Swiss Re makes a difference

Business Development in South Africa
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We cannot imagine life without Personal Computers and Internet anymore. In Africa too, the number of people who have access to these technologies is growing. However, relatively few can afford to purchase new equipment. Numerous companies in Europe donate their used PCs for Projects in Africa. Are these PCs "closing the digital gap" in the recipient country or become they "electronic waste"? In 2008, Swiss Re donated 130 Note-books to ESM – this report shows the efforts required to ship them to South Africa and to make the exercise a success story.

Where will the Swiss Re PCs end up?

Besides Swiss Re, which donated the PCs, the following players are involved:

- Linuxola (www.linuxola.org) and revamp-IT (www.revamp-it.ch), two Swiss based NGOs actively promoting recycling of used PCs and ensuring the logistics in Switzerland,
- Hilltop Empowerment Center (www.hilltop-centre.org) our partner in South Africa.

While ESM receives the Swiss Re PCs for free, all steps in the process of shipping them to South Africa generate expenses and somebody has to cover them. There are "business models", where the initiator of the project finds a sponsor to cover the transport cost and the beneficiaries in Africa receive the donated PCs as a gift. The ESM model works differently. Hilltop Empowerment Center, which receives the donated PCs for free, is responsible to pay all import related

cost. In return they can sell approximatively 30% of the imported products to other local NGOs or emerging IT entrepreneurs. Often ESM makes it a condition which organisation or entrepreneur must be given priority. The organisations in Switzerland (Linuxola and revamp-IT) are compensated with a small number of donated PCs for their services. They can distribute these PCs to the organisations they want to support.

Years ago it made sense to ship used Desktop Computers and Monitors to Africa, but it is difficult to justify this today in view of the lower prices for new equipment and the high transport cost. Since 2008, ESM is only facilitating the shipment of notebook computers and, to give you an idea, the total cost related to transporting the 130 donated Swiss Re Notebooks to South Africa amounted to CHF 3'900 or CHF 30 per PC.

Step 1: take delivery from Swiss Re
All used PCs that Swiss Re donates to ESM or other organisations are functional and not older than four years – there is no software installed.

Günter Schier checks that only functioning PCs leave the warehouse.

Step 2: Configure Servers with Linux & Wikipedia
A small number of Notebooks are configured as Servers. Installing the required software is a time consuming process for which Andreas Rudin from revamp-IT takes responsibility. The operating system of choice is Linux and, in addition, Andreas installs a copy of the Wikipedia library – this is very much appreciated by the recipients in South Africa. In general, a server powers a network of 10 clients.

Andreas Rudin:checking the configuration of a Server.

Step 3: Packing and shipping

Once all components are ready, the Notebooks are separated for each recipient in South Africa. It is not possible to just make one big box and then ask the partner in South Africa to sort things out. Notebooks would be mixed up and some would go missing. Anton Wüst, a Swiss Re IT-Expert, has been very helpful in this phase and we did save 30% shipment cost thanks to his engagement. For his assistance, Anton received a few of the Swiss Re notebooks which he deploys in his project.

Anton Wuest, a Swiss Re employee, assists in packaging the Notebooks in his free time.

Finally everything is ready for the shipping company.

Corporate Social Responsibility really works when the employees of a company get involved. Anton is illustrating this very well. He has established a school in Zurich, where women with an immigrant background can learn how to use a PC. The school is also a library for training material and, with his technical know how, Anton supports other computer centers in Africa.

Step 4: Customs clearing in South Africa

It is not possible anymore to import used computers to South Africa without an appropriate license. Our partner is Rommel Roberts, founder of Hilltop Empowerment Center in King Williams Town. Rommel has spent most of his life in community development. He started to import used PCs in 2002 and over time built an organisation which runs over 50 computer centers in rural schools. Thousands of children and adults have access to basic computer training and he developed a model that has become selfsustaining - it provides a regular income to over 100 people. Rommel is working closely with the Department of Education and it is thanks to his achievements that he has been granted an import license for used computers.

