

By Khawar Iqbal & Damian Radcliffe

Bridging the digital divide in Qatar

At the heart of Qatar's National Vision 2030 is a roadmap to creating a knowledge-based economy. This cannot happen without digital inclusion, as ICTs will play a crucial role in this new economy. To help achieve this, the country's National ICT Plan set the target of a 90% adoption rate of ICTs by 2015.

This would be a challenging target for any country, not least one as demographically diverse as Qatar, but this is not a country short on ambition. We recognize the transformative power ICTs can play, and the need to ensure people have the ICT skills and knowledge required to support their personal and professional needs.

The Supreme Council of Information and Communication Technology (ictQATAR) and its Digital Inclusion Department define digital inclusion as:

The process of reaching out to all segments of the population of Qatar, who are currently unaware of the benefits and potential of technology or are not using it effectively, and ensure they have access to, and skills to use, technology and are therefore able to participate in and benefit from Qatar's growing knowledge and information society.

The work of the Digital Inclusion Department is on-going, with projects supporting Qatari women, expatriate labourers, people with

disabilities, and those living in remote areas, with plans to address intergenerational learning through developing Qatari youth as ICT champions.

In this article we share some of the ictQATAR Digital Inclusion Department's experiences in working towards these goals, including how we have adopted international best practices and adapted them to the needs of the country.

Typical approach

Historically, efforts to address the digital divide have focused on ICT access and the provision of basic computing skills. This provides what has commonly been referred to as 'first order' digital skills and is primarily aimed at people who are not online. In Qatar this means groups such as housebound non-working Qatari women, older people and those living in rural communities, as well as groups where there is no access to technology and the motivation to use it unclear.

The diversity of the country's demographics also means that for other target groups such as low skilled workers - part of a large transient labour force often working in construction or the oil and gas industries - additional barriers such as working hours, language and literacy levels, must also be

considered. Providing access, explaining the benefits of ICTs and offering culturally relevant support, are essential as these audiences embark on the start of their digital journey.

Developing digital skills requires more than just access and basic ICT skills. 'Second order' digital skills are needed to help online users develop a richer understanding of how ICTs can benefit them. We recognize that the ICT needs of female entrepreneurs, people with special needs or those who did not continue to higher education, are often different.

The final tier - or 'third order' - of skills involves the ability to become critical users of the Internet and creators of digital content. This means having the ability to question, analyze and evaluate online information, as well as understand an individual's responsibility and then creating, contributing to - or distributing - content. This is just as important in the Middle East as it is anywhere else.

Our approach

In developing a strategy for digital inclusion in Qatar we have sought to build on this proven approach whilst also developing four further general principles to guide our work. This has included:

1. Collaborating with and building capacity in local organizations that work with digitally excluded target groups
2. Taking account of local cultural issues
3. Contextualizing awareness, content and training
4. Reflecting the literacy levels and language needs of each target group.

These principles are important for a number of reasons.

Firstly, Qatar does not have a large voluntary sector, and there are few specialist organizations serving the needs of particular parts of society.

Secondly, issues such as gender segregation, as well as religious and cultural norms and values, need to be understood and reflected. This is especially important in terms of highlighting relevant and appropriate content that meets the needs of local audience.

We cannot explain the benefits of ICT if it is described in terms not relevant to their lives.

Digital inclusion for women

Qatar has many well-educated and very successful women. But at the same time, there are some Qatari women who, for culturally sensitive reasons, have not yet been able to take advantage of the opportunities available to them.

In working with this group we need to reflect a number of key considerations. This includes ensuring that access and training is provided in circumstances which are acceptable to the wider family. We have also needed to recognize that this broad target group contains many subsections, including:

- Non-working Qatari women: most likely housebound, potentially without access to technology, the knowledge of how to use it, or the motivation to learn. Some may, for cultural reasons, also have limited access to educational establishments.
- Parents with low ICT skills: want to develop skills to support their children who can be accessed through their children's schools.
- Single Qatari women (divorced, widows and separated women): sometimes segregated from the rest of the family, leading a reclusive lifestyle with restricted activities. They may be hard to reach.
- Women seeking to be entrepreneurs: accessible through women's networks, interested in marketing their businesses online. These women are generally well-educated, with strong networks. They are role models in their community.



