The Value of Certification

E-skills, outcome metrics and Corporate Social Responsibility in India

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Evidence Narratives at the Center for Information & Society

This paper is part of a project at the Center for Information and Society to broaden and deepen our understanding of the impact of Information and Communication Technologies and Development (ICTD).

Our intention is to choose examples of ICTD implementations carefully and to write about them in such a way that each one, individually, illustrates important aspects of the featured settings and so that, taken together, the examples describe and reveal larger themes about core aspects of ICTD. It is our hope that by being systematic at every stage in the research process we are able to expedite the accumulation of credible and accessible information about the impact of ICTD on individuals and communities.

The ICTD field is filled with success stories extolling the benefits of access to Information Technology. As these often rhetorically powerful and memorable stories describe what can be achieved under the best of conditions, they may distort our understanding of what is achieved more typically, or may fail to describe aspects of their settings or strategies that were crucial to success.

Each setting in which ICTD projects are implemented is unique, but our experience is that with careful attention to the idiosyncrasies and commonalities across settings, patterns soon emerge which reveal more general themes about the qualities of settings, people, and programs that make a difference.

While tension may exist between an organization's desire to feature certain cases and the critical researcher's commitment to rigor, we believe that a methodology built on intensive questioning and attention to detail can yield stories that uncover and communicate an accumulation of credible evidence about why individual programs and larger strategies succeed and fail.

By crafting exemplary stories, by developing and disseminating useful methodological tools, and by promoting these techniques among NGO managers and grant makers, CIS aims to shape a research framework that can fulfill the needs of NGOs and donors, with stories that accurately represent realities in underserved communities, accumulating evidence that serves the ends of rigorous analysis while publicizing good work.

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"A lot of people have asked us, 'How come you guys are so successful? Other people are trying really hard, but they're not achieving what you guys have achieved?' Well, we looked at it like any other business decision. We put a process in place. We defined our end results and devised a plan to achieve those end results." Roopesh Sekhar, the project manager for Sutherland Global Services' nonprofit Community Technology Center (CTC) training program in Chennai, applies corporate discipline to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) training, usually delivered by nonprofit, social organizations.

Sutherland's program, anchored in the idea that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs should align with a firm's core services, delivers Microsoft Digital Literacy curriculum to students and NGO beneficiaries at the same location where Sutherland staffs a call center and houses its Human Resource operations for five facilities in Chennai. According to Roopesh, "This is a corporate responsibility that every company has. Microsoft gave us the opportunity and we dedicated the room, the trainers, Bubishesh and Shankar, the systems, and the projector. Microsoft helped us with the curriculum."

The result is 2.5 days of digital literacy training, culminating in a one-half day exam. Students leave with a certificate saying they have officially passed the Microsoft® Digital Literacy Certificate Test. To date, Sutherland reports training over 1,300 students and certifying over 1,100, by offering two training sessions per week for 25 to 35 students.

Unpacking Success

Organizations define success in a number of ways, shaping program design and evaluation metrics. Sutherland's notions of success have grown from their corporate, for-profit orientation and their experience running the program. The certificate, in this context, is highly valuable.

