eLab News

The Broadband eLaboratory Newsletter - June 2004

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In this month's issue:

Thanks to everyone.....

Welcome to the final edition of eLab news - for the time being at least.

The aim of this issue is to provide a synopsis of the final project report, copies of which are available on request. The project has been an interesting experience for everyone involved, and many positives have emerged. The following pages cover the various stages of the project in more detail, but I'd like to highlight a few points that I believe are worthy of note.

The project has been delivered on time, within budget and has achieved its original objectives, and thanks are due to everyone who played a part in the project's success. In particular, I'd like to thank my fellow members of the Project Steering Group – Mike Damms and Mike Caulfield (East Lancashire Chamber of Commerce), Martin Kirk (eLancs.net), Peter Dickinson (Business Link East Lancashire) and Mark Sullivan (NWDA). They all played important roles at the different phases of the project, and their input was invaluable.

The project engaged with over 60 companies, the bulk of those being non-IT businesses, and the feedback we have had has been extremely positive. I believe we managed to achieve a good balance between increasing knowledge about broadband in general, and in assisting business people to make informed decisions about the use of broadband within their own companies, and all of us involved in the project found the sessions and workshops were very well received.

I believe that one of the main reasons for this is that the project was conceived by a business on behalf of other businesses. That meant the focus was always on looking for ways in which businesses could benefit from utilising broadband connections, rather than concentrating on the more technical aspects. The result has been that tangible business benefits have been identified and measured, and this will be crucial in the months ahead as we look to secure more funding to continue the project. Any Government assistance will be provided on the basis that the support will increase the profitability of businesses, and as we have evidence of this at each of the various project phases, this gives us a solid base for developing the project further.

Much has been learned by everyone involved in the project over the last twelve months, and it is my hope that, as well as using this knowledge for our own means, our work and expertise will act as an inspiration for other business people to adopt and use broadband to benefit their businesses.

Anthony Capstick
Managing Director
Instant Search Ltd.

Further information

Anyone requiring further information on the Broadband eLaboratory should visit the website. From the home page (pictured right) a series of links will take you to pages that explain the background to the project, and the origial aims and objectives, and a description of the facilities that have been made available to companies in East Lancashire.

Since eLab News began back in November 2003, we've been reporting on all the latest stories as the project progressed, and you can access back copies of each newsletter from the News section of the site. The web site address is displayed at the top of this page.

Phase 1 - the demonstrations

The demonstration phase of the Broadband eLaboratory project was designed to show small businesses how another business – Instant Search at Whalley – had utilised broadband to improve their business processes and overall efficiency. The project began in earnest when video conferencing equipment, PC's and monitors were installed at the Instant Search offices in June 2003, and the second site, at the East Lancashire Chamber of Commerce offices in Accrington, opened at the end of August 2003.

With the two sites established, demonstrations began, and delegates from over 50 companies attended sessions, which were hosted at the Whalley site. The sessions were delivered in two distinct parts. The opening part of the session was aimed at establishing the level of understanding of the delegates in each session, and answering any questions they had about broadband. Then, the delegates had an opportunity to see equipment that utilised broadband connections in action, including wireless networking, Internet Protocol (IP) telephones, and one of the most popular elements of the sessions, video conferencing.

In December 2003, e-Commerce Minister Stephen Timms MP spent two hours at the Whalley site, a visit that generated some excellent publicity for the project and was covered by the Financial Times and the local press. Demonstrations continued after the turn of the year, and in February 2004, some detailed telephone market research was carried out to assess the effectiveness of the sessions. The feedback received was extremely encouraging, with an 86% response rate from individuals who were invited to take part in the survey – a very high percentage for an exercise of this nature. Among the points highlighted by the research were:

- Delegates felt the demonstration was pitched correctly and as a result their knowledge was enhanced.

- Four out of five visitors to the e-Laboratory had not experienced the benefits that broadband could offer their business.

- Although many of the delegates did not see videoconferencing as a facility they could utilise themselves, this part of the session generated the highest level of interest. Many individuals had no experience of using it, and the session at the eLaboratory gave them their first opportunity to see it demonstrated.

