

Bridging the Digital Divide: Engaging Indigenous Communities through Cross-Sector Collaboration

Lupi A^{1*} & Winters J²

¹ Positive Outcomes, Australia

² Cisco Systems, Australia

Abstract

In Australia, Cisco's community investment program has been directed at efforts to bridge the 'digital divide'. With its belief that the "Internet and education (are) the two great equalisers in life", Cisco has grown its community investment program from two-way partnerships to a collaborative program spanning other companies, community organisations and government. A particular focus has been on bridging the digital divide in Indigenous communities.

This paper sets out Cisco's 'learning journey' through this experience.

Keywords

Cisco Systems, collaboration, cross-sector collaboration, community development, corporate community investment, digital divide

Introduction

Global corporations have been playing a part in social and economic development as part of a growing in interest in and commitment to corporate social responsibility. This paper sets out what this means to Cisco Systems (Australia and New Zealand) and highlights what this company has learnt over the past five years as it engages with communities to deliver results that give benefit to the community, employees and the business itself.

Cisco Systems is the global leader in networking for the Internet. Cisco's business is about connecting people through the Internet and using the Internet to transform the way businesses operate and the way people work, live, play and learn. Hence we have made this the cornerstone of the way we invest in communities.

Our community investments have largely been an investment of our technology and skills to transform the way community organisations go about their business, and to try to extend the reach and power of the Internet to disadvantaged or hard to reach communities so that they too can actively participate in this networked, digital world.

For some years therefore we have seen the 'digital divide' as the area where we can make the most useful community contribution in line with our business. In Australia, we have had a specific focus on working with Indigenous communities to bridge the digital divide.

In this paper we describe the key features of our approach to social investment. We illustrate how this plays out in practice through three specific projects Cisco is involved with in Queensland. A hallmark feature of these projects has been our determination to work collaboratively with government, Indigenous community organisations and other companies, as we try to bridge the 'digital divide' in these hard-to-reach/disadvantaged communities. In the concluding section of the paper we will share some of the lessons we have learned and the benefits that we believe accrue from taking a cross-sector collaborative approach.

Cisco's approach to social investment

As a company, Cisco operates on "core values of customer focus and corporate citizenship. We express these values through global investment in educational, community and philanthropic efforts" (Cisco Systems 2003).

Cisco's program is integrally linked to its core business: using the power of the Internet to improve communities. Globally, a key focus is on supporting non-profit organisations in their work. This is part of the Australian program, but Cisco ANZ also goes beyond that focus. In Australia, poverty and disadvantage are linked closely to education and the extent of choices and opportunities that people have.

Education has been a core aspect of Cisco's community investment approach. This is demonstrated through its investment in the Cisco Networking Academy program. This began in the US in 1997 but now spans 152 countries. Australia was the second country after the US to introduce the Cisco Networking Academy Program. Throughout the region it has been consistently used not only to teach network technology skills but also it has been focussed particularly on disadvantaged and marginalised individuals and communities, helping them to gain access to Internet and networking technology and skills.

Cisco works from the premise that strategic investment in the community needs to deliver benefits for the community, employees and the business. This approach was highlighted in a recent article by Porter and Kramer (2002), which detailed the benefits of corporate social responsibility in terms of innovation, marketing, clustering and staff morale.

In this article, Porter and Kramer use the example of the Cisco Networking Academy Program to illustrate their arguments regarding the convergence of interests, with economic benefits and social benefits no longer being seen as distinct and often competing; and the value of clusters.

“Cisco has used its unique assets and expertise, along with its worldwide presence, to create a program that no other educational institution, government agency, foundation or private donor could have designed as well or expanded as quickly. And it has amplified the impact by signalling other corporations in its cluster. Other corporations supplemented Cisco’s contributions by donating or discounting products and services of their own, such as Internet access and computer hardware and software” (Porter and Kramer 2002).

The Cisco Networking Academy Program encapsulates Cisco’s investment approach:

- Focussed on education
- Working with both mainstream educational institutions and also reaching out to marginalised and disadvantaged communities
- Tackling the digital divide
- Working collaboratively with other organisations — non-profit organisations, educational institutions, government and other businesses.

Cisco’s Australian community investment program has grown and matured in the past five years.

It began with a comprehensive partnership with The Smith Family, <<http://www.smithfamily.com.au>>, where Cisco expertise and technology helped the Smith Family transform its operations through use of a state-of-the-art converged voice and data network and the power of the Internet. This transformation has resulted in significant ongoing cost efficiencies in their operations as well as opening up new ways of delivering services.

Today, Cisco’s Australian community investment program has evolved into a more comprehensive social responsibility initiative where Cisco seeks to demonstrate leadership within the corporate community.

We see the way to exercise this social responsibility leadership is to:

- tackle ‘hard’ issues
- make a commitment for a significant period of time
- engage our employees so their skills and talents are part of our contribution
- work collaboratively with other businesses, particularly our network of customers and partners in the IT industry, government and relevant community organisations.