"In our first batch, we only certified about 2 out of 25 students. Everything was in English. We tried to teach it in Tamil but certain terminology was very difficult to translate and at 3% throughput we were like "Nah, you know. It's not doing them any good. I could go for a course, but if I don't walk out with a certificate that says that I've done something, its worth nothing. Especially for these kids. They've never had anything that tells them that they've done something, achieved something."
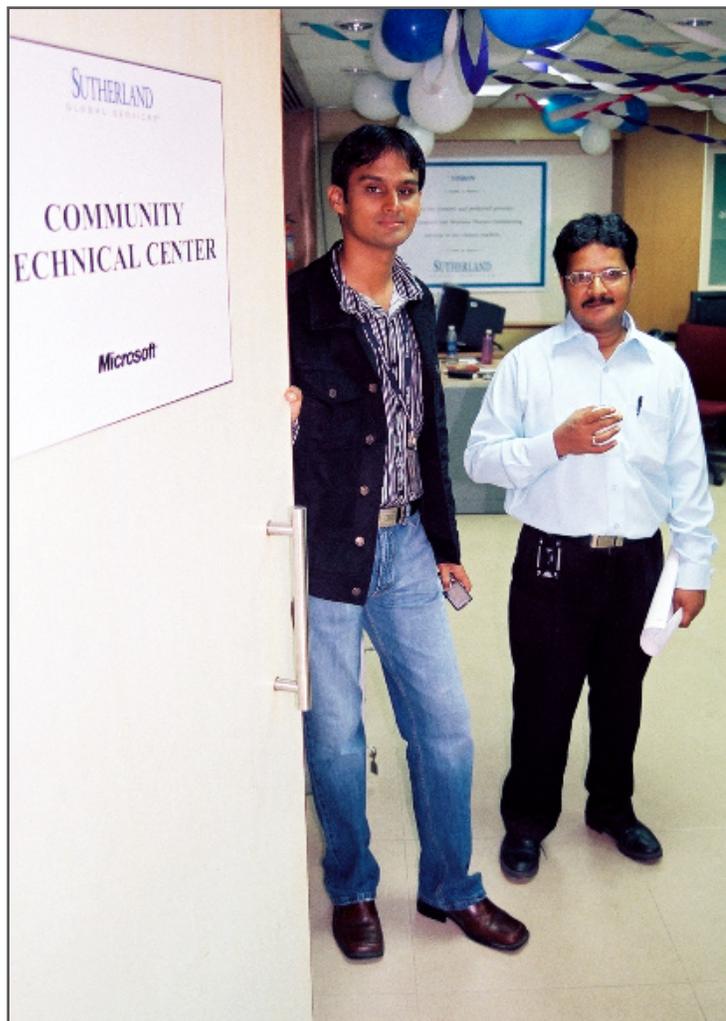
Bubishesh (left), the trainer, and Shankar (right), the coordinator, have provided training to over 1,300 students in Sutherland's CTC. Staff energy and passion are reported to be important element of success. Bubishesh and Shankar are evaluated based on the numbers trained and trainee satisfaction.

The certificate is so important that Bubishesh, the trainer and the person responsible for administering the test, has allocated up to four hours helping each student fully understand the questions. Previously 30-60 minutes were spent on testing. The test is taken with pencil and paper so that he can circulate among the students and clarify questions. Sutherland adapted the training in other ways. They translated the test into Tamil. They also shifted course emphasis away from self-learning on the computer into a "projector and lecture" model. Often the "lab is empty for weeks" when students are in classes, then participation swells

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>
> *Bubishesh, on the value of passing the certification exam*

during school holidays. The projector approach allowed them to address the influx and serve up to 35 students per session. "We are passionate about our students. We want them to do well. We want them to pass. If they don't pass, we encourage them to sign up again," said Bubishesh.

The certificate is also valuable internally for Sutherland. The fact that Microsoft has developed a curriculum that attaches the Microsoft brand to certification allows them to focus on training. Developing its own curriculum and certification was not within Sutherland's CSR mandate; implementing Microsoft's baseline was the starting point. "We cut the 3 day training down to 2.5 days, so there was more time for the test," said Roopesh.   "From a business metric perspective it doesn't really make a difference to me because there is nothing coming in. I can't say this is my profit. My profit is how many people are certified or going back to school. How many of these school kids are working harder because they have experienced this training in this setting?"

Sutherland's CTC training is popular with students, especially during school holidays. Sutherland shifted to a popwerpoint lecture model to accomodate the influx of students.

That's a good, and as of now unanswered, question. While Sutherland keeps careful records regarding trainee satisfaction with the course and instructor, no data is collected or measured beyond day three of the training. The heralded metric is number certified. "I know it's really cruel to put targets on the trainer and coordinator, but they've got targets," Roopesh explains. "They need to show that they've done something to get the salary they've got."

Employability Outcomes

The Digital Literacy Curriculum contrasts with the Unlimited Potential (UP) Curriculum, an alternative Microsoft offering that typically provides 80 hours of deeper, more hands-on training. It is available to NGO's and nonprofit entities worldwide who frequently integrate it with other training and services. One UP trainee outside of Chennai that heard of the 2.5 day training was skeptical of the learning that could occur in that time: "What can be taught in

2.5 days? It must only be an introduction." One of the UP trainers speculated on how much they could be prepared for work. "They need confidence and that is not enough time to be confident."

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>
> *Roopesh, on ICT skills and employability*

Roopesh acknowledges that the UP curriculum provides better training; he would "love to get his hands on that curriculum, but we have licensing issues because we're a corporate." However, he also thinks that the ICT skills themselves are not necessarily the point of the certification, especially with respect to employability. "If you were looking at employability, computer literacy would be secondary, not be your primary agenda. The first thing you would look at is communication, English communication. For example, an engineering college that graduates 1,200 students every year may only have an employability success rate of about 40% at most because of their English communication skills. Now you're talking about people that have been taught in English, or attended English schools throughout their lives. Then, you look at these kids who have no idea of English." He continues, "The guy sweeping the street has a cell phone with Internet connectivity. He can chat. He browses cricket scores. So it's really not about employability at the end of the day. It's about technology and cultural awareness."

