

The Queensland Rural Women's Network

ICT training maintains social connections

The Queensland Rural Women's Network (QRWN) was formed in 1993 to meet the needs of women in rural communities. The Network is not restricted to women or to people who work in primary industry; some of its members work in local government, or in manufacturing and small business ventures, in regional, rural and remote communities. QRWN is an enthusiastic user of ICT.

Helping members build social and professional networks with ICT training

QRWN has an excellent website that supports member activities and sponsors several projects. Technology has helped overcome the tyranny of distance for women living in remote areas; an example is the BridgIT project, an innovative training scheme that helps people living in rural and remote areas of Queensland to use the Internet.

The Network started BridgIT in 1999 to help rural and remote community members, many of whom live on isolated properties, overcome the difficulties associated with communications, inadequate infrastructure and fear of technology. Its core business is to deliver customised ICT training to regional, rural and remote clients in their own home. The Network was helped with Australian Government funding under the Networking the Nation program.

Initially BridgIT was a program to help people who had just connected to the Internet to become more

familiar with the technology and to be able to use it effectively in isolation. Trainers live and work in several training regions across the state and offer training in clients' homes or offices or in public venues. Because the service is local, its value to the community is increased and this contributes to its sustainability.

The project's services have expanded since 1999 and now include support beyond individual training sessions. Trainers install modems and software, configure software, test line speed and compatibility and provide a phone-in helpdesk service.

BridgIT also conducts community awareness sessions. For example, BridgIT has provided training so that business enterprises could make the transition to using telecommunications and technology.

This has enabled many rural businesses to remain commercially viable. Without BridgIT, many canegrowers and dairy farmers would not have had the opportunity to undertake ICT training and could have suffered commercial disadvantage, which could have affected their future in the industry.



In July 2003 the BridgIT program was formally accredited as a training provider under the Farmbis program, jointly funded by the Australian and Queensland governments. BridgIT's success came to public attention in 2000 when it won an Asia Pacific Information Technology and Telecommunications award for Queensland and Australia.

BridgIT's management and development has all been teleworked because members and staff live far apart across the state. The regional trainers are geographically distant from each other and from key management staff. BridgIT demonstrates that living in a remote area need not preclude people from developing and managing ambitious projects.



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Benefits and success factors

Through BridgIT, QWRN enables many people in regional, rural and remote Queensland to use ICT to improve their personal and professional lives. These people now have the capacity to use email and the Internet to establish and maintain social and professional networks. For many business people, these skills have enabled them to continue participating in their industry and remain viable.

The Network lobbies governments about issues affecting rural women and families. This has resulted in improved service provision and price reductions for some services. The Network has promoted the value and diversity of rural industries and communities, and lobbied to:

- improve regional, rural and remote consumers' access to telecommunications, for example through price reductions to make costs more comparable with those charged in metropolitan areas

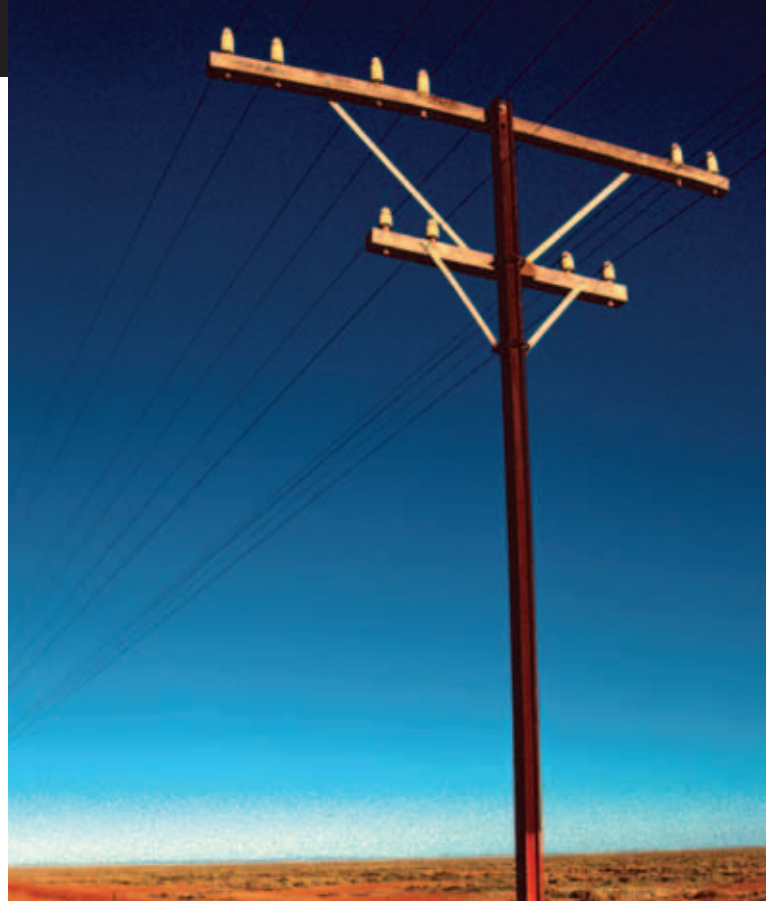


- reduce the gap in telecommunications access between metropolitan and rural areas
- encourage service provision by government agencies and private organisations
- raise the status of rural women
- improve relationships between country and city.

Customising its services to meet the needs of communities and trainees has been BridgIT's pivotal success factor. It was recognised that to meet the specific needs of the client group the training had to be customised. This meant that they had to home deliver training and support—installing and configuring software and modems and testing for line speed and compatibility—before the clients' training could begin.

BridgIT's success results from a number of factors.

- Make sure the project is properly resourced. Remember that equipment must be maintained to ensure safe working conditions for trainers and to meet clients' needs.
- Maintain the skills of professional staff.
- Connect to the local community. A strength of QRWN is that it is local and has a geographical spread across the state. By having BridgIT trainers based locally, local communities have adopted, supported and used its services.
- Evaluate the program and use the feedback to ensure that clients receive the services they want and need.
- Establish and maintain strategic partnerships to help sustain and extend the project and attract additional funding.



Barriers

Infrastructure provision problems mean that people living in regional, rural and remote areas often have more challenges accepting and using ICT than metropolitan residents. Barriers to ICT use can include access issues, a lack of knowledge of technology, and high costs.

For example:

- Technology can be intimidating for people who have not previously used it.
- For some people in regional, rural and remote areas, the costs of accessing training can be prohibitive. People might need to travel long distances and arrange childcare and, for people in remote areas, accommodation. During a drought any extra cost can be a burden for rural people.
- The extensive travel and overnight absences from base can make it difficult to find, employ and retain quality and qualified trainers for rural and remote areas.
- The guidelines and regulations around government grants can be restrictive. This relates to specific areas such as professional development of staff, purchasing of equipment and evaluation of the project.



Key lessons

- BridgIT provides a local service and is therefore valued by the community. This creates demand for the services and contributes towards sustainability. However, initial seed funding is required to initiate and establish these projects, to demonstrate their value and success.
- The involvement of the whole community, including established rural women's networks and government, contributed to BridgIT's success.
- Promotion, and the profile that it builds, is crucial to the success of a project of this type. Profile contributes directly to the ability to be both financially and socially self sustainable.
- It is necessary to provide technical support as well as relevant ICT training.

References

QRWN BridgIT www.qrwn.org.au/bridgit

Community Groups Online report: Practical examples of the non-profit sector using electronic networks.
www.noie.gov.au/projects/Access/Archive/community_groups.htm

QRWN BridgIT Training Case Studies Kenilworth - Linda Cockburn
www.qrwn.org.au/bridgit/casestudies.htm visited 26/9/03

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 or email community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au.

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