Abstract

In the effort to increase the participants of rural communities in broadband subscription and usage, a programme to develop e-entrepreneurship among women at rural communities was launched recently. The main subject of this paper is 1Nita Project and this programme is funded under the 2nd stimulus package under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (MOSTI) Malaysia and the main organiser is .my Domain Registry of Malaysia. Among other participating partners in training and supporting the project are E-Community Research Centre, UKM; NCWO; MdeC; and Malaysian entrepreneurs associations. The objective of this programme is to empower women entrepreneurs at rural community with ICT so they could access and use Internet for promoting their products and to increase their e-participation. The programme has trained more that 400 women entrepreneurs thus far and will continue to train another women entrepreneurs at rural communities in six zones of Malaysia. The paper will discuss some of the issues and challenges and the impact of the women e-entrepreneurship programme and the acculturation of Internet among the targeted group.

Key-Words: 1Nita Project, women entrepreneurs, e-entrepreneurship, rural community, cyber community, ICT acculturation

1 Introduction

The development of the mind has been the main educational agenda in Malaysia towards achieving the nation’s 2020 vision. For that reason, the Malaysian government especially through the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, has invested a huge amount of money in developing relevant infra-structure to support life-long learning via technology. By doing this, the government hopes to bridge the digital divide among marginalised groups in Malaysia such as children, indigenous communities, women, youth, senior citizens, disabled communities and Small Medium Entrepreneurs (SME). One such program is a trailblazer project known as 1Nita. The main aim of this project is to transform the role of telecenter to be the focal point of internet-based economic activities for the economy it serves. The paper will discuss some of the issues and challenges towards the acculturation of ICT among rural women entrepreneurs in Malaysia. The main subject of this paper is 1Nita Project which is a project funded under the 2nd stimulus package Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (MOSTI). The main organiser is .My Domain Registry of Malaysia. Other participation partners in training and supporting the
project are among others E-Community Research Centre, UKM; NCWO; MdeC; and Malaysian entrepreneurs associations.

2 Background of 1Nita Project

It is in the Malaysia’s ICT roadmap that ICT will provide the platform and the main catalyst for boosting Malaysia’s economy into the next decade. ICT is capable of moving the national economic value chain from that of a middle-income to a high income economy and Malaysian citizens should take the opportunities and benefits offered to expedite economic growth and bridge the digital divide among the people. The 1Nita Project is a government initiative that would provide a platform for women entrepreneurs to build strong businesses through the use of information technology and the Internet [7].

This Women Internet Entrepreneurship program is proposed to meet the needs of some identified female rural communities to market and sell their products and services by using the internet infrastructure available in their areas. Besides that, the program is also aimed at transforming the role of telecenter as a focal point of internet-based economic activities for the community they serve. As a result of this, 1Nita program hopes to empower women-owned SMEs to take advantage of the global developments and join the global economy and market spawned by the Internet towards increasing business potential and revenue.

1Nita (pronounced as "wanita", which means "woman" in Malay language) is a program to empower woman entrepreneurs of the rural community to access and use the Internet to promote their products and to increase their participation in cyber community. The number "1" in 1Nita is the symbol of unity among Malaysian women, which is in line with the country’s Vision 2020. This means women of different ethnic backgrounds are included in this programme such as the indigenous and disabled communities. The interface appears in two languages, which are Bahasa Malaysia and English. So far, the programme has trained more than 400 women entrepreneurs from selected states throughout Malaysia, including East Malaysia; and it is expandable to all states in the future.

3 The Programme Structure

The programme is run in two cycles for each location. In the first cycle, the participants selected are given some lessons in the form of talks on topics like internet marketing, language in advertising, and social networking sites. It is during this cycle that a profiling questionnaire is distributed. The participants also do their registration online then. This is the time when they are also asked to create their own user ID and password. For those who have not gotten an e-mail address, they are also helped to register with any e-mail facility such as yahoo and gmail.

In the second cycle, the participants are also given some lessons on photographic technique and how to create supplementary space in blogsphere. Talks and demonstrations on payment method are also given to the participants such as on how to use postal services by Post Malaysia, Paypal and commercial banks’ banking facility like CIMB Clicks and Maybank2u. The second set of questionnaire for the impact study is also being distributed during this cycle.

