

Learning about Technology Bridges Cultural Divide in Israel

Supported by Cisco, the Net@ Scheme Unites and Teaches Disadvantaged Young People from Different Cultures in Israel

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



PROJECT

The Net@ Program

FOCUS AREA

Education

CHALLENGES

- Limited access to technology-related education for some marginalized groups in Israel
- Problems of social and economic exclusion compounded by political and cultural rifts

SOLUTION

- The Net@ program offers ICT education and “soft skills” training to Israeli and Arab students
- There are currently 21 centers across Israel with over 1800 students

RESULTS

- Young people are acquiring valuable ICT skills that will help them to achieve their potential and contribute to their communities
- Mixed classes promote better understanding between cultures, genders, and generations
- Net@ helps to strengthen communities further by employing local people whenever possible

Based on the Cisco Networking Academy® Program, the unique Net@ scheme simultaneously develops cultural understanding and teaches invaluable technology-related courses, developing highly skilled and culturally open-minded young people for the next generation in Israel.

CHALLENGES

Information and communications technology (ICT) can be a gateway to social inclusion and equal opportunities within a society. By providing access to information and the employment market, knowledge of ICT can empower people to help themselves and their communities.

However, in Israel and around the world, there has been widespread concern regarding the “digital divide”—unequal access to the Internet and knowledge of computer skills that can potentially increase social, cultural, and economic disparity. Many socioeconomically and geographically marginalized communities in Israel are isolated from the Internet and ICT education. Furthermore, in this highly politicized region, such inequity is compounded by cultural rifts. The challenges of digital inclusion, educational equality, and cultural integration are complex in Israel.



SOLUTION

The Net@ program, initiated in 2003, teaches ICT and leadership skills to disadvantaged young people from many different cultural backgrounds. There are now 21 centers across Israel.

The program is tailored for populations on Israel's geographical and social periphery. Centers are located in border-town communities, and actions in the admissions process to promote the inclusion of those normally excluded help ensure that classes in each locale represent minority populations living in that area. Net@ targets poor, under-served groups including new immigrants and minorities such as Bedouin and Druze. As young people from a myriad of backgrounds attend class together and collaborate on projects, the program uses ICT training as a vehicle to engender cross-cultural understanding and respect.

“Six months into the program you can identify the Net@ kids in the school yard—they walk taller.”

—Oshrat Abergil, Ninth-grade teacher, Sderot

At the core of Net@ is the Cisco Networking Academy Program, which was launched in 1997 to help students worldwide acquire the skills needed for ICT-related jobs and for higher education in science and technology-related fields. Participants learn about the structure of computers, the basics of Internet access, the assembly and management of communications networks, and computer repair.

At Net@ this is supplemented with intensive English classes and “soft skills” training. Students participate in the program alongside their high school studies, attending classes twice a week in centers in their communities. At the end of the first year, students are qualified to offer computer maintenance services in their schools and private homes. In the second year, they continue to study computer networking and begin mentoring and teaching younger students.

On completion of the three-year course, students achieve the Cisco Networking Academy internationally recognized certification and are encouraged to use this expertise to aid their own communities by opening repair and training centers. In this way the program seeks socioeconomic stability by using education to promote the development of local leadership, contribution to the community, and the pursuit of excellence.

Net@ aims to further strengthen communities by employing local people; 70 percent of the program's instructors were previously unemployed and, whenever possible, come from the community in which they teach.

“Six months into the program you can identify the Net@ kids in the school yard—they walk taller,” says Oshrat Abergil, a ninth-grade teacher at Sderot.

RESULTS

Now engaging over 1800 students, the program has already produced significant results, which have been confirmed by external auditors. Students have shown considerable improvement in their schoolwork and have grown in confidence and self-esteem. They now have renewed hope in the future and belief that they will succeed in their lives.

Many students who were previously uninterested in matriculating now have the motivation, confidence, and passion to take the final exams that will allow them to progress to higher education. Net@ has especially helped to empower girls, who are often more reluctant than boys to continue education, particularly in the field of ICT. The program helps students to realize that they can contribute to their own communities and encourages them to develop and maximize their skills. In addition, the Net@ course is taught in English, which prepares students very well for the world of commerce.

“We put Arabs and Jews together in the same classroom. They initially did not want to be together. As they worked together in teams, we watched their prejudices gradually melt away.”

—Zika Abzuk, Corporate Responsibility Manager, Europe and Emerging Markets, Cisco Systems



Bringing Israelis and Arabs together to study has resulted in tangible improvements to relations between students, helping to generate cross-cultural understanding. The program creator, Zika Abzuk, says: “We put Arabs and Jews together in the same classroom. They initially did not want to be together. As they worked together in teams, we watched their prejudices gradually melt away.”

Friendships have even developed, resulting in Arabs and Israelis visiting each other’s houses, an occurrence previously unimaginable for many of the young people. Students’ parents have also started to attend classes, further extending the reach of cultural tolerance and ICT education.

The program has thus helped reinforce the basic values of excellence and social involvement in Israel. It strives to translate the achievements of individual Net@ students into benefits for their society as a whole, to empower pupils to improve their own communities.

“Net@ gave me the opportunity to meet new friends and learn about other cultures,” says Aviram Toledano, Net@ student, age 15.

THE FUTURE

Cisco created the Net@ program in partnership with three nongovernmental organizations (NGOs): Keren Hayesod United Israel Appeal; Tapuah, the Israeli Association for the Advancement of the Information Age; and The Jewish Agency. Cisco is now working to empower its NGO partners to manage the scheme without the company’s involvement. This will make the project sustainable, enabling its impact to continue successfully into the future.

The impressive achievements of Net@ have inspired plans for widening the scheme into a Mediterranean Youth Technology Club with centers across the Mediterranean region. Net@ represents a replicable and scalable solution, which can be extended to many locations and tailored for local needs. This means that the program has the potential to reach countless communities, and its adaptability enables it to be sensitive to local cultures and requirements, helping to ensure that the most appropriate help is provided. In this way, Cisco can empower more people and communities to help themselves.

MORE INFORMATION

To read more about Cisco Corporate Citizenship projects, please visit: www.cisco.com/go/ccprojects

To learn more about Net@, please visit: www.neta-project.org/

Cisco would like to thank the partners who helped make Net@ a success:



Keren Hayesod - United Israel Appeal
קרן היסוד - התגבית המאגדות לישראל



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The Jewish Agency
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