

BUILDING WEBSITES WITH A SOCIAL DIMENSION

Emmen, a Dutch city undergoing rapid economic change, is coping with a sombre situation: the city's inhabitants are increasingly under pressure to adapt to socio-economic change, meaning that their traditional jobs and life styles are slowly being undermined or disappearing. Those who are 'left behind' are finding themselves increasingly isolated and trapped in deprived neighbourhoods, where the idea of leaving the city to pursue a 'better life' and find new employment is becoming a distant dream. Moreover, this situation is passing from one generation to the other, with young people growing up in districts deprived of a sense of community, social support and reduced job prospects. One only has to look at the figures to see the extremity of this situation.

In Emmen, the average education level is particularly low. 50% of the population do not have a basic qualification. 14% of young people are unemployed. And wages score 10% lower than the national average. Moreover, Emmen has had a fundamental problem: computers are rendered inaccessible due to a lack of ICT skills amongst Emmen's inhabitants. Furthermore, people's previous negative experiences of learning and periods of unemployment often cause them to stay away from any training courses or educational settings.



visiting the users of MyPortfolioOnline

NTN members

In 2000, the [Lisbon Strategy](#) for Growth and Jobs recognised the social and economic value of the digital economy and set the ambitious goal of ensuring that every citizen has the appropriate skills needed to live and work in the new Information Society.^[1] Since then, a key component of the EU's renewed Lisbon Strategy has been 'i2010'. This initiative has comprised a package of proactive policies to harness the potential of the digital economy to deliver growth, jobs and modern, on-line public services, all of which are at the heart of solving the problems that cities like Emmen face.^[2]

Following collaboration in EQUAL Round 1, three organisations, Brekend Vaatwerk (lead partner), de InformatieWerkPlaats and Sedna put their heads together and brainstormed about potential solutions to Emmen's problems, focusing in particular on the employment and social inclusion potential of ICTs. They came up with the concept of 'My Portfolio Online', offering fun ways of ICT learning which not only promote the competences and skills of individuals, but also the identity, capacity and social dimension of the community/neighbourhood. This highly innovative project thereby combined social and physical restructuring at local level, framed within the wider employment perspective of EQUAL.

The *My Portfolio Online* partnership benefited from the participation of Sedna which has a long-standing interest in promoting social cohesion in Emmen and advocating for regeneration programmes. Having Brekend Vaatwerk on board allowed for a continuation of the tradition of ensuring that social workers are knowledgeable about, and adequately respond to, the concerns, interests and resources of the target groups they work with. The InformatieWerkPlaats represented the final missing link as it was an ICT company interested in the social application of ICT. With this team in place, the foundations for a holistic approach to ICT learning were secured. As Tom Sleeking, aldermen of Emmen, says: "*This EQUAL project is fantastic and that's why we are a 100% behind it. We get people talking to each other again, exchanging information and most importantly learning ICT skills. Hopefully this will also free the way to a job*".

THE DIGIROOMS: LEARNING ICT WITHOUT FEARS

As 8% of the Dutch population accesses the Internet outside of their home, school or office, an essential element of *My Portfolio Online* was to create public access points called 'digirooms' where citizens can use technology and where social professionals can offer personal assistance. The digiroom has been developed in such a way as to minimise the barriers for potential users via: a location that is frequented by a wide range of community members (e.g. close to a shopping centre), an interior design that creates a welcoming and relaxed environment, the presence of social workers who are knowledgeable on ICT and its social applications (rather than only the technical side) and a user-friendly software programme.

This software programme was developed by the *My Portfolio Online* partnership specifically to help in the design of websites and web applications. The idea underpinning the programme was that once the user receives the free toolbox and learns how to use the instruments with the assistance of the social professionals,. The project trains social professionals because they are educated to empower people. They can support people to use the internet as a tool to facilitate their activities.. The actual building and updating of their own websites can be done by the person him/herself The slogan of the project – 'Design a website with 4 clicks of your mouse' is therefore very apt!

As Else Rose Kuiper, coordinator of the project, explained, the result of using such a software programme for the design of websites and web applications is that *"People are no longer thinking I'm developing a website in the most technical sense, but more what am I going to use it for, what can I do with and how can I help other people with it."*

Ms Kuiper goes on to observe: *"What is remarkable is that inhabitants of the districts we've worked in now consider themselves experts in the area of social use of the internet and the web design that goes with it in particular"*

A SAFE BRIDGE TO FURTHER EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

The previous section has shown that *My Portfolio Online* creates learning environments that feel safe and fun to be in, which is particularly significant when working with target groups who might have had a negative experience of education. Through their participation in the project, these groups can gain ICT skills and learn how to reach their goals by using these skills. They design their own websites, which in turn promotes confidence, self-esteem and interpersonal skills. All of this means that the digiroom creates a safe bridge for community members to (re)access further education and ultimately gain employment

And this employment potential is particularly important. Unemployed people make up approximately 60% of the visitors of the digirooms^[3]. They can participate in free computer courses to increase their skills, qualifications and, as such, their opportunities for finding a job.

For some, the experience social advantages of ICT has been an incentive to go on to take more advanced ICT courses and to search for jobs which draw on these skills, as Haikey Raterink, employed as a social professional in the digiroom "De Naoberschapsbank" in Bargeres, Emmen, is the living example of.

