



Monarch Media, Inc., Case Study

4-H Launches Online Global Knowledge Center

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Industry

Nonprofit youth development organization

Challenge

Deliver agricultural training materials and community-building tools in Tanzania via mobile phones.

Solution

A portal and content management system for hosting eLearning courses, online forums, and an “Ask the Expert” system, all optimized for delivery on mobile phones using the Android operating system.

Key Benefits

- Allows students, 4-H club leaders, and district advisors to communicate with each other and share best practices.
- Provides access to a growing knowledge base of agricultural projects and solutions developed for African youth.
- Lets users ask questions and receive answers from agricultural experts.
- Allows 4-H to inexpensively distribute learning materials in areas with limited infrastructure.

Overview

Founded in 1902, 4-H offers youth development clubs and programs across the world. It has developed a “learn by doing” approach that’s been proven to help kids and adolescents perform better at school and in society. With 6 million members, 540,000 volunteers, and 60 million alumni, it is the largest youth development organization in the U.S.

Today, 4-H has a presence in more than 70 nations. Its worldwide programs focus on providing members with effective tools for agricultural and economic development. Each country’s 4-H organization, however, operates autonomously, and there are no systems in place to connect partners around the world to increase the impact of knowledge and resources.

Leveraging Global Connections

Globally, 4-H organizations share a common goal of improving the lives of young people and their families. In rural areas of developing countries, one of the greatest needs is agricultural knowledge that boosts food security and economic development while reducing hunger.

With more than a century of experience and a wealth of expertise and training materials, 4-H is well positioned to provide this knowledge. But a number of barriers have stood in the way, including:

- A lack of tools and structures to promote connections and communication
- Inadequate infrastructure and networks in developing countries to physically distribute training materials
- Insufficient scale to reach the millions of youth who could benefit from 4-H

To overcome these obstacles, the National 4-H Council has joined with private partners, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Cargill, to undertake a global initiative to:

- Offer technical training and assistance that improve agricultural and youth development practices
- Link 4-H programs around the world for greater impact and scale
- Build Web-based, culturally relevant resources and tools accessible to 4-H partners worldwide

The Knowledge Center was conceived as a way to use technology to achieve our goals.

-- Professor Bob Horton



To meet the need for Web-based tools, Professor Bob Horton, who leads 4-H youth development programs for The Ohio State University Extension, launched a project to create an online global knowledge center. “The Knowledge Center was conceived of as a way to use technology to achieve our goals,” says Horton. “It’s an essential tool that our 4-H partners in developing countries can use to stay connected and share ideas that work.”

Creating an Online Knowledge Center

The first phase of 4-H’s global initiative is to test its model with an African partner. The team selected Tanzania for its pilot project in 2010.

“There is a very strong 4-H presence in Tanzania,” says Horton. “They have a robust 4-H program with more than 30,000 members, and they’re among the most innovative organizations in Africa.”

To create a knowledge center with country-specific resources for Tanzania, Horton built a team comprised by Monarch Media, Vivayic, and Farmer, Lumpe & McClelland. With an aggressive schedule to launch the pilot program in less than three months, the team developed a strategy based on creating a Web portal that offers:

- Agriculture project courses and job aids in both Swahili and English;
- Online forums to foster communication between district advisors, club leaders, and members across Tanzania;
- An “Ask the Expert” system allowing users to submit agricultural questions to U.S.-based volunteers who research and answer them via email.

Going Mobile

Because many of the youth 4-H wants to reach in the developing world don’t have access to computers, Horton decided to focus on making the online knowledge center primarily a mobile learning hub. In Tanzania, as in much of the developing world, mobile phones have allowed people to communicate and access the Internet in places where even a phone land line—much less

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-- Craig Rebich, Vivayic

a computer with a Web connection—can be hard to come by.

“We’re seeing a real uptick in the use of smartphone technology in developing countries,” says Horton. “The infrastructure, the whole backbone, is built upon cellular towers being installed everywhere. You see many Africans carrying around cell phones, and it transcends age, gender, and social-economic situations.

