

Reference: O'Donnell, Susan (1998) "Closing the information gap," Web Ireland September, 35.

Closing the information gap

The high cost of Internet access, combined with low levels of IT training among their employees and volunteers, are hampering the efforts by voluntary and community based organisations to fully exploit the advantages of the Internet, according to a new report.

The report, *Weak Connections: The Voluntary Sector in the Information Age*, shows that while many voluntary and community groups are enthusiastic about the potential of the Internet to help them work more efficiently and build networks of organisations, lack of funding means they can't afford to train staff or pay for computer maintenance, upgrades and increased telephone charges.

As well as a shortfall in finance, many organisations haven't developed a culture that is compatible with the Internet. For instance, few had established information management procedures and staff found it difficult to deal with information taken from the Internet or contribute information from their organisation.

Such a shortfall in the benefits of the Information Society could raise serious problems for society as a whole. A recent government Green Paper recognised that an active community and voluntary sector contributes to a democratic, pluralist society and fosters a climate in which innovative solutions to complex social problems can be pursued and realised.

So what can be done to counteract this information gap in the voluntary sector? Although the report did not directly explore how the business sector could help the situation, one avenue suggests itself. Business users could make it a priority, when dealing with a community or voluntary organisation with an Internet connection, to communicate by email.

If the organisation had difficulty responding to emails, assistance could be offered - perhaps an informal training session on using email software and sending attached files, or an informal "mentoring" arrangement with the IT expert in the business organisation. Donations of computer hardware and software, training, and IT maintenance and support would likely be appreciated - and also may be tax-deductible.

The Government, of course, also has a role to play and the report criticises it for showing little awareness of, or concern for, the IT problems in the sector, despite several submissions to its Information Society Commission by the report's research team.

A number of policy recommendations are put forward, such as funding an infrastructure for the sector to provide training, technical support, advice on hardware and software purchase and maintenance, and including a freephone number for computer support.

It is suggested that this infrastructure for the community and voluntary sector should be

funded along with the current government initiative which provides schools with computer and Internet services and support.

The report also advocates that community and voluntary organisations need to take a more strategic approach to information: they need to ask what information would be useful to generate, how they get it, who they provide it for, and how they disseminate it. A significant amount of time and energy will be required to launch an Internet initiative, and organisations planning to do so need to be well prepared.

Generally, the report found that higher-income organisations use the Internet more than those on a tight budget, but those with a history of communicating with the media or internationally may be keen users despite limited resources.

The report, *Weak Connections: Final report of the research project The Voluntary Sector in the Information Age*, can be ordered from the School of Communications, DCU.