

6TH EUROPEAN CONFERENCE IN E-GUIDANCE: *WIDENING ACCESS TO LIFELONG GUIDANCE*

ABSTRACT

TITLE OF THE SPEECH

Integration between traditional and distance services: The iCentres Experience

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SHORT AUTHOR(S) PROFILE



Vanya Petrova is Head of the Projects Development Unit of iCentres Association. As such, she is the Project Manager of several iCentres initiatives (the eGOS Project, CIP of the EC, the B3 Regions Project, Interreg IVC Programme of the EC; the Roma ICT training Project funded by the Open Society Foundation-Budapest), and is responsible for the financial and administrative reporting of several other projects (SISC, Grundtvig/LLP of the EC; the Unlimited Potential of Bulgaria Project funded by Microsoft). Ms. Petrova's prior experience includes work on projects of the United Nations Development Programme. Ms. Petrova holds a BA degree in English Philology and an MA in European Integration from Sofia University.

ABSTRACT

In line with the i2010 strategy, the iCentres project is committed to the inclusive eGovernment objectives ensuring that all citizens, including the disadvantaged ones, become major beneficiaries of e-services. We do this by focusing on activities related to bridging the digital divide in Bulgaria and provision of access to information technologies (ITs) and Internet. We are proud that for 4 years we developed from scratch a network of 120 icentres (almost 45 % of the country territory) established in locations of various size, economic condition, location (remote, rural and mountain) with focus on economically and geographically disadvantaged regions. We became the leading national provider of IT-based services to citizens and local communities in Bulgaria.

The iCentres make sure that all citizens, including the socially disadvantaged groups, will be able to become main beneficiaries of e-government services, as well as increase the information awareness for the benefits of e-government. We do this by supporting all citizens in using the e-government services by ensuring access to them, as well as providing face-to-face and on-line consultations. And last but not least, in order to make sure we've closed the cycle of competences, we organize Core IT skills training courses for virtually all citizens groups: all age groups (kids, young people, adults, seniors aged 55 +), ethnic minorities (Bulgarian, Turkish, Roma), all social groups (disabled, orphans), all activity groups (students, unemployed, including young mothers, employed, SME employees, business, public



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administration including the state administrative employees whose level of digital skills is lower than the European standards due to Bulgaria's recent history of economic development).

We use multi-channel services when bringing the "outer", i.e. virtual, world closer to the people: by offering them limitless possibilities for communication we give them chances to find friends and extend their social life; by offering access to e-business opportunities we motivate young people and entrepreneurs to remain in their home town; by offering free Internet access to young mothers we fight their temporary isolation; by organizing awareness campaigns on Safer Internet we promote kid protection there; by providing face-to-face, telephone and distance consultations we support people in the smallest towns of Bulgaria in using the various e-Government and other e-services. And because we want to demonstrate everyone ITs, the first 15 minutes Internet usage at our icentres is free of charge. Further, we pay attention to our clients' possibilities and the Internet access for marginalised groups and young mothers is absolutely free.

We make people's life in the remote locations easier by enabling them to pay bills through the Internet, and save them time and money for travelling to the nearest town for court references, tax quotations/payments, etc. The opportunities for hotel bookings and touristic information we offer have positive impact on the local tourism, local economy, and popularize the local culture and traditions. We also work with the local Labour Office Directorates (LOD) and provide the first consultations on the steps to applying at the LOD for finding a job.

Because it is important for us to answer the needs of each client, we adopted a strong customer-oriented approach. In order to introduce continuous and distance learning, we developed an e-learning solution for training, testing and feedback. It has allowed simultaneous training of thousands of trainees accessing it from anywhere. Not just that. We advocate the human rights of the individual. We use Braille software with the visually impaired; we invite sign interpreters to the deaf groups classes. The trainings of orphans, persons of Roma origin, disabled people and young mothers are absolutely free of charge. Moreover, we are concerned about the individual, that's why when training some marginalized groups like orphans and disabled, we work (if necessary) with psychologists. We are flexible when customizing the trainings of the state administration.

We use ITs for attaining network effect: our server system allows central & local posting of information/content which is distributed to virtually all users of our network, turning it into tool for direct inclusion into an already formed community.

Further, we developed a Mobile iCentre - a bus equipped with modern ITs making it suitable for working with disabled citizens. Using it as a high-technology demonstration tool, we pro-actively create interest in ITs, having already established 7 icentres in disadvantaged areas. The Mobile iCentre also travels around Bulgaria assisting trainings where necessary, so far having facilitated over 480 such courses.

Each icentre has also proven flexible to quickly respond to the local needs even in crisis situations: after the devastating floods in Bulgaria in 2005, two of our telecentres were used for gathering relief for the people and for on-the-spot and distance collection of data on the losses caused by the floods in the region.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFO

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