From small beginnings, Rommel Roberts initiated the establishment of over 50 computer centers which combined give regular employment to over 100 trainers. Lydia is one of the trainers who qualified for the job after working at Hilltop.

The Hilltop Empowerment Center is located on a farm outside King Williams Town; there Rommel has the facilities to store, repair and distribute the imported computers.

The store room for components at Hilltop

In this workshop at Hilltop every PC is configured to meet the local requirements. Rommel's wife, Robin, is also supporting the efforts and spends a lot of time supervising the activities. Next to Robin is Ncedo; a young man who learned his IT-skills at Hilltop.

One of the Computer Centers initiated by Rommel

Step 5: Distribute or sell the PCs

As mentioned, Rommel uses some of the PCs for the needs in his own computer centers. Some are sold to pay for the cost associated with importing and localising the PCs. The remaining units are handed over to other individuals or organisations as agreed with ESM. One recipient, for example, is Mlondi Kosi, based in a small town called Idutywa, about 200 km away from King Williams Town. Five years ago, Mlondi also started to implement computer centers at schools similar to Rommels business model. However, Mlondi does not have the infrastructure, resources and experience that Rommel's can rely on. Initially Mlondi got support from Linuxola and SDC (Swiss Development Cooporation/DEZA) and he established four centers. Later, with the help of Swiss Re PCs, he increased the number of schools to 6 and started to develop his personal commercial IT-Training company.

Mlondi Kosi, an entrepreneur located in a rural area explains his business plan with the help of his Swiss Re notebook.
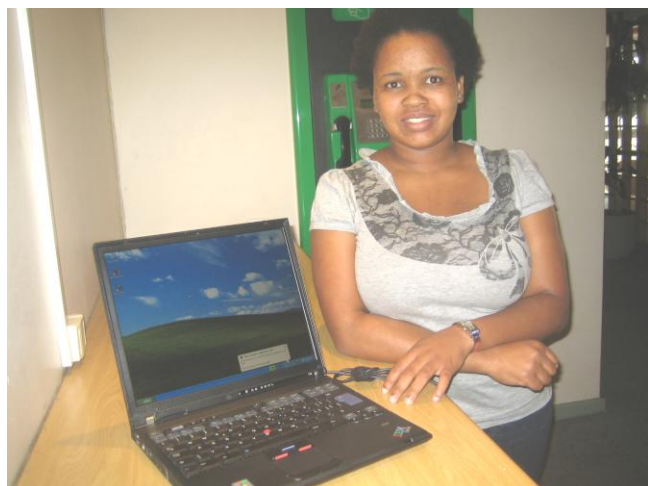

In the more recent centers Mlondi uses Swiss Re notebooks as Server.

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Mlondi is not only providing the hardware for the Schools – he also is one of the IT-Trainers.

Special Delivery

One of the ESM projects is about providing small loans to women-groups in Cape Town. The project started 2007 and has grown to 60 participating women. ESM is working with three students, Nomfezeko, Nomakhozasana and Pumla, who assist us in coaching the different women groups. For their services, the three students receive a small salary from ESM. Early 2009 Swiss Re made a special effort to give us three additional notebooks that we sold to the students for € 50. They use them for their study assignments and for writing the reports due to ESM.

Pumla Sodela – one of the three students with a Swiss Re notebook. Pumla recently qualified for an internship at Novartis and currently works in Basle for three months.

Conclusion

The Swiss Re notebooks, besides assisting Anton with his "women computer school", Andreas with his social integration project "revamp-IT", Rommel Roberts, Mlondi Kosi and the three students in South Africa, a small number went to Cameroon where they are used in a project (www.sokolo.cronopios.org) initiated by the Swiss Michel Pauli.

From collection of the notebooks at Günther Schier's warehouse until notebooks were handed over to the new users in South Africa and Cameroon, a lot of work and cooperation was required and the whole exercise made a large number of people **very happy**!

Sincerely,

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