CHAPTER 12

THE DAIMLERCHRYSLER DISTANCE LEARNING SUPPORT CENTRE IN MASERU, LESOTHO

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LOCATION AND CONTEXT

The Maseru telecentre — or to give it its full and correct title, the DaimlerChrysler Distance Learning Support Centre — is based upon the Institute for Extra-Mural Studies (IEMS) of the National University of Lesotho at Roma, about 36 kilometres outside Maseru, the capital of Lesotho.

The 30,350 square kilometres highland kingdom of Lesotho, home to the Basotho people, is in southeastern Africa, bordered on all sides by the Republic of South Africa. To the east, the Drakensberg Mountains form a natural barrier, but to the west the country is accessible from a number of border posts, the nearest point of entry to Maseru being at Ladybrand in Free State.

Lesotho has a population of 1,550,000. Its people are largely subsistence farmers, its villages are scattered on mountain slopes and poverty is endemic. The winters are very cold, with the mountains covered in snow, and the summers are hot and dusty. The rural Basotho, who are renowned for their pony-riding skills, traditionally wear blankets and pointed woven grass hats. The mountain villages remain trapped in a time warp that is very attractive to tourists. In reality, however, population pressure is forcing settlement in marginal areas, with overgrazing, severe soil erosion and soil exhaustion being the result.

Lesotho's economy is based primarily on subsistence agriculture, livestock and remittances from miners employed in South Africa (though this work has declined steadily over the past several years). A small manufacturing base depends largely on farm products that support the milling, canning, leather and jute industries. Proceeds from membership in a common customs union with South Africa and from the Highlands Water Project (which controls, stores and redirects water to South Africa) form the majority of government revenue.

Compared to the mountain villages, the towns in the lowlands are more affected by modern economic and political events. In the capital, Maseru, people have adopted

western ways and styles of dress and many make their living from small business and street trading. Civil disorder in September 1998 destroyed 80% of the commercial infrastructure in Maseru and two other major towns. Most firms were not covered by insurance, and the rebuilding of small and medium business is proving to be a significant challenge. Many street traders have set up their stalls in the ashes of burnt-out buildings. There are 11 schools in Maseru, and many churches. Religion is important to the Basotho, who are predominately Christian.

HISTORY

The Distance Learning Support Centre was started as part of TELISA (the Technology Enhanced Learning Initiative of Southern Africa), which operates under the auspices of Technikon South Africa's Centre for Lifelong Learning. TELISA has, for a number of years, been involved in an Integrated Community Building Programme, a scheme that operates on the principle that no development project or programme can or will succeed without community support. The Integrated Community Building Programme has a wheel as its symbol, each spoke representing a special functional interest of the community and radiating out to support the whole. The programme is not a controlling body. Rather, each member and organisation retains its own identity and autonomy, but benefits from sharing with and supporting others for the greater good. Community Development Forums are organised to rally and stimulate public agencies, community groups, businesses and the professions to network and develop ways of utilising their natural, human and financial resources effectively. This is in the true nature of Ubuntu, the spirit of Africa, meaning "I am because we are — and we are because I am."

The aim of the TELISA telecentres initiative is to provide high-tech facilities to people who would otherwise be denied access to these. It is customary in Africa for people to share facilities, and such sharing of telecommunications facilities seems likely to be the norm in Africa for at least the next generation. The entire continent currently has fewer phone lines than New York City and yet students, communities and business people increasingly need to use the Internet in their studies and work. The TELISA telecentres also offer such services as typing, printing, photocopying and binding. The users pay for these services, but may in turn charge their own clients. The centres thus also provide opportunities for self-employment and local enterprise. They may be hosted by particular institutions, businesses or community organisations, but must run as independent businesses. TELISA seeks out the organisations and people willing to operate these centres and sponsors who will provide the initial capital costs in return for naming rights.

The way TELISA works, a community-building programme is normally expected to be in place before the introduction of a telecentre. However, in the case of the Distance Learning Support Centre, the project evolved somewhat differently. Joseph Gorgels of the Southern African Initiative of German Business (SAFRI), which has strong links with the Lesotho monarchy and government, had seen photographs of a community centre at Kgautswane in South Africa's Northern Province. This inspired him to approach DaimlerChrysler about sponsoring a similar centre in Maseru. Subsequently, Paul West, Director of Technikon SA's Centre for Lifelong Learning and TELISA visited SAFRI's head office in Stuttgart, Germany. DaimlerChrysler became convinced of the need for a telecentre in Maseru and, in view of the company's relationship with the monarchy, agreed that — should the stakeholders in Lesotho support such an initiative — it would sponsor the centre in return for the naming rights.

