

DIGITAL DIVIDE

benefiting from the net

AOL UK has formed an alliance with a charity that provides housing and residential care for disabled people. By supplying free computers, web access and training, it has demonstrated that companies in the new economy are well-placed to practise social responsibility

When the government-backed Digital Futures inquiry reported in early 2001 that internet businesses had a long way to travel before they matched the 'old economy' on corporate social responsibility, AOL UK was at least able to feel it had made more progress along the road than many of its competitors.

As a leading internet and e-commerce services company – and one of 14 businesses that made detailed submissions to the inquiry – AOL UK has set up a ground-breaking project on the 'digital divide' that it believes sets a standard for others to follow.

In collaboration with the charity John Grooms, which provides housing and residential care for disabled people, the company has given free computers, internet access and training to around 50 of the charity's clients to improve their quality of life, computer literacy and independence. Residents at five homes in Norwich, Southend, Colchester, Edgware and Birmingham – plus people with disabilities working at a John Grooms agricultural nursery in Hertfordshire – have been linked up to the internet by AOL since the pilot project began last year. The scheme is part

of an AOL community investment programme that seeks to extend the benefits of the internet to those who find access difficult, and has proved so successful that there are plans to expand it.

Computer equipment has usually been set up in common rooms, where AOL staff give the

residents one-to-one tuition on how to hook up to the internet, send emails, surf the net and hone their computing skills. Around eight AOL staff have taken part, usually visiting homes in twos or threes, and there have been several repeat visits to provide follow-up support.

AOL has provided the computer hardware, software, telephone lines and specialized equipment, such as head sticks, as well as the initial training. The company has also helped to fund a research officer employed by John Grooms to monitor the project's development.

Typical of those who have benefited is Carla Espinosa, a 37-year-old who lives at a John Grooms independent living centre in Southend, following a

car accident in 1986. 'Using the net at the library would be difficult, with having to arrange transport and to get someone to help me,' she says. 'The internet allows me to take things at my own pace and it is opening up a new world for me.'

Espinosa says access to the net has spurred her to take a basic computing course that she hopes will lead to a job in IT. There have been other benefits too: as a native of Tenerife she can now read Spanish newspapers on the web, and email keeps her in regular touch with her sister.

Like others in the project, Espinosa has also taken part in private chatrooms set up by AOL and found John Grooms residents around the country with similar interests and experiences; a novelty, since such contact has generally been rare until now.

It was just such outcomes that AOL was hoping for. The digital divide – which leaves disadvantaged sections of the community without access to the net – was identified by the Digital Futures inquiry as one of the areas in which dotcom companies could make an impact for the general good.

A De Montfort University study last year concluded that people living in supported housing were less likely to be connected to the internet than other social groups, such as high-income families and country dwellers – although they were more likely to be connected than blue-collar workers and those living in council accommodation.

Katrina Giles, who was on the Digital Futures steering group in her capacity as head of corporate responsibility at AOL, says the John Grooms project – which has so far entailed cash support of £40,240 and an as yet uncosted figure for staff support – has helped the company to learn valuable lessons about

following the decision by Ofcom to allow unmetered internet access, AOL members' usage has quadrupled

■ Carla Espinosa (pictured), who lives at a John Grooms independent living centre in Southend, says that access to the internet has encouraged her to take a college computing course and has made it much easier to stay in regular contact with her sister



HELEN STONE

how to bridge that divide. 'This has been about improving lifestyles and encouraging independence, but part of the aim for us was also to identify barriers to access for disabled people so we could gain a broader understanding of how the digital divide works,' she says. 'We wanted to look at and test the assumption that people with disabilities can benefit from access to the internet.'

'This project in itself isn't going to change the digital divide, but what we learn from it will help our core business become more inclusive.'

HELPING THE CAMPAIGN FOR UNMETERED ACCESS

It also helped AOL UK to achieve its commercial aim of winning the right to offer unmetered internet access in the UK. Monitoring showed that being charged per minute for access greatly inhibited internet use. This data was made available to telecoms regulator Ofcom.