There are also phone calls and e-mails following to ensure that the participants are actively using the platform. Researchers constantly make random phone calls to ask if there is any issue or problem faced by the participants. Calls are also made as a means of checking the participants’ progress and development. Besides that, continuous checking of the users online is also made so that comments can be given to the participants on how they can improve their marketing strategy and products.
4 Literature Review

What makes women turn to become self-employed and entrepreneurs? In a study of women entrepreneurs, Carter and Cannon [3] examined the motivational and behavioral characteristics of 60 female business owners, utilizing both structured questionnaires and unstructured interviews. They found that the need for independence was an important motivating factor to start a business for the women in their sample.

Brindley and Ritchie [2] aimed to explore the personal and contextual factors that influence the start-up and successful continuation of women’s businesses. Taking a comparative approach, they conducted twenty semi-structured interviews with SME owner/managers, ten female and ten male, in order to examine how personal and contextual factors may be gender related. They found that the female entrepreneurs’ main motivations for starting their own businesses were the need for flexibility due to childcare responsibilities, and their negative experiences of previous employment.

The effort to bridge digital divide is a global effort. One such global project is called One Laptop per Child (OLPC), which was introduced by Nicholas Negroponte to children in Cambodia [14]. Negroponte is one of the scholars who worked together with professionals from other fields like information technology, business industries and education to ensure this project a success. Indeed, Negroponte believes that the project is so important that the children’s first English word is “Google”. Negroponte’s effort is in line with many efforts done in bridging digital divide all over the world. Most projects focus on marginalised communities such as children, women, indigenous communities, disabled communities, as well as urban and rural poor. What such efforts suggest is that countries in the world are embracing the importance of technology, hence mirroring the development state that the countries are in. Manuel Castells makes such an observation, claiming that “since technology is society, and society cannot be understood or represented without its technological tools” [4].

Several studies have been done on women entrepreneurs. These studies generally look at the motivations and challenges faced by women in venturing into online business. One such study is done by Norudin Mansor and Azman Che Mat who looked at whether there is a significance of psychological and environmental dimensions for Malaysian Muslim women to venture into online business. The study reveals that psychological factors are highly relevant and the strength of their contributions are supported by the role of environmental factors that encourage Muslim women to venture into various types of business activities at the local and national level. The study which is published in an article entitled “The Significance of Psychology and Environment Dimensions for Malaysian Muslim Women Entrepreneurships Venturing [sic]” concludes that Muslim women “are going to be a perusal factor in economic advancement” especially in Malaysia [11]. In effect, the conclusion drawn by Mansor and Che Mat is in accordance with the basic assumption of iNita and is carried out as one of the pillars of this paper.

4.1 Media literacy

The role of media in disseminating information has become increasingly more important nowadays. Media are used in everyday activities, whether at home or in the office for entertainment and leisure, education, and many other purposes. Media can be used as a tool to empower human beings and in this context, women. However, there is a need for women to be media literate before media can be used to empower them. Without progress towards the empowerment of women, any attempt to raise the quality of lives of people in developing countries would be incomplete [9].

There exists little research on Malaysian adults’ media literacy levels, particularly in relation to television. Existing sources are more on audiovisual media and on computer-based media and the Internet. The initial need is to try to benchmark whether the adults are media literate, do they think they are media literate and how they rate their competency in using the media. There is no general term on media literacy that can be used among the adult population. It is therefore not possible to ask questions about it as a concept in theory or in practice. Although media literacy encompasses many areas, here we focus on its access. Media literacy in the context of this article is defined as the ability to use the computer, the Internet, telecommunications, and electronic media. In terms of media usage, studies have proved that women tend to use certain technologies more frequently than men, such as telephones, the Short Message Service (SMS), pagers, email, and chat [6].

The basic knowledge and skills of the computer can include knowing how it functions, how to input data and retrieve information, how to use the keyboard and how to navigate the screen [1]. This is a core skill that should be available to anyone who wishes to live and work effectively in this modern and technology-driven world. Thus, with more opportunities for women to enter the field of work, and with the decreasing segregation in the work place, women would be more driven to comprehend communication technologies [8].
4.2 Media literacy in Malaysia
In Malaysia, media becomes an important enabling tool toward acquiring the ability to create, distribute, and exploit knowledge and information, which is often regarded as the single most important factor underlying economic growth and improvements in the quality of life. The extent of media utilization is an important determinant of a country’s competitiveness in the borderless world, brought about by globalization. In Malaysia, as in many other developing countries, government plays an important role in shaping the nation’s media development.

