For information

Legislative Council Panel
on Information Technology and Broadcasting

Transformation of the IT Easy Link Services

Introduction

This paper updates Members on the progress of the transformation of the IT Easy Link Services (the Services).

Background

2. In collaboration with the Hong Kong Computer Society (HKCS), we launched the Services in June 2002 as a pilot project to promote the wider adoption of IT in the community. The Services provided free helpdesk services to the general public in using basic IT applications. A dedicated website (www.iteasylink.com), with frequently asked questions and answers (FAQs) posted on it, was also set up for reference by members of the public.

3. Every year, we review the effectiveness of the Services and explore the best way to integrate the Services into the broader range of services offered by the social services sector and the private sector. After reviewing the Services with the HKCS in 2003, the Services was expanded to cover the assistance to the small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). A dedicated enquiry service, known as IT Easy Link for Businesses, was established. Free face-to-face advisory services in areas ranging from initial planning of IT adoption to selection of business applications were provided to the SMEs.

4. In 2004, the Services was extended for another year till June 2005. However, we were mindful that publicly funded services should not compete for business opportunities with the private sector. The

Services should only serve to create awareness and fill the gap by providing support to users during their early stage of IT adoption and the Services should eventually be a market activity

5. Taking into account the utilization statistics of the Services, the overall improvement in IT literacy in the community, and views of industry support organizations and other relevant stakeholders, the HKCS proposed in early 2005 to transform the Services into a self-supporting and self-financing mode starting from 1 April 2006, with a 9-month transitional period from July 2005 to March 2006.

6. Members of the Panel were briefed on 8 April 2005 and updated in October 2005 on the proposed transformation plan of the Services. In summary, the HKCS proposed to transform the Services by way of:

(a) setting up a SME IT Support Centre;
(b) seeking sponsorship from and partnership with the private sector to continue providing service to the general community; and
(c) exploring cooperative opportunities to further expand the Services to cover disadvantaged groups through non-government organizations (NGOs) and the Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS).

Transitional Period (July 2005 - March 2006)

7. The HKCS originally anticipated that the IT Easy Link for Businesses would end on 30 June 2005 upon the opening of the SME IT Support Centre. However, the application by the HKCS for $2 million funding from the SME Development Fund to setting up the SME IT Support Centre was not successful. The HKCS had to combine the Services for Businesses with that for the community for better resources utilization since 1 July 2005.

8. On the other hand, the HKCS successfully solicited support from personal donation and commercial sponsorship to operate the Services at a reduced service level during the transitional period. The

operating expenses were budgeted at about $1.3 million and the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO) provided $0.5 million sponsorship.

9.   In order to achieve the optimum deployment of resources, the hotline service hours of the Services had been rescheduled to office hours, i.e., Mondays to Fridays: 9 am to 6 pm and Saturdays: 9 am to 1 pm. For enquiries outside the service hours, users were advised to make enquiries via fax, email or voice message.   Moreover, users were encouraged to look up the enhanced FAQs on the IT Easy Link website or subscribe to the free-of-charge bi-weekly IT News Express for useful tips on general problems.

10.   During the initial transitional period, there were enquiries and complaints about the reduced service hours and the telephone lines being always busy.   The situation improved after the HKCS had fine-tuned the operation of the Services and injected additional resources to clear the backlogs.   To better manage the user expectations, users were also informed about the scope and the objectives of the Services.   The number of enquiries and complaints dropped significantly from over 60 in August 2005 to just 3 cases in the past three months (December 2005 to February 2006).

11.   It was encouraging to see that users had also been adapting to the change of service hours.   The average number of daily requests was gradually reduced from around 150 during the initial transitional period to around 80 in February 2006.

12.   The percentage of technical requests resolved within 15 minutes had been dropped from 97% before the transformation to 92% in February 2006.   However, almost all non-technical requests could be resolved within 15 minutes during the transitional period.   The average satisfactory rating of the Services dropped from 8.7 to 7.7 (on a 10 point scale, 1 being the least and 10 being the most) during the initial transitional period but the average satisfactory rating gradually resumed to 8.7 in January 2006 and over 9.7 in February 2006.   We are of the view that the HKCS has effectively managed the transformation of the Services.

13.	The HKCS has taken initiatives to cooperate with the social services sector and is working with the Hong Kong Council of Social Services (HKCSS) to provide assistance to the non-government organizations (NGOs) in setting up their own IT support centres.	The HKCS is also prepared to transfer the knowledge gained from operating the Services, such as the FAQs, to the NGOs on their request.

Changeover of Services (February - March 2006)

14.	To ensure a smooth changeover and to better manage user expectations, a series of advance announcement were made from February 2006 at the IT Easy Link website, voice message system, and email notices to the registered users.	For every incoming phone call and in replying incoming emails, users were also informed of the new arrangement.

15.	Despite the termination of the free-of-charge telephone hotline services, the existing hotline and website would not abruptly disappear on 1 April 2006.	Instead, the existing hotline will be kept for one month and the existing website will still be available for three months.	The Services Centre will keep users informed of the changeover and advise them to switch to the new service scheme.

Transformed Service (April 2006 onwards)

16.	Beginning 1 April 2006, the Service will be transformed into a self-supporting and self-financing mode with a new multi-purpose portal and a new subscription scheme.

17.	A	new	multi-purpose	portal	"IT	EasyStation" (www.iteasystation.com) is set up to help users integrate and maximize the technology to ensure investment and returns.	This new portal will serve the same purpose as the existing website with enhanced FAQ section.	The website has online tools and facilities, including those listed below :

- ◆ FAQs and IT tips;
- ◆ Information on latest industry information and solutions;
- ◆ Tools for IT health check;
- ◆ Services on IT application assessment; and
- ◆ Facilities on open discussion forum and problem diagnosis.

18.   To cater for the demand on more dedicated services, a new subscription scheme "IT EasyCare" is provided.   Under the scheme, advisory service on system administration, desktop support, hardware repair and some value-added services are provided.   This scheme would be run in a commercial mode and that the price and service coverage would be adjusted according to the market demand.   It will replace the existing telephone hotline services by providing an affordable choice of technical advisory service.

19.   The transformed services will operate independently of the HKCS and the OGCIO's support, both in terms of financing and its management and operations.

Advice Sought

20.   Members are requested to note the transformed IT Easy Link Services beyond 1 April 2006.

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