

Behind bars but learning to network

Italian inmates receive training in a Cisco computer program

By Eric Sylvers

BOLLATE, Italy: The Internet bubble may have burst long ago, but you would not know it in the Bollate prison, where inmates, some of whom entered the facility before many people had even heard of the Internet, are studying six days a week to become certified to work on local area networks that run Cisco Systems Inc. hardware.

In a pilot program that is also being tried in Ireland, four inmates are several months into a course that, if completed, will certify them to configure and maintain networks and, the organizers hope, help them find work once they have served their time behind bars.

"The idea here is that a jail should be more than a place where you lock people up," said Lucia Castellano, director of the medium-security prison in this town 15 kilometers (10 miles) north of Milan.

The Bollate prison — which also offers computer, language, theater and school-proficiency courses and has its walls covered in murals painted by the inmates — is no ordinary prison.

If one forgets for a second the thick bars that cover the classroom windows and the Cisco routers near the door, this could be a nondescript classroom in just about any Italian school. There are maps and posters on the wall and computers dispersed around the room.

"I'm thankful to have the opportunity to do this course and hopefully it will

help me find work when I get out," said Mustafa Sillah, 30, a shy inmate from Gambia who has nine months left in his drug-dealing sentence.

"If I can't stay in Italy when I get out, I'll go back to my country and help others learn what I have learned," he added.

The course does not cost the prison anything. Cisco donated the networking equipment, International Business Machines Corp. provided the computers and Lorenzo Lento, the teacher who started the course and who still comes twice a week, is a volunteer.

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Lento said the course was hatched when he happened to be seated at a dinner with a regional prison director who liked the idea as long as it did not cost the prison anything.

To be selected for the course, students must have at least an elementary knowledge of English and some computer experience, both of which can be learned in other classes offered at the Bollate prison.

The course, which began in January, will end in December if the students keep up their current pace. The course

is largely self-taught, with the students going online everyday to study from a Cisco Web site.

To receive the internationally recognized certification, the students must pass about 60 online exams and then do 300 hours of laboratory work.

"Despite the fact that many high-tech companies have gone bust, there is still quite a demand, especially from small- and medium-sized companies, for people who are certified to work on our networks," said Isabelle Poncet, who directs Cisco's training courses in Italy. "We hope that Bollate isn't a drop in the ocean and instead will become a catalyst for other detention centers."

Judging by the enthusiasm of Sillah and the other inmates, it would seem that expanding the program would depend more on the prisons and the companies donating the equipment than on lack of students.

"I was taking theater class and studying for high-school proficiency, but this is a lot more practical and interesting," said Gianluca De Benedictis, 27, who has three years left on a four-year prison sentence for dealing drugs.

Students such as De Benedictis who finish the course and still have long sentences to serve will become the teachers for the next group of inmates.

"I hope this is the beginning of a new life for me," said Kenneth Owaosa, 37, a Nigerian inmate in the class who will be released before the end of the year.