Aside from the unemployed, statistics show that the EQUAL project is supporting other disadvantaged groups. Amongst those visiting the digirooms, 60% are women, 30% are disabled and 30% are over 55^[4]. Geert, an older inhabitant of Emmen and frequent visitor to the digiroom, commented:

"Being amongst the older population, I was really petrified of computers and I didn't want to have anything to do with it. But this has all changed since joining the digiroom here in Emmen. I've built my own website on historical locations in Emmen for which I, myself, make sure the nicest digital pictures are put on the web. You have no idea what this means to me, I found a new hobby in my life. I never thought I would be able to these high-tech things!"

FOSTERING AN ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT!

One other benefit of *My Portfolio Online* is that it has promoted and nourished the entrepreneurial spirit of the digiroom users – a clear innovation for the project! The combination of promoting ownership of the website and creativity in terms of the content and purpose of the website has proven to be a perfect recipe for entrepreneurship.

For example, what started out as a forum or communication channel in relation to motorcycles and safety, has now become a portal for innovative thinking, exchanges, the development of particular gadgets and international sales. Joost Bosman, inhabitant of Bargeres and often to be found around the digiroom says: *"It is amazing what I have achieved, I'm even doing business abroad now. I'm really proud that, via this website, I'm able to contribute to safe driving. Why don't you check out some of my inventions on www.ej-electronics.nl"*

Another interesting example is that of a single mother on benefits who approached the digiroom, acting upon a concern that few children in the neighbourhood were playing outside. She came up with the idea of organising outdoors trips for children. With the help of the social professionals, she built a website which informed the neighbourhood about the initiative and on which upcoming events were posted. Due to the success of the initiative, the mother has recently been invited to a local school to present her project. They have asked the mother to discuss this initiative with school staff and parents and think through ways for rolling this out at the school level. As such, employment might be around the corner for her.

AND SOCIAL INNOVATION

Finally, it is very important to highlight the social, as well as the employment benefits of *My Portfolio Online*. As partners of the transnational project 'Vit@I Society', the project perceives 'the social use of ICT as daily personal and local use of ICT for stimulating social activities and networks by individual citizens'. While the idea of neighbourhood portals has been around for some time, the innovative element of this social application of ICT resides in the fact that *My Portfolio Online* has put the structure in place that allows local inhabitants to come up with and realise independently their own ideas for local websites, individually or collectively. As a result, citizens become 'active producers of information and services' and/or 'partners for organisations' that have traditionally delivered those[5]. *My Portfolio Online* has noted that 1,600 people logged in the webapplication of De Naoberschapsbank in Emmen and more than 4.500 websites have been built so far. Approximately 3.000 visitors used the digiroom. The Portfolio Online Partnership is also active in Rhe Hague where similar processes can be shown. The average number of sites per person in the neighbourhood has in four years increased from two to five. It has promoted a sense of community in Emmen and boosted the resources to be mobilised when faced with local problems.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR MY PORTFOLIO ONLINE?

A digiroom has been set up in two other districts of Emmen and conversations are being held to introduce the digiroom to other cities in the Netherlands. The partners are also in the process of upgrading the software. Although *My Portfolio Online* has found its software programme to be the perfect means to pursue its objectives, the partners have recently come to the decision that the software purchased five years ago, has now become outdated. The new software to be developed by the partnership would incorporate more recent developments and allow its users to participate in trends, such as uploading and exchanging videos. The *My Portfolio Online* partnership found in the software programmers of Q42 in The Hague long term partners in development.

The validation of the skills and competences that users gain is a further objective that *My Portfolio Online* will be pursuing over the next months through EQUAL. Users will be offered the option of creating a digital portfolio, which would document the ICT skills developed through courses and/or the design and maintenance of websites. In addition, the project workers are contemplating the idea of asking inhabitants who need help with, for example, work on their house, garden or street, to identify the skills and experiences required and attach these to the (electronic) ad. Subsequently, those responding to these ads and satisfactorily fulfilling the tasks

could transfer those skills to their digital portfolio and have it validated by those 'employing' them. This digital portfolio could support those who are currently unemployed to gather and/or validate skills facilitating their (re)entry into the labour market. Clearly, there are lots more exciting developments still to come!

Els Rose Kuiper
Co-ordinator of My Portfolio Online
E-mail: info@brekendvaatwerk.nl
Stichting Brekend Vaatwerk
The Netherlands
Tel: +31 20 6247743
Website: www.brekendvaatwerk.nl/
Website of the digiroom "Naoberschapsbank" in Emmen, Bargeres: www.barger.es.org
Link to the ECDB: My Portfolio online ([NL-2004/EQF/0005](#))

[1] http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/soccul/eincl/index_en.htm

[2] http://europa.eu.int/information_society/eeurope/i2010/ict_and_lisbon/index_en.htm

[3] Vit@I Society (2006), *Vit@I Society: The new social use of ICT*, pg.42..

[4] Vit@I Society (2006), *Vit@I Society: The new social use of ICT*, pg.43.

[5] Vit@I Society (2006), *Vit@I Society: The new social use of ICT*, pg.43.