

Project Background

The Ambassadeur project is a pilot project initiated by the Saguenay-Lac St-Jean regional office of Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC)(1). The problems of employment, the circulation of information, and communities assuming responsibility for their economic development as well as training are the main focus of this endeavour.

Socioeconomic Setting

Saguenay-Lac-St-Jean is a region with one of the highest unemployment rates in Quebec (Saguenay-Lac St-Jean HRDC, 1999a). Moreover, the Jonquière-Chicoutimi twin-cities area is often the urban centre with the highest unemployment rate in the country. The region is somewhat dependent on natural resources such as forestry and agriculture. Manufacturing accounts for 21% of jobs and is primarily engaged in processing wood and aluminum — industries subject to the vagaries of world markets (Saguenay-Lac St-Jean HRDC, 1999a). There are numerous seasonal jobs and skilled positions that remain unfilled. There is also a school dropout problem: "Around here unemployment is a family tradition," as some might say. Similarly, there is a decline in the employment opportunities for newcomers, especially unskilled youth, in the labour market. This leads to an exodus of youth and the best trained workers.

Yet Saguenay-Lac St-Jean has interesting information about the labour market in the region, its needs and training. In this regard, considerable research and studies have been done jointly by HRDC and local organizations (e.g., the agreement with the region's industrial commissioners for the knowledge and updating of employers in the territory; agreement with the Chicoutimi, Jonquière et La Baie Chambers of Commerce, school boards and post-secondary institutions in the Saguenay, and local employment centres (CLEs), on workforce erosion in the Saguenay). The problem does not appear to be related to the availability of information because there is a great deal of information about the labour market and it is published on the Internet. Yet it is failing to reach the target clientele, especially young people choosing a career and job-seekers.

At the same time, the federal government is putting increasing emphasis on the Internet both as a means of providing information about its products and services, and as a means of communicating with citizens. The Ambassadeur project derives its foundation from the standpoint of strategic orientation and particularly federal initiatives in the realm of information technology.

Strategic Context

The Canadian government has rooted its strategies for delivering public services in the development of information and communication technologies. Many initiatives are underway under the umbrella of the Connecting Canadians program, by which the federal government aims "to make Canada the most connected country in the world"(2).

To attain this objective, Industry Canada(3), was put in charge of administering the Community Access Program (CAP)(4), through the creation of Community Access Centres (CAC) in rural areas to provide Internet access at affordable prices in various public places such as schools, libraries and community centres. Launched in 1994, the CAP was initially intended for communities with a population of less than 50,000, but since December 1999 the program also applies to larger urban municipalities. Run by volunteers, the CACs are headed by a management committee made up of community representatives and including a member representing the Community Futures Development Corporation (CFDC). The CFDCs are community organizations in rural areas subsidized by Canada Economic Development (CED)(5) to stimulate the local economy.

At the same time, the Government On-Line initiative(6) is a plan to give all Canadians Internet access to government programs, services and information so that they can deal with the government electronically. Similarly, Service Canada(7) offers three forms of access for obtaining information: the Canadian government's website, toll-free access for all citizens with a 1-800-O Canada line, and "In Person" access through accredited centres with an Internet connection. These programs are part of a strategy to improve service delivery for all citizens. "By 2004, our goal is to be known around the world as the government most connected to its citizens, with Canadians able to access all government information and services on-line at the time and place of their choosing" (Speech from the Throne, 1999).

All these initiatives are orienting the actions of the federal government, various departments and players towards service delivery based more on a relational approach, one of personal service that meets the citizen's specific needs, while gradually abandoning the purely transactional service (forms to fill out) available directly through the Internet. For Saguenay-Lac St-Jean HRDC, this change must be accompanied by an effort to create awareness

of the new technologies and teach people to use them. Since HRDC wants citizens to be able to find information on their own, to improve decisionmaking and interact with the government, it was necessary to reach them where they live. The CACs therefore seemed the perfect place for mobilization in rural areas. But, as one person put it, "Just having a computer doesn't make you a winner." The information is there on the Internet, the computers are available, yet no specific program, mobilization or training accompanied Industry Canada's creation of these centres in rural communities.

In fact, as result of a study of the situation at the approximately 40 CACs scattered throughout the region, HRDC found that these issues are left to volunteer initiative and the drive of each community.

Thus the idea of the Ambassadeur project began to take shape: use the CACs to introduce people to the Internet, teach them to find as much information as possible on their own, and promote government programs and services.

When HRDC approached Industry Canada and Canada Economic Development (CED) about its intention regarding use of the equipment installed in CACs, it was referred to the Community Futures Development Corporations (CFDC), the organizations responsible for the CACs. To carry out this type of project within the CACs, a partnership with the CFDCs was essential. In addition to being members of the federal family under the CED umbrella, the CFDCs have expertise in the field. The project appeared to be an excellent opportunity to connect federal players in the region through a common goal.

The proposal was submitted to the CFDCs in autumn 1999 and sparked their interest. Although the CFDCs had been an HRDC responsibility for over five years, the initial meetings were spent on winning them over according to participants. Based on the general idea, the project was mapped out jointly with the CFDCs with two main dimensions emerging: an employer phase and a citizen phase. This report takes a closer look at the latter.

(1) Saguenay-Lac St-Jean HRDC, http://www.qc.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/imt/html/saguenay_e.html

(2) Connecting Canadians, <http://connect.gc.ca/en/100-e.shtml>

(3) Industry Canada, <http://www.ic.gc.ca>

(4) Community Access Program (CAP), <http://cap.ic.gc.ca/> and <http://www.connect.gc.ca/en240-e.shtml>

(5) Canada Economic Development, <http://www.dec-ced.gc.ca>

(6) Government On-Line, http://www.gol-ged.gc.ca/index_e.asp

(7) Service Canada, <http://www.servicecanada.gc.ca/>