A survey by Rahmah [12] among Malaysian women shows that the computer is used for word processing by administrators, professionals, entrepreneurs, students, and housewives. Only a small number of women involved in the study use computers for data storage/analysis and learning purposes. The study also indicates that the computer is very useful for its effectiveness, convenience, ability to store and update data and information, and ability to save time. Women involved in the study also agree that the use of media, particularly e-mail, fax machines, and computers has increased work efficiency and productivity. In order to survive in the present job environment, they must take initiatives to learn new skills, particularly in relation to computers and other new technologies.

There are many projects introduced and implemented by various government agencies and private sectors to assist the rural areas in the use and applications of media technologies in Malaysia. Some of the large-scale projects are Medan Info Desa, Community Broadband Centres and Pusat Internet Desa (Rural Internet Centers). The objectives of these centers are: (a) to assist the rural communities to participate in media and ICT awareness programs and use media and ICT to communicate; (b) to bridge the digital divide of the rural communities; (c) to increase the marketing of local products; (d) to upgrade the media and ICT literacy level of the surrounding community; and (e) to produce media and ICT entrepreneurs [10]. Even though many projects are being funded to improve the media literacy level of Malaysian society, the issue that seems unsolved is: How many of the rural people, especially women, take advantage of these technologies? Do they have computers to work with? Do they have the skills to perform simple operations on the computer? Can they access information on the Internet? Do they use cellular telephones and fixed line telephones in their daily lives? Do they watch television and listen to radio? Furthermore, are they interested in learning these media skills to improve their quality of life? These are all questions that need to be answered if the Malaysian government wants to impose media on society, especially on women. This media literacy information is also useful in determining the media channels to be used in disseminating programs appropriate for target audiences.

5 Issues and Challenges
There are several issues and challenges in the running of the program. For the purpose of structure, the issues and challenges will be discussed based on two categories, which are the participants and technology.

5.1 Participants
The first challenge faced by the researchers and trainers in dealing with the participants is the issue of computer literacy. Since the participants are from rural areas and of low ICT literacy level, they have problems handling both the hardware as well as the software. Indeed, registration was held up due to their problems in using gadgets like the mouse and keyboards. On top of that, they were also struggling to understand basic ICT terminologies such as “to scroll”, “to cut and paste” and to understand icons. Their frustration at their own inability to comprehend basic instructions is palpable. For that reason, some of them struggled to compose the scripts for their products and services. The participants’ frustration hamstrung their development, and this had to be dealt with at the individual level. The trainers and researchers sat down with the participants to give them step-by-step guidance in terms of using the hardware as well as the software.

The second challenge is also related to the participants’ level of literacy or their educational level in general. It has to be said that the majority of the participants is of low educational background; hence, is not able to construct grammatically accurate language to advertise their products or services. To counter this problem, a talk on how to write an effective online advertisement was given to expose them to the different styles of languages that are appropriate, attractive and interesting. The lecture consists of the introduction to the various ways of advertising as well as the ethical aspects of advertising in the context of Malaysia. Some words in the forms of adjectives and adjectival phrases are also provided as stimuli.

The third challenge is due to the overall impression of the interface or the layout of the platform itself. Some participants especially those who are not familiar with computer screen found that the categories provided are limited and that the many graphics are overwhelming. In addition to that, as they need to categorize, label, and do the pricing for each product separately and not in range, they find the process very tedious as well as repetitious. The challenge for the researchers and trainers is to make
sure that the participants understand which categories their products or services belong to. They also need to be calmed down by being informed that the whole process requires patience as this is a natural process of learning.

The fourth challenge with regards to the participants is the fact that some of them have no registered business or no business at all. The call for participation was made through representatives of local community as well as words of mouth. As the aim of the project is to include as many woman entrepreneurs as possible, the program does not deny those who have not registered their businesses, or those who have not started one. The idea is that the program also hopes to inspire more women into business, especially those who would like to work from home. For the participants of this category, a special clinic is carried out to help them brainstorm on business ideas and opportunities. Even though business registration is not included in the training, advices on how to register their business are also given.

The fifth challenge involves the participants’ lack of idea in marketing, labeling and packaging their products or services. Since most of women entrepreneurs in rural areas are Small, Micro and Medium Entrepreneurs, they have little concern in terms of labeling, packaging and pricing. However, because this is an online business, which means they have gone global, they have to start thinking about making their products and services more appealing to people. To overcome this challenge, the participants are made aware of the fact that their participation in online business means that their businesses have gone beyond their communities or geographical proximity. For that reason, they need to start thinking about the presentation of their products and services, and should be willing to allocate some money for that. To overcome this issue, the participants are taught and given ideas on how to package, label and price their goods and services creatively. Importantly, when they are taught photographic technique, they are made to think about how their products are seen by others.

The last challenge is the participants’ reluctance and ignorance in the online assistance provided. Due to this, the online assistance is not fully utilized. As a result, the participants are not able to move forward or expand their businesses as expected. Some participants are eager to get the trainers’ contact details for further assistance, yet they do not make any contact afterwards. To overcome this challenge, the trainers keep reminding the participants of each cycle to keep contacting them and to utilize the online assistance available when they need help. Moreover, the platform is continuously updated, and to make sure that their products and services are constantly highlighted in the first page, they need to be actively doing their business there.

5.2 Technology
The second category of challenges to the researchers and trainers is technology. We separated the technology into two categories: website and hardware.

5.2.1 Website
The platform or the interface itself even though user friendly and can be accessed in two languages Malay an English, still pose many challenges for the users. In our opinion, this is a striking teething problem in any project like this. Researchers and trainers alike noticed that especially at the initial stage of this project, the website cannot be accessed from certain location due to congestion if the internet access is wireless. When the training is conducted in a various institutions there is a need to ensure that uploading and downloading of online materials from secured sites only. This slows down the process of uploading the information on the website. However if the participants use the telecenter or the community broadband centers, this problem is not an issue anymore.

Misplaced or forgotten password and user names also slowed down the whole training session. As a result, the participants have to re-register and re-upload the information. In the latter, as most participants are from rural areas, they are not very computer literate and needed a lot of attention and assistance.

5.2.2 Hardware
Hardware here is defined as the physical infrastructure and technology which includes connectivity, coverage and accessibility. In some locations, there are frequent disconnections of the Internet. This could be due to the high internet usage during peak hours whereby all participants are trying to be connected to the Internet at one time. Since there is an average of 100 participants at each location, the capacity of the system may be overloaded when there are too many concurrent connections.

Besides frequent disconnections, slow Internet connections or even worse, low internet accessibility at certain locations are also experienced during the training. The reason for this could be due to network issues or problems with connection speed in certain areas. As a result, some participants are not able to get as much assistance as possible since the researchers and trainers have to be more selective in what to tutor the participants because of the time constraint.

6 Suggestion and Improvement
Based on the challenges and issues faced during the implementation of this project, we have come up with a few suggestions on how to improve the program. First
of all, since language is crucial for the participants, language proficiency courses to improve and enhance their usage of the language should be introduced. The training for language proficiency is important so that women entrepreneurs will be able to make sure that their products and services are marketable and competitive at the global level. In addition to that, further training on basic computer literacy for those who really need it should be organized prior to the training. Further training on website development and updating of information should be given on regular basis. In some cases, motivational workshops and business reviews and strategies to be successful online entrepreneurs should be integrated in the project. For example, in the case of the senior citizens and indigenous community participants, they should be persuaded via several layers of ICT awareness programmes to assist them to be better equipped with the knowledge and empowered by ICT.

7 Conclusion
In conclusion, 1Nita project has successfully instilled and subsequently increased the confidence level of women entrepreneurs in Malaysia especially those at the rural areas. In terms of economic impact, relatively about 30 % of the participants have expressed increased in sales up to 40 %. The challenges faced in the implementation of this project, especially at the outset, are common problems deal with the application of new technology. While computer and language competency are some of the major challenges, issues related to technology, literacy, stability as well as hardware availability and Internet access points also play a major role. However, the most glaring spillover effect of the access to the Internet has also shown that the participants’ language proficiency, i.e. the usage of standard Malay language and and the formal usage of the English language have also improved over time. The online presence of the participants increased and this new-found skill empowers them, which consequently increases the value of them being online economically and socially.

References:


