Developing Digital Literacy Among Women Entrepreneurs
JAMALUDDIN BIN AZIZ & NORIZAN ABDUL RAZAK
E-Community Research Center, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
43600 Bangi, Selangor
MALAYSIA
Jaywalker2uk@gmail.com; norjef@ukm.my; http://www.ukm.my

Abstract: - 1NITA Project is a Malaysian national project that aims at transforming women entrepreneurs business mode from material business to online venture. In line with the government’s effort of promoting racial unity via the concept of 1Malaysia; the aim is to train Malaysian women, regardless of their age, racial background and economic standing. The impetus for this project is a second economic stimulus package grant under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation .my DOMAIN Registry is the project implementer. E-Community Research Center research team is invited to do the training as well as conducting impact study on the success of the project. This paper presents the initial report on the impact study, focusing on the impact of the project on the entrepreneurs especially on their ICT literacy level. Two sets of questionnaire were distributed to the participants. Phone interviews were also carried out three months after the training to allow the participants to progress. The data is then analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.

Key-Words: - Women entrepreneurs; 1NITA, Digital Literacy; economic impact study, E-entrepreneurs

1 Introduction

1nita Project is a national project that aims at transforming women entrepreneurship from material business to online venture. Previously known as Platform W-X, the platform’s name is changed into 1Nita, in line with the government’s effort of promoting unity via the concept of 1Malaysia. The aim is to train Malaysian women especially marginalized groups such as single mother and urban poor regardless of their age, racial background and economic standing. The impetus for this project is second stimulus package grant given by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, and the idea is carried out by its subsidiary .my DOMAIN REGISTRY. In making sure the success of this project, E-Community Research Center, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, is invited to do the training as well as the economic impact study for the project.

The training for the women entrepreneurs was roll out the whole of Malaysia since 2009 till Dec 2010. This paper presents the initial report on the impact study, focusing on the effect of the e-entrepreneur training on the ICT literacy level of Sabahan women entrepreneurs. University Malaysia Sabah was chosen as the venue for the training and 50 participants took part. Two sets of questionnaire were distributed during the training. Phone interviews were carried out three months after the training to allow the participants to progress.

We would like to express our gratitude and state our acknowledgement to .myDOMAIN REGISTRY and Ministry of Science Technology and Innovation for giving us the consultancy and research grant to conduct the training and complete the research. This research was made possible under the consultancy research code Women e-Entrepreneurship (IT 090946) fully funded by .myDOMAIN REGISTRY.
2 Literature Review

The invention of computer and subsequently, the Internet marks a new era of human civilization. So important are these inventions that they are seen as metaphors for new enlightenment. As an illustration, Robertson (1988) in his book *The New Renaissance: Computers and the Next Level of Civilization* argues that “The Invention of the computer is one of the pivotal events in the history of civilization”. Speculations about the new era produce an inchoate idea about these new technologies. Consequently, computer technology creates certain myth, which according to Mosco (2005) makes us “experience an epochal transformation in human experience that would transcend time (the end of history), space (the end of geography), and power (the end of politics)”. Hence, it is crucial to know the importance of ICT literacy to be able to compete at the global level. This project is built upon the thrust that a knowledgeable society needs to be competitive, and analogously relevant with contemporary demands.

One crucial debate concerning training using the computer technology is the change in one’s identity. It is true that once one is connected to the Internet, one will expose one’s identity to the world. This change of identity is actually desirable in this context as the re-visioning of one’s identity will allow one to exist harmoniously with the cyberworld. Women are then forced to re-think about how they think of themselves, or how they want the world to think about them. Indeed, their behavior in the Internet affects they way women behave in real life. A study done by Amy L. Gonzales and Jeffrey T. Hancock finds that “individuals internalize online representation in mediated environments and that mediated identity shifts can result in influences on ‘real-world’ behaviors” (179).

Essentially, this project promotes the notion of bridging digital divide between urban and rural areas. Several studies have emphasized the importance of bridging digital divide in making sure that the marginalized communities, such as single mother and rural poor, are not left behind. A study by H. Acka et al supports that the advantage of the Internet is that it helps rural agriculture to market their produce. Indeed, the study concurs that “to remain competitive in global information economy, rural-based businesses and individuals must acquire emerging technology such as broadband concurrently with their urban competitors” (2007:411). The main challenge is there is no proper guide in how to achieve this. What is clear is that all the challenges are part of the learning process. Blattman et al, in analyzing the ICT status in developing country like India, evaluates that “there is no “one size fits all” design for rural ICT networks; communities vary greatly in their social, economic and political organization, and therefore, information needs and the design of the most appropriate and relevant networking system may vary from place to place and over time within a given area” (2003: 349)

In this case, this project reflects the necessity of promoting ICT literacy level among women. What is unique about this project is that the literacy level is increased by training the women to be female entrepreneur. This essentially means that they are trained to use ICT with a more meaningful purpose. The level of ICT literacy increases automatically when they participants see the relevance of the skill to their work and lives.

3 Background of the participants

The participants of these workshops are women of different ages. They are women who have been involved in business, working in another person’s business or are interested in doing business in the future. For that reasons, some of them have Registration of Business, and some have not registered. But that is not the big issue as the training also provided assistance for them to register their business once they have decided to do so.

