



# Community ICT Transformation

## Case study overview

Information and communications technology (ICT), especially the Internet, is transforming how we communicate, interact and connect with each other.

Community or nonprofit organisations and groups are increasingly using ICT to make their operations more efficient, better connect with their clients and members, and work together to improve their communities.

In this set of case studies, a cross-section of community or nonprofit organisations and groups share their experiences: how they introduced ICT, the barriers and challenges they overcame, and the lessons learned.

The case studies present the ways these groups and organisations are using ICT from three perspectives:

1. enhancing operational efficiency and capability
2. delivering services and support
3. building communities, networks and connections.

Cases studies under the first two headings illustrate the innovative and entrepreneurial nature of nonprofit organisations. They use ICT in strategic and flexible ways toward their own goals, and contribute to a wider agenda of community and social capital building, collaborating with one another and partnering with government and business.

Case studies under the third heading, *Building communities, networks and connections*, illustrate the potential of ICT to build social capital within a variety of communities. This includes examples of geographic and virtual communities that are using ICT to develop increased social and community inclusion and cohesion.

## Summary of main findings

### 1. Enhancing operational efficiency and capability

These case studies examine organisations embracing a variety of technologies including broadband enabled networks, clever use of standard commercial products and open source products. They demonstrate increased capacity in terms of efficiencies in administration, service delivery, improved communications, and improved engagement with their target audience to increase revenue.

### Main benefits and outcomes

- Work processes in administrative and financial operations are improved. This results in reduced processing time, less waste, and reduced costs or reallocation of resources.
- There is improved business information management, resulting in increased capacity, continual improvement of service delivery and decision making.
- Organisational culture surrounding the use of ICT improves, and there is better use of information. This helps empower staff to be innovative.
- A planned or architected approach to ICT implementation and management, such as centralisation of ICT operations or using open or interoperable systems, facilitates:
  - greater alignment of ICT with overall strategic and organisational objectives
  - more robust, portable and flexible ICT applications
  - improved connections and engagement with external agencies.



- Collaboration, directly or through an intermediary, enables greater sharing of ICT resources, training and knowledge and cost sharing.

### Common barriers and challenges

The most common barriers and challenges encountered are:

- costs and lack of resources
- level of ICT skills, knowledge and awareness by staff, management and board members
- ensuring sustainability
- lack of experience with ICT or ICT readiness and online networking within particular sectors and smaller organisations
- the need for specific skills such as negotiating a contract, system implementation and change management present a significant challenge for many organisations.

### Key lessons

- A robust business case is needed for each ICT project, based on clear identification of the problem to be addressed, and aligning ICT deployment with overall strategic and organisational objectives.
- Supportive management, adequate project resources and effective project management are needed. Whether the work is outsourced or in-house, every project needs a caretaker or champion who has the time, communications skills, technical skills and knowledge to manage the project and provide strong direction.
- Staff commitment is essential. Without it large organisations cannot deal with a complex development environment. Smaller organisations with minimal resources need staff who are committed to seeing projects through despite having other responsibilities.
- Organisations need to have a trusted source of ICT advice, technical support and skills—one that understands the needs of the sector. Strategic partnerships can provide this kind of support.
- Open source is a viable and healthy alternative to commercial software, of particular benefit to nonprofit organisations.
- There is a need to work towards standardisation across sectors. Candidates for such standards

are government client and grant reporting formats, client and membership information.

## 2. Delivering services and support

The *Delivering services and support* case studies show organisations improving client service or broadening service reach. Several transformed service delivery by complementing or replacing traditional services with Internet services, while others increased social connection, by empowering clients, providing people with necessary ICT skills and overcoming geographic or social isolation.

### Main benefits and outcomes

The main benefits from these case studies are:

- ICT creates new opportunities such as improved relationships with members or clients. It also enhances an organisation's capacity for online engagement and access to a wider audience, and interagency coordination, collaboration and networking.
- ICT provides wider community benefits, for example volunteers skills transfer, and enhances the role of nonprofit organisations as trusted intermediaries in the community.
- ICT overcomes social and geographic isolation and exclusion so there is greater access to and availability of information, services and support for clients and members.
- Better access to ICT facilities, training and support can empower clients.
- Improved outcomes for members such as the ability to keep in touch and share knowledge or skills with other members through online community networking.
- Voluntary member driven organisations can provide ICT training that is appropriate and relevant to the client group
- With support community organisations that felt overwhelmed by ICT issues are developing confidence that they can move forward without losing control
- Ability of small organisations to collaborate and take advantage of economies of scale, for example, jointly develop new services or applications, such as online donations.
- ICT capacity can not only provide direct benefits to organisations but also enable a multiplier effect, extending benefits to wider networks and communities.



