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Fostering Empowerment of Young People in Rural Areas
Through Social Entrepreneurship and Employment

PROJECT RESULT 4

How to implement online/F2F Rural Digital Hubs

Learn all how to set rural digital hubs in rural areas!

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1.- Introduction

Digital hubs are physical spaces with access to superfast broadband alongside community and business focused services. The provide digital connectivity, support the development of digital skills and encourage the use of emergent digital technologies. Digital hubs aim to enhance the local digital environment and can be available to the public, businesses, or local authorities, or a combination. This guide will provide information on what is a digital guide and how ir can do to your community or region.

2.- What are digital hubs?

A digital hub is a shared workspace for a variety of complementary activities, including commercial businesses, public sector and community organisations. If provides fast, state-of-the-art technological amenities and services as well as has a focus on connecting people through meeting rooms, event venues and training facilities. It aims to enhance the local digital environment. For a monthly charge, freelancers, business owners and small companies can use this adaptable shared workspace to work alongside more established, high-growth companies with longer-term office locations.

With its shared services, the environment promotes collaboration, stimulates creativity and offers a stage for ideas to take of and companies to expand. The goal is to establish a regional hub innovation, technology and creative industries. In contract to a traditional office setting, a digital hub is highly organized and concentrated on linking people, information and ideas to produce particular results.

It differs from a standard shared office environment because of its emphasis on bridging diverse groups and individuals. Successful digital hubs provide a contagious and motivating environment where members get support and assistance in solving difficulties.

Digital hubs are the next generation of co-working spaces linking regions into global networks and opportunities.

3.- What kind of digital hubs are there?

In rural locations, there are four main types of digital hubs to be found. Digital hubs come in a variety of forms, from those that merely offer high-speed internet access to those that help enterprises in a particular industry by giving them access to certain technologies. These four categories can exist separately, but they frequently overlap to provide businesses and communities with a special range of services that are tailored to a particular area or development focus.
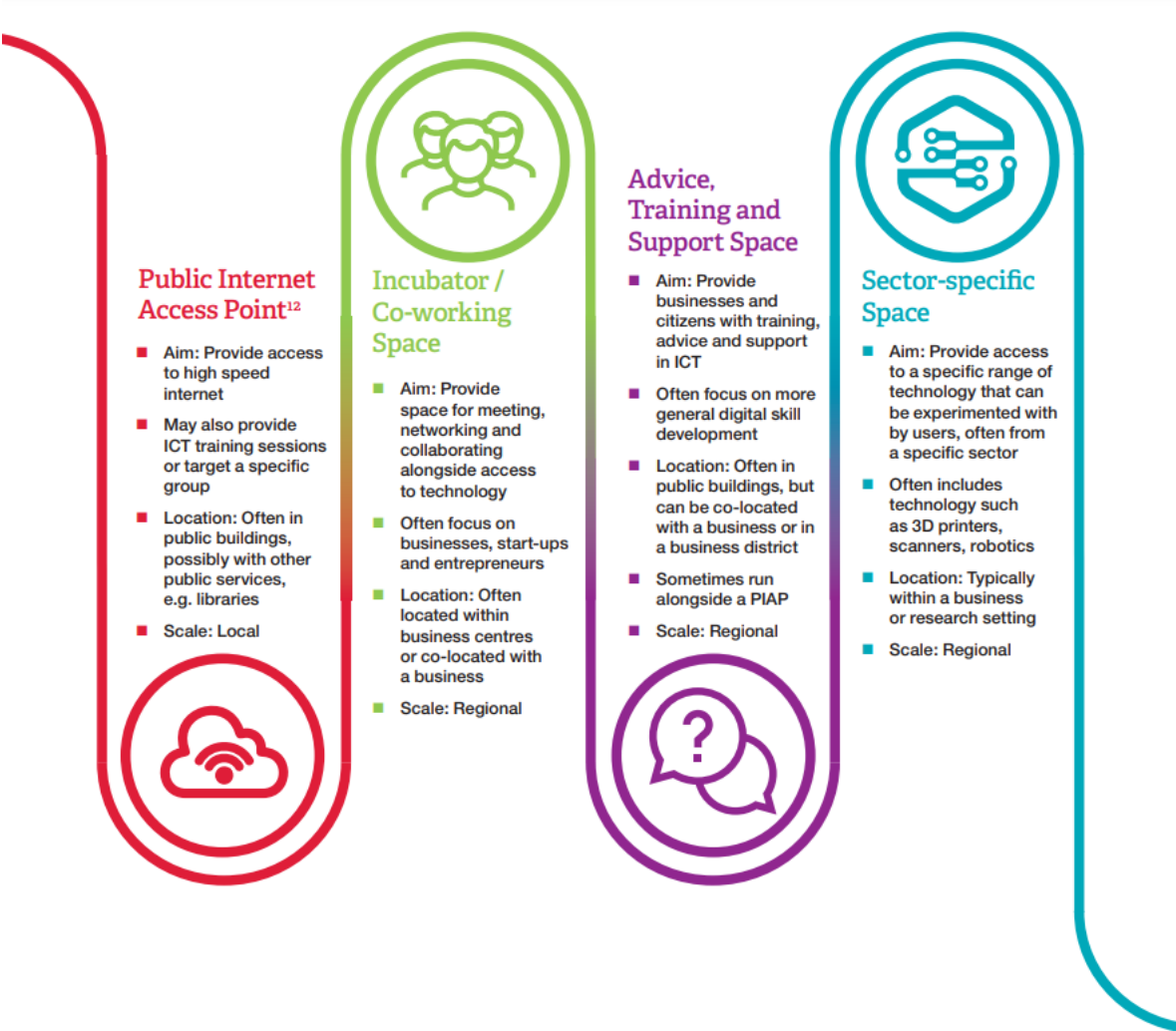
Public Internet Access Point[12]

- Aim: Provide access to high speed internet
- May also provide ICT training sessions or target a specific group
- Location: Often in public buildings, possibly with other public services, e.g. libraries
- Scale: Local

Incubator / Co-working Space

- Aim: Provide space for meeting, networking and collaborating alongside access to technology
- Often focus on businesses, start-ups and entrepreneurs
- Location: Often located within business centres or co-located with a business
- Scale: Regional

Advice, Training and Support Space

- Aim: Provide businesses and