The next challenge was to identify the local stakeholders. The National University of Lesotho helped to identify people associated with the university and the Institute for Extra-Mural Studies (IEMS) who might be interested in such a centre. These potential stakeholders were invited to a workshop in Maseru in July 1998 and hosted by the IEMS. Paul West made a presentation on the TELISA initiative and explained how a telecentre could be run. Two representatives of the MicroData Corporation in Pretoria, South Africa, attended the workshop to discuss the technical aspects of the centre and gain first-hand knowledge of the needs and circumstances.

The workshop participants agreed that:

- the offer of sponsorship from DaimlerChrysler would be accepted;
- the IEMS would host the new telecentre; and
- the telecentre would be run as an independent business and should be self-sustainable.

A contract was then drawn up between DaimlerChrysler, AG (the sponsor), Technikon SA (the facilitator) and the National University of Lesotho (the host). On the basis of this, DaimlerChrysler South Africa released a cheque for the full sponsorship amount. Because the project was in support of education and development in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) sub-region of Africa, a tax receipt was issued to DaimlerChrysler.

The Technikon SA purchasing department assisted in obtaining the furniture and computing equipment for the centre. These items had to be purchased in South Africa because there was no company in Maseru that could provide the entire range of equipment and services needed to get the centre up and running. MicroData were contracted to provide these, because of their competitive pricing, understanding of the circumstances, and willingness to undertake the installation in Lesotho. Purpose-designed furniture to house the computers was ordered from a company with experience of fitting out another telecentre. Like MicroData, this company agreed to their staff travelling to Maseru to attend to the installation, and to honour the warranties even if they were in another country.

Unfortunately, the installations were then overtaken by the political upheavals of 1998. Shortly after the July 1998 workshop, opposition political parties began to confront the Lesotho government about elections held earlier that year. Sporadic violence broke out in the streets and there were even gun battles between different factions of the military and police. Violence continued to escalate until October 5 when SADC troops crossed the border from South Africa to stabilise the situation. While these troops concentrated on securing strategic installations in an effort to avert a possible military coup, looting and arson broke out in the main streets of Maseru and businesses were destroyed. A number of academic institutions were also targeted, including the National Teacher Training Centre and the IEMS, but fortunately the half-completed telecentre was left untouched, possibly because no one knew of its existence.

Finally, the centre opened for business on March 5, 1999, at a ceremony attended by local and foreign VIPs and the

local stakeholders. Political stability had returned, but there is still some sporadic violence which gives rise to some concern over the centre's security.

AFFILIATIONS AND STRATEGIC ALLIANCES

The TELISA initiative involves a number of stakeholders:

- World Bank (which has been an invaluable partner and donor)
- Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA)
- Southern African Initiative of German Business (SAFRI)

In the specific case of the Maseru Distance Learning Support Centre, the primary stakeholders are:

- Lesotho Distance Learning Centre
- Institute of Extra-Mural Studies, National University of Lesotho
- Institute of Education, National University of Lesotho
- Institute of Labour Studies, National University of Lesotho
- National Teacher Training Centre (Lesotho)
- University of Botswana
- University of Namibia
- UNISA (University of South Africa)
- Emlalatini Development Centre, Swaziland
- University of Swaziland
- Maseru Chamber of Commerce.

FUNCTIONS

The centre's prime function is to provide access to computer, Internet, telephone and fax services. It is also intended to act as a hub for gathering and disseminating information for education, training, development and business, and for providing office and communications services. The TELISA experience has shown that other services such as printing, laminating, photocopying and spiral binding can be of benefit to community development and so these are also provided.

Before the centre opened, the only public telephone facility within a 5-kilometre radius was a single coin-operated kiosk at the entrance to the IEMS, which was heavily used by students, school pupils and adults alike. The provision of an eight-booth facility in the Distance Learning Support Centre, with rates that undercut the phone shops in Maseru, attracts many potential users of other services into the centre. It is quite common to see 20 – 30 students waiting to use the phones, which are monitored by computer. Unfortunately, only four of the phones are currently in working order.

The primary beneficiaries of the Distance Learning Support Centre are the on-campus and distance education students of the educational and training institutions operating in Maseru, as listed above, and the pupils from the local public and church-run high schools and primary schools. Some of these schools have computers but no Internet access, and so use the centre for this purpose; some of the schools rent the centre for computer and Internet training for their pupils. Part of the centre's outreach

programme is specifically designed for school principals and teachers, the idea being that if they can be attracted into the centre, they will in turn bring in their pupils to introduce them to the facilities.

The Institute for Education, attached to the University of Lesotho, also rents the centre on occasions to train civil servants in the use of the Internet. Lois Sebatane of IEMS, the TELISA contact person for the project, reports that ex-patriots also use the centre's computers and Internet access.

