

Territory Bridges!

Towards a Northern Territory Partnership

A Discussion Paper

November 2007

This paper accompanies the reports, 'Bridging the Digital Divide' and 'Building Bridges: A Social Action Plan' (referred to collectively as 'the Reports'). It discusses practical issues of dealing with Digital Poverty within the Northern Territory, and proposes a partnership between the Northern Territory Government ('the Government') and the Darwin Seniors Computer Club (the Club').

1 Executive Summary

As the Reports make plain, Digital Poverty is very widespread within the Northern Territory, with seniors, people with disabilities and the long-term unemployed especially affected. Dealing with these issues will be difficult and potentially very costly, given the Territory's vast physical size, tiny population, and many spoken languages (including many Aboriginal languages).

To deal with this problem, it is proposed, in accordance with recommendations of the Reports, that Government and the Club partner together to create a regional computer club with a Territory-wide network of hubs able to deliver computer teaching and support services into every Territory community.

The Government's role in this partnership would be two-fold:

- To provide on-going funding for -
 - Premises in Darwin, to contain offices, workshop and storage areas, training facilities, and social surfing¹ facilities;
 - Salaries for an Executive Director, up to five Hub Development Officers, and an administrative assistant.
- To encourage other organizations, including local schools and colleges, to assist in improving home computer services along lines suggested in the Reports.

The Club's part in the partnership would be to build a network of volunteers and services capable of helping to bridge the Digital Divide.

¹ Social surfing, also called social Internet café, refers to communal surfing, in which people have an opportunity to surf the Web together, sharing what they find. The Reports identify this as useful.

2 Introduction

For the past three or four years, the members of the Darwin Seniors Computer Club ('the Club') have been discussing ways of helping Territorians across the Digital Divide. The reports, 'Bridging the Digital Divide' and 'Building Bridges: A Social Action Plan' flow out of this debate.

In essence, these reports indicate that, if the Digital Divide is to be successfully bridged, a network of computer clubs throughout the Territory, united by a regional club, is a practical and economic necessity. Accordingly, if the Club wishes to participate in the bridging, it has two options:

- Stay as it is currently, which is an essentially Northern Suburbs organization, and hope that somebody else creates a regional club; or
- Convert itself into a regional club, and attempt the servicing of the entire Northern Territory, with semi-autonomous 'Hubs' in every town and community.

Unfortunately, it cannot do this alone. The size of the Territory, and the sparseness and diversity of its population make this absolutely impossible. Help from the rest of society is essential.

The questions, therefore, are whether society is willing to commit the necessary resources to fix the problem, and how quickly it wants it fixed. The job cannot be done without allocating resources on an on-going basis, any more than what currently passes for universal literacy could be achieved without the building and maintaining of schools and colleges.

A further question, then, is: how can this best be done? As the Reports make plain, Governments have little chance of bridging the Digital Divide by themselves, without involvement of the computer club sector... and if by some miracle they succeed, the exercise will be horribly expensive.

Accordingly, it is proposed that a system similar to that being successfully run in Brisbane be introduced to the Territory.

In Brisbane, a computer club ('Brisbane Seniors Online', or 'BSOL') acts somewhat as a regional computer club, organizing teaching services throughout Brisbane. The Club is supported by Government (in this case, Brisbane City Council), which provides its headquarters premises and other funding. In providing its teaching services, BSOL has divided the Brisbane City Council area into a number of 'hubs', each hub representing an identifiable community, usually of several suburbs, with training venues being provided by public libraries and other community organizations.

This paper suggests that the Club and the Territory Government work together to introduce a similar type of arrangement into the Northern Territory, with the major difference being that Territory hubs would not only provide basic teaching services, as is the case in Brisbane, but would also provide other services identified in the Reports as being important. For example, whenever possible hubs would also provide social surfing, monthly meetings, and at least some low-level technical support.

To introduce such a hub system to the Territory, the following needs to happen:

1. The Club needs to reorganize itself into a regional organization – that is, create the infrastructure to allow hubs to be created and fostered;
2. Hubs need to be created, initially providing basic teaching services;
3. As the hubs become established, they can be encouraged to expand their services.

The key to this is, obviously, the initial creating of the regional infrastructure to encourage and manage large numbers of volunteers.

3 Volunteers

When functioning at maximum effectiveness, computer clubs provide an enormous number of services. For example, they provide a huge variety of teaching services, surfing facilities, newsletters, brochures and instruction manuals, websites, social events, technical support services, cheap computers, even social services such as personal counselling and emotional support! Providing such a full array of services, however, requires large numbers of volunteers, some of whom need to have very advanced skills. Small hubs in particular rarely have sufficient numbers of volunteers to provide more than a handful of these services. Yet, as the Reports show, all of these services are desirable, and most are essential.

