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Empowering Communities of Color Through Computer Technology

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As we hurtle towards the 21st century, an increasing number of individuals start to realize that the ability to use computers and information technology resources effectively will determine how well individuals, organizations, and communities function in a rapidly changing technological society. Numerous studies, including one conducted in the Summer 1995 of Boston's Black community by Freedom House and The Trotter Institute, and highlighted in this issue, have documented the need of Americans—students, workers, unemployed, youth, adults and senior citizens, to become knowledgeable and proficient in the use of computers and information technology. There are several questions that do face communities of color, in particular: Why is there such a low distribution, in comparison to more wealthy communities, of up-to-date computers and information technology resources in inner city and minority communities? What role does one's race, gender, age, class, education, residence, and employment status play in their ability to access, and use computers and information technology resources? How does a community's socio-economic, racial, cultural and linguistic make-up affect its ability to learn about such technology for its own development? These are valid questions which are fundamental for understanding the relationship of access, technology, and democracy. The purpose of this essay is to summarize some of the practical, day-to-day challenges faced by individuals and organizations—specifically within communities of color in gaining access to, learning about and utilizing computer technology for personal, professional, and community empowerment.

Lack of Access to Computers

The phrase "lack of access" is frequently used in describing the relationship between communities of color and computers and information technology. Nevertheless, a closer look should be taken to the term "access." One could argue that the lack of computers and information technology resources in inner city schools, homes, neighborhood organizations and businesses simply mirror the long existing shortage of other vital resources in poor and inner city communities such as, adequate health care facilities, jobs, job training programs, day care centers, housing, schools, and police services. While it is a part of the problem, the issue of getting more communities of color to equally gain from the benefits of computers and information technology, is much more complicated. "Access," according to The Random House Dictionary, is defined as "Ability or permission to approach, enter, speak with or use;" as in "They have access to the files." The key part of this definition is "ability to use." This speaks directly to having the knowledge (literacy) and the skills (proficiency) to use a computer properly to perform specific tasks such as, locating a file on a computer's hard drive, editing a report, saving it and making a back-up copy on a floppy disk (after formatting the floppy disk), printing a copy of the report, and using the computer's modem to send a copy of the file, via electronic mail, to several people across the country or in the community.

Gaining proficiency with computers (and therefore full access, in terms of the "ability to use") is a multiple, often difficult and frustrating process, for both individuals and organizations. This process involves:

1. receiving initial and proper orientation and training about the capacities of the computer; how it functions; and, how to use specific applications;
2. having mentors or individuals, after the training, to answer questions when and if problems arise with the computer, software or printer;
3. establishing physical access to a functioning computer (at work, home, or a community-based computer technology center) to practice and experiment several times a week;
4. acquiring strategies to learn new computer-related skills (new applications or new features in a current one) on one's own after the initial training;
5. allotting time to have consistent practice working on the computer; and,
6. creating the desire or motivation to learn to use a computer effectively.

Based on the above, it may be clear that the issue of access to computer technology involves the presence of other factors, such as appropriate training, technical

support, access to a computer, and allotted time to use it. The existence of these other factors are, in many cases, lacking in inner city homes and organizations. We must add that individuals, families, and organizations must also have sufficient knowledge and monetary resources to ensure that the computer systems they acquire actually meet their current and future needs. Several observations come to mind concerning these intricacies of the computer and information technologies as it relates to communities of color.

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Computers: Powerful and competitive market forces are driving computers and associated software to be consistently and rapidly updated and more powerful and faster. While the prices of computer systems continue decrease rapidly as new models come to market, the simple fact is that even these cheaper computer systems are still by and large unaffordable for most people, especially individuals in poor and inner city communities. Multimedia computers with the capacity to integrate text, sound, graphics, animation and full motion video that come equipped with fax modems and CD-ROM drives are the current state of the art and cost about $1,400. Once a person adds a very low cost printer and a few basic software applications, the total bill quickly jumps to over $2,000. Depending on what other features the systems have, the price can easily double. If access to the Internet or a commercial information service like America On-Line, Compuserve or Prodigy is desired, additional monthly costs will be incurred. The February 1995 issue of *Interactive Consumers*, a monthly primary research report of FIND/SVP, states, "today's average $1,600 home computer investment undoubtedly continues to pose a real spending hurdle for households constrained by other demands on disposable income."[1]

The term "user friendly" is frequently attached to the new generation of personal computers on the market today. Computers are easier to use than in previous years, and their documentation is more clearly written. At the same time, computers are still not as easy to learn or to become proficient with, as computer manufacturers and mass advertising would want the public to believe. The term does not apply to first time users, who bring no point of reference to dealing with computers, but rather to current, experienced users of computers. Apparently in recognition of this reality, the previously mentioned publication, *Interactive Consumers*, has supplied statistics which purport to show that for the foreseeable future (10 years) the vast majority of consumers (identified as those with annual incomes below $40,000), "...have little interest in high-level information services, either from the PC or the TV. They have less use for information in general and are less cognitively able or willing to pay for advanced tolls or appliances to manipulate it... Such

consumers will be more interested in using low level interactive media such as video on demand and custom program listings."[2] By contrast, this same publication believes that families with incomes over $50,000 will be the favored targets of high level information services, multimedia computers and software marketing.

