Creating Community Catalysts

Request for Proposal 905
September 27, 2009

CEO: David Molik
Troy Derouin
David Blevins
Dan Bekowitz
Tor Hagemann
Evan Slaughter

Smeirc
Abstract

The question of social stratification and improvement of society as a whole has concerned humanity for as long as some people did not have the same privileges as others. In recent years, this problem revolves around the digital divide, the “haves” and “have-nots” of computer and network technologies. Many communities have been visited by philanthropists who have endowed them with community technology centers, or CTCs. However, many of these centers find that they do not receive enough attention to meet their goals. The new problem for society is not “how can we get computer technology to the masses?”, but instead “how can we get the masses to accept computer technology?” and “how can we teach them how to use it effectively?” Working with CTCs, Smeirc hopes to improve public attendance to CTC’s and increase overall computer literacy.

Background

The digital divide, although no longer a simple problem of technological “haves” and “have-nots”, is the separation between the people who can harness modern technology and those who cannot. As CTCNet notes, “those able to harness and apply the power of technology have access to a wide variety of opportunities that span education, employment, arts & media, and communication.” When people do not have the experience with technology to properly harness and apply the power of technology, they miss all of the opportunities that technology has to offer. In the past, the cost of technology prohibited low-income families from purchasing and utilizing it; this barrier to technological uptake still exists, albeit to a lesser extent due to significant price
decreases in the computer and communications segments. However, the working poor are still struggling to compete with higher income workers in the job market. As illustrated by a Community Technology Center (CTC) student, Nancy Farrow, “In the world today you have to have some computer experience and I still didn’t know a thing about computers. But what could I do? I had no money for computer classes or transportation to get them and I certainly didn’t have money to buy a computer.” Low-income people do not have the time or the money to independently familiarize themselves with computers, making them a part of the “have-nots” side of the digital divide. As Virginia Eubanks brings to light, however, even when low-income people are familiar with information technology, it is often viewed as a tool of oppression\(^2\), rather than a gateway of opportunity. Along that same line, although low-income families may be familiar with information technology, that familiarity does not necessarily indicate that they have skills that could be used within the workplace – filling out electronic forms for social security does not teach one how to operate a word processor or a spreadsheet. As the need for unskilled or low-level jobs begin to recline in cities and rural communities, computer skills become necessary in order to allow low-income workers to effectively compete for skilled labor jobs\(^3\). Adults are not the only ones being left out in the digital divide. Children in low-income school districts are likely to be left behind as well, as teacher training and underdeveloped curriculum tends to inefficiently utilize computer resources. Neither do they teach the “complex learning activities, analysis, and writing skills that command higher wages in today’s economy,” in the way that higher-income school districts tend to\(^3\). The Community Technology Center movement hoped to solve these problems by bringing the technology and skills training necessary to enter the digital world to communities in need. However, negative perceptions of information technology, as well as the perception that computer skills are necessary for success in the workforce\(^2,3\), continue to keep participation in CTC programs below what is necessary to bridge the digital divide. Lack of political support and funding for CTCs also prevents the establishment of CTCs in every place that needs them. If a CTC program is to be successful, it will need to not only get people to participate, but will also need to gain wide public support in order to continue operation.
Problem Definition

