Chapter 5.4
Building Local Capacity via Scaleable Web-Based Services

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INTRODUCTION

Information communications technology (ICT) has been identified as a key enabler in the achievement of regional and rural success, particularly in terms of economic and business development. The potential of achieving equity of service through improved communications infrastructure and enhanced access to government, health, education, and other services has been identified. ICT has also been linked to the aspiration of community empowerment, where dimensions include revitalizing a sense of community, building regional capacity, enhancing democracy, and increasing social capital.

In Australia, there has been a vision for online services to be used to open up regional communities to the rest of the world. Government support has been seen “as enhancing the competence levels of local economies and communities so they become strong enough to deal equitably in an increasingly open marketplace” (McGrath & More, 2002, p. 40). In a regional and rural context, the availability of practical assistance is often limited. Identification of the most appropriate online services for a particular community is sometimes difficult (Ashford, 1999; Papandrea & Wade, 2000; Pattulock & Albury Wodonga Area Consultative Committee, 2000). Calls, however, continue for regional communities to join the globalized, online world. These are supported by the view that success today is based less and less on natural resource wealth, labor costs, and relative exchange rates, and more and more on individual knowledge, skills, and innovation. But how can regional communities “grab their share of this wealth” and use it to strengthen local communities (Simpson 1999, p. 6)? Should communities be moving, as Porter (2001, p. 18) recommends (for business), away from the rhetoric about “Internet industries,” “e-business strategies,” and the “new economy,” to see the Internet as “an enabling technology—a powerful set of tools that can be used, wisely or unwisely, in almost any industry and as part of almost any strategy?”

Recent Australian literature (particularly government literature) does indeed demonstrate somewhat of a shift in terms of the expectations of ICT and e-commerce (National Office for the Information Economy, 2001; Multimedia Victo-
The term online community means different things to different people (Preece, 2000). In early definitions, the term described communication facilitated through bulletin boards (Rheingold, 1994, pp. 57-58). More recent definitions reflect the expansion of Web-based technologies and often link online communities with concepts of regional communities and local strengths (Keeble & Loader, 2001).

In Australia the terms online community, regional portal, Web portal, and community portal are often used more or less interchangeably. Web portals “provide focal points on the Web, places to start, places to go to find things” (Gronlund, 2001, p. 88). They have been identified as one strategy for encouraging regional participation in the information economy. For example, according to the Department of Communications Information Technology and the Arts (2001), a regional portal can achieve the online aggregation of potential and existing regional presence into a comprehensive portal, gateway, or regional Web site. In funding initiatives, preference has been given to projects that offer inclusive regional aggregation of business, government, and community services, and which provide interactive services to clients both in and external to the region.

Some definitions of online communities capture the concepts of both communities of interest and communities of location, and identify the role of encouraging communication and information sharing among members as important (McGrath & More, 2002). Australia’s largest telecommunications provider describes online communities as providing a focal point for the provision of local regional information. In terms of functionality, these community portals generally incorporate local news services, local weather reports, a directory of community organizations, and features such as bulletin boards, discussion forums, a calendar of events, and transaction services (Telstra Country Wide, 2002).

To achieve optimum online collaboration, various issues require consideration. These include notions of community, trust and commitment,
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