The rapid changes and advances in computer systems and software means that people and organizations have a confusing plethora of choices to make when purchasing computer systems. The question that is often asked prior to making a commitment to purchase a computer system is: Will my investment be obsolete in one or two years? Such a question is not easily answered. For an inner city organization, the question takes on even more weight. Upgrading systems means applying scarce resources for training people to use the new systems or software and reconfiguring old systems and files to integrate with the new technologies.

People: Parents, business individuals, teachers, ministers, students and the unemployed in poor and inner city communities know that computers are the wave of the present and future. They want to learn about them because they might be able to get a better job. In many instances, they are not sure where to begin or where to go for information. Interestingly enough, many people's knowledge of computers goes slightly beyond word processing, data entry or games. The vast majority of adults who took the computer courses I conducted while working in Boston were women, unemployed, and openly afraid of taking a computer course for the first time. They had been made to believe that computers would be difficult to learn or they had a bad experience with a previous instructor.

At the other extreme, there are pockets of highly-skilled individuals of color who work in the engineering and computer science fields or professors and students. Many in this almost hidden (but not silent) group are eager to give of their expertise to inner city organizations that want to introduce computers into their environments. The problem is that many of these individuals work outside communities of color and are not sure where to find those agencies in the community that are in need. This group is a valuable resource just waiting to be tapped.

Organizations: Community-based, non-profit human service organizations that operate in communities of color are struggling to take advantage of computer technology with often little in-house resources or knowledge of external, affordable technical assistance to help them. Not having the funds, most non-profit organizations get their computers through donations from foundations, computer companies or from large businesses and organizations that are discarding old systems in preparation to upgrade to new ones. This has often resulted in several serious problems for the receiving organization:

1. Non-profit community-based organizations end up with a variety of old computer systems, printers and software thrown together with some new systems that are often incompatible with each other, and are in

various states of functioning and use.

2. Organizations in poor, inner city communities have become the "dumping ground" for old equipment, frequently in poor condition, in the guise of donations from companies. The community organizations often do not have a person on staff with sufficient computer background to ask specific questions of a donor regarding the types of computers being donated and their capacities and conditions. Frequently, the individuals who represent donor companies do not themselves know the capacities of the computers they are trying to donate.

If an organization is fortunate enough to actually get brand new or fairly current computer systems and software, their problems are just beginning. If the organization receives these systems through donations (as is usually the case), they are then left on their own to set up those computers and install the software. If the computers are to become networked, the organization has to confront extremely technical and complex issues concerning the type of network software and physical cabling to use; how systems will be configured to ensure security; how staff will be divided into workgroups to share information on the network; how the network will be managed on an ongoing basis; and, who should be trained to use the systems.

The challenges of integrating computers into an organizational setting are generic to all types organizations, whether they are big or small, for profit or non-profit, are in the public or private sector or located in inner city communities or in affluent areas. The reality is that few inner city non-profit community organizations have the people or financial resources necessary to acquire current computer systems and software. Those select few organizations with the financial resources (or the ability to obtain grants) and an appreciation of what it takes to integrate computer technology into an organization have in-house departments with trained staff to maintain computer systems and networks as well as train and support staff to use them.

There is another point which is not often discussed in the process of integrating computers into organizations; i.e. the necessity of radically changing how staff perform various administrative functions such as, prepare reports and proposals, and create and maintain client records or lists. For organizations with no prior history of using computers, and as we see, many organizations in communities of color fall into this category, the change is nothing short of a cultural upheaval.

Staff persons are being asked to use a new technology (change their ways of doing things) which might or might not be properly installed on which they might or might not have been adequately trained. Out of necessity, staff persons and entire organizations go through a period of confusion (meaning the agency's efficiency suffers) where two administrative systems (one non-computerized, one newly-computerized) unhappily co-exist. Depending on the quality of technical support and executive leadership brought to bear to anticipate and address this stage of

organizational change and stress, many organizations, departments within organizations or individual staff never fully recover to adopt the new computer systems.