### Common barriers and challenges

The major barriers encountered by these case studies are:

- costs and lack of resources (seen as more significant barriers in rural communities), for example, provision of quality ICT training in rural areas
- inadequate ICT skills, knowledge and awareness by staff, management and board members (in particular, many community workers and clients expressed insecurity or a lack of trust in using ICT)
- ensuring sustainability, an even more significant issue where projects lack the backing of an established organisation (e.g. depressionNet)
- specific barriers around dealing with clients' privacy and security and gaining credibility (online interactive health and welfare services encountered these).

### Key lessons

The key lessons from these case studies are:

- the need for a supportive organisational culture, complemented by an understanding of the organisation's business needs as well as those of the major stakeholders
- ICT can deliver improved outcomes for clients and members only when organisations and their clients have access to technology, skills and relevant online services
- the importance of involving key stakeholders such as volunteers, staff and members in ICT projects
- the ability to connect with the stakeholder community is a key success factor
- the value of developing strategic partnerships with the business, education and government sectors
- the importance of organisations working collaboratively, particularly to streamline services to shared customers.

## 3. Building communities, networks and connections

The *Building communities, networks and connections* case studies look at the role of ICT in building a sense of community in both geographic and virtual settings and in building networks or connections ('social capital'<sup>1</sup>) within and between groups, organisations and communities.

Attention is paid to the type of social capital that is formed and which serves different functions:

- *bonding social capital*—relations within similar groups which further strengthen social ties or bonds within these groups
- *bridging social capital*—interactions between different groups which strengthen the ties across or between these groups
- *linking social capital*—links formed between individuals and groups in different positions in society on the basis of power, social status and wealth.

The benefits, barriers and lessons identified in these case studies relate closely to these types of social capital as well as to the role of ICT in facilitating community development.

### Main benefits and outcomes

- ICT can be effectively built into equity strategies targeted at the needs and interests of particular groups.
- Mixed models which combine face-to-face and online interaction can act as a transition strategy in communities with low levels of ICT skills and use.
- ICT can be used as a tool to connect individuals to a range of community types, both wired and virtual, primarily designed to increase bonding social capital providing a sense of belonging, inclusion and community.
- ICT can be used to create bridging social capital between geographically or socially diverse individuals forming a basis for collaborative work and understanding.

### Common barriers and challenges

The common barriers and challenges encountered are:

- Transactional and social forms of trust are major issues which limit the potential of the Internet to strengthen existing communities and develop new virtual communities.

- Funding issues feature prominently as a barrier to both the sustainability and development of wired and virtual communities. This is particularly significant in those cases where the community exists exclusively in the virtual realm.
- Over-reliance on a very small number of dedicated volunteers creates high workloads for these individuals and threatens the social sustainability of the community.
- Ongoing technical knowledge and support is often unavailable, difficult to access or cost prohibitive.
- Inclusion in online communities is limited to those individuals who have access to Internet connected computers and the skills and knowledge to operate them.

### Key lessons

- ICT can serve as a powerful tool for building social capital in communities but the type of social capital generated depends on the nature of the community, its stage of development and the strategies it adopts.
- While the impact of ICT leads easily to increasing bonding social capital, explicit strategies and actions are required to build bridging and linking social capital.
- Each community's stage of development impacts on the level and type of social capital formed within it as well as affecting the types of barriers and benefits that arise.
- Nonprofit organisations play a key entrepreneurial and intermediary role in building alliances and partnerships within and across communities, and act as a catalyst to promote and facilitate the use of ICT to build social capital.
- Organisational support provides a platform for increased sustainability, funding options, technical expertise and professional facilitation, support and leadership which will lead to improved benefits and outcomes.

### Endnote:

1 Social capital is defined as 'networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups.' (OECD)

## COMMUNITY CONNECTIVITY

### More information

In these case studies, communities, nonprofit organisations and groups share their experiences and lessons they have learnt using ICT: enhancing capability and service delivery; supporting and building communities, networks and connections; and overcoming barriers and challenges.

*Australia's Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004–2006* emphasises the need to ensure that all Australians can participate in the benefits of the information economy.

Key strategies in 2004–06 will be to strengthen collaboration and capabilities in nonprofit organisations, facilitate the creative use of ICT for building stronger communities and social cohesion, and develop networks, capabilities and tools to enable participation by people who are facing economic, geographic or social barriers.

**For more information visit the DCITA website [www.dcita.gov.au](http://www.dcita.gov.au) or email [community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au](mailto:community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au).**

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