

How Microsoft Does It: Helping to Promote Computer Literacy

PC SOLIDARITY

A Remarkable Partnership Among Private Companies, Government, and Non-Profits Helps Close “the Digital Divide” in Belgium

Overview

What it is: PC Solidarity is the Belgian project of Close the Gap, a non-profit organization working globally to close the gap between rich and poor by closing the gap between those who have computer skills and those who do not.

How it works: PC Solidarity provides PCs and more—software, service and support, training, and printers—to Belgian non-profit organizations that operate programs and facilities for computer literacy, job-training, job-search, education, and social welfare, among others.

How it succeeds: One of PC Solidarity's keys to success is its use of decommissioned PCs donated by business and government, and refurbished by Flection, a Microsoft Authorized Refurbisher.

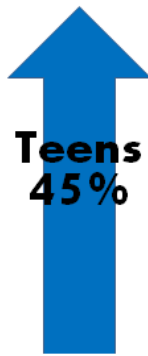
“The computers bring people to us that we otherwise wouldn't see and couldn't help: the most isolated people. With the computers, we can extend our reach to help more of those with the greatest need.”

Carolien Patyn, Policy Officer at the Flemish Network

Unemployment, poverty, homelessness—could teaching people how to use computers help to alleviate these age-old problems? Businesses, government, and non-profit organizations in Belgium are working together to show that it can. They're partners in PC Solidarity, which seeks to diminish the digital divide between those who can use computers to help themselves and their communities, and those who can't. Early results are encouraging. In one job-training program supported by PC Solidarity, 80 percent of participants succeed in finding work—which also helps to restore economic vitality to their community. PC Solidarity and its parent program, Close the Gap, were founded with the support of DNS.be, which continues to be a major funder.



Unemployment Rate
In Kuregem, Belgium



Among the poorest neighborhoods of Belgium is Kuregem, in the capital city of Brussels. The local slaughterhouse is the main source of income—for those lucky enough to have jobs. The unemployment rate is high: 30 percent for adults and 45 percent for youth. Half of the community has only a primary-school education.

Most of the people in Kuregem don't know how to operate a computer. In this, the neighborhood has something in common with disadvantaged communities throughout the world.

Computer literacy and employment have an obvious connection. Computer skills help to reduce unemployment by helping people both to find and to qualify for higher-paying jobs. So, closing the gap between rich and poor is tied inextricably to closing the gap between those who have computer skills and those who do not.

Meet "Close the Gap"

One organization with exactly this mission is called, appropriately enough, Close the Gap. Founded in Brussels in 2003, Close the Gap has distributed more than 85,000 computer assets to 2,100 organizations in 40 countries, including learning centers, schools, and universities mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. It estimates that those computers are used by more than one million people each week. The organization was launched with the financial support of DNS.be, the Belgian branch of the international Internet domain-name nonprofit organization, which continues to be a close partner and funder.

"Close the Gap makes a significant difference in the lives of people in the communities we serve," says Olivier Vanden Eynde, Managing Director of Close the Gap.

"But we will not consider our mission complete until the gap has been closed."

That not only requires more computers—millions more, Vanden Eynde estimates—but also that Close the Gap help communities outside of developing countries, which were its first focus. Charity begins at home, goes the old adage and, for Close the Gap, "home" includes communities throughout Belgium, a country in which almost one-fifth of the adult population has never used the Internet. Many non-governmental organizations or nonprofits serve this population and could help to close the gap and eliminate computer illiteracy—if they had the proper support. Microsoft Belgium estimates that 30,000 nonprofits in the country could benefit from technology donations to promote computer literacy.

Most of these nonprofits—60 percent—have no annual budget for technology. Only 27 percent spend €4,000 (US\$5,060) or more on technology per year. Only 30 percent of the employees of these organizations are computer-trained. Many of these organizations do not operate with the current versions of the software that they use, either because they can't afford the licenses or because their years-old PCs won't support them—or both.

PCs are not Enough

To meet this challenge within Belgium, Close the Gap created a Belgian project, PC Solidarity, in 2009. It supports nonprofits that promote the digital inclusion of youth, people with disabilities, and those with low income, in addition to nonprofits with education projects that help young people and adults to enter the job market. The organization's mission is to address what Vanden Eynde and his colleagues see as the specific needs in their country: to help close the digital divide by providing not



In March 2009, HRH Prince Philippe of Belgium inaugurated PC Solidarity's Belgian project by paying a formal visit to the non-profit organization ARKTOS.

just the PCs that are needed by social and educational nonprofits, but also the related products and services without which PC training is unlikely to succeed.

