

Greek information society expanding

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Greece is known for many things -- its sun-kissed islands, lively Athens, and as the birthplace of democracy -- but its latest reputation may become its quick climb up the information-technology ladder.

Having lagged behind many of its fellow European countries in Internet usage, including e-commerce and e-government, Greece is now taking a leap into a more wired future, according to government and private-sector reports.

While having an overall estimated Internet usage of 25 percent of the adult population, Greece also reports some of the lowest level of broadband penetration in Europe -- currently at around 2.5 percent to 3 percent (compared with a high of over 20 percent elsewhere in Europe.) But, the country is starting to make up for lost time, with its government investing heavily in tech infrastructural improvements and companies such as OTE, the country's telecom giant (formerly state owned), rushing to expand its broadband network.

With an expected capacity of 750,000 ADSL ports available by end of year, the company recently launched "OTE On the Broadband," a broadband roadshow, slated for appearances in 29 cities to help sell OTE's faster Internet service to a citizenry that had been accustomed to slow connection at home and business.

According to Yorgos Ioannidis, CEO of OTE's Internet division, OTENET, a key part of the company's marketing strategy involves making broadband more "relevant" to the average Greek, particularly by

associating broadband with sports, music and games.

The motto for the roadshow is "Make Your Life Easier," said Ioannidis. The road show includes a moveable Net café.

On the broadband front OTE estimates it will have approximately a half million users by the end of 2006.

In addition to OTENET's "Broadband Roadshow," the company is also hosting an academic contest called "Innovation 2006," which is soliciting entrepreneurial ideas from young Greeks, with the caveat that they must be sent in over the Internet. Ioannidis noted that within days of launching the contest there were nearly 1,000 applicants and thousands more are expected to apply by the August closing date.

"We (want to) trigger youth to think innovatively," the OTENET head said.

Part of the Ministry of Economy and Finance, the Secretariat for Information Society, has also been working making e-technology more relevant to the average Greek citizen.

Yannis Larios, advisor to the Secretariat for the Information Society, said that government believes the low level broadband penetration in the past several years has not been because of "technophobia" but rather that market factors have not been as favorable in creating better prices for Net access.

That said, as part of a government public relations campaign to increase Net awareness, Larios said -- similar to the OTE campaign -- that the trick is to make "it local, make it relevant."

"We are letting persons at the local level decide how to implement (the

campaign), Larios said.

Paul Spirakis of Greece's Computer Technology Research Institute, part of the Ministry of Education, said of the country's changing information society, "I think that there has been a great change in the last few years," adding that some of the most notable changes have come in tech infrastructure of the government, particularly in the launching of many e-government services."

According to EU statistics, 32 percent of Greece's government services are online, compared to an EU average of 40 percent.

For Spirakis, however, the "biggest change has been the schools." Greece's 10,000 schools (elementary to high school) are connected by a high-speed Intranet (in order to screen out some material.) There are also Net portals the Department of Education has launched for distance education of young Greeks abroad.

"We have also started an effort to digitize the cultural heritage of Greece," Spirakis added.

On the e-business front, he said, "The Internet has affected some business -- particularly tourism," adding, however, that overall e-commerce has not progressed all the quickly.

Trying to speed up the adoption of e-commerce is the Athens Chamber of Commerce and Industry, a 65,000 member association of businesses, which is working on a cyber shopping mall that will allow Greece's many small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to display their products online.

Chamber President Constantine Michalos said that among small businesses -- many the "mom and pop" category -- there is a cultural aversion to the online world. He added that Greek's often complain

about the cost of going online, but said "Greeks love to grumble."

While SMEs make up more than 90 percent of the Greek economy, Michalos said the effects of globalization are starting to transform the economy toward larger types of businesses.

"The future of the country is through the service sector -- including IT and tourism companies."

Michalos called for a simplification of the Greek bureaucratic process required for launching new businesses, in order to act as a stimulus for both domestic and foreign investors wishing to start businesses in Greece.

According to recent European Union statistics, of the 15 "old" members of the EU -- not counting the 10 newcomer countries that joined in May 2004 -- Greece currently post 13th on the list for being the most bureaucratic, with it taking an average of 38 days of government red tape to establish a new business.

Greek government officials asked about this problem said that it is a high priority to reduce the length of this process.

Greek Research and Technology Network (GRNET) Chairman Panayiotis Tsanakas estimates that within the next five years all of Greece's small and medium-size business will be connected.

He added that "the more persons using broadband, the more will demand e-gov," about how Net usage will reach a certain upward critical mass.

GRNET supports the research and development of information and communications technologies within Greece and internationally, through a high-capacity networking and grid computing infrastructure it helps to

facilitate. The agency operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Development and is supervised by the General Secretariat for Research and Development.

Tsanakas said that agency's high speed GRNET2 project currently has seven major nodes throughout the country, with a focus on connecting academic and scientific institutions.

For Richard Grant, an American IT developer residing in Greece, the change in technology infrastructure and tech usage has been a rapid one, albeit after initially starting off at a slow pace.

"Five years ago, you couldn't find a DSL connection to save your life. A 42-inch plasma TV cost 30,000 euros. Digital cameras were toys only the super rich could afford. Today, you can buy a 6 mega pixel digital camera for under 200 euros, and that 42 inch plasma TV has come down to 3,000 euros. There are so many DSL providers that companies are forced to offer continuous incentives to prevent their customers from moving onto the next big deal," Grant said.

In addition to large-scale domestic efforts to increase broadband Internet usage, the European Union is currently examining an over 200 million Euro project entitled "Broadband Access Development in Underserved Greek Territories." The scope of the project would focus on those areas of Greece outside the main urban areas of Athens and Thessalonica.

Making the stakes clear, EU Chairman of Information Society and Media Viviane Reding noted during a recent speech in Athens the positive effects of a fast e-connected society.

"Broadband gives us the chance to do things differently; to exploit content, applications and services that can help a nation to become a truly knowledge based economy; to help citizens to be healthier and

better educated; (and) to help administrations become more efficient," Reding said.

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