

Ghana Pursues Justice and Development Through Computer Training

Demand for computer and Internet training surges as information society takes root

BY KWESI WREKON OBENG

ACCRA, GHANA

A call comes through his brightly coloured 2.5-inch-long cell phone while Clive Enchil, 33, is having a drink with his wife and friends on a Friday evening at a local bar in Tema, Ghana's port city.

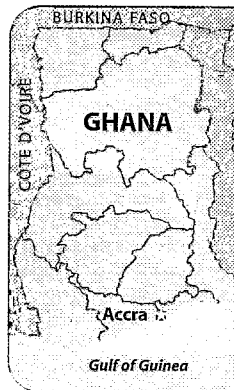
"Oh Enchil! Our server, the design machine, has collapsed but we have to go to press tonight. Could you come over?" the caller from an Accra-based national bi-weekly newspaper pleaded.

At the time of this incident, in 1999, Mr. Enchil was one of only a few trained computer troubleshooters in the region who could handle the emergency call, although he was 30 kilometres away at the time. And it was up to him to make the repair.

Mr. Enchil recalls that there were far fewer computer engineers and technicians, computers and ICT training schools and businesses then. Today, every other office or

shop in Accra and other large Ghanaian cities is either an ICT training school or dealer for computers, mobile phones, radios, televisions and Internet cafés. Not only is it trendy to have technological skills, but many Ghanaians are making a living from these skills. ICT is speedily colonizing every facet of life in this country from classrooms through farms, from government agencies to the judiciary.

But the country still must on improve its basic telephone system. Of the country's 600,000 phone lines, only 283,000 are land lines, and most are unable to carry large amounts of data.



Building a Private Sector from the ground up

Ghana has been working to establish itself as the ICT gateway to West Africa, and a sprawling "Kofi Annan Centre for Excellence," a one-stop shop ICT enclave, is near completion in the capital. Already, a number of highly trained professionals have returned from India to serve as the backbone of the Centre, which is structured along the lines of Malaysia's Cyberjaya. The government paid the bill for the trainee trainers while they were in India.

But a strong high-tech sector needs a skilled labour pool and Ghana is working to train the next wave of workers. But most people in Ghana cannot afford their own home computers and many do not have access to training, computers or the Internet.

Jerry Wormenor, 24, an agricultural and general science teacher at the Ring Road East Junior Secondary School in Accra had not touched a computer until one of the "Mobile Telecentre To-Go" buses visited his school. Having only seen computers in magazines and on television until then, Mr. Wormenor says. "The mobile telecentres have demystified computers to many of us."

The Mobile Telecentre To-Go programme, financed and implemented by UNDP, the government and the private sector, is bringing ICT to students, teachers, health workers, journalists and farmers. Since the project began in October 2000, 6,000 people have received training and e-mail addresses at the telecentres.

Essentially a school and an Internet portal on wheels,

ACS, a US-based company, has invested significant resources in back office operations in Ghana to handle everything from hospital records to parking tickets.



Photos: Johnette Jits Subbe ©



As most Ghanaians cannot afford a computer, let alone an Internet connection, Internet cafés do a brisk business in Accra.

the telecentres consist of two medium-sized buses, each outfitted with 30 laptops behind the seats and equipped with a wireless Internet

access network that allows connectivity from inside and outside the buses.

The buses shuttle between the target groups, many of whom had never seen or physically touched a computer before, to give free tailor-made tutorials on computers and the Internet to meet their educational and professional needs.

Eva Lokko, project communications expert and coordinator, says the telecentres now serve 26 computer and Internet-deprived basic schools, three nursing schools and members of the Ghana National Association of Teachers in and around Accra. Demand for the telecentres, she says, is high throughout the country.

"The project has been very successful. It has proven viable, practical and the partners have remained reliable and committed," says the energetic Ms. Lokko, who is now the Director-General of the national television.

There have been requests from other African countries to copy the project and Ghana is planning to replicate the telecentres countrywide.

But that would be an uphill task, says UNDP Resident Representative Alfred Sallia Fawundu. "It would involve commitment and resources to extend this successful programme throughout the country."

Teachers and pupils find computers handy

Seth Mantey, 24, a math teacher, said he stayed away from the Internet cafés because "I didn't want to disgrace myself as I couldn't operate a computer." But after receiving training in the telecentre, now, he says, "I can now walk to an Internet café to browse the Net and check my e-mails."

Now the teachers use the computer for their work, saving time by using Excel's 'auto fill,' feature which automatically calculates the percentages of each of their 210 pupils. Mr. Wormenor says, "I now have enough time to be with my friends."

Emmanuel Salifu, 14, of the Kanda cluster of schools says, "I am not afraid of computers anymore," adding that "I think the computer will help me to become a better

chartered accountant in the future."

Training for a modernized judiciary

Ghana is also using ICT to improve government services. With a court system that is painfully slow, choking from swathes of cases, it takes years, sometimes decades, to settle one case.

In June 2003, Justice S.A. Brobbey, one of this country's 11 Supreme Court justices ruled on a complex investment case involving two large real estate developers, a traditional authority and the state-owned Lands Commission, in the record time of two years. Ordinarily, Justice Brobbey says, the case could have dragged on for between 15 and 20 years.

The automation was provided through a project funded by UNDP and the government called "Fast Track" which is working to upgrade the antiquated court system through the use of technological innovation. Staff are being trained to use the computers, scanners, appropriate software and public address systems that have been introduced. Presently, 18 court reporters are undergoing training on stenograph machines to record proceedings. The recordings of these machines can be translated immediately into text on computers and printed out for the litigating parties, allowing a case to be continued the following day without the need for time-wasting adjournments.

The automated courts look remarkably different. In addition to the technological additions, they are well lit, air-conditioned and fitted with comfortable chairs, a sharp departure from the older stuffy, dark and cramped court-rooms.

At the half-way mark of the court modernization programme, in July 2003, courts using Fast Track had delivered judgment on approximately 1,000 cases in just two years. The government now says it will extend the programme to nine of the country's 10 regional capitals and Tema. Accra has six modernized courthouses and Kumasi, the country's second largest city, has four. ■



Court reporters receiving training on new stenograph machines. The machines are part of a larger effort to automate and speed up legal proceedings.

Kwesi Wrekon Obeng is a news editor for Public Agenda in Accra, Ghana.

Mobile telecentres, equipped with 30 laptop computers, have allowed more students to have access to computer training.



Ghana

AT A GLANCE

Population:
20 million

Area:
239,460 sq km

Human Development Ranking: 129 of 173 countries

No. of telephone mainlines per 1,000 people: 12

No. of cellular subscribers per 1,000 people: 9

No. of personal computers per 1,000 people: 3

No. of Internet users per 1,000 people: 2

GDP per capita:
\$2,250

Sources: Human Development Report 2003 and UNDP Global ICT for Development Factbook



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