

Best Practices – Key to Closing the Digital Divide

Secretary General of the World Information Technology and Services Alliance (WITSA), Dr James Poisant, addresses the UN's role in bridging the Digital Divide



Dr James Poisant, Secretary General, WITSA

Q: You've just come back from the most recent meeting of the United Nations (UN) Global Alliance for Information Development (GAID). Why is WITSA involved?

A: GAID is the arm of the UN that spearheads the development of ICT around the globe, particularly in developing countries. Several months ago, I was invited to sit on the GAID Strategy Council which allowed me to 'mainstream' WITSA inside GAID. WITSA is involved in GAID because WITSA represents the ICT industry as its global voice. The Digital Divide can be closed only by a partnership between industry, governments and other related institutions and organisations, such as the World Bank.

Q: What's new in GAID?

A: Talking about closing the Digital Divide has been going on for decades. To my knowledge, the one organisation that has been given the role of globally addressing the Digital Divide is the GAID organisation. This is why WITSA wanted to get very involved with GAID as WITSA's role in the world is to facilitate the expanded use of ICT.

In reviewing the work of GAID resulting from their publications and past conferences I found that there was volumes of outstanding work and a number of wonderful and ambitious goals set for the organisation. However, I found that there was a lack of specific ICT related actions taking place in order for the goals to be accomplished.

As good fortune would have it, I was invited to give an address to the GAID council in Monterrey, Mexico in September. In my speech I called upon the council to create a plan of action of which I would lead with GAID that would be able to measure benchmark progress in bridging the Digital Divide by working with governments to expand the use of ICT in their respective countries.

Q: The Digital Divide can mean all things to all men. What does it mean to you?

A: The Digital Divide is just not limited to those who are enjoying the benefits of the Digital Age and those who are not. The Digital Divide really has everything to do with government e-readiness. If Governments are supportive and engaged in ensuring that their schools, hospitals, citizens and the like are connected and engaged in the Digital age, the Digital Divide will be bridged.

Without that first monumental leap into the digital age, the Digital Divide will remain part of a much more profound problem and guarantee that the divide will intensify.

Q: How do you solve that problem?

A: The problem is a governmental and societal divide resulting in a digital divide. We need to convince governments that they need to get on board to embrace digital technologies. I don't think that there is a single rational governmental official on earth who doesn't understand that we are in a globalised digital environment. Many countries are moving quite rapidly while others lag behind.

It is not enough for governments to simply want to employ digital technology. Officials need to partner with industry to make comprehensive, intelligent decisions; especially in the area of infrastructure and government policies. They also have to make intelligent decisions due to the cost involved in making poor decisions.

So, where GAID has the responsibility to offer assistance and resources to developing countries one of the places that I thought of immediately was for GAID to collect and centralise ICT best practices. For example, if governments are planning on building a new network they should know who else has successfully implemented one and the lessons they learned while they built theirs.

My initial thought going into GAID was that we needed to have a subset of people within this large group of Council members to work with me in establishing a comprehensive collection of best practice. However, during the process of the meeting the council members reminded me that it is not simply a matter of giving someone a best practice case example that worked for somebody else. You have to have best practices designed around particular conditions that exist for the government seeking a best practice.

Q: It is good in principle to customise best practices but how do you know what to recommend?

A: As a result of my meeting at GAID it was determined

- ▶ that the best approach to helping governments and bridging the Digital Divide is to figure out a way to leverage best practices from numerous similar governments to derive intelligent recommendations and solutions for governments.

We are now working on a special Global Government Decision Enhancement Portal tool that will allow governments to define their requirements, create a profile and then go through the best practices tool to determine what solutions fits them best. The tool will consist of not only the best ICT practices, but include information on best government policies and procedures, as well as proven project management practices and strategic planning.

We intend to test this tool out in six countries by having the countries apply real applications that they to have implemented and measure their results against the tool. Assuming that the tool proves to be effective, we will launch the tool globally as a UN GAID WITSA initiative.

If we create a best process tool, designed around governments' individual requirements GAID will have a valuable resource that should facilitate the development of ICT applications globally which will eventually lead to the closing of the Digital Divide.

Q: How will the countries be selected or indeed self-selected?

A: GAID of course has access to all of the governments within the UN so identifying the countries is not a concern. We already have five (5) countries willing to conduct a pilot test of the tool.

Q: What's the next step after the tool is released?

A: After release of the tool the next phase will be evaluation

and measurement. I envision that in another 12 months, once we refine the tool we will go into an evaluation phase. In other words, we will seek to assess if in fact the tool produced the type of results that we were seeking.

One of the things we haven't mentioned is the advent of new technologies. If you look at landlines, the US alone is losing 700,000 land lines a month because people are going to mobile and Voice over Internet. An article in the Economist recently estimated that by 2025, there will

be no landlines at all. Mobile communications are taking a lot of the underdeveloped countries by storm. Access to the Internet via mobile telephone is much more rapid than anticipated. Users can use their mobile phone to access information from around the globe. The cost of technology is coming down. The networks are getting larger and new technology is appearing every day.

The role of government is critical in engaging their citizens, communities and economies in the Digital Age.

