



From a distance, the people queuing outside one of the few brick buildings in Orange Farm could well be mistaken for pensioners or voters waiting their turn. They are, however, residents queuing at the Orange Farm ICT Hub, the only place around for kilometres from where they can make photocopies, type their CVs or learn how to use a PC. **By Clairwyn van der Merwe**

On top of an unemployment rate hovering above 60 percent, Orange Farm is an unusually isolated community. Not only is it off-the-beaten track geographically but its telecommunications connectivity is also sparse, making Internet access almost non-existent. Formal businesses are rare, forcing community members to travel outside for everything from stationery to job and training opportunities.

"The big problem in Orange Farm is that all the revenue goes out because people have to go into town for almost everything," says Douglas Cohen, project consultant of the ICT sector support programme in the Economic Development Unit of the City of Johannesburg.

Small wonder, then, that the Orange Farm ICT Hub is attracting such queues. Now in operation for almost a year, the Hub is fully equipped with computers, printers, telephones, fax machines and photocopiers, all for use by the local community at a minimal cost.

Established by the City of Joburg, the CSIR Information Technology Centre and Computer Sciences Corporation, the Hub also offers computer skills training to community members, as well as business consultancy and desktop publishing services.

RESOURCES PLOUGHED BACK

Eight volunteers offer these services, in exchange for the training they've received. All eight have had computer training, and while half have been trained in business advisory skills, the other half learned DTP skills. The fees they charge are low – about R200 for basic computer training – and the volunteers take only a small percentage for themselves, whilst ploughing the rest back into running the Hub.

"We originally had 12 volunteers but four have since found full-time jobs, which is fine," says Cohen. "We're happy for people to use the skills they gain here to find employment or run their own businesses. Either way, they're helping to stimulate the Orange Farm economy."

Limited by having only eight PCs, demand for computer training outstrips supply. So far, 26 people have been trained on various PC courses and the waiting list is growing.

"Training in basic computer skills is probably where the need is greatest," says Jorg Schwartze, chairman of the CSI team committee of Computer Sciences Corporation (CSC) in South Africa, which has contributed R100 000 to equip the Hub, along with training and technical advice.

He says the Hub, which is busy moving into purpose-built offices, faces two main challenges in deepening its impact on the Orange Farm economy. "One is cost. The eight volunteers have to be very creative in providing services to a market that is so cost-driven." He says CSC is looking at various ways to help them keep costs down, such as by assisting trainers to print training material. At the moment, a simple printer cartridge cannot be bought anywhere in Orange Farm and few suppliers are willing to deliver to them.

"The major challenge, though, is connectivity," says Schwartze. "If Orange Farm had better connectivity, mainstream businesses would be able to use the DTP services in Orange Farm and local businesses would really take off."

In fact, developing the Hub's connectivity is the next step in its evolution, as it is soon to be used as a test bed for wireless voice over technology.

"Not only does the Web bring access to information, jobs and tenders for local business but will also include a VOIP telecentre," says Cohen. "This means cheaper calls for the community and even free calls to linked satellites of the Hub within Orange Farm, such as clinics, businesses and schools." ■

