learn about other computer applications and technology issues (such as LANs) through online tutorials and courses.
- ▶ People who understand town politics or are extensively involved in community affairs have a rich command of marketing opportunities. This skill is extremely useful when introducing new or foreign ideas.
- ▶ It takes a lot of persistence and perseverance to make a cybercenter work in a small town. Make sure your partners are motivated and have the necessary finances.





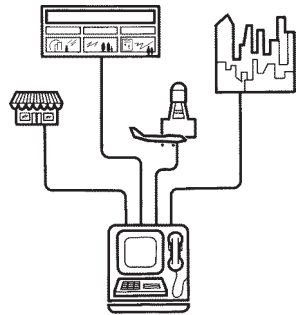
SED and the Internet



Small business Volunteers in Suriname have worked with local women artists to produce a website marketing handmade quilts. Not only does the website provide an opportunity for the women to showcase the beautiful materials they have created, but it also provides a means for them to globally market these products.

Eliminating Fear of the Internet

For many host country colleagues, the Internet is new and sometimes intimidating. Often people are interested in learning more, but they may be afraid to experiment for fear of “breaking” something. When teaching a group how to use the Internet, consider a strategy used by a Volunteer in the Ukraine. This Volunteer decided to help participants relax by beginning the lesson with nontechnical material—Internet shopping. Participants used shopping as an example of how to find information on the Internet. They were shown the newest catalogs from a few well-known stores. Participants were eager to see what products were available in the United States and what fashions were current. This short, but fun and interesting activity helped lessen participants’ fear of using the Internet. After that, participants were less apprehensive about using the Internet and felt more comfortable searching for and visiting business-related sites.



Small business Volunteers in Kenya have worked with individual businesses in the information and business centers (cybercafes) to create websites and teach the business community how to use the Internet to increase their access to information and customers.



Online Resources to Explore

- PEOPLink – “A nonprofit marketplace benefiting grassroots artisans and their communities around the world.”
www.peoplelink.org
- ICT for Poverty Reduction and Economic Growth
www.developmentgateway.org/node/133831/sdm/docview?docid=492330
- ICTs and Small Enterprise in Africa
<http://idpm.man.ac.uk/rsc/is/ictsme/ictsmeaf.shtml>
- Information, Technology and Small Enterprise: A Handbook for Enterprise Support Agencies in Developing Countries
<http://idpm.man.ac.uk/esahndbk.html>