In this proposal, we hope to, specifically, make low-income communities more enthusiastic about CTCs and motivate them to visit and utilize CTCs more often. As mentioned in the background statement, low-income families may not view technology positively due to previous experiences with technological utilization that left them feeling oppressed, rather than feeling liberated. In order to remove this feeling of oppression, we must develop the image of the CTC as a place of self-improvement and as a place for the community to gather and socialize. Another problem many low-income families face is a lack of financial resources. If single parents wish to acquire commercial technology skills, they need a person to watch their children; however they may not be able to afford a baby sitter or day care. The CTC must find a way to address this issue in order to reach single parents. The problem of transportation has also prevented people from going to computer-skills classes in the past. Cheap – preferably public – transportation must provide access to the CTC in order to allow members of the community to easily visit the CTC. As low-skill jobs leave cities, leaving predominantly service jobs, low-income neighborhoods may see an increase in urban decay and unemployment. Unemployment, specifically, will slow the uptake of technology in these communities, so it is vital for CTCs to allow people time to freely use computers in order to acquaint them with the technology and motivate them to increase their computer-based knowledge. Urban decay will likely increase crime. A crime-reducing strategy often employed in low-income neighborhoods is to keep children off the streets after school. CTCs can help alleviate this problem by developing after school programs. Summarily, it is important for the CTC to play a central role in solving issues within the community it inhabits in order to not only increase the number of people that visit it, but also to stabilize and technologically modernize the community. Key inhibitors of technological uptake are the lack of moderate-income jobs and high
unemployment. In order to achieve the CTC’s end-goal of closing the
digital divide, it is important to provide community members with
opportunities to move into jobs that pay well. The combination of
negative perceptions of technology, the lack of financial resources, the
lack of transportation, rising unemployment, the necessity of childcare,
and the absence of a safe community-enhancing location to learn
technology skills are all issues that have slowed the uptake of information
technology in low-income neighborhoods. If a CTC were to address
these issues, it would receive large amounts of traffic, publicity, and
would be able to effectively meet its goals. The CTC must also address
its needs, as well as the community’s, however; the CTC must find a way
to gain funding in order to pay for and sustain its programs. Without
funding and support, the CTC will not be able to address the issues of the
community and will therefore not be able to achieve its goals. The
problem of funding is the most vital issue to the CTC; without funding, its
programs may die before it is ever able to help the community, simply
wasting the money of the investors and philanthropists. Thus, sustainable
operations are necessary and should be considered before any of the
other issues.

Proposed Solution

The Smeirc Plan solution works to not only provide computer
resources and teach the community how to use them effectively, but to do
so by promoting community pride. The main point is to show the
community how technology can help them and how they can make it their
own. Smeirc plans to play a mostly advisory role in this process, while the
main work is placed on the CTC. This is to allow the CTC to develop into
a self sustaining system from the start.

The initial stage of Smeirc’s plan is to research the community and
the area; to discover the community and the people who live there. How
does the community view technology? How much do they already know?
What do they want to learn? Do they want to learn? These are the
questions that will be answered through the initial community research phase. Business outreach will provide insight as to which businesses will help contribute to the CTC, through various means. The outreach will show businesses how the CTC can help them as well as how they can help support the community center. At this early stage, the point is to establish communications and later to strengthen bonds and trust as time goes on.

We at Smeirc want to find ways for every person in the community to get to the center. Working with the public transportation system is a great way to provide the support to community members to get to the CTC. For example, providing free bus passes to people going to and from the CTC. A database would be created so that returning community members could sign in, enabling them to get benefits such as coupons to nearby establishments and the ability to earn CTC points.

One of the main focuses of the project is to have a community day built around the community center, these would happen quarterly (which may change depending on the community’s response) and would open the doors to get new members to join the program. On this day we will use methods such as letting the community members paint the walls or add signs for the community centers. This will allow everyone to have a sense of membership and pride in their community. We will have food of local ethnicities, adding an extra incentive to visit the CTC on this day.

During these community days, the guests will have the opportunity see presentations of the different classes they can join at the CTC. They will also be able to sign up for these classes, which will be held in-between these main community events. The first small lab will allow members to create an email address and see the dates of classes available to them. The first fifty users to sign-up are given a $25 dollar gift card to a local supermarket, or business that works in conjunction with the CTC. Then anyone who signs up for the program after 50 will be entered in a raffle for a $100 gift card to the same establishment. A few extra quick lessons or handouts available to the visitors will include how to find cheap recipes online, resume building, and basic computer facts. The center will attempt to promote the benefits of learning these skills, along with encouraging users to come back and take more classes.

The second main focus of our project is to have classes held
between the major events of the community center. These will teach more basic skills and continue the education that visitors started at the community day. There will be a point system, where users get points for completing classes and/or helping out around the community center. The more points a user has the better the coupons that the user receives monthly. The coupons will be received in email to continue promoting the use of the email system. While classes are not in session, the labs will be available for the public to come in and practice or investigate on their own. Users can also use this time to look up email or do general research, if they do not possess their own computer. This is one possible method to promote friendly competition and pride when a user does well in the classes.

