

## The 'Networked Co-op' - using the Internet as a Backbone for Alternative Busine

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These two articles are an early look at some of the basic ideas behind the Networked Co-op concept. They argue that organizations and individuals working in the area of civil society networking can both provide better service and expand the 'market' by working together.

### **Introduction**

Just as the Internet has opened up new ways of working, it has also opened up new ways to think about and run organizations. NGOs and alternative businesses no longer need to exist in a singular place. In fact, they don't even need to exist as a single entity or organization. Using the Internet, it is easy to think of 'organizations' as organic constellations of individuals and groups that coordinate efforts and work together online. At the least that's the theory behind the 'networked co-op' approach to alternative business.

Drawing on the experience of Web Networks and others in Canada, the following two articles begin to articulate some of the basic ideas behind the Networked Co-op concept. They argue that organizations and individuals working in the area of civil society networking can both provide better service and expand the 'market' by working together. The second article goes into some detail about how this sort of cooperation effort could emerge through a the creation of a networked co-op tendering system.

These articles are offered as 'food for thought' for the APC. While the specific ideas may not apply, the general concept is one that may allow APC members to focus on their areas of 'strategic excellence' while at the same time relying on other members to fill in their 'weakness' gaps. If approached properly, the result could be stronger members, a more effective APC and better Internet services for civil society.

### **Canada's Community Technology Sector: Universal Access, Civil Society and Sustainable Solutions**

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*The following is a paper on the emergence of a Community Technology Sector in Canada. It was presented to a Universal Access Policy Seminar at the University of Toronto during the spring of 1997. The results of this seminar were presented in a report to Industry Canada.*

### **Overview**

Canada's Community Technology Sector - community networks, Community Access Program (CAP) sites, community-based Internet solution providers - offer a socially and economically sustainable way to solve certain access issues and deliver government access programs.

### **The Emergence of a Community Technology Sector**

Something very exciting is sitting right under our noses. It's a significant piece of the universal access puzzle. It's a new sector of the economy. It's creating hundreds of jobs. It's a hotbed of entrepreneurial energy. It's a dynamic world of real, workable, tangible, sustainable democratic communications. What is 'it'? It is Canada's Community Technology Sector.

Over the last few years, hundreds of organizations and individuals across Canada have focussed on filling the 'technology gap' within civil society and the voluntary sector. They have created community networks, installed LANs, built WWW pages, offered training or just helped organizations they care about to learn what the Internet can do for them. In doing this, they have gradually and organically created the collection of self-sustaining non-

profits and small businesses that make up 'Canada's Community Technology Sector'.

### **What is the Community Technology Sector?**

Canada's Community Technology Sector is a loose but very real collection of organizations providing access to technical services and knowledge that meet the unique needs of civil society organizations. These organizations share an entrepreneurial attitude and a commitment to developing 'social business models' that allow them to solve community technology problems in a self-sustaining manner. They also believe that excellent communications tools are an essential part of any social change strategy.

Organizations in this sector offer – or are in the process of developing – the following services:

- Free or low-cost access to connectivity, WWW hosting and electronic community spaces.
- Online commerce for fundraising and revenue-generation by non-profits.
- Assistance in understanding the relevance and potential of the Internet to voluntary sector projects.
- Hands-on and online training in the technical and social aspects of Internet use.
- Community-focussed database and software development.
- Online and paper-based technical support documentation.
- Online facilitation and group workspace management.
- Specialized Internet publicity services for civil society organizations.
- Technical support call centre services for both end users and small service providers.
- WWW site development, database programming and online publishing.

Together, the organizations offering these services have created an informal community-based communications infrastructure to serve civil society in Canada. While this infrastructure is far from seamless, it does represent a significant step towards solving the access problems of civil society.

### **Who is the Community Technology Sector?**

The community technology sector includes a wide variety of individuals and organizations. Some are small businesses, others are not-for-profit. Some sell their services, others give them away for free. The people and organizations in this sector include:

- FreeNets, community networks and other members of Telecommunities Canada.
- Revenue-generating non-profits offering Internet solutions to civil society.
- CAP sites and other technology projects grounded in a specific community.
- Small Internet consulting firms focussed on a particular issue (eg. health or environment).
- Community economic development projects aimed at creating jobs and knowledge.
- Volunteer organizations providing training or hosting to other non-profits.

