Drishtee Case Study

Background and Context
Drishtee is a revenue-generating platform for rural networking and marketing services that enable e-governance, education, and health services. It is a state-of-the-art software package which facilitates communication and information interchange within a localized intranet between villages and a district center. A string of rural services, which include land records, mailing software, virtual marketplaces, matrimonial services, on-line grievance postings, and a host of other customized services have supplemented this communication backbone.

Project Description
The objective of the project has been to establish community-owned, innovative and sustainable information technology projects in the most poverty-stricken and tribal-dominated rural areas throughout India. The project addresses the social, economic, and development needs of the villagers through an innovative G2C (Government to Citizen) model. The project seeks to mark a paradigm shift by using information and information technology for rural people, causing a shift in the government’s delivery apparatus - to serving villagers directly rather than through civil servants.

Drishtee is currently in the process of installing low cost, self-sustaining, and community owned rural Intranet projects in several targeted districts. Services are provided through Drishtee in a village (or a group of villages). A local villager owns a kiosk after having it financed through a government-sponsored loan. Kiosk owners can then pay for their loans with their earnings and become an entrepreneurial role model for the younger generation.

With a goal of 45,000 kiosk owners by 2003, the employment generated has the potential of seeding a new IT-literate generation.

These Information Kiosks provide user-charge-based services to rural people. Each kiosk will have computers and will be wired through an Intranet network. Besides the computer and modem, the hardware set up at the kiosk includes a printer, UPS, furniture, and stationary. Soochanalayas, or centers, have been established to cater to the 25 to 30 surrounding villages. Soochanalayas have been established in the buildings of Gram Panchayats, which are located either at block headquarters or at prominent haat bazaar (weekly marketplace in tribal areas) or are in prominent villages on major roads (e.g. bus stand points). Soochanalayas are nodes working as rural cybercafe-cum-cyberoffices. Server/hub is a Remote Access Server (RAS) housed in the computer room in Zila Panchayat (District Council). Each Soochanalaya provides an option to access services to about 15 Gram Panchayats (25 to 30 villages or 20,000 to 30,000 people). The services of the network cover wide-ranging information needs of the villagers. Thus, Drishtee provides an option to access various services through its network to villagers living in 311 Gram Panchayats and over 600 villages and a population of around half a million.

The person operating the Soochanalaya is a local matriculate operator, called a Soochak. A Soochak is not an employee but an entrepreneur, and only needs maintenance and numeric data entry skills. He/she needs very limited typing skills since most of Drishtee is menu-driven. A village committee and the local community selected the Soochaks for the original 20 centers. He/she runs the Soochanalaya on commercial lines and has an initial one-year agreement with Drishtee. He/she does not receive any salary, and bears the cost of stationery, maintenance, and electric and telephone bills. He/she pays 10% of their income as commission to Drishtee for maintaining the net. Each Soochak is expected to earn a net income of at least Rs. 6,000 per month at conservative projections after the end of Quarter 3 of Year 1.

Drishtee has developed software to run the intranet and various services. It is very simple and menu-driven software, which requires minimum data entry at the client end. The software is in Hindi language and requires the LINUX operating system. MySQL will be used for the RDBMS backend and PHP as the programming language. Java is used for communication. The software has an elaborate administration mechanism to monitor node activities and maintain quality of services offered to the people.

The project has demonstrated a new model for a more effective, accessible, prompt and transparent governance, which benefits not only the citizen but also the government by effectively making the citizen a partner in the process of governance. The system is very cost-
effective. In the Drishtee model, each of the kiosks caters to the needs of the surrounding villages. Kiosks have been established in buildings, which are located either at block headquarters, at prominent haat bazaars (weekly marketplace in tribal areas), or at prominent villages on major roads (e.g. bus stand points).

**Obstacles**
Infrastructure and power supply have been the two major barriers to Drishtee.

**Impact**
Around 40,000 users have used the intranet system since the inception of the project. Mandi rates, land records, and grievance redress continue to be the most popular services, which have been utilized by 75% of all users. Eleven new Soochanalayas have been established within eleven months of the project inception. Soochanalayas are running as economically viable units with all the Soochaks comfortably earning a livelihood. All the commercial banks in the district are eager to finance new Soochanalaya units and three new Soochanalaya units are sanctioned by the commercial banks for financing. There has been a 3% to 5% increase in the margins of farmers due to the ability to bypass middlemen and traders. There has been a four-fold increase in the number of users per month and an increased awareness of computers and IT in rural areas. This has resulted in the opening of new private computer training institutions and enrolment in such institutions has increased by 60%. The effect has opened a new horizon of employment avenues for the rural youth. Efficiency level in the functioning of government departments has increased resulting in improved and prompt services to the rural masses. Self Help Groups in the rural areas are getting more organized and empowered due to the transparency brought about in government services and rural economy (e.g. Farmers’ Association in village Kod are demanding a new kiosk in the village). The lower government functionaries have become more computer-savvy. This is apparent in an increased number of applications for computer loans from the Employees Provident Fund and an increased number of officials who have joined computer-training classes.

Computer literacy has increased in rural areas as approximately 120 rural youth are getting trained in the Soochanalayas in the remote areas. Drishtee has affected political decision-making in resource allocation. A Member of Parliament has allocated Rs 25,00,000 to set up information kiosks in 30 schools to develop a new model of e-education. Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has opened a study center for undergraduate and postgraduate courses on computer applications in its distance education program after realizing increased awareness about computers and IT in the district. Government of Madhya Pradesh instituted an award in the name of Gyandoot (former name of Drishtee) amounting to Rs. 2,00,000 to be awarded every year to a project in the state, which takes IT to the masses. The state IT policy has been re-oriented based on the impact of the project. Several prominent organizations like Microsoft, ISRO, MIT, IIT, IIM, NIC, LBSNAA, IIPA, HLL, Tata Trust, Mahindra Tractors, Jain Irrigation, Web Duniya, and S.Kumars have sent their high level teams to understand the model and its impact. Various State Governments like the Governments of Himachal Pradesh, Haryana and Orissa have sent their teams of officials to understand the model so that it can be replicated in their respective states. The Gyandoot project of Dhar District was awarded the Stockholm Challenge IT Award for 2000.

**Scaling up**
Drishtee is customizing its software and services for nearly 500 districts in India. It has already started expanding to the northern parts of the country. Drishtee has planned to reach out to all the villages of the country in a three-phase manner. The start of each phase would be preceded by the testing of the next phase either as a pilot for a state Government or as a model for technology testing. The groundwork has been established in many locations and the next phase is for expansion. The long-term objective of the project has been to use innovative e-governance, e-commerce, and e-education techniques as a tool for social change and development through wired villages within districts.
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