

DIGITAL INCLUSION

getting online

BT is working with a variety of charitable organizations in the UK to increase access to, and knowledge of, online services. The telecoms provider is focusing its efforts to narrow the digital divide on two groups – older people and those living in deprived areas

‘Digital inclusion’ may be unpalatable jargon to some, but it’s useful shorthand for a key social challenge that the world currently faces. Despite all the hype about the internet, large swathes of humanity still have no regular access to the web. In many Asian countries, fewer than one in 20 of the population has online access, and in African countries the figure can run below one per cent. Industrialized countries fare much better. But even here the figures may surprise. A third of the UK population has never used a computer, let alone tried accessing the internet, according to research by the telecoms provider BT, with those near or past retirement age particularly affected. In the UK, joint research by the Future Foundation think-tank and BT has shown that 9.7 million people over the age of 60 do not have regular online access to the internet. And within this age group, even those reasonably familiar with the technology are often unsure how to use it: four in five of 55-64 year olds say they lack the confidence to use all its functions.

Figures such as these help to explain why BT is putting so much effort into various digital inclusion projects in the UK. Some, but by no means all, of these involve working to increase take-up and understanding of the internet. Central to these efforts is a partnership that BT has formed with the charity Age Concern to help thousands of older people in Britain use computers for email and online information-gathering. Adrian Hosford, BT’s



the company

BT serves more than 20 million business and residential customers in the UK, with more than 30 million exchange lines, and also operates in mainland Europe, the Americas and Asia Pacific, providing telephone, broadband and internet services. In 2005 it made gross profits of £2.8 billion (\$5bn) on turnover of £18.6bn. It:

- n was judged the best UK sustainability reporter in the 2006 Sustainability Reporting Awards, sharing the accolade with Anglo American
- n has created The Better Business Game, which introduces corporate responsibility dilemmas to business school students, company employees and charity workers
- n provided £11.7m to community projects through direct funding and gifts in kind in 2005, and gives at least 0.5 per cent of UK pre-tax profits to society

corporate responsibility director, says: ‘Britain could be facing grave consequences if the digital divide isn’t taken seriously. If we don’t address this problem now, it will get a lot worse. People will find it more difficult to get jobs, education opportunities will be limited, and they’ll not be able to keep up with society.’

Against the background of a UK government pledge that every home should be connected to online services by 2008, BT has linked up with Age Concern for a three-year digital inclusion campaign, worth £240,000 (\$421,000), that is intended to surmount two obstacles.

Techno-fear is the first. ‘Many think it’s too late to learn,’ says Mike Hughes, BT’s head of digital inclusion, ‘yet all the evidence is that older people handle the technology well and enthusiastically when they get the opportunity to try it for themselves.’ The second obstacle is the assumption that the internet offers them nothing. However, Hughes continues, ‘once they see how easy it is to find information, there’s usually no holding them back’.

In practice, the benefits for those engaged by the BT campaign include access to cheaper goods such as low-cost air fares and the ease of keeping in touch with friends and family. The danger is that people without internet access will not benefit from the technology.

Of course, as a provider of broadband and other services closely linked to the internet, BT stands to benefit commercially if it can persuade more people

n BT’s Internet Rangers initiative encourages young people to teach their elders how to use computers and the web

to move online. But Hughes says there is much more to it than that. 'We're striving to create a better world through communication and the internet is an invaluable link to the outside world. One lady wrote to us saying that at 84 and living in a very rural part of the country, she never feels lonely now that she can send and receive instant messages over the internet. It's inspiring stuff.'

One key aim of the BT digital inclusion campaign is to attract more people to the computer drop-in centres where Age Concern runs its 'Silver Surfer Clubs'. This will help the charity towards its goal of making all its 540 clubs internet-enabled, paying for more computers and volunteers' expenses. The tie-up should allow clubs to be open longer and will finance about 100 additional training sessions for older people to learn the basics and overcome any misgivings they may have about using the technology.

Some of the money has been used to support a Silver Surfer Week, which had a target of giving more than 10,000 newcomers their first taste of being online. One Newcastle-based silver surfer member who caught the bug is Patricia Humble, who was given a computer as a 70th birthday present. Having had lessons, she is now cutting her telephone bills by keeping in touch with her grandchildren in North America by email and using a webcam.

Jennie Lavin, who works in Age Concern's corporate partnership team, says BT clearly shares the charity's goal on digital inclusion, and is therefore a good fit to work with the organization. 'This is a long-term partnership and not just a single hit,' she adds.

Although BT has helped Age Concern introduce 70,000 people to the internet so far, both parties acknowledge that what they're doing is still a drop in the ocean. BT is therefore keen that its programmes also reach other sectors of society. Age, of course, is only one barrier: the partnership with Age Concern was partly inspired by the EverybodyOnline initiative. Starting four years ago, BT has been working with another charity, Citizens Online, to bring internet technology to people of all ages who live in deprived areas.

One of the foundations of the EverybodyOnline approach, which has helped 4350 people over the past 12 months, is the appointment of local project officers to work with training colleges and other bodies to promote internet use. How this is done depends on the needs and facilities of the local area: in one area, Rhyl, North Wales, for example, the officer conducted training sessions in a pub, while in another, Bettws, near Newport, South Wales, a creche was provided. In some places, BT has established centres equipped with computers.

10,000 newcomers to the net had their first taste of being online in Silver Surfer Week



Children and teenagers are also brought into BT's digital inclusion net by the company's Internet Rangers initiative, which came about after researchers discovered that 32 per cent of parents and grandparents had been taught or encouraged to surf the net by a child aged between 13 and 16. The Internet Rangers campaign therefore concentrates on recognizing and encouraging those who are using their communication and ICT skills to get their elders online. It will hold Internet Ranger awards later this year.

BT says that, in themselves, the results from such initiatives are reason enough to become involved, but there are also spin-off benefits for the business. One key bonus is the effect they have on BT's reputation, which helps the company generate more business. Add to that the extra goodwill among staff created by the company's involvement, and another piece of jargon – 'win-win' – comes to mind.

n Further information: www.btplc.com/societyandenvironment

n local project officers assist people living in deprived neighbourhoods to benefit from online access as part of the EverybodyOnline scheme

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This is a good example of mutual benefit being derived from partnerships between special interest groups and a large corporation. BT and charities such as Age Concern obtain tangible benefits from closing the large 'digital divide' between the computer literate and others, be they old, young, or among the one in three people who have had no previous access to machines or training schemes. The project has also shown that very young children can help their grandparents to use computers and the internet.

Features of note include:

- n research-based facts have been driving the programme
- n there has been extensive use of local institutions (colleges, pubs etc) to deliver the programmes
- n younger helping older
- n genuine personal and community benefits are flowing from the company's initiatives

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