It was always intended that the centre should also serve the members of the Maseru Chamber of Commerce. With the destruction of businesses in Maseru, the completion of the telecentre was considered to be even more urgent to provide support to small and medium businesses trying to re-establish themselves in Maseru. Currently, however, the users are predominantly the student community.

As well, the centre was intended to provide facilities for community meetings and workshops, and be a place for students to study. Again, it is more commonly used for the latter, with many students calling in between classes and sometimes after hours.

The centre's users come from up to 20 kilometres away, with most of those from beyond Roma travelling in by bus or taxi.

COSTS AND FUNDING

DaimlerChrysler donated US$55,000 towards the centre's set-up, equipment purchase, and initial computer training programme. Before the unfortunate experience with the student managers, monthly turnover was US$1,500 – $2,000, which was enough to cover the centre's running costs. Run according to proper business principles, it seems likely to yield a profit. Lois reports, "People here are very poor, and even a charge of R10 (about US$1.50) an hour for use of the computers is a lot for them. We are hoping that in the future the schools will be prepared to pay a monthly sum for the use of the Centre by their pupils. Then if we introduce an ID system, pupils from those schools will be able to use the computers free of charge."

ACCOMMODATION

The centre is situated on the IEMS campus of the university, opposite one of the local high schools, and on the main tarred road into Maseru from the south. There is a bus stop right outside the gate. The centre occupies one classroom-sized room in the IEMS, an institution that attracts many part-time students to its wide range of daytime and evening courses.

MANAGEMENT AND STAFFING

In keeping with the philosophy of maximising community involvement, the TELISA staff keep in close touch with the centre, but have no controlling role in its operations. Lois Sebatane of IEMS acts as the TELISA contact person for the project. The centre is run by a Management Board, with one representative from each of the educational institutions in Maseru, plus Lois. The Board is responsible for pricing the centre's services and finances in general. As with other TELISA telecentres, the centre was always supposed to become self-sustaining.

TELISA always stresses that the long-term financial viability of the telecentres must be planned for right at the very outset. There have been far too many examples in South Africa of Internet cafés having to shut down because they were non-viable and school, college and university computer centres being sponsored by external agencies and then failing because the institutions were unable to maintain them, even in relatively affluent areas. So the telecentre must levy appropriate charges for usage and, unless these can be subsidised in some way by institutions or organisations, the users must have capacity to pay. Lois observes that the centre would have run much more efficiently right from the beginning had it been operated according to a proper business contract. Unfortunately, the Board decided to let the centre be run by two students — a system that proved to be unworkable because, while the students were at their lectures, other students used the unsupervised facilities free of charge. The result was that the centre ran into serious financial problems.

The Board then decided to contract a private company to run the centre as a proper business venture with a salaried manager in charge. As of August 2000, tenders had been received from the Corporation of the National University of Lesotho and two private individuals, but the selection process had not been concluded.

Properly managed, the telecentre should be able to pay rent for its accommodation in the IEMS. Up until now, the university has been extremely generous towards the centre, providing this accommodation and Internet connection free of charge.

TRAINING MANAGERS, STAFF AND USERS

As soon as the centre was established, 10 potential student supervisors, nominated by members of the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa, were given initial training in using the computer equipment, word processing, Internet and e-mail in a one-day session by MicroData, the company that installed the system. The two most able students were then selected as supervisors to help the users. Since then, other students have been trained to help others in computing and thus develop the community's capacity to use the new technology for various purposes.

As shown earlier, training sessions have also been conducted with civil servants and by the schools. Further training activities are hampered by the fact that the Internet service, currently attached to the university server, is very slow. Lois suggests that it would be far better if the connection were through a commercial provider or a business rather than an educational institution. She believes that Internet service providers respond far more readily to the requirements of businesses than educational institutions.

PUBLICITY

The most common form of publicity for the centre is word of mouth. The teachers using the centre and being trained in computer use are its strongest advocates, informing their students and their families about the facilities on offer. The university community also circulates news of developments and activities. Once its new manager is in place, further publicity strategies will be needed to attract new users and backers.

ACCESS

The centre is available to all who are able and willing to pay. It is currently open Mondays to Fridays from 8:00 a.m. to 4:45 p.m. Under the new management, it is hoped that these opening hours will be extended.

TECHNOLOGY

Responsibility for providing the centre's telecommunications infrastructure lay with the Lesotho Telecom Corporation, a wholly-owned government company. At the time of establishing the centre, the laying of a 64 Kb line to the National University of Lesotho was in progress and it was decided to apply for an extension of this line from the university to the IEMS on the outskirts of Maseru, as well as for 10 voice telephone lines. The subsequent political unrest and problems with the company subcontracted by Lesotho Telecom Corporation to install the digital line to IEMS delayed matters, but eventually the work was completed and the equipment installation could proceed.

The centre is currently equipped with:

- 1 x IBM Netfinity 3500 server
- 10 x IBM PC 300 GL desktop workstations
- 11 x Samsung 14-inch 400b monitors
- 1 x HP Officejet 1150c printer copier/scanner
- 1 x laminator

The server is equipped with Microsoft Windows NT Server v 4.0, IBM Suite for Windows NT, and Lotus Notes Domino Server Single CPU. All computers have been fitted with Microsoft Office 97 and Notes Desktop Licenses. Upgrades now need to be paid from the centre's revenues by the new management.

Original documentation had to be provided for the company shipping this gear across the border, explaining that the equipment had been purchased through sponsorship from Germany and was destined for educational use in Lesotho. Because the legal purchaser of the equipment was a company to be formed in Lesotho, South African VAT (value-added tax) had to be claimed from the purchaser by the new company in Lesotho. A Lesotho general sales tax exemption than had to be applied for by IEMS on the basis that the equipment was being donated for educational purposes.

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

Until now, research has been hampered by the fact that all of the funds have been dedicated to running the centre. When funding is forthcoming, a formal evaluation will be carried out. Meanwhile, the new manager will be responsible for monitoring developments and problems. Lois, who has been monitoring the centre's progress on an informal basis, says, "Despite current management problems, we do regard this as a wonderful facility for students and all those who do not have access to telephones, computers and the Internet. It has encouraged us to plan for other such centres. The IEMS has been granted land by the local chief in the mountain district of Mokhotlong, and we hope to secure funding to erect buildings there and install another centre. This would be wonderful for students in the area who are studying by distance education, and who could then access their study material via the Internet."

CONCLUSIONS

The DaimlerChrysler Distance Learning Support Centre has certainly experienced a steep learning curve and several traumas in its first year of operation. Unlike many other telecentres, the centre has started by focusing on the needs of local students and pupils,

and time is still needed for it to become widely accepted and absorbed into the business and wider community. Invaluable lessons have been learned by the Board in regard to business planning and management. The first year ends on an optimistic note, with those involved seeing a positive future for the centre.

The roles of TELISA in getting the idea of the centre off the ground and of DaimlerChrysler in providing sponsorship were pivotal. The centre also owes much to the university for its support and to the companies that installed the facilities and provided the initial training.

On the negative side, the political instability of 1998 and subsequent delays in getting the line connected hindered the establishment of the centre. After that, the connection of the Internet server through the university, combined with the recent management problems, affected the smooth running of the centre. Lois reports that there have also been poor lines of communication, with Board members often unavailable when urgent decisions were needed, and some cases of "too many cooks spoil the broth." She is, however, confident that the centre will run much more efficiently with the appointment of a business manager reporting to a company that is accountable to the Board.

On the basis of the Maseru experience, it would appear that the following are critical considerations in setting up such telecentres:

- The centres must be set up from the outset to run as independent businesses in a self-sustainable manner, as well as productive hubs of community activity in disadvantaged areas.
- There should be a clear community need and demand for such services.
- The ownership of the ventures and their outcomes should be vested in the community at the very outset.
- Such initiatives need managers and staff who are energetic, have a stake in their communities, and take a strong personal interest in the long-term viability and success of the centres.
- Depending upon their primary purposes, centres may be accommodated by educational institutions, business organisations or their communities.
- Operators will need financial assistance with the setting up and equipment costs, and such capital costs may be met through sponsorship in return for naming rights.
- A project plan is essential to specify the steps required to bring the centres to fruition and contingency plans may be needed where there is volatility in the circumstances.
- In planning the centres, consideration should be given to such factors as accessibility, connectivity with other services, and security.
- Provision must be made for technical maintenance, repairs and support.
- The opening hours must suit the users' lifestyles.
- The managers should not have dual interests and responsibilities.
- There should be business incentives for the managers.
- The lines of communication for those involved in the running of the centres should be simple and clear.
- The managers, staff and volunteers alike must be given initial and ongoing training to optimise service delivery and support community capacity-building.

- Everyone involved with the telecentres must be prepared to work flexibly, creatively, to deadlines and under severe time, resource and other constraints.
- New developments and successes must be publicised to generate interest and support.
- Sponsors and other stakeholders should be given regular progress reports.

The Maseru experience shows that telecentres can help dispell myths and fears about technology, support learners at the secondary and tertiary level, and provide access to distance education programmes and resources such as the African Digital Library (*http://AfricaEducation.org/adl/*). Such centres also have the potential to support business, local enterprise and the wider community.

The Maseru telecentre is attracting attention from the U.N. and other international agencies who believe that it can serve as a useful example for the establishment of other such centres elsewhere in Africa. It is hoped that one day the Maseru facility will win accolades for bringing benefits to learners, business people and ordinary citizens of the mountain kingdom of Lesotho.

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