The two e-Laboratory demonstration sites - the East Lancashire Chamber of Commerce offices in Accrington (above) and the Instant Search offices in Whalley

- After attending the sessions, two in five people had installed broadband in their businesses, with a further one in five planning to do so. Only one in five people said they would not pursue broadband, either through lack of availability or perceived business benefit.

- Of those who had installed broadband, three in five people stated that productivity has increased by at least 15% as a result of their broadband installation.

The overall conclusion to draw from this phase of the project is that the demonstrations delivered benefits to all those who attended. The sessions gave people the chance to see broadband technology in action, and their improved understanding of the key issues enabled them to make informed decisions about the installation of broadband in their businesses. Best of all, a number of survey respondents who took the step of installing broadband stated that tangible and measurable benefits have been delivered to their businesses as a result - a very satisfying outcome from what initially began for many as an information gathering exercise.

Phase 2 – developing a broadband solution

Phase 2 of the project was aimed at assisting companies, who had already made the decision to adopt broadband, to develop their ideas and business processes in a controlled environment away from normal day to day business operations. A pilot project was defined after it was identified that 10 small businesses based in Bee Mill, Ribchester all had requirements for broadband connectivity, but lacked the individual means to specify and implement a solution for themselves. The complex was adopted as a test site for phase 2 of the eLaboratory project, and work began on designing a small LAN that connected the two halves of the business complex together, providing private and secure VLANs with broadband connections for each of the individual businesses. This involved the following tasks:

- Internet/e-mail and firewall services were configured at the eLaboratory and introduced once the equipment was in place at Bee Mill.
- All internal PC networking and PC configuration was completed by eLaboratory support staff, as the individual businesses lacked the in-house skills to undertake this work themselves.
- A workshop was presented by eLaboratory staff at the Chamber of Commerce offices in Accrington, to assist the businesses in gaining immediate benefits from the new broadband connections. Topics covered included: how broadband and the internet works, how to maximise the potential of broadband, and general advice on anti-virus software, firewalls, general security and housekeeping issues.

The solution was implemented in the early part of 2004, and now each business is benefiting from their broadband connection, and the corresponding effect it has had on their respective businesses. The general response to the work carried out and the support provided by eLaboratory staff has been very positive.

Sylvia Hopwood is a director of The Recycle Works, a company that provides equipment to separate and recycle waste, and she says the connection has definitely had an impact on the overall efficiency of the company.

“We have been selling via our website for some time, but the lack of a broadband connection was definitely holding us back, and when I had just about given up hope, the eLaboratory came to our rescue”, she said. “I am full of praise for the staff involved, who have taken so much trouble to ensure our connection was secure. The speed at which we can now deal with suppliers and receive e-mail and orders, is now much quicker than before”.

Sylvia’s thoughts are echoed by another business representative in the complex, Trevor Belcher, General Manager of Tremaco Products. He said: ”The broadband connection has made a huge difference to our business, both in cost savings and speed of working practice. E-mail correspondence with our customers is much quicker than our previously used dial up connection, our customers are happier with the fast response we are able to give, and attachments to e-mails are much easier to send and receive”.

The Bee Mill solution is undoubtedly one of the major successes delivered by the Broadband eLaboratory project, and it can now be used as a model to undertake similar projects for other business sites where broadband connectivity is required,

Phase 3 – new broadband-based business processes

If Phase 1 was the beginning, and Phase 2 the middle, then Phase 3 was the end. This is where every small business should be concentrating time and effort – figuring out how to use broadband for new business processes that generate revenue.

In this phase of the project, the eLaboratory was able to provide assistance to four small companies in East Lancashire. In many ways, this element of the project was the small business research and development phase, as the businesses involved would have been unlikely candidates as broadband pioneers.

None the less, eLaboratory staff were able to provide valuable assistance to the individual businesses. In each instance the company had an idea of what they needed, but lacked the necessary expertise to develop a solution themselves. The eLaboratory staff undertook a requirements analysis at each company and produced a specification that, when implemented, will meet the specific business needs of each company. Each exercise was completed with full cooperation from the companies concerned, and gave eLaboratory staff the opportunity to demonstrate ways in which resources at the eLaboratory can be utilised to deliver the solution to the individual business.