"PCs—good PCs—are essential, but so is much else," says Aurélie Dupont, Operations Director at Close the Gap. "The organizations we help also need software, the type of software that their students or clients will need to know in order to find and keep skilled jobs. They need service and support, training, printers, and funding to keep their computer literacy programs active."

Close the Gap couldn't provide that on its own, so it assembled a high-level group of governmental organizations and corporations. Leading the support for PC Solidarity is DNS.be, and the King Baudouin

Foundation, which organizes PC Solidarity's annual calls for funding proposals.

"We want to make the Internet more accessible to everyone," says Phillip Dubois, CEO of DNS.be. "That's the mission Close the Gap and PC Solidarity, and that's why we support their work."

In March 2009, HRH Prince Philippe of Belgium inaugurated PC Solidarity's Belgian project by paying a formal visit to the non-profit organization ARKTOS, in the township of Leuven, which assists socially vulnerable youngsters.

A Deep, Strategic Relationship

Another key supporter of both Close the Gap and PC Solidarity is Microsoft Belgium. The company has donated at least €790,000 (US\$1 million) worth of licenses to PC Solidarity for Microsoft Office 2010 business productivity software, benefitting 176 program participants. It makes additional software available to PC Solidarity recipients and other Belgian nonprofits through SOCIALware, an organization dedicated to distributing such donations on behalf of corporate contributors.

Microsoft Belgium has been supporting PC Solidarity since the start of the project. "In Belgium we support 3,000 nonprofits, but we have deeper, strategic relationships with a few—including PC Solidarity," says Philippe Rogge, General Manager, Microsoft Belgium. "It is very important to us to promote education for youth. We support organizations that help youngsters with online safety, technology training and access. PC Solidarity fits well within these interests."

Microsoft has also been instrumental in helping PC Solidarity to meet its need not just for software, but for hardware, too. PC



School children join the “digitally included” as they learn computer literacy using PCs from PC Solidarity.



Solidarity distributes PCs well equipped to handle current software, and protected by warranties. “Buying new PCs for this purpose is beyond the reach of PC Solidarity, even with the support of its corporate and foundation sponsors,” says Laurence Verriest, Community Affairs Manager for Microsoft Belgium. “Fortunately, PC Solidarity doesn’t need to resort to new PCs. It distributes refurbished ones.”

Exceeding Industry Practices

But not just any refurbished PCs. Its PCs are refurbished by Flection, a Microsoft Authorized Refurbisher (MAR), one of a select group of refurbishers that achieve and retain their certifications by exceeding standard industry practices. For example, Microsoft requires MARs to meet specifications for environmental responsibility, data security, and compliance; and to demonstrate their continuing expertise by refurbishing at least 1,000 PCs per month.

For PC Solidarity, Flection collects decommissioned PCs from the nonprofit’s corporate and governmental donors, performs triage to identify machines that meet PC Solidarity’s requirements, repairs and upgrades them, restores their exteriors, adds keyboards and other accessories as needed, loads them with Microsoft software, and packages them with PC Solidarity branding for distribution to the organization’s beneficiaries. The company maintains an inventory of these PCs and ships them to grant recipients at the direction of PC Solidarity.

The Microsoft software loaded by Flection—as well as the Microsoft software provided separately through SOCIALware—is fully licensed, and each PC receives a certificate of authenticity for its Windows 7 operating system software. These steps are important contributors to the success of PC Solidarity, according to Dupont.

“When we provide the software that our beneficiaries want to use, we’re not just saving them the cost of buying these products on their own,” she says. “We’re presenting them with PCs that can be used just as they come out of the box. Many of the organizations we support do not have their own technology staffs. By presenting them with fully operational PCs, with software already loaded and configured, and with warranties from Flection, our beneficiaries can put their new PCs to immediate use.”

Flection supports the success of PC Solidarity in other ways, too. For example, companies and government agencies that want to donate their decommissioned PCs may be hesitant due to issues of security—these PCs, after all, contain corporate or governmental data and, in some cases, very sensitive data.



MAKS runs a computer training program for recent immigrants, helping them to integrate into Belgian society, using PCs supplied by PC Solidarity.

