

A Rental Service for Computers in Rural Tanzania

By Amour Usi¹

ICT Rural areas

I am based here in Dar es Salaam where I am working with FUNEA Softnet. My business supplies ICT for rural areas.

In a rural situation there are many challenges: it is difficult to get hold of computers; they are expensive; there are problems with electricity and other problems with the technologies for internet access. However, the big problem is the lack of technical personnel or ‘fundis’.

I therefore decided to set up a rental service for computers in the rural areas, with local service personnel to provide backup. There are hardware problems facing computers in rural areas. There is a lot of dust, which means that the computers require regular maintenance. At present if there is a technical difficulty the time to reach the client is long because those technical personnel are in town. Then of course the price that is charged is high due to the distance travelled, so often the owners cannot afford to maintain their computers well.

InkMedia Laptop Trial

I have decided to make a trial with InkMedia laptops. This is a computer which has been designed for use in Africa. It is small and portable but it is robust, has no moving parts and operates using Linux. The price of the machine will be reduced because of Linux is open source software; which means that you don't have to pay for it. So you can cut the cost of the computer by removing almost 150,000/= Tshs which it would cost for using Windows XP.

The InkMedia machine is configured in such a way that you are not able to save anything on the system. If you want to save anything you have to put it on the external flash. So it means that when you switch off the machine it does not allow for a virus to be saved on the system.



Amour Usi with the prototype InkMedia computer

Reducing Cost by Renting not Buying

These machines will be offered as part of a rental package. Many people in the rural areas cannot afford to buy a computer but they could afford to rent one for a small fee. People will not have to worry about the maintenance or even the start up costs for getting internet access in the rural areas; this will be part of the rental package.

Renting; the Cheapest Solution?

We have not yet put an exact cost on our rental package, but will try our best to have a very minimal price so that the rural people are able to pay for the rental. We are looking for the cheapest solution. The InkMedia computer costs about 450,000/= Tshs but if we provide a rental system our clients will be able to rent a computer for a short period to do a particular project, and then when they finish with the computer another can use it. By renting it will not tie up the client with a computer when he doesn't need it. We will also upgrade the computers when it is necessary to do so as well as making sure that they are serviced regularly.

¹ Interviewed by Anne Dennig in April 2008

Connecting to the Internet

With the InkMedia laptops It is also possible to connect to the internet through a GPRS modem. With a mobile modem and a Sim card, like you use in a mobile phone, you can connect your mobile laptop or normal computer and access the internet. With the GPRS system, the client is charged for their internet use to their Celtel or other mobile phone provider.

Servicing the Computers as a Rural Business

For the servicing we are going to have a training course for the rural ‘fundis’ who can then take care of these rental machines in their area. I am looking for those who have a vocational training based on electronic and computer maintenance and these people I can find through the regional vocational training institutes. We have to find the people from the rural districts and help them to set up a business that will help them to stay in the rural areas.

The ‘fundis’ will be trained to make sure that people can be online and they will need to troubleshoot the hardware problems which their clients face in the rural areas. An important part of the course will be to provide entrepreneurship training so that they will be able to establish their own business in their area. So each ‘fundi’ will have their individual business and we will work together with them.

Future Plans



Amour Usi with Sarah Bartlet at a demonstration of the TradeNet marketing platform

For the future I think that once the people have rented the system we will offer applications online. For example, if they connect with the Firstmile project they could get access to a marketing system like TradeNet. We can also offer educational information for the children and parents.

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