To supply these services, and to make them available at the grassroots levels, the Reports recommend two key measures: a telephone hotline, and regional clubs (in turn supported by a national club). The function of the hotline is, in essence, to give home users easy access to volunteers (either directly, on the phone, or by referral to a computer club somewhere). The function of the regional computer clubs is to allow the efficient and effective deployment of volunteers over a wide geographic area.

Ultimately, it is the power of computer clubs to marshal volunteers that make computer clubs so useful in the battle against Digital Poverty. Properly lead and adequately resourced, computer clubs encourage non-computer users to learn computer skills and thus to become users; and then encourage these new home users to become volunteers, and thus to start the whole process over again, in a kind of virtuous circle.

The operative words, however, are 'properly lead' and 'adequately resourced'.

4 Central Leadership

To manage the volunteers, permanent staff will be needed, including somebody to manage the permanent staff and to provide organizational leadership. The three main positions within a regional club will be: Executive Director (ED), Hub Development Officer (HDO), and Administrative Assistant.

The Executive Director²

Since its inception in 2001, the Club has been managed by its Presidents, all of whom have been more or less full-time volunteers. As well as being CEO, the Presidents have also chaired Management Committee and Club meetings.

With the changing role and increasing complexity of the Club, having a volunteer CEO is increasingly unsatisfactory, as is having one who doubles as Club President and Chairman. If the Club is to make the transition to a regional organization, it needs a full-time professional 'Executive Director' (ED), who is not part of the Management Committee (other than perhaps in a non-voting ex officio capacity).

What will the ED's duties be? Initially, the ED primary tasks will focus on recruiting, inducting, training and supervising additional personnel (volunteer and otherwise); providing leadership in creating the hub network; and working with governments, industry and other

² This term 'Executive Director' is often used within non-profit sector to describe "the person appointed by the Board of Directors to provide leadership toward the achievement of the organization's mission and strategic goals". In effect, the ED is the CEO. Within the Club, the President has always exercised, and continues to exercise that role, although the title 'Executive Director' is never used.

organizations to create the all-sector partnership discussed in the Reports. Later, they will also include evaluation of progress in these matters, and revision of strategies as needed.

Should the ED be paid, and if so, how much? To be effective, the ED will need to be very well qualified, almost certainly with a degree or better, excellent interpersonal and leadership skills, and excellent computer skills. It may be possible to find a volunteer with these qualifications, but insisting on this would involve putting the entire project at risk. Accordingly, it will be necessary to offer a salary that will attract a good person.

In other organizations, the pay rate for EDs depends partly on the size of the organization, and partly on the qualifications of the person. By way of estimating the appropriate salary ranges, the author visited payscale.com, a site that claims to provide information on salary ranges. After entering qualifications appropriate to the position (tertiary qualifications, previous management experience), plus token figures for the Club as it might be within a year or so (that is, having a staff of 10 ten full-time equivalents, and an annual budget of around \$200,000), the site reported that it knew of about six similarly qualified people working in similar jobs within similarly-sized non-profit organizations. These people earn salaries in the range \$80,000 - \$103,000. When staff levels were changed from 10 to 30 full-time equivalents, the salary range changed to \$90,000 - \$112,000.

Since the position will involve travelling extensively around the Territory, vehicle and accommodation costs will need to be provided.

Hub Development Officers

To develop a suitable hub network in a reasonably timely manner, a number of Hub Development Officers (HBO) will be needed to travel around the Territory, visiting local communities, explaining the hub system and its benefits, and then helping to recruit and train volunteers to run the hubs and provide their services. These positions will need to be permanent; the recruitment, training and supervision of volunteers never ends ... and, in any event, part of the process is to encourage each community to extend the range of services it can offer to its members.

Payscale.com suggested an annual salary range of \$40,000 to \$46,000 (average \$43,287) for a tertiary qualified person doing this job. Since the position will involve travelling extensively around the Territory, vehicle and accommodation costs will need to be provided.

How many HBOs will be required to cover the Territory? Based on information supplied by Brisbane Seniors Online, and the author's experience talking to organizations around Darwin, it is probable that each hub will take about a week of the HBO's time (maybe more in remote locations) – allowing servicing of about 40 hubs per year, allowing for holidays and travelling. How many hubs will there be? This verges on guesswork, but let us assume 200³. If this proves to be the case, it will take at least five HBOs a full year to cover the Territory.

(Note: this time estimate assumes that every hub has a pool of readily available potential volunteers, all suitably computer literate, all ready to be recruited. Such an assumption will not always hold true. In some Aboriginal communities, for instance, it is possible that suitable volunteers will be found to be in short supply. Other strategies will need to be developed for such communities to help them create their hub, which will probably turn out to be more time consuming.)

³ Hub areas are defined more in terms of what people think of as their local region or community than formal town boundaries. In the Darwin City Council area, for instance, it is likely that three or four hubs will be formed, while in some rural areas, it may be that hubs turn out to be many hundreds of kilometres across. Only experience will reveal the final number.

Once the hub network is established, how much HBO time will it take to maintain? BSOL says that it spends about two days, twice year, on hub maintenance, which works out to roughly about a week per hub – which means that the same five HBOs involved in setting up the network will be needed to keep it running⁴.

Administrative Assistant

To complete Head Office's staff, an administrative assistant will be needed to look after the office, deal with phone and personal enquiries about the Club, and assist with bookkeeping. This assistant will be assisted by volunteers.

Overall Costs

Allowing for on-costs, and travel and accommodation as necessary, we may make a back-of-envelope calculation of likely staff costs:

- Executive Director:..... \$150,000
- 5 x Hub Development Officers @ \$100,000..... \$500,000
- A part-time Administrative Assistant..... \$35,000

This gives a total of \$650,000 in annual salaries and associate costs.

5 Central Premises

In order to provide quality work, both permanent and volunteer staff need appropriate premises in which to work.

In the case of a computer club, the location and structure of the premises need to be chosen with an eye to maximizing both the numbers and quality of volunteers.

Given that it is the most populous city in the Northern Territory, Darwin would be a logical place to locate a regional club. To operate effectively, premises will need to be located conveniently close to volunteers (e.g. in the Northern Suburbs, not Winnellie), with easy access to public transport. They will also need to have many attractions, such as computer workshops, training rooms and social surfing facilities, so that volunteers are drawn to the premises. Finally, they will need to be large enough to accommodate a lot of volunteers, and designed so that people can work on many different projects without interfering with each other.

Obviously, given that the Club works with computers, the premises will also need to be clean, air conditioned, and well-equipped with power points and an Internet connection.

6 The Hubs

The key to solving the problem of Digital Poverty is having a universal network of local computer clubs or 'hubs', all supported by the regional organization. Creating this network would be undertaken in a partnership between the Club, local organizations (such as local Government), and local businesses.

In this partnership –

- The Club would recruit and organize volunteers;

⁴ It is unknown whether four days a year is too much time spent looking after hubs, or too little. Only experience will reveal this.

- Local Government or other organizations would provide the necessary premises (possibly plus equipment);
- Local industry (especially local retailers and technical service suppliers) would provide money, equipment and technical support.

The aim would be for each hub to be largely self-supporting financially, and indeed wherever possible to make a profit. (Income would come from Club membership fees, training fees and donations.) Overall profits would then be channelled back to help support unprofitable hubs, and to fund unprofitable services such as providing technical support to particularly needy people.

7 Other Points of Cooperation

As the Reports indicate, building bridges across the Digital Divide will be achieved by such single actions as creating a hub network, no matter how dramatic that may seem. It will be achieved instead by a veritable host of actions, some small and seemingly insignificant, others large and imposing. Adequately lead and resourced, the Club can play a useful role in almost every one of these actions.

Some of these actions will of necessity fall beyond the scope of the Territory Government. For instance, it is up to the Federal Government to enforce the provisions of the Trade Practices Act, and, as necessary, force computer manufacturers and retailers to provide Internet safe computers. It may also be that the Federal Government may choose to accept the Reports' suggestion about hosting the recommended telephone hotline within one of their departments, in which case there will be little point in creating a duplicate hotline within the Territory.

Other actions, however, will fall within the ambit of the Territory Government; and with these the Club can help, either by sharing its knowledge of home usage, or by providing research subjects.