In 2004 as part of this leadership approach we began to explore ways that we could contribute to bridging the digital divide with indigenous communities in Queensland. Before describing some of these collaborative projects it is worth considering what we mean by the ‘digital divide’.

The digital divide

The gap between the technological 'haves' and 'have-nots' has gained credence as one of today's most significant social challenges. The OECD defines the digital divide as "the gap between individuals, households, business and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard both to their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) and to their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities" (OECD 2001).

Zadek and Raynard, in their paper for BT's 'Hot Topic' on the digital divide (OECD 2001), identify three key 'divide' issues — the Three C's:

- Connectivity — basic access to ICT in its various forms
- Content — the type of information communicated and the way it can be used to facilitate social and economic processes
- Capability — the ability of different groups to use technology.

It is Cisco's view that in each project we get involved with we need to consider what Cisco's role/contribution can and should be around each of these Three C factors. We also believe that if we take a cross-sector collaborative approach to digital divide projects we are more likely to get traction and results around each of the issues of connectivity, content and capability, and the end result will be far more effective for the communities we are working with, for our people who are driving the engagement and the collaborating partners who join with us in these projects.

Cisco is also of the view that the digital divide is a key issue for economic and social development in Indigenous communities. If Indigenous communities are going to participate in the real economy, tackle welfare dependency and ensure that individuals have real choices and opportunities in their lives through education, then they must have access to the Internet and technology — they must be on the 'right' side of the digital divide.

Because of this belief that tackling digital divide issues is important for Indigenous economic and social development — we have focussed some of our key community investments in Australia on Indigenous communities in Queensland.

Our experience in Queensland

Three projects that exemplify a cross-sector collaboration approach to bridging the digital divide in Indigenous communities are:

1. Establishing a Cisco Networking Academy program in Weipa
2. Connecting the Palm Island Community Youth Centre to the Internet
3. Supporting the Cape York Digital Network to be the key IT&C resource for 16 Indigenous communities across Cape York.

In Weipa, Cisco has been collaborating with Western Cape College, the Weipa Multi Purpose Facility (a post-school vocational training provider) and CYDN to try to establish a Cisco Networking Academy program for the Western Cape communities.

In terms of the Three C's, connectivity/access to the Internet and technology in Weipa and Napranum are reasonably good. This has been achieved in part through CYDN and the federal government's Networking the Nation Program. Similarly, the Queensland Government has ensured that there are post-school IT educational resources available through the Weipa Multi Purpose Facility.

The big need, however, is for capability and content — so that the Internet and networks become an empowering enabling and relevant tool for Indigenous people in the Weipa community.

Cisco is trying to achieve this by establishing a community-based networking academy program that would be based at the Weipa Multi Purpose facility.

The focus to begin with is on trying to establish local capacity to run basic IT training courses using the HP IT Essentials curriculum, and training Indigenous 'academy' instructors who will be able to run these basic level courses in the local community.

On Palm Island, Cisco has been leading a collaboration of corporations to work with the Queensland PCYC and the Queensland Government to provide Internet connectivity and resources to young people on Palm Island — a particularly disadvantaged Indigenous community off the coast of Townsville.

Cisco has provided state-of-the-art equipment for wireless networking of the youth centre as well as a VOIP phone system, which will now allow the centre to be connected via the Internet to the external world for both voice (phones) and data (Internet content, emails, etc). The Internet-based phone system will provide significant operating cost reductions to the centre as calls using the VOIP system will not incur a per call cost.

Cisco has also been instrumental in encouraging other companies to join this collaborative cross-sector partnership including:

- Telstra, who has contributed broadband Internet connectivity to the centre
- IBM, who has contributed laptops to complement the centre's PCs, thereby enabling young people to take advantage of the Internet throughout the centre and not just in the 'IT area'

- Austar, who has provided pay TV channel content which will be available at the Youth Centre for free
- NQITX, <<http://www.nqitx.net>>, whose students are providing IT support to the youth centre as a part of their postgraduate studies.

At the time of writing this article, the collaborative partnership's involvement on Palm Island is on hold while an inquest is held into an Aboriginal death in custody.

Cisco's plans for the future include:

- conducting an e-games day at the youth centre to encourage young people to start using the ICT technology
- e-mentoring by Cisco employees of young people on Palm Island, teaching them how to maintain and manage the systems themselves
- linking the PCYC to Youth Noise <<http://www.youthnoise.com>>, One-economy <<http://www.one-economy.org>>, Teachers Without Borders <<http://teacherswithoutborders.org>>, Beehive <<http://www.beehive.org>> and the Jhai Foundation <http://www.jhai.org/jhai_remoteIT.htm>, which are global initiatives supported by Cisco worldwide that have applicability for youth and economic and social development.

In terms of the Three C's, the project on Palm Island at this stage has been focussing on connectivity and to a lesser extent on content. The challenge for the future will be to enhance the capability of Indigenous young people to make use of this connectivity and to identify content that will be relevant to their lives and circumstances on Palm Island.