The third and final stage of this project is to create sustainability for the CTC. Methods for this include fund raising, local business contributions, and selling advertising space. There would be local fund raising for the CTC. This will most likely not bring in large enough amounts to sustain the facility, but it will help. The coupons that help drive the community members to the center will also bring renewed customer interest to the businesses. In turn these businesses will give a small amount of money back to the CTC. An example of this would be a produce store providing food for the CTC community days. Local and national businesses will have the opportunity to add advertising, such as space on the logon screen and around the center. With these three things the center should be able to support the Smeirc Plan, and continue the program for years to come.
Implementation Plan

Smeirc’s proposal to catalyze Community Technology Centers follows the outline depicted below. In this mapping of our path from initial planning to final exit, we ensure that the project will progress through to its successful completion—that is, to a situation where the CTC is not only self-sustaining, but able to foster the community independently. Herein, we describe the four stages to Smeirc’s plan of action.

First, it is necessary for CTCs to take a good, hard look at its community’s attributes. Analyzing the demographics and logistics of a place will quickly reveal both where action is required and how it is to be done. For example, access to public transportation can greatly affect the accessibility of any CTC. A non-visible CTC does not attract business sponsors, volunteers, and most importantly: the people who it is meant to serve. We must evaluate whether or not problems exist here (and how to mitigate them) before we can hope to fix ones anywhere else.

This must be done in each CTC on a local level. We at Smeirc recognize that each community has its own unique culture and diverse set of needs. This necessitates a Community Technology Center that is directly tailored to these needs. For instance, an area’s population density relates to its CTC’s need to accommodate transportation to and from its places of operation. Places difficult to reach people rarely go. Also important is the community’s identification with those who work in the center. Any CTC that ignores its community is, by definition, doomed to fail.

After the preliminary research phase (Stage 0) each CTC is now able to see what its community enjoys. The strategy now is to draw as much attention as possible, using that data. A traditional “block party” environment is generally effective for catering to the atmosphere of any neighborhood, which can make it comfortable and attractive to everyone in the community. Smeirc believes events of this nature are a CTC’s best bet for maximizing attendance. Regular, perhaps quarterly, gatherings not
only promote, but boost widespread participation.

Following with this strategy, once a large mass of residents are clustered at these gatherings, signup campaigns can be quite effective. Residents register with the center for email accounts, through which the CTC can post mailings, incentives, announcements, anything and everything that it needs to communicate to its constituents. These promote interest in the community to use the services offered through the CTC, such as classes in practical skills, coupon campaigns, or local information databases accessible at the center and perhaps maintained in part by the community itself.

Once people are actually visiting centers regularly, this growing force of interested people may then contribute to the instruction of newcomers. The benefits of education are compounding; seminars in résumé building are only useful once people are fed and healthy enough to work. Completing series of courses accumulates “points” that can be used for other neighborhood services, giving coupons to people for services they need, but keeping money from leaving the community. Those individuals of special achievement can be honored for the inspiration of their neighbors. People need to feel pride in the work they’re doing when they come in the center’s door, and this plan will do exactly that.

Figure 1: Flow of Implementation
Finally, we should offer a word on sustainability. A CTC cannot keep going without the continued benevolence of people giving their time and money to its cause of improving a neighborhood’s effective use of technology. Throughout all the stages of our proposal, we find it necessary for the CTC to: 1) be flexible (offer its services in as many ways as possible for the benefit of the community); stay connected (listen to its community, by using suggestion boxes for example); and 3) remain effective (remember that “throwing bytes” at a problem doesn’t always fix it, and that technology, and the technology center exists to make life in the community easier, not harder).

Figure 2: “Gradual” Exit Strategy, phasing in large community involvement

Our Involvement over Time
“The Handoff”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year:</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Funding</td>
<td>Smeirc</td>
<td>Community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Resource Request

Research - $10,000
  - includes transportation and data collecting

Community setup - $160,000
  - $20,000 - provide community connections for businesses, coupon starter kits
  - $20,000 - creating and providing for advertising space
  - $20,000 - setup databases and networking systems
  - $50,000 - CTC community day resources
  - $50,000 – initial employee training

Total cost - $170,000

Individual Contributions

David Molik -
  Brainstorming session, outline, project direction

Troy Derouin -
  Brainstorming session, main researcher into background and problem definition

David Blevins -
  Brainstorming session, research and writing into background and problem

Dan Bekowitz -
  Brainstorming session, writing into problem solution

Tor Hagemann -
  Brainstorming session, graphics, implementation

Evan Slaughter -
  Writing into abstract and problem solution, editing, compiling and formatting final draft