The majority of the participants in Sabah are young women in the age group of 25 to 29 years old, which makes up 29.5% of the participants. This is the age group that is most dynamic in the sense that they are at the stage in life to improve their standard of living. Interestingly, the age groups of 21-24, 30-34, 45-49 and 50-54 each similarly contributes 11.8%, making the total of 47.8%. The other age group make up the rest of the percentage.

There are two important assumptions that can be drawn from this data. One, this is an important indication of the participants’ relatively higher computer literacy level as they are considered the products of the Malaysian new economic plan. Two, it also suggests that the women in these age groups are more enthusiastic to be involved in this kind of project. Their motivation, in effect, is remarkably high.
3.1 Pre-workshop Literacy Level

Computer literacy means the ability to use the computer, and this involves basic knowledge such as to switch on and off the computer, to identify computer parts, and to use keyboard. Majority of the participants above 93% self reported that they have the knowledge and ability to do so. But there are about 6.5% who were first timer and first time touching the computer. However they are already involved in business and very motivated to now venture into online mode. When further investigated 87% self reported they are comfortable with the computer parts and knew their functions such as keyboard, cpu, printers and basic computer peripherals. However, their knowledge about the internet and search engine was still low and they need help in navigating the internet.

The pre training ICT literacy recorded the participants need to be taught and given exposure to the benefits of ICT for their business development. They also must be tutored one to one to ensure higher success rate for them to use the internet and upload their company and product information within the training period.

4 Impact study

After three months the participants were contacted and data for the impact study collated. The important information gathered was 37 of the 50 participants still using computer and still updating and downloading information via the internet. Few dropped out and the training had helped the participants to understand better the mode of dealing and conducting business online and the platform 1NITA at www.1nita.my helped them to advertise their products and linked them to their individual websites. For the purpose of this paper, only three themes are presented as they can reflect the participants’ increasing ICT competency and the digital culture of doing business which started to show positive impact on their income level, online presence and network.

4.1 Developing Online Business Model

About 47% of participants recorded that their level of knowledge in developing and reviewing online business as now at Good and Excellent level. In addition to that, over 29% said that their level of knowledge is Moderate. This is positive indicator that they learned the principals of e-commerce well and the modules offered to them are effective for them to understand and start online business on their own after the program ended. Only about 6% reported that their knowledge is Limited.

4.2 Taking Digital Photos

The majority of the participants 47%, stated that their knowledge of taking digital photo is now considered Good. Earlier before the program they did mention that they are comfortable with digital photography but not for taking pictures of their products and to sell their products online. In addition, over 11% confidently believed that their photo taking knowledge is at Excellent level and they could also edit using adobe photoshop to further edit and enhance their pictures. The overall percentage from Moderate to Excellent is over 76%, which is very encouraging.

4.3 Using Search Engine To Search Business Information

This category provides an interesting insight into not only the knowledge level of the participants but also their willingness to learn further independently. Only 6% recorded that their ability to use search engine is Limited. Over 70% of the participants believed that their ability of using search engine to gather business information ranges from Moderate to Excellent. This ability is crucial as when the training progresses there are intentions to provide online training for other modules and advance courses for those who are interested.
5 Discussion
From the phone interview we also found that the top performers among the 50 participants are those who are involved in business in these categories
  a) Food industry, suppliers of can food, catering and bakeries
  b) Services such as sewing and beadings
  c) Beauty and bridal services

We also observed that those who have at least basic ICT literacy meaning able to use computer and able to surf internet and low technofear have better chances of continuing the use of computer after the training. Other factors that are identified are as listed below

1. ICT literacy prior to training
2. Access to computer and Internet
3. Readiness to market products and services online
4. Review of present business and adaptation to the demand and mode of online business
5. Attitude and involvement of participants in the use of computer
6. Level of technophobia and regularity of use
7. Promotion of 1NITA and popularity
8. Support group and technical assistance after program

6 Conclusion
In summary, it can be concluded that participants in this study are generally ICT literate and this fact actually an important factor to ensure the success of developing online entrepreneurs. Even though their ability was limited but with the training they were able to continue working online and seeked for assistance online as well. For those who are first timers and very limited literacy there is a need to offer longer training and more persuasion needed to convert them and to assist them in becoming successful online entrepreneurs. The digital culture among the women entrepreneurs is not a one week creation. It needs concerted effort from all parties to ensure that the program is successful, the training program completed and the after training impact is high. We observed many of the participants have managed to network among other participants and starting to become agents of each other products and used each other services. This is a healthy culture and very promising.

Few participants dropped out from the program but it was due to their lack of interest and attitude towards internet business. Some are still struggling to modulate regular business into an online venture. Some are not able to cater to higher demand of products once they advertised online as they are involved in very high skilled services such as sewing beads on dresses and bridal gowns. To majority of participants, they felt that the training was an eye opener and a great opportunity to secure more business and network with others. What is of great significance is the fact that the project has directly increased the participants ICT literacy level and this is proven by the high standard of presentation of their 1NITA products display and other web-blogs at www.1nita.my.

References:


