

Rural Net access a new market in India

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Taking India to the next level is going to be a major part of the discourse during the World BPO Forum to be held here in September, and rural wireless initiatives are set to steal the show.

"India has many opportunities, companies are focusing on these in the same way that the IT revolution started in the mid-1980s, this is the next wave that will be addressed at the forum," said Riaz Naqvi, vice-president of the World Business Process Outsourcing Forum and architect of the Indian IT promotion sector since the late 1980s.

Currently associated with Stanford University, Naqvi, who is also formerly the Indian representative to the United States for IT, prior to which he was first commissioner for Indian's first special economic zone in Noida, told UPI that the broadband wireless market in India is just beginning to open up. And with a population four times that of the United States, it certainly will be a bigger cut of the pie.

Today there are close to 3 million wireless Internet connections in a country with a population of about 1 billion people. The number of wireless connections is likely to rise to meet the demand of 199 million over the course of the next few years.

The capital alone has 200,000 Internet connections at present, with a demand for about 500,000.

"The market has grown immensely with government, private and education sectors all needing to be connected," said Naqvi.

At present several proposals regarding rural wireless access are in the pipeline, he said. There are plans to wire 150,000 higher secondary schools in the country -- present plans draw on utilizing one wireless connection for three schools.

Additionally, 600,000 villages are waiting to be networked with a broadband connection. Kiosk centers are a popular plan of action. "One will cover three villages," said Naqvi. "These centers will enable villagers to do things like make rail and bus reservations, access telemedicine and access other essential forms of e-governance."

About 100,000 of these are due to address the needs of about 600,000 villages.

Essentially, the Internet-enabled kiosks will enable faster connectivity and access to the rest of the world, replacing mail-carriers who must travel great distances and may only reach the village once every 10 days or so, said Rajesh Kalra, a senior hi-tech columnist with the Times of India's business daily, The Economic Times.

Each kiosk will create virtual mail accounts for villagers, and a computer-literate scribe will take the place of the village snail-mail scribe, prepared to access and send e-mail messages for villagers.

But given the major lack of energy as a resource in India, power problems are issues that must be confronted in this equation. "The government has to give some incentives," said Kalra, "for example, information kiosks with power backup."

However, both he and Naqvi remain confident that such progress is absolutely possible.

"Everything is in the pipeline -- the whole thing must be geared up

within three years," said Naqvi.

They both told UPI of options that include technological development of harnessing India's abundance of sunlight, for solar powering computer and Internet systems in villages.

HCL, one of the big tech manufacturers in the Indian market, has also been investigating prototypes of pedal-powered computers for rural use.

Financing must also be confronted for a country that suffers vast socio-economic disparities -- villages cannot be expected to dig into their own pockets in order have a kiosk set up. This is where the World BPO comes into play, raising the interest of foreign and domestic partnerships in sponsoring the technological needs.

At present, Kalra and others have also suggested that given the extremely short product lifecycles of computers, new computers are not necessary for the rural initiatives if a working recycling program is established by which old, unwanted computers are gifted to the government.

The World BPO Forum anticipates the attendance and participation of about 200 U.S. companies and thousands of Indian companies Sept. 23-26. At the forum, other forms of business-processes outsourcing are to be discussed -- ranging from service-sector opportunities such as mortgage claim processing, legal and healthcare offshoring, to call centers and other forms of managed services.

"The 200 U.S. companies are due to represent a financial worth of between one (billion) and \$10 billion dollars, and will be coming to interact with Indian CEOs to explore these as well as broadband wireless opportunities," said Naqvi.

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