One of the companies involved, Pimpersound, operates a music and recording studio and offers studio hire and CD mastering. At the moment musician have to “snail mail” their CD’s to Pimpersound’s offices in Rishton, and in turn the completed work is sent back via the same method. (continued over)

Phase 3 – continued from previous page

Pimpersound identified that they needed to be able to receive and send music files over the Internet, in order to compete with the main players in their marketplace. In conjunction with eLaboratory staff, a web-enabled Customer Login Management System was specified, which will enable a customer to login and make requests for track mastering, transfer music files using FTP, and track the progress of their work. This solution will mean that a small local firm can compete with bigger competitors in delivering the required levels of service to customers in their chosen market sector.

The intention is that the system will be developed and tested by eLaboratory staff, with the Macintosh within the eLaboratory being set up and configured to run the FTP server. This will enable the systems and procedures to be developed in a test environment, before full implementation. A fully tested system will then be implemented at the customer's premises, delivering immediate business benefit to a company that would have struggled to develop the solution without external assistance.

Executive summary and recommendations

The present Government is committed to encouraging businesses to adopt broadband, as there are demonstrable business benefits in doing so. The contribution made by the eLaboratory project towards this goal has been well received, and interest was such that Stephen Timms, the Minister for e-Commerce, visited the Whalley site in December. Meeting representatives from local companies during his visit, he was able to hear at first hand the benefits that had been delivered from the work carried out at the eLaboratory.

However, providing this type of support costs money, and any funded project must obviously be able to demonstrate tangible business benefits. Gross Value Added (GVA) is a measure being increasingly used by agencies in measuring effectiveness of support. It is the belief of all the partners in the eLaboratory project that each of the three phases of the project have demonstrated that the GVA within the businesses involved has been increased.

It should also be recognised that if small businesses are encouraged by Government to adopt technology, this same technology could cause them problems if adequate support is not available to assist them with complex technical issues. This is another area in which the project partners believe that the eLaboratory could provide value added services. In addition to developing new solutions, eLaboratory staff could work with the private sector to provide guidance and answers to questions raised by the very technology that is beginning to reveal both opportunities and threats to small businesses.

There are many challenges ahead in the area of broadband technology – and with the work that has been carried out so far, it is the belief of all the partners involved in the project that the Broadband eLaboratory is ideally placed to meet these head on, and continue delivering value added solutions to small businesses.

The future for the Broadband eLaboratory

This project was one of a number of broadband pilots in the North West, and has delivered everything that was set out in the original objectives, within budget and to a strict timescale. Regular newsletters and the website have been communicating progress at the various stages to all interested parties, and general feedback suggests that this is a project that can be developed further. Our immediate goal, therefore, is to secure further funding to enable the project to continue.

In particular, we want to develop the intellectual property to enable the concept to be franchised across the North West and the rest of the UK, working in conjunction with partners from both the public and the private sector. Public sector money has funded the project up to now, as part of a general Government strategy aimed at increasing the number of businesses adopting broadband. However, a project such as this can deliver major benefits to private sector businesses such as software, hardware and communications companies. Continued expansion in the use of broadband means these companies will have new opportunities for growth through offering products and services to broadband enabled businesses. We also believe opportunities exist for universities and colleges to get involved, either as a partner or providing support in specific areas.

We would be very interested to hear from any organisation who would like to get involved in developing the concept with us, and in turn benefiting directly or indirectly from the project's continued success. Anyone wishing to discuss future involvement should, in the first instance, contact Project Director Anthony Capstick at Instant Search on 01254 822288.

The Broadband eLaboratory project is managed by Instant Search and supported by the following organisations:

CHAMBER of COMMERCE East Lancashire | northwest development agency | dti Department of Trade and Industry | elancs.net Connecting Lancashire to the World through Broadband | eBusinessClubs PLANNING SUCCESS FOR YOUR BUSINESS THROUGH TECHNOLOGY | Business Link | UKonline for business