To reach these groups ictQATAR's Digital Inclusion Department launched a number of programmes to initiate support for women. These have used Qatari female trainers and mentors, who provide tailored training in Arabic, offering content sensitive to the cultural and religious values of the trainees. Fashion and cooking are the topics these groups of women are most keen to explore. To overcome access issues, training often takes place in locations acceptable and familiar to the family, such as girls' schools.

Dr Haya Al-Meadhadi, General Manager of one of our partners on the project, the Al Fursan Center, noted the impact of these efforts by telling us, "We reduced the gap between the grandmothers and granddaughters... They now have a different relationship with technology and will hopefully be contemplating new activities and a new life, completely different to what preceded the projects."

One person for whom this is already a reality is Mariam Ahmad. Although she has eight grandchildren, her education stopped after her first preparatory class, "I'm no longer asking my grandchildren how to log on to the Web. But what excites me the most is that I can now use *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and search for topics, such as women's interests, cooking, and healthcare... I have collected on a flash drive new ideas for a restaurant project I would like to invest in."

Digital inclusion for labourers

ictQATAR has embarked on two pilot programmes aimed at providing ICT facilities in migrant workers' places of residence. A major outcome of these pilots is a blueprint providing detailed recommendations and guidance for employers and owners of their accommodation, as well as digital literacy materials made available in a range of languages - English, Arabic, Hindi, Tamil and Malayalam.

For employers a key driver has been the recognition that ICTs can improve the quality of life of their staff, and thus their productivity. With this in mind, content has been designed to help individuals in a social context, but which also meets their employer's needs. Examples include an 'Introduction to Qatar' and 'Safety in the Workplace' which were produced in Hindi and Sinhalese; the two most common languages spoken amongst Qatar's migrant construction workers.

Digital inclusion for people with impaired vision

ictQATAR's Digital Inclusion Department embarked on a partnership programme with QSCCB (Qatar Social and Cultural Centre for the Blind) and Mada (Qatar Assistive Technology Centre) to support individuals with special physical, mental and learning needs, in line with the country's e-accessibility policy.

The benefit of this was summed up by David Banes, Mada's CEO, "Working with the Qatar Social Cultural Centre for the Blind allows us to directly impact the lives of the visually impaired in Qatar in a way that increases their opportunities in education and employment."

The Digital Inclusion Department provided computer equipment and assistive technology to equip two labs at QSCCB, whilst Mada offered

expert advice and guidance which included needs assessments, technology recommendations, installation, training and support. In addition to installing large monitors, Arabic screen readers, Braille printers and screen magnifiers, training was given to staff and users of QSCCB.

Connected communities project

Just 30 kms from Qatar's capital, Doha, lies Simaisma, a small, rural community, of 3,000 residents, most of them Qatari.

It is also the home of a pilot project designed to support an entire community on their digital journey by promoting access to government services, introducing alternative entertainment/lifestyle options, enhancing education and generating additional employment opportunities.

To do this the project is bringing together businesses, government service centres, schools and a local youth centre, with the latter being designed as a community hub equipped with state-of-the-art technology. Residents will be able to learn to use technology, use online services and gain access to virtual branches of major services providers, for example utilities and telecoms, through teleconferencing. To improve connectivity free Wi-Fi is also provided in the Simaisma public park, on the beach, and in public buildings.

To support the community on their digital journey, ictQATAR's Digital Inclusion Department has also sought to involve selected community members as change agents. Their role is to address and help break down barriers, i.e. fear of technology, lack of awareness and confidence, as well as cultural barriers that prevent disadvantaged target groups from entering the digital age. These champions raise awareness of ICTs and digital inclusion opportunities within the

community by going into people's homes and community venues such as mosques and majlises,¹ gaining access - and harnessing trust - which would be very difficult for people outside such a tightknit community to replicate.

Final thoughts

The experience gained from these pathfinder projects - and the other initiatives we have begun in Qatar in recent years - offer best practice and a blueprint for similar initiatives in other communities and other countries in the region.

Like many of the communities we are working with, our work is at the start of a digital journey. As new technologies come on stream so our work will evolve. The result of this is that we will continue to remain vigilant and innovative in the work we do supporting communities to benefit from ICTs. It has been, and will continue to be, a fascinating journey.

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¹ Places where men can socialise