Amongst the more pressing issues will be these –

- Creating an advisory body for the Territory devoted to home user issues, with membership of the Club (representing home users), retailers, technical service providers and government. This body would be charged with working out ways of improving the chances of people successfully crossing the Divide;
- Introducing computer courses oriented to home usage into the high school and TAFE systems. This means: subjects that do not merely mention topics relevant to home users in passing, but provide a coherent body of knowledge and skills appropriate to home users. Most importantly, it would also include creation of a professional development facility to help existing technicians upgrade their home user-relevant skills – and help keep them up-to-date!
- Creating an academic unit devoted to research into home computer issues – to determine, for instance, what skills do home users typically have, and what do they need? What are the most cost-effective ways of training them? What are their minimum hardware and software requirements? At the moment, while there are many theories about such matters, most theorists are operating in a largely fact-free environment.
- Creating a phone hotline if the Federal Government declines to create one;

- Producing training material and handouts. By and large, computer clubs produce their own training materials, rather than use professionally produced material⁵. This material is then supplied on either CD or photocopied sheets, to keep costs to negligible levels. Nevertheless, there may be circumstances when properly printed handouts would be useful. For example, a laminated instruction sheet in routine weekly computer maintenance would probably be welcomed by most home users. Within Darwin and other larger centres, it would be relatively easy to find a corporate sponsor willing to pay for such an item. In the remote areas, however, this might be very much harder, especially if they were needed in a local language. Under such circumstances, the Government might wish to give consideration to producing the handouts.
- Adapt the hub system as appropriate to remote Aboriginal communities. While it is probable that the hub system could be introduced without significant problems into many Aboriginal communities (those with significant numbers of existing home users, at least), it is also probable that there could be considerable benefit in customizing it to local conditions. For instance, following the definition adopted in the Reports, 'home users' are typically seen as adult, and so hub members are assumed to be adult as well. There is, however, no particular reason why the hub system could not be adapted to benefit children⁶. Likewise, modifying the standard hub model might well prove useful in communities with few existing home users.

These matters just mentioned come within the immediate responsibility of the Territory Government. Other matters, however, are of less immediate concern, but nevertheless may be of interest. For instance –

- For many years, the Club has cooperated with other organizations, variously providing expertise in home user issues, computer training, technical advice, and even a refurbished computer. These organizations have included: Alzheimer's Australia NT, Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre, Integrated Disability Action, Mental Health NT, MS Society and Red Cross. The Club has been asked for assistance by many other organizations, but has been unable to respond for lack of resources (especially space). With more resources, the Club could do very much more in this regard;
- Working with computers is reasonably popular with volunteers, and helping people cross the Digital Divide is an especially popular mission. Nevertheless, the Club turns away more volunteers than it accepts. The reason for this is, quite simply, lack of space. It turns away potential volunteers partly because it has no place for them to work, and partly because it has no one to supervise them. The reason that it has no one to supervise them, however, is also it has no place for a supervisor to work. In short, the Club's lack of space impacts adversely on volunteers' work opportunities.

Finally, there is the question of what else a computer club could do, if adequately lead and resourced. Here are some of the author's favourite thoughts –

- For several years, the Club has had a charitable idea called the Lazarus Project, in which volunteers help the housebound and people with severe disabilities look after their computers. (Hence the name: new life for old computers.) The idea is that that suitably skilled volunteers ('para-technicians', or para-techs as they call themselves) visit people

⁵ There probably is a reason for this, though it momentarily escapes the author's mind.

⁶ Indeed, there seems to be considerable evidence that the hub system could be used very successfully with children. The author knows of at least one case where it was used, apparently with much success, to limit violence and crime amongst Aboriginal children in Darwin.

and undertake low-level technical work such as plugging in equipment, installing programs, or doing routine maintenance. At the same time, if appropriate, they stop, have a cuppa and a chat, and generally be a friendly visitor. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of the project is badly hampered by lack of space to deploy volunteers (see above) and lack of appropriate training in home user skills (also see above).

- A variation of the Lazarus Project would be to create a charitable fund (with tax deductibility) to finance the hiring of suitably qualified technicians to provide technical support to the particularly needy;
- Yet another variation of the Lazarus Project would see the creation of a sort of AANT for computer owners, in which the computer owners would pay an annual fee for 'road side service'. In this case, roadside service might involve qualified technicians providing basic diagnostic services and 'easy' repairs (such as cleaning dirty cabling, and fixing easy software conflicts.) Maybe such a service could be organized in conjunction with an insurance company such as TIO;
- Many home users are experienced at using a computer to work from home. Sometimes they are self-employed with an Internet-based business. Club members are currently working to create an 'e-entrepreneur support unit', which would provide help for work-at-home e-entrepreneurs. Potentially, this could be of benefit in remote Aboriginal communities, creating work opportunities, possibly enabling some individuals to become employers, and helping them sell their local products.

8 Conclusion

Since time immemorial, a test of a society's level of civilization has been how well it fosters literacy amongst its citizenry. In the 21st Century, the test that is emerging is: how well do we foster computer literacy.

In this discussion paper, a number of suggestions have been made. It is not for the Club to say whether these suggestions should be taken up, or modified. It is perhaps enough to observe that the community wants something done, and that the Club is willing to part of the doing.

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