'We were providing these people with equipment, training and support, yet we could show their use was still hindered by the fact that they had to pay according to how long they were online,' says Giles. 'The project was a powerful help in our overall campaign for unmetered access. Since Ofcom allowed the change to unmetered access, our UK members' usage has quadrupled. That must be useful in countering the digital divide.'

John Grooms residents also helped the company to develop a dedicated disability area within its online travel channel. They were invited to talk to AOL staff and discuss in chatrooms how the service worked for them. As a direct result, the company added an area for disabled travellers to the site. 'Our staff had direct access to the community they wanted to build something for,' says Giles. 'And it was satisfying for the participants to see their opinions taken on board.'

AOL technical staff who trained the residents also found the process useful. 'To be sitting down with somebody who had never used the internet was very refreshing for them,' says Giles. 'It has got our staff talking about the people they are creating stuff for.'

The initiative will be extended to other John Grooms homes this year, including residential and nursing homes in Borehamwood and Harrow, a respite home in Norwich and the Jane Hodge Hotel in Glamorgan, which provides holiday accommodation.

Giles believes it is important that the scheme receives a long-term commitment rather than being run only as an experiment for a couple of years. She also thinks it is an ideal vehicle to deliver something of what the Digital Futures inquiry has called for. 'This is a fast-growing industry, but that's no excuse for us to ignore our social responsibilities,' she says. 'We have a great opportunity to develop such things at an early point in our existence.'

■ Further information: Katrina Giles, head of corporate responsibility on KatrinaGiles@aol.com or visit www.aol.co.uk/info/responsibility

The screenshot shows the AOL Travel Holidays website. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'Destination', 'Price', 'Type', 'Accommodation', 'Group', and 'Activity'. A prominent banner for 'Disabled' features a wheelchair icon and text: 'Don't let your disability deter you from taking a holiday! Check out our features for inspiration, or read our useful travel information!'. To the right, there's a 'Sleep easy! Find a place to stay - where to look and book!' section with a house image. Below the search bar, there's a 'Plan your journey!' section with a person in a wheelchair and text: 'Planes, trains and automobiles - click here for our guide on getting around'. A 'Useful links' section lists: 'W ABTA', 'Access Able Travel Source', 'Access Travel', 'Department of the environment', 'Disability World', and 'Disabled travel planning'. The footer includes 'Meet the editorial team', 'Feedback', 'Messages', and 'Chat', along with the keyword 'DISABLED TRAVEL'.

the company

AOL UK is an internet service provider and e-commerce company that was founded in 1995 and now employs 400 people. A division of AOL Europe, which is in turn a division of America Online, the US-based wholly-owned subsidiary of AOL Time Warner, it:

- works with Fairbridge, a national charity, to provide web-based training courses on work and life skills for young people in deprived inner-city areas
- offers schools and UK-registered charities access to AOL unmetered services via direct debit
- runs free internet accounts to train, educate and empower young homeless people with the Centrepoint charity
- has two full-time community investment staff reporting to the head of corporate responsibility.

the background three per cent of poor households in the UK are online, compared with 48 per cent of affluent households, according to the Cabinet Office.

■ AOL UK added an area for disabled travellers to its online Travel Channel service as a direct result of its work with John Grooms residents – AOL Keyword 'disabled travel'

ibc comment AOL UK

The Digital Futures report highlights the digital divide, which results in many in the community not having access to the net. AOL UK identified disabled people as being particularly affected, as it can be difficult for them to visit public places where net access may be available, such as the local library. The net is all about sharing information, and bringing people together through email. AOL's practical support in collaborating with the John Grooms charity is helping to 'open up a new world' for disabled people.

Features that impress are:

- The commitment of the company and individual employees to provide training and technical support
- The openness of AOL in listening to and engaging with potential customers
- The practical nature of how it has addressed the issue of the Digital Divide with tangible benefits for disabled people
- The use of this case as an argument to gain unmetered access from Ofcom.

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