Community-Based Computer Technology Initiatives: Two Examples

In 1985, Freedom House was the recipient of a major, unsolicited computer equipment grant from a local computer company. Over the next ten years, the organization hired a training/technical staff, received additional monetary grants and equipment, sought out volunteer expertise in computers, and developed relationships with groups interested in helping inner city communities use computer technology. Freedom House created an education and technology unit which was responsible for:

• Ensuring that all program departments and staff were trained and supported in using the computers;

• Designing and implementing a computer instructional component in all youth and adult programs in the organization; for example, using computers as a means of enhancing students' academic skills;

• Creating and offering a variety of computer courses to community residents and staff from area agencies and businesses;

• Serving as a major community access point for individuals and organizations to come to learn about and use computers.

• Providing technical assistance to local agencies interested in introducing computers into their organizations.

Success over this period was due, in large part, to:

• Strong leadership from the organization's executive director in conveying to the staff the importance and the benefits of learning and using computers;

• The existence of a strong technical staff that designed and clearly articulated to other staff and agency administrators a plan for integrating computers into the organization and how Freedom House could play a leadership role in providing computer technology resources in the community;

• The technical staff continually sought out those with computer skills interested in helping the organization while also upgrading its own computer knowledge through books, joining user groups and attending conferences;

• Implementing an ongoing computer training and technical support program for all agency staff.

In 1994, United Neighborhood Houses of New York City, a non-profit umbrella organization of 37 neighborhood settlement houses received a one year $700,000 grant from the federal government to develop, operate, and maintain an integrated information system through a wide area network that links the social service programs and computer systems of five settlement houses; and provide them with access to Internet services. IBM donated close to $1 million in computers for use in the

settlement houses to be used with $800,000 in software donated by Microsoft. Despite this massive influx of money and equipment, this ambitious five year Information Technology Initiative Project is currently struggling with the following issues:

1. the difficulty of securing additional funds beyond the first year to match its projected five year budget;
2. overcoming numerous bureaucratic difficulties and delays in installing and configuring the computer networks at each settlement house;
3. determining how the settlement houses will financially support their new computer network systems and train staff to effectively use it;
4. assessing the introduction of networked computers and an integrated information system into human service organizations can show increased efficiencies in the delivery of social services to residents, better administering of programs and improved productivity by workers.

Conclusion

The experiences associated with the cases of Freedom House and United Neighborhood Houses of New York City illustrate that individuals and organizations within communities of color across the country face many hurdles as they strive to acquire, learn about, use and benefit from computers and information technologies. Lack of resources, in terms of funds, experienced technical assistance, and trainers mean limited control over the kinds of computer systems individuals and organizations in communities of color can acquire and an inability to truly understand and thus take full advantage of whatever computer systems are obtained.

The joint Trotter Institute/Freedom House report described in the essay by James Jennings asserts that community-based organizations, educational institutions, businesses and donor institutions need to work together to develop new outreach strategies, programs, and funding mechanisms to ensure increased use, understanding of and access to computer technology by inner city communities.[3]

Community-based human service organizations play a vital role in the day-to-day life of inner city, urban communities. They provide a variety of needed education, health, housing, employment, recreation, information and referral and advocacy services for all population groups. If inner city communities are to catch up to speed with the rest of this country in fully utilizing computer technology, community-based organizations will have to become one of the focal points for introducing this resource in their community. Most community organizations are not prepared to play this role, and will need help.

At the same time, many exciting examples of community technology initiatives exist across the country that involve community organizations, colleges, public schools, businesses, libraries, foundations and local governments working together to bring computer technology into the inner city. The Freedom House experience, The Trotter Institute/Freedom House relationship and the United Neighborhood Houses project are live models proactively addressing these issues. It is important to know that for over ten years, there has been a growing push to create community technology centers in community agencies in urban areas nation-wide that provide computer facilities for residents to use and that offer low cost or free computer courses and workshops.

Such community collaboratives, however, have to be based on an equal partnership and mutual respect. Inner city community organizations have to challenge themselves to be proactive on several fronts to seek out ways to learn about computers and rapid changes in information technologies and be able to articulate how such resources can benefit their mission. Such knowledge brings credibility to their efforts (and discussion points) as they enter into collaborative technology ventures with other groups, request computers or ask for technical assistance in choosing systems.

Universities, businesses, and foundations need to look to community-based organizations in inner city communities as prime locations to support the development of on-site computer training programs and facilities that remain current with the changing technology.

The task ahead for communities of color to fully acquire and use computers and information technology will not be easy. Computer technology and the resources of the highly touted information superhighway are not standing still, nor are those communities and individuals who are serious about harnessing it. However, enough examples exist that show that those of us who work in and with communities of color do not have to be (nor can we afford to be) on the sidelines watching and waiting.

Notes

[1] "PC or TV?", *Interactive Consumers*, Vol. 2 No. 2, February 1995, 2.
[2] Ibid, p.6.
[3] James Jennings (Ed.), *Computer Technology Utilization Survey*. (Boston: The William Monroe Trotter Institute/University of Massachusetts Boston and Freedom House, 1995).

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