“As a Microsoft Authorized Refurbisher, we have to meet very high standards for handling and destroying the data on the PCs we process,” explains Koen Janssens, Managing Director of Flektion Belgium. “Our certification from Microsoft confirms that we meet these standards, and the companies and agencies with whom we work in Belgium know they can trust us. This helps to allay any concerns that donors to PC Solidarity might have about risks associated with their PC donations.”

Aiding the Most Isolated

Indeed it does. Since its founding in 2009, PC Solidarity has distributed 7,500 PCs throughout Belgium. About 100 of those PCs have gone to the Brussels-based Flemish Network, an association of 55 anti-poverty organizations working to improve the lives of poor people and to better integrate them into Belgian society. The Flemish Network integrated 15 computer centers within its organizations. In these friendly environments, people living in poverty can come, without appointment, to do homework, write letters, read online, look up bus and train schedules, and do virtually anything else they want.

“Many of our clients aren’t in a position to look for work because of their age or mental condition—but they can benefit from the services we provide,” says Carolien Patyn, Policy Officer for sports, culture, and youth participation at the Flemish Network. “Our open invitation to use the computers brings people to us that we otherwise wouldn’t see and couldn’t help: the most isolated people, those not even receiving assistance from the government. With the computers, we can extend our reach to help more of those with the greatest need.”

Revitalizing Kuregem

Thirty-six of those computers have gone to a nonprofit called Media Actie Kuregem-Stad (MAKS), which seeks to revitalize both the social and economic life of the disadvantaged community of Kuregem. Its mission, focusing on Kuregem, closely mirrors the mission that PC Solidarity has for Belgium as a whole.

“The doors to the digital world remain closed for many in Kuregem—both young and old,” says Veronique De Leener, Director of MAKS. “We work to promote the digital emancipation of these people in our community, so that they can find better

opportunities in education, housing, work, and leisure.”

Among the projects through which MAKS seeks to do this is KureghemNet, a computer learning center that sponsors education courses and multimedia projects for children as young as six, and for adults of all ages. It serves about 1,500 people a year. Another MAKS project is Kurasaw Tewerkstelling, a job-search center with Internet-connected computers that serves about 350 unemployed people a year.

The computers from PC Solidarity are crucial in helping MAKS to fulfill its mission, according to De Leener. “Because we are teaching people to use computers, especially to use computers to qualify for and find jobs, we need the latest Microsoft software—with licenses in Dutch and French—and we need computers capable of running that software,” she says. “At first, we didn’t have computers that could do this. PC Solidarity gave us the PCs that could run Windows 7 and Office 2010—and, along with Microsoft, they gave us this software, too. I don’t know how we would have afforded this otherwise.”

MAKS has been putting its donated PCs and software to good use. About 100 children are gaining advanced computer skills by learning to develop computer games. Eighty percent of the people in its job-training program succeed in gaining employment. That’s about 1,200 people a year. And, for the young people of Kuregem, MAKS isn’t just a training and job-search center—it’s also their employer. MAKS hires about 22 people in their late teens to staff its centers. After they receive their own computer training, they go on to teach classes to their peers.

“We’re improving the economic and social prospects for these people and, through

them, for the entire community,” says De Leener. “We’re helping to erase the digital divide. And PC Solidarity is helping us to do it.”

Citizenship at Microsoft

Microsoft's mission is to help people and businesses around the world realize their full potential. Our Citizenship work plays a vital role in delivering on that mission as we apply our technology expertise and resources to help solve societal challenges on both a global and a local scale. We do so in two ways: serving communities and working responsibly. For more information about Microsoft's Citizenship programs and activities, visit the website at:

www.microsoft.com/about/corporatecitizenship/en-us/

For more information about Close the Gap, visit the website at:

<http://www.close-the-gap.org>

For more information about PC Solidarity, visit the website at:

<http://www.pc-solidarity.be>

For more information about MAKS, visit the website at: <http://www.maksvzw.be>

For more information about the Flemish Network (Vlaams Netwerk), visit the website at: <http://www.vlaams-netwerk-armoede.be>

For more information about Flection, visit the website at: <http://www.flection.be>

Microsoft Authorized Refurbisher

Refurbish. Rebuild. Reuse. Microsoft Refurbisher Programs help people, businesses, and communities around the world embrace sustainable technology.

To learn more about Microsoft Refurbisher programs please visit

www.microsoft.com/refurbishedpcs