Chapter VI

The Design and Implementation of Rural Communication Technology Initiatives: Issues and Strategies for Project Planners

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ABSTRACT

Communication technology initiatives have proved to be an important influence in rural communities in recent years. Our research has demonstrated that such initiatives have far-reaching effects on a community’s formal and informal social networks and, as a result, on its social capital.

Given this fact, it is critical that leaders and management committees of community technology projects are aware of the broader social context in which project activities take place, and the potential interactions that can both benefit and damage community social capital.

This chapter addresses key issues that have arisen out of a number of major communication technology projects in Queensland, Australia, and draws upon our findings to propose guidelines that will assist project planners with the design and implementation of future communication technology initiatives in the context of regional and rural community development.

INTRODUCTION

Communication technology initiatives are increasingly being perceived as an important influence in rural communities, and a potential remedy for rural decline. As we point out below, while there is some evidence to encourage such a view, the literature and our research suggest that the implementation of communication technology initiatives in rural communities can be problematic.

First, narrowly conceived initiatives that focus on the installation and upgrading of communication technology hardware and infrastructure may show relatively little return for significant investments of financial and community resources, and may not be sustainable past initial project funding. Second, communication technology initiatives may have far-reaching effects on a community’s formal and informal social networks and, as a result, on its social capital. Given these issues, it is critical that leaders and management committees of community technology projects, and others involved in project planning, are aware of the broader social context in which project activities take place. This includes an awareness of the potential interactions that can either help or hinder project implementation and benefit or damage community social capital. Stakeholders in these processes may include federal, state and local government personnel, community development workers and others in the community responsible for the design and implementation of communication technology initiatives.

Drawing on research undertaken over the past five years, this chapter identifies issues arising from a number of communication technology projects in rural and regional Queensland, Australia, and suggests strategies for designing and implementing communication technology initiatives to assist project planners to respond to these issues. A social capital perspective is employed to ensure that strategies are comprehensive and embedded in a broad understanding of the social context and consequences of implementing communication technology initiatives in rural communities. Such a perspective emphasises the intangible social features of community life, such as shared values and norms, trust, participation in networks, proactivity, reciprocity and a strong sense of community that can, as Longo (1999, p. 11) notes, potentially contribute to the well-being of that community (Simpson et al., 2001, pp. 23-26).
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