

Title: Uconnect Schools Project - Lessons on e-management, training in Uganda

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Selected articles:

Overcoming the Digital Divide in Education [www.inet2002.org/inet-program.html](http://www.inet2002.org/inet-program.html)

Train Trainer Telecentres ... Wireless [www.uconnect.org/telecom99twinpillars.html](http://www.uconnect.org/telecom99twinpillars.html)

Let Children be Fed [www.isoc.org/inet2000/cdproceedings/posters/363/index.htm](http://www.isoc.org/inet2000/cdproceedings/posters/363/index.htm)

Upcountry HF E-mail Network [www.uconnect.org/hfnetful.html](http://www.uconnect.org/hfnetful.html)

## Uconnect Schools Project - Lessons on e-management, training in Uganda

Backgrounder: It's generally acknowledged - thankfully the gainsayers are in retreat - that Internet is good for education. It is an extraordinarily powerful tool for good, and especially so for the disadvantaged, the poor, particularly for students and teachers in developing countries. My NGO, Uconnect, has been working for eight years to assist in bringing the benefits of Internet technologies to students and teachers in Uganda. And yet the wider adoption of ICTs and Internet for enhancing education in Uganda has been infuriatingly slow. Time is ticking; students are missing opportunities an Internet's connectivity away! What could our NGO do; what could I do to make it happen more quickly, to create the impact, to act as a catalyst, to bring the information revolution to the widest number of students and educators?

The Uconnect Schools Project aims to provide primary and secondary schools in Uganda with computing equipment, train teachers and students to set up their own computer labs and get their labs connected to the Internet on a sustainable basis. I would like to show how email collaboration between team members has been crucial to the successful management of the project.

There is a lot that goes into making such a project a success: interaction with education ministry officials, business partners, teachers and students; preparation of equipment, warehousing and inventory; troubleshooting hardware and software; generation of invoices and bookkeeping; drafting of training curricula and issuance of certificates; workshop and personnel management, and more. The neglect of any one aspect of our operations could result in failure. And it is gratifying to see that in the six months or so since we cleared containers of computing equipment out of Uganda customs our team of less than a dozen Ugandan volunteers with a wide variety of backgrounds, ranging from school leavers to university graduates, has

distributed some 300 computers to forty or more schools, and trained hundreds of teachers and students. Our team has accomplished most of these achievements during my absence. Obviously something is working. That something is email!

It is our team's regular reporting to each other, and to me, sending updated files - tables, spreadsheets, database, not to mention the latest digital photos - on every aspect of our operations, equipment inventories, workshop training rosters, revised fliers and brochures, weekly income and expense reports, school invoices, proposed agendas for meeting and minutes. These documents are sent as email attachments to keep our management in Europe informed about the situation on the ground in Uganda on a weekly basis, and are worked on throughout the week on a daily basis in a collaborative effort, with the interaction from all concerned, replies and comments, copied to other members of the team. And it is this collaboration by email that has produced just the right mix of supervision, feedback and freedom for each team member to carry out his or her particular responsibilities in a true team spirit according to the overall vision of the project. This is what I would call email management or e-management.

E-management has resulted in lead times being shortened between the first signs of trouble - things turning out not quite as expected, and our taking measures to correct, and this rapid response time is despite African and western cultural differences that might otherwise tend to exacerbate problems. We are each of us learning new lessons on an almost a daily basis - mostly through our team's email correspondence with one another - about how to work together more effectively to develop the project in such a way that it can scale more quickly and thus meet our goals. Email, collaboration and management, has been a driver for innovation for our schools project.

And this email-enhanced ability to innovate has probably been the key factor in giving our small NGO the adaptability needed to find ways to make a project work under difficult, sometimes critical, circumstances - not least of which is to make the project pay for itself, and to allow the project to scale. We have learned that schools could pay the mandatory (\$150 - \$175 per computer) contribution for the equipment they received from us in order that we might continue to purchase and ship additional equipment for the expansion of the project. (We see that schools can cover their expenses through opening their labs to parents and the public after hours and charging for services.) We discovered that we could no longer deliver computers to schools, but that schools would need to arrange their own transport for taking delivery of computing equipment. Nor could we continue to send teams up country to install school computer labs as we had been doing. Instead schools would have to send teachers and students to our network training workshops at education ministry headquarters in Kampala - after which they return to their schools to set up their *own* labs. And although our NGO had arranged to provide Internet bandwidth for schools directly from satellite companies, we are finding that connectivity, at this early stage, should be left to third party companies, partners who have the expertise to manage it for us.

I have been constrained to limit the time of my visits to Uganda to two or three months at a go, during which time I lead our team by personal supervision, instruction and example. I also meet with stakeholders, partners, ministry officials, and sort out problems that require my physical presence. Yet we have discovered over the years that the team seem to develop their skills, and grow into their new responsibilities, much more quickly when I come and go as I must do. The team receive intensive instruction from me when I am with them - and they do need me to be there from time to time; but by means of email I am able to continue with my

Careful instruction, supervision and correction after my departure. Team members then have a chance to spread their wings while I am away. And they make lots of mistakes too, but then lessons learned from being corrected reinforce the learning experience. And I think an interesting aspect of our project, and perhaps one of its greatest attributes is the personal training that each of the team members receives through being given the responsibility for some task or other, making mistakes, receiving correction or instruction, mostly by email, and being thus guided toward greater productivity.

We have learned that by means of e-management a relatively inexperienced team consisting of many new volunteers can be brought up to speed quickly to adapt to the day-to-day needs of running the project and working together as a team.