Lead IT partner with Indigenous Enterprise Partnerships (IEP) in Cape York

In 2004, after an extensive period/process of consultation with Indigenous leaders, the board of IEP and its own employees, Cisco joined the founding partners of IEP. This leading-edge cross-sector collaboration aims to break the cycle of welfare dependency and promote economic and social development of the Indigenous communities of Cape York.

As part of its initial engagement Cisco is focussing on four key initiatives:

- To provide technical and business knowledge, IT equipment and support to Cape York Digital Network (CYDN) and so enhance CYDN's capability and capacity to become the key ICT support and resource organisation in Cape York
- To introduce the indigenous leadership and community organisations of Cape York to the Australian ICT corporate community and to take a leadership role within the industry to encourage other IT firms to participate in the Cape York Partnership

- To engage the skills, talents and energy of Cisco employees in IT social and economic development projects in Cape York, including mentoring of CYDN staff, specific project support and employee volunteering
- To leverage the global strength of Cisco to introduce and broker relationships between Cisco-supported community initiatives in other parts of the world to the economic and social development projects in Cape York. For example encouraging networking, dialogue and shared learning between Cape York organisations and Youth Noise, Beehive, Teachers Without Borders, One-economy and the Jhai Foundation Navajo Nation Education Program.

Moving from 'partnership' to 'collaboration'

It is worth noting that in all three of these projects Cisco has moved from developing partnerships to collaborative ventures that involve multiple organisations, often crossing sectoral boundaries so that government, community and corporate organisations are involved in the projects.

Whilst this is in keeping with how Cisco normally does business, when this collaborative approach is applied to community capacity building and community investment the outcomes for all stakeholders are significantly enhanced.

Lessons we have learnt

Cisco's first experiences in the Indigenous digital divide space in Australia were in 2001 when it began providing support to Euraba Paper Company, an Indigenous business venture in Western New South Wales that specialised in making quality paper from cotton waste.

Cisco provided financial resources and equipment to enable Euraba to build a website and use the Internet as part of their marketing strategy.

The involvement with Euraba was essentially philanthropic, with Cisco providing resources that it thought would be useful and helpful to Euraba. There was very little mutuality in the relationship, and Cisco did not spend much time getting to know and understand the local Indigenous community and their social and economic contexts. Neither did they take the time to get to know the local Indigenous leaders and try to understand what it was that they would have liked Cisco to be doing in support of the Euraba venture.

In the end, whilst the Cisco support was appreciated, it was not long lasting, and there are no sustained or ongoing relationships between the two organisations.

In the three Queensland examples cited above, however, Cisco has spent much time and energy listening to the local Indigenous leadership and other organisations that have a long

track record of working in these communities. Cisco has also invested in trying to understand what the world looks like from the 'shoes of the Indigenous people' and working out, in terms of the Three C's, where the first set of Cisco investments need to be made to result in longer-term impact to bridge the digital divide.

Cisco has also understood from the outset that it is only one player in the IT&C landscape, and that for real impact it needs to work with its colleagues/partners/customers within the IT&C sector, as well as other organisations that are impacting on these Indigenous communities. In other words, it needs to bring to its community investment approach the same level of discipline and rigour it would normally bring to any work with a potentially valued customer in understanding their context, and working in a myriad of alliances/networks and collaborative partnerships to achieve an end result that will be valuable to all stakeholders.

However, one of the issues that arise with this cross-sector collaboration is the importance of understanding the differences in organisational context and culture of many of the other collaborative partners. Whereas Cisco is used to doing business in time-critical ways where agility, flexibility, a can-do attitude and speed to market are key ingredients of success, this is not always the same organisational 'success' drivers for other collaborative partners.

For many community and government organisations, getting the 'buy in' support and understanding of others can often be a key success driver. This means more time spent in consultation, listening and discussing options.

For Indigenous organisations, local community politics, history, the views of elders and leaders, and generations of living in a welfare economy often mean that they do things differently and often to different time scales. If corporations are going to work along side Indigenous organisations then they have to come to grips with the frustrations and challenges of this different 'lens on the world'.

It is often in coming to grips with these different contexts, world views and organisational cultures that real change for all stakeholders takes place. It is also often where corporate community investment becomes truly challenging — where it is difficult and complicated and where tackling the hard issues and being there for the long haul really comes to life.

It is also where the company needs to develop its skills and understanding in community development as distinct from business development. Often, cross-sector collaborative ventures such as the ones we have described in this paper, much of what the corporate is engaged in is the unfamiliar (to them) terrain of community development. And it is terrain that

has to be traversed if the corporate community investment and the collaborative partnerships are going to result in real, sustainable community capacity building.

Conclusion

Cisco's journey in this respect is a continuing one; it is a work in progress of learning, making mistakes and sometimes getting it right. The exciting thing is that it doesn't look like Cisco is shying away from a long-term involvement. It is also undertaking this learning journey in other parts of the world. The power of networks and the Internet, which can facilitate joined-up thinking and learning, means that we should be able to benefit from this global experience and make significant progress and transformational learnings by sharing our experiences from these different yet similar journeys across the globe.

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