

## Straight Talking – The Big Picture on the Next 5 Billion

By Clive Longbottom, Service Director, Quocirca Ltd

Microsoft has announced its Unlimited Potential campaign – with a sub headline of 'The Next Five Billion'. This number points to the number of people as yet untouched by general computer technology, with only around 1.2 billion people on the planet currently having such technology available to them.

With multiple offerings hidden under the main banner, Microsoft seems to be providing 'commercial philanthropy' – a very low cost of entry to the target users but also in a way that provides revenue with margins to the mothership. As an example, governments in qualifying environments will be able to license a Microsoft stack (operating system and software) at a cost of \$3 per student.

By doing this, the theory goes, Microsoft will turn out adults who are more used to Microsoft than the alternatives – and local commercial organisations will probably opt for buying Microsoft products to tap in to this available skills base.

However, an area that has to be watched here is the overall global sustainability of getting technology to people who are disenfranchised through existing distribution models. The West went through massive changes in the 19th century as the industrial revolution progressed, with mass migration from the rural economies to the cities.

Many of the people moving from the country to the cities found their situation did not improve – life in a country hovel was often better than the day to day struggle to survive in a city slum. The move would also have had an impact on the agricultural output of the rural economies but luckily the agricultural revolution had already replaced a lot of manual resources with automated ones, so providing a ready base of workers for the industrial needs.

If we look at the relentless pace of the technical revolution in certain emerging economies we see something remarkably similar – cities such as Mumbai and Pune in India and Beijing and

Shenzhen in China have become the technology magnets, attracting people from surrounding towns and villages towards a promise of wealth in the technologically advanced centres.

Again, this migration has bred large shanty towns and/or low cost, low quality housing for the people who thought that the cities would provide them with wealth – but find that if they can find a job, the wages paid do not make up for the increase in their cost of living. Worse, the loss to the agronomy of the country is not being offset to the level that the West managed and the pace of change is happening over the space of a few years, rather than the decades the industrial revolution took. With the West having a degree of dependency on the agricultural output of many of the emerging economies, any failure in the agronomies of these countries has a far-reaching knock-on effect.

It becomes incumbent, therefore, on technology vendors to be careful in how they approach these markets. The creation of specific technology centres within many countries will lead to destabilisation of the supply and demand of basic staples and to unsustainable use of resources, first at a local level but rapidly growing to a country, regional and then global level.

However, we in the West must also make sure that we do not attempt to force our own regional viewpoints or global aims onto other cultures. In many cases, an individual within a technologically underserved environment will not be looking as to how they can move to become an entrepreneur, a large cog in a global concern or a skilled economic migrant. For a subsistence farmer, it may well be to move from subsistence to having spare food. Meeting the basic requirements means that the farmer becomes more self-sufficient, while ensuring that there is spare food can enable the farmer to barter or trade the food for other services.

Technology can make this all happen – for example, through the use of image-based training in better farming practices, in animal husbandry and food storage, to communication

and collaboration with more remote communities as to what services or goods can be swapped for the excess food. That this circle of communication may only be a matter of a few miles can well be an extension of opportunity well beyond the previous horizons of the farmer.

Again, when we look at many of these communities the parents save as much money as possible in order to send their children to a larger centre in order to gain better education and, nominally, better jobs. Many of these children find that the cultural shock of moving from a small community into a large conurbation means that their educational potential cannot be realised and then the jobs hoped for are not available. With their parents or local community having invested a lot of money in them many of these children find it difficult to return to the community.

Technology can help here. Rather than children having to go to the educational establishment, education can take place within the community, through the use of suitable local dialect or highly visual tools and data and visual communication and collaboration tools, such as video and teleconferencing.

In this case, education can be far more targeted at task-based issues, rather than at a curriculum. For example, should a community identify that having a member of the community being able to communicate in Spanish would be useful this can be more rapidly covered through a remote course where the person learning is still being a contributory member of the community than it would by removing that person from the community for the duration of the course.

Technology also provides capability for the communities to work together for the greater good. If we take it as read that parents want something better for their children than they had themselves, the mindset of sending them away to the Big City has to be broken. However, if that child can be taught how to deal with tourists or how to run a small local business or how to trade community goods with more distant communities not only do we have a generation of people who are making a 'better' deal of their environment than their parents but the whole community gains and retains a high level of cohesion.

To create a globally sustainable technologically empowered environment we have to provide the technology that enables the users to do what they want, not what we want them to do. We need to foster community and local sustainability and minimise the growth of the number of super-cities in the world that are massive net consumers of resources from water and food to forests and human resources.

Microsoft's approach has many of these aspects built into it but Microsoft will have to work carefully with governments, non-governmental organisations, charities and commercial bodies to ensure that the vision is not subverted for short-term, local gains. We in the West will have to play our part, supporting plans for economically sustainable local and regional programmes that maintain small-scale communities and agronomies.

## About Quocirca

Quocirca is a primary research and analysis company specialising in the business impact of information technology and communications (ITC). With world-wide, native language reach, Quocirca provides in-depth insights into the views of buyers and influencers in large, mid-sized and small organisations. Its analyst team is made up of real-world practitioners with first hand experience of ITC delivery who continuously research and track the industry and its real usage in the markets.

Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation's environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca's mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

Quocirca has a pro-active primary research programme, regularly surveying users, purchasers and resellers of ITC products and services on emerging, evolving and maturing technologies. Over time, Quocirca has built a picture of long term investment trends, providing invaluable information for the whole of the ITC community.

Quocirca works with global and local providers of ITC products and services to help them deliver on the promise that ITC holds for business. Quocirca's clients include Oracle, Microsoft, IBM, Dell, T-Mobile, Vodafone, EMC, Symantec and Cisco, along with other large and medium sized vendors, service providers and more specialist firms.

Details of Quocirca's work and the services it offers can be found at  
<http://www.quocirca.com>