Sutherland's laser-focus on their own business shapes the above description of employability outcomes. Roopesh further explains that Sutherland's approach terminates their consideration of the outcome chain at certification. Sutherland doesn't consult employers, internally or externally. "We don't want to get involved with other employers that may commit us to producing a certain number of workers. Getting a job is important, but it dilutes what we're doing, which is to train and certify. The Microsoft certification, anywhere in the world, is looked at with a certain amount of weight. Especially in India, where it's all about paper and not about experience. The certification carries substantial weight."

Locating the training at Sutherland

"This is some of the most valuable real estate in the world," says S. Sundar Raman, the Vice President of Training and Development championing this particular CSR project within Sutherland. "Human resources is always asking for the room. They say 'We could use that room to conduct interviews and hire people.' But we hold them off. This training is important."

The real estate is surely in

"This is some of the most valuable real estate in the world," says S. Sundar Raman. Sutherland's CTC training uses space that could go to Human Resources. "They would like to use that room for hiring...but the training is important."

high demand. Located centrally in Chennai, the facility is packed with job applicants. There is a long line of optimistic young job seekers, dressed in meticulous business attire and toting small business portfolios and backpacks. It is a snapshot of the new, young and globalized Indian workforce. Once inside the facility it is clear that Human Resources has used every spare inch to queue applicants awaiting interviews. The waiting room has overflowed and in the hallways where people aren't talking and working, applicants patiently wait. Outside, an awning has been built to shade approximately 100 people sitting in long rows of plastic chairs from the 104 degree Fahrenheit sun. The choice to allocate an air-conditioned computer lab with around 20 workstations to CSR is a significant business investment.

It was important for implementation reasons that training be located at Sutherland. According to Roopesh they considered formal relationships with NGOs, but it was easier to maintain the machines with a fast Internet connection onsite at Sutherland. Plus, partnering with NGOs is a loaded proposition.

"We haven't tied ourselves up with one NGO or formalized a contract because NGOs want money back. Initially we were talking about legal agreements where the NGO recruits trainees. We thought that would be easier. But it kept coming up. Can Sutherland set up a computer lab? Can you donate money? It was really difficult to tell them no," Roopesh said.

There are additional student-centered benefits to bringing students into a facility like Sutherland. Roopesh explains: "Another reason we wanted it here is because the kids experience something that they can only look at from the outside. If a kid passes by the building they look in and say 'Wow, look at these guys with their ties and their shirts and their pants-- they're all so impeccably dressed. Now they can come in, they eat in the cafeteria and rub shoulders with everyone. Nobody disrespects them. They are treated as people. And they take that back with them. It's a real morale boost."

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> *Roopesh, on the value of training at the Sutherland facility*

Re-packing success: What counts?

There are a number of definitions of success for community technology training programs worldwide. The appeal of crisp metrics, such as number certified, is especially strong in CSR enterprises that see their efforts through a business lens, even as it is blended with social value. And the discipline of counting makes it possible to ask follow-up questions with some understanding of scope. 1,100 people have been certified. What did they learn? What value did certification bestow? The piece of paper has value, but the learning that it symbolizes must also be considered.

These questions are not theoretical. Program designers and donors face a real choice: many graduates thinly trained versus deeper, intensive curricula, with smaller numbers and lower pass rates. "Less throughput," from Roopesh's point of view.

Community technology programs, built from CSR assumptions, offer a useful vantage for understanding these sorts of program dilemmas. The contrast is illuminating. And for all the passion and the goodwill that Sutherland expresses for its social mission, these activities are also business driven. "There's no

better marketing at the end of the day," Roopesh says. "People get to know what you're doing and they stop looking at you as a cold-steel BPO. People say 'Oh, they have a heart.'"

AUTHOR

Joe Sullivan is a research analyst at CIS. His focus is on community development, social impact, program design and sustainability, especially around technology programs in underserved or marginalized communities around the world. Prior to joining the University of Washington, he was an analyst with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's US Library and Native American Access to Technology Programs. He has worked closely with NGO's in South Asia around gender, migration and technology issues. Joe holds an MPA from the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington.