

Interfacing with Mogalakwena

Hewlett Packard does its bit to bridge the digital divide

→ Christine Haran

Many approaches are being tried to help close the gap that separates the 94% of the world who don't have access to the Internet from the 6% who do. In the case of one world leader in information technology, it is simply a question of applying their business philosophy – finding solutions to customer needs.

In the highly competitive world of global information technology, Hewlett Packard is very big. Its core business is to satisfy the demands of the world's most advanced economies for ever faster and more flexible electronic information solutions. So it can come as a surprise to find HP staff also at work in remote rural villages in India, South Africa and South America. After all, what can the maker of ten million laser jet printers offer that these villagers either need or could afford? The answer, according to Debra Dunn (in the picture), HP's Vice President of Corporate Affairs and Global Citizenship, is 'e-inclusion' – you could call it the ultimate in flexible solutions. "e-inclusion", explains Dunn, "is HP's effort to apply technology to accelerate economic development and bridge the gap between those who currently have access to technology and those who don't."

The California-based company has always had a commitment to social responsibility, and figured that it made sense to focus their contributions

around their core competency, "Because we are a technology company, e-inclusion is a natural thing for us to focus on. It is about applying skills and capabilities that are related to our business to trying to narrow the income gaps in the world and help underserved communities."



Corporate philanthropy is far more widespread in the US than in Europe and takes place on an altogether different scale. A league table for 2002 published in *Business Week* magazine shows the top 56 donors accounting for a total of nearly two and a half billion dollars. HP, which comes somewhere in the middle, stands out from many of the

other listed companies in the way it tailored its contribution to the requirements of a sector where knowledge, structures and systems are as important as equipment, and where new technologies can offer new ways of generating income.

"Four years ago," says Dunn, "we started marrying our philanthropic investments with our business development investments and with



Brightly painted mobile community information centres like this one bring Internet access to villages around Kuppam, southern India

staffing. Our flagship e-inclusion projects involve some contribution of equipment, but more importantly, staff on the ground to work collaboratively with local nonprofit and community organisations and government. So what we're bringing is not just financial support, but the broad assets of the company."

Getting so deeply involved in communities so different from their main markets proved a challenge. It started close to home with the digital villages initiative, aimed at bringing information technology at a community level in underserved areas in the US. "The first thing we did was put out a request for proposals to communities. We let them know the kind of thing that we were looking to do, and that we were looking for communities that had strong collaboration across sectors – government, business and nonprofit – and we were inundated with proposals."

THE FIRST THREE

Three proposals were accepted as a start. One in East Palo Alto, on the doorstep of HP's own headquarters, one near San Diego with 18 Native American tribes, and one in East Baltimore, Maryland. Each project had full-time senior-level HP staff on the ground for three years and a

budget of \$5 million over the same period.

The communities seemed pleased with the results. "One of the things that was very beneficial about the projects was that we didn't really have a specific solution that we were driving. We started each of the projects with a visioning session in the community, so that the key stakeholders in the community were defining the priorities for that community. We were bringing HP's technical abilities to try to address those priorities."

In the Native American project, for example, one of the big priorities for the community was to retain some of their cultural heritage. In many of the tribes, their language was only being kept alive through the elders in the community, who were aging and dying. One of the big initiatives there was to use technology to capture the stories and the language of the tribes, and now they are available for not only the current generation but for future generations as well.

Having thus gained some level of confidence and experience from these early initiatives, HP's e-inclusion projects started to venture further afield. The approach also shifted from philanthropy towards business development initiatives, working in much stronger partnerships with national governments.

InsideTrack

"We launched two i-community projects [the 'i' stands for 'inclusion'], one in India, in a community called Kuppum, in Andhra Pradesh, southern India, and one in Mogalakwena, a rural community in the Limpopo region of South Africa. In Kuppum one of the foundations of the project is the delivery of government services through community information centres that we set up. These centres are run as entrepreneurial ventures; their business is charging for the information services that they provide. Part of the suite of services provided is government information services."

The Indian government, says Dunn, is notorious for being bureaucratic, and there are many transactions that citizens need to conduct with the government, often on a monthly basis, perhaps even more frequently. Most utilities, such as electricity, are public services and, historically, people living in rural areas had to travel fairly significant distances if they wanted something done. With long queues and inconvenient opening times, said Dunn, this sort of business consumed a lot of time that could have been used much more productively. So HP worked with the Indian government to take some of the online services that they'd already created for the cities and make them available in rural areas through the community information centres.

In some ways this job was the bread and butter of HP's business. But coming as they did from the heartland of California's Silicon Valley, staff inevitably found it quite a culture shock.