More often than not, these organizations see themselves as isolated entities working on a very specific problem or project. But they are not isolated. They are part of a movement that has recognized a set of problems and come up with solutions.

### **Community Technology Success Stories**

All across Canada, organizations and individuals are finding innovative ways to solve access problems and get civil society online. These are just a few examples:

*Cape Breton is a beautiful place with too few jobs or economic opportunities. Over the last few years, the Centre for Community Enterprise Networking (C/CEN) has confronted this fact by teaching displaced workers about the Internet and small business development. For example, they helped a former fish processing plant supervisor named Ken Leblanc learn the basics of Internet connectivity and technical support. Using C/CEN as a base, Ken has gone on to provide e-mail support to Nova Scotia's Community Access Program sites and helped install satellite Internet connections for six Micmac schools in Cape Breton.*

*Working in a community-based child health agency, Liz Rykert started out with almost no knowledge of computers*

or the Internet. But when a computer and a modem hit her desk five years ago, she found out that online workspaces could change her job, her organization and her life. Based on this experience, Liz has gone on to found Meta-Strategies, Inc., a consulting firm focussing on electronic communications, group work and organizational change at the community level. Liz has played a key role in helping Health Canada consult with Community Action Programs for Children on the electronic delivery of services. She has also been a driving force behind the online strategy of Toronto's Citizens For Local Democracy.

In the late 1980s, Canadian environmentalists had no way to communicate quickly or inexpensively. Faxes and phone calls were not cheap. The mail system was slow. Faced with this problem, a small group of environmentalists in Ontario put a 286 in a church basement and created a national e-mail and conferencing system called Web Networks. In the 10 years since it started up, Web Networks has become a successful not-for-profit business that provides dial-up access, an online community and Internet solutions to over 3000 Canadian non-profit organizations.

### **What's Missing - The Access Gap**

Canadians have come a long way in the last few years in terms of addressing access issues. Government programs like CAP and SchoolNet combined with the efforts of organizations in the Community Technology Sector as well have had a significant impact. Still, many access issues remain for civil society organizations and others. These issues include:

- Access to a range of free, low-cost and high-cost Internet solutions.
- Development of online applications appropriate to the needs of civil society.
- Access to online business opportunities and jobs for displaced workers and others marginalized by the information economy.
- Development of adequate electronic public space for community self expression in a variety of electronic media.
- Staff time and capacity for voluntary organizations to learn and take advantages of new technologies.
- Access by voluntary organizations to equipment and technology upgrades.
- Development of a cross-subsidy system within the community technology sector that ensures less advantaged individuals and organizations have access to technology.
- Service to rural and remote communities.

As we move towards electronic service delivery and Internet-based communications, these access issues represent real barriers to social participation.

### **Investing in Canada's Community Technology Sector - A Call to Action**

Canada's Community Technology Sector has the potential to help resolve many of the issues listed above. It offers a well a developed infrastructure, a strong knowledge base and government program delivery partnership opportunities that can sustain themselves long after funding has disappeared. Yet this potential cannot be realized unless a variety of players recognize the need for cooperation and investment in this sector. More specifically:

- Organizations in the Community Technology Sector must begin to communicate with the aim of developing partnership networks that aid in the delivery of full-service technology solutions.
- Government must recognize the Community Technology Sector as effective partners in the delivery of access-focussed programs.
- Foundations, private companies and governments must invest in the consolidation and further development of Canada's Community Technology Sector.

If we take these actions, we will have something that exists nowhere else in the world -- a fluid, organic, networked 'meta-business' focussed on solving the access needs of the voluntary sector and other groups within Canadian society. The development of a network like this could help to leverage existing resources into the ongoing generation of economically and socially sustainable solutions to a wide-variety of access problems.

Efforts in the right direction have already started to emerge. Industry Canada has recognized the value of

community technology partnerships through its Memorandum of Understanding with Telecommunities Canada. At the community level, Web Networks and the Centre for Community Enterprise Networking are working together to develop a Community Technology Network to aid in the sharing of ideas and business opportunities. Expanding these efforts, making them concrete and investing in joint projects is essential in making the most of Canada's Community Technology Sector.

