"Digital Communities" Built with Certiport IC³ Bridge the Divide

IC³

Dublin Institute of Technology

Location: Dublin, Ireland

Number of centers: 21

Success Metrics:
Implementing a Certiport IC³ certification program resulted in:

- Personal transformation with skills that lead to better employment opportunities
- Increased government support of community employability programs
- Higher education credit for certificate holders

CERTIPORT®

Program offers hope to thousands of Irish citizens who need computing skills and experience to pursue higher education, find work

CHALLENGE

Leading the way in technological higher education, Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) is an accredited academic institution that confers universally accepted degrees. Several years ago, DIT began an initiative to place computers in disadvantaged inner-city schools. Forty-four schools were identified for the program, a partnership with Fujitsu Siemens Computers was established and students and teachers began receiving IT training.

Unfortunately, organizers soon discovered that when students and teachers left their classrooms and went home, they had no access to technology. As a result, the Digital Divide—the gap between individuals with regular access to technology and individuals without it—was reinforced.

SOLUTION

Without access to government funding or tax dollars, DIT partnered with Hewlett-Packard Development Company (HP), the Dublin Inner City Partnership, the Dublin City Council, Eircom, The Digital Hub and the National Centre for Technology in Education to create the Digital Community Programme. The program identified 10 of the most seriously disadvantaged schools and communities. In these areas, unemployment was as high as 87 percent, crime was excessive, illiteracy and lack of education was prevalent and individuals suffered from low self-esteem.

After each sponsoring organization assigned a senior-level, decision-making representative to serve on the Digital Community Programme board, a committee approached the communities to learn how members of the communities felt they could be serviced. "We turned the design back to the communities and asked what they wanted, rather than telling

them what we thought they should do," said program manager Peter Byrne. "We needed their support and ideas to ensure they would use our services and engage in the opportunity we were providing them."

Soon, six Digital Community Programme centers were set up in apartments provided with heat and electricity by the Dublin City Council, state-of-the-art computer equipment contributed by HP and broadband service provided by Eircom. Basic courses focused on keyboarding, computer usage and Internet usage were scheduled to slowly build the skills included in the three Certiport Internet and Computing Core Certification (IC³®) exams—Computing Fundamentals, Key Applications and Living Online.

As the program grew from 10 to 21 centers, Byrne said both the number of courses available and the participants wanting to attend them increased. "In some centers, we do not have enough capacity for those wishing to participate," he reported. "In 2007, 1,900 people attended courses, including participants of all ages—six to 76."

Each center is accredited through DIT to allow participants to earn university credit through the European Credit Transfer System. IC³ is worth five credits, and an accompanying teacher-training course is worth an additional two credits. "Individuals can transfer their credits to any third-level institute in Europe and use them toward degrees and as a pathway to their chosen fields of study," Byrne said.

RESULT

After seeing the value of the Digital Community Programme in Dublin, Irish government officials, including Prime Minister Bertie Ahern, T.D. and President Mary McAleese's husband, Dr. Martin McAleese, have engaged loyalists and republicans to eliminate violence, promising to implement the Digital Community Programme in other areas as part of peace process.

Indeed, Byrne said government support has been helpful. President McAleese attended a Digital Community Programme graduation in 2006, at which 54 certificates were awarded to participants. In 2007, Minister Éamon Ó Cuív, of the department of community, rural and Gaeltacht affairs witnessed the conferral of 58 certificates. In 2007, 121 individuals graduated from the program.

On an individual level, Byrne has seen lives transform, stories he finds "hugely satisfying." Speaking of his experiences working with single mothers, drug abusers and individuals with prison convictions, Byrne has met a number of individuals who have accomplished personal and professional goals through the Digital Community Programme, which has now expanded to 21 centers in Dublin and surrounding areas.

One young woman left school at age 14 and had five daughters before attending courses at a Digital Community Programme center. She now teaches courses for the program, and, following her example, all of her daughters want to attend college.

"To influence the next generation is key to the whole thing," Byrne said. "There is no other approach like this. We must engage people on their terms, not tell them what to do. They need to be consulted about what they want, and we need to be able to provide jobs to people who really need them and wouldn't get them otherwise."

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 Program Manager
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