"To give an example," says Dunn, "We have a very strong time-driven sense in the business community here and in South Africa. Everybody's living off their schedule and pays a lot of attention to it. Not true in the rural community in Mogalakwena. Things as basic as making sure that people show up for meetings took some effort."

HP has also had to develop ways of training and developing technical skills in communities with a very different skills base from what they are used to back home. This has involved literacy training as well as teaching basic computer skills to people who cannot read and may or may not be numerate. Again, it is a question of finding

flexible solutions, "Depending on the area, there are different resources. We partner with lots of different organisations to help build some of that capacity in the community."

So with equipment installed, systems online, operators trained, it all amounts to an impressive piece of bridge building. And yet, explains Dunn, it's still not enough to close that digital gap. This is not least because that wealth of information that you can explore via your choice of search engine if you live in Palo Alto is of little use to people in other parts of the world looking for information relevant to them, in a language they understand. Development of content has therefore been a priority in these projects.

BRIDGING THE HEALTH DIVIDE

Of course the effects of HP's e-inclusion work go well beyond the projects themselves, because once the infrastructure is in place, it can be used for any number of initiatives, whether public, non-governmental or private. In the field of cancer, for instance, as Dr Alex Jadad of the Centre for Global eHealth Innovation described in the previous issue of *Cancer World* (September 2004), a huge effort is being put into taking advantage of the Internet to deliver information on palliative care and health promotion materials on anti-smoking tailored to communities the world over. The e-inclusion initiatives being run by HP make a vital contribution to this effort.

Dunn mentions some other health initiatives already in operation. In Mogalakwena a telemedicine project allows data and photos to be e-mailed to a physician who can then e-mail back recommendations. In Kuppam, eye testing for community members is done through a computer programme on a laptop that is part of a mobile van that travels from community to community. New mobile clinics are staffed with two physicians who provide consultation and medicine free of charge. And a new partnership between HP and UNICEF offers a photo-based software programme about pre-natal and early childhood care that is accessible at community centres or through the mobile clinics.

As a piece of philanthropy, the potential value of

all of these projects is clearly immense. But like many successful initiatives, the benefits of HP's e-inclusion programme go both ways. It is the old question, says Dunn, of knowing your market. Having high-level staff working over a three-year period with underserved local communities, and in partnership with their governments and local authorities, has given HP a unique understanding of new business opportunities that would simply be impossible to gain from an office in Palo Alto.

Most information technology solutions, she points out, have been developed based on the needs of people in the developed world and then pushed out to those who can afford them. "I think it's not new within the business world that deeply understanding the needs of your

world of electronic organisers, mobile phone dependencies and business breakfast schedules, and trying to interface with rural communities whose lives are dominated by the age-old rhythms of the countryside must surely be pretty daunting.

"It is very messy to do this stuff this way," agrees Dunn, "and that is uncomfortable for most corporate organisations. And risky. It's a bet. But our experience to date would say it's been very productive bet."

HP, she feels, has taken a lot of credit for taking the risks and trying to move beyond the traditional 'we give – you receive' models of corporate philanthropy towards a more collaborative and engaged approach, focused on building capacity and creating sustainable models in the commu-

"We've learned a lot in terms of the dynamics and needs of these kinds of communities"

customers is key to success, but not many technology companies have invested in deeply understanding the needs of people who are further down the economic pyramid. We've asked: If you're someone living on a dollar a day – and some people in some of the villages where we're working fit that description – are there solutions that really add value to you that you would pay for? Then we have come up with business models that would be workable."

There may not be a great future, for instance, in selling digital cameras and colour laser printers to families in rural India. But many people may be willing to pay for photos on a per-photo basis, and so one of the ideas HP has been piloting in Kuppam has been helping individual entrepreneurs set up their own businesses as village photographers.

So individuals benefit, HP benefits and the local communities benefit. It all sounds very neat. For those working on the ground, however, it can hardly feel that way. In fact the prospect of parachuting in as part of a task force of high-flying American IT specialists, leaving behind the

nity. "I think we've got reasonable evidence that we have contributed to the communities that we're working in. The feedback we consistently get is that they've never worked this way with a company."

"Equally importantly," she adds, "we've learned a lot in terms of the dynamics and needs of these kinds of communities, and we've come up with some different approaches and different solutions. So from a business perspective, they've also been valuable to us."

Given the enormity of the digital divide, these projects may seem rather small fry. But HP hopes this is just the beginning. "We're continuing with the developing world projects," says Dunn. "We are in the process of identifying specific components of those projects that can be replicated and we are taking some of the specific business solutions that we've been working on and moving them into the marketplace."

There will be many who wish them well. Not least all those involved in the effort to use the Internet to boost global efforts to prevent cancer and improve cancer care.