

The Digital Divide.

At long last organizations are beginning to realize the dream of the paperless office. From government to local housing association, those businesses which generate vast quantities of printed paper, store it, distribute it, recover data from it and process it, have found ways to solve the problems of audit trails and security and have started to gain some of the benefits of integrated electronic data systems. Only twenty years late!

However this apparent bonanza has a downside - the potential for shutting out those people it most wants to help. The problems of forms and literacy are bad enough, forms and electronic literacy are even worse. If the issuers of electronic interaction don't want to disenfranchise and alienate their prospective users then more has to be done to mediate between the user and the provider.

In reality this means that more attention has to be paid to providing ways and means for the general public to gain access in a meaningful way. It is not enough to put forms on the internet or www and expect users to navigate around them. There has to be on the ground help. What I would term mediated access.

As the personal computer matures from general purpose device to specific and integrated device, buried within the guts of more familiar apparatus, such as TV, hi-fi, and domestic electrics, so the everyday use of its connectivity will increase. Already the cable and satellite TV companies have weaned the British Public onto interactivity in a way and at a speed that computers miserably failed to do. Text messaging, 3G services on WAP mobile phones has also done a lot to increase general public awareness and familiarity with computer system interaction. This convergence marks the start of the delivery of a future which was predicted back in the sixties.

What was also foretold then was the gradual disenfranchisement of a large sector of the population. Avoiding such a situation requires intense effort to provide the mediated access to system which is open to all, available round the clock and in locations which are easy to reach.

I believe that this predicts a new role for the internet café - a community ICT access centre. As a result of years of providing such services it has been obvious that we have progressed beyond the simple

access to e mail scenario so familiar in most internet cafes. The type of people who run the cafes are usually heavily into computing and the internet, have intense experience in the problems of maintaining systems, accessing the web and finding information. They also usually have no axe to grind when it comes to hardware and software and can freely and honestly share experience with others as to the suitability and usefulness of potential purchases.

But as most of them find out to their cost, it is getting harder and harder to make a living from it. The cost of high street locations, the business taxes and bureaucracy and the reluctance of most of the public to pay for something they think they ought to have by right, are driving the internet cafes out of business.

So its time for a rethink. That there ought to be some sort of subsidy for providing high street access 24/7 is indisputable. If the information gatherers want their cost cutting exercises to work then they will have to pay for them. Using experienced and motivated people to assist the general public to access, understand and use the form systems seems inevitable if those systems are to be widely and freely used.

With the computer systems now becoming affordable, reliable (mostly), and ubiquitous, it seems sensible to make a major effort to ensure that everyone has equal, unimpeded access to the information the systems contain.

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*For discussion at a meeting at Exeter Central Library
Computer Training Room
April 1 4pm*

www.inxpress.co.uk/castle

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*News about Life Bytes, the most recent internet café in Exeter
www.life-bytes.co.uk*