From both a technology and a content perspective, developing for mobile phones creates some unique challenges. “It affects everything, from the graphic design, which has to look good on a very small screen, to decisions about what platform to use to deliver the content,” says Chris Bush, Monarch Media’s project manager.

Vivayic’s instructional designer Craig Rebich, who wrote the training materials and job aids for the knowledge center, agrees. “Knowing that people weren’t going to be sitting down at the computer to take an hour-long course, that they were going to be actually out in the field using mobile phones, impacted the eLearning materials we created. We had to consider how to keep things very concise and to the point, to make the training materials really easy to use and flexible.”

Picking a Platform

As the platform for the portal, Monarch Media selected WordPress, an open-source content management system (CMS) that’s known for being easy to administer and use, and is also highly extensible through plug-ins. “Although it started solely as a blogging tool, WordPress has rapidly evolved during the past few years into a powerful content management system,” says Monarch Media’s Chris Bush. “It also offers plug-ins that could be easily and rapidly installed to meet the needs of the project.”

Among these plug-ins, Monarch Media implemented WordPress tools that enabled the Ask-the-Expert system, offered machine-based translation of English materials into Swahili, and optimized the site for smartphones. Monarch also integrated the online forum tool bbPress with the CMS, allowing seamless posting and administration of community-building features into the portal.

Another advantage of using WordPress was that it helped the



WORDPRESS

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*-- Chris Bush,
Monarch Media*

team launch the site within the short project timeline. “As an existent, stable CMS, WordPress offered some of the functionality needed to meet project specifications and requirements, reducing the need for ground-up platform development,” says Bush. “And by selecting an open-source system, we were able to easily modify the code to quickly implement project-specific requirements and customizations.”

Tackling Hunger Through Training

A key to making the 4-H Global Knowledge Center a successful resource is the eLearning short courses and training materials it hosts. Part of what makes the 4-H youth development model successful, says Bob Horton, is its ability to provide good content that improves people’s lives.

“In the cases of developing countries, agricultural content is the most pressing need,” says Horton. “There’s an old adage that says a man with food has many needs, but a man without food has but one need. If we can help people satisfy that need for food, then they can begin to look at other areas and other opportunities for growth.”

To develop the training materials, Vivayic’s Craig Rebich first worked with 4-H to determine what learning goals they wanted to accomplish. “We really wanted to figure out what the end goals were,” he says. “What do you want people to do at the end of a training? What do you want them to do with each particular piece of information?”

Rebich started by analyzing a needs assessment 4-H had undertaken in Tanzania. Based on that information, he determined that providing courses and job aids to help youth raise rabbits and care for chickens would provide the best value. “People in Tanzania are already rearing rabbits and dealing with chicken diseases, so those were the logical topics for the courses,” says Rebich. “For example, with poultry, the needs analysis showed a real gap on information about dealing with the birds’ diseases, how to prevent them, and how to take care of the chickens that become infected.”



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-- Professor Bob Horton

Next Steps

The Global Knowledge Center launched its pilot site for Tanzania in late January 2011, and Bob Horton traveled to Africa to present the project to Tanzanian 4-H leaders and help train them in how to use the tools. "When we showed them the Web pages and the training assets that are on them, they were extremely delighted and encouraged," he says. "Now they have something that can serve 4-H members across the country."

With the Knowledge Center launched, 4-H and its funding partner, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, are evaluating the pilot to see if Tanzania's experience proves this to be a scalable model for expanding into other countries. If so, the organizations will work with their other partners to continue to expand the program across Africa and eventually other parts of the world.

For Horton, he's seeing the project as a great way to take 4-H's values and resources to the world using technology and eLearning. From his standpoint, both the Web portal's educational materials and community building tools are important. "Members may come to 4-H for the agricultural knowledge and experience, but they'll stick around for the youth development and the fellowship," he says. "It's about bringing kids together for a purpose."

More Information

To learn more about how Monarch Media can help you with your next eLearning project, please call, email, or visit our website:

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