### **Listing of Community Technology Organizations**

Organizations working on community technology projects include:

- Centre for Community Enterprise Networking (CCen)
- Clarenville Telematics Strategy
- Colchester Regional Development Agency
- Commons Consulting
- Community Data, Inc
- Community Systems
- Eskasoni Training and Education Centre
- Free Team (Netherlands)
- Hewitt & Johnstone
- Hilbourn Consultants
- iCOMM
- L'Ardoise Enterprise Centre
- Meta-Strategies, Inc.
- NetEffect Communications
- Newfoundland Telecentres
- Strait East Nova Community Enterprise Network
- Southeast Education Centre
- Telecommunities Canada
- Web Networks

If you know of organizations to add to this list, please e-mail contact info to [mark@web.net](mailto:mark@web.net).

### **Canadian Community Technology Co-op: Initial Concept Paper**

Prepared by: Web Networks  
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August 27, 1997

*This is a concept paper proposing the creation of a Community Technology Network that would facilitate cooperation and partnership between individuals and organizations working with the Internet and civil society. It was presented to a number of funders during the summer of 1997. While it was never funded, a number of informal relationships emerged from the project.*

#### **Concept:**

Use the Internet to weave community-based technology and economic development initiatives across Canada into a 'distributed virtual business' that can serve the technology needs of the community and voluntary sectors.

#### **Benefits:**

A distributed business of this nature would not only provide the specialized services that community initiatives and non-profits need but also it would create sustainable jobs in every province in Canada. More specifically, it would:

- Promote the creation of Small and Medium Size Enterprises (SMEs) and new jobs in rural and urban communities across Canada.
- Take advantage of existing organizational capacity in CAP sites, community networks, local economic

development projects and small community technology businesses.

- Provide services needed for community access and voluntary sector networking initiatives without the need for large-scale investment.
- Provide opportunity for CAP sites and other funded projects to become self-sustaining.
- Provide low technology costs with high social impact.

These benefits could be realized within three to nine months of the initial startup of the network.

### **Description:**

With the rise of community access and voluntary sector networking initiatives, there is a tremendous demand for affordable Internet development and support services that meet the unique needs of the not-for-profit world. Small businesses and economic development projects are cropping up across the country to meet this new market need. Unfortunately, the people and organizations offering these services are often too small or too focussed in their expertise to take on the medium-to-large projects that come across their desks.

The solution to this problem is simple: create a distributed network that allows organizations offering these services to share work and divide up project components. The network would use Internet mailing lists and WWW-based databases to 'tender' projects between community technology providers across the country. Various project partners would act as 'specialty hubs' with a focus on training, technology, marketing, support and other aspects of community technology delivery.

As an example, an organization in Vancouver might sell face-to-face training to a national charity with offices in a number of locations. Unable to deliver training outside BC, this organization could put out an online call for similar organizations to deliver the sessions taking place in other provinces. As a result of this network, the BC organization is able to offer national services and the organizations in other provinces secure contracts they would not have otherwise had.

**We don't need to build big new organizations to meet the Internet needs of the community and voluntary sectors, we just need to link all the little ones together.**

### **Services:**

While the array of services that could be offered by a network of this nature is almost endless, there are some core services that could easily be offered within weeks of this network's startup. These include:

- Technical support call centre services for both end users and small service providers.
- Hands-on and online training in the technical and social aspects on Internet use.
- Online commerce for cost-recovery by small Canadian content producers.
- Community-focussed database and software development.
- Online and paper-based technical support documentation.
- Online facilitation and group workspace management.
- WWW site development and online publishing.
- Hosting and other Internet technical services.

As they would be offered by organizations specializing in community technology, all of these services would be offered in a manner that was both affordable and sensitive to the needs of the community and voluntary sectors.

### **Getting Started:**

Setting up this project is not a matter of massive technology investment. Small initial startup funds would be needed for:

- Staff time to animate participation in the network. Most work would happen online or via telephone.
- A meeting between lead partners to take place three to six months after network startup.
- Development and hosting of network services including mailing lists and a small scale WWW-based database.
- Concept development and creation of marketing materials.

Overtime, transaction fees or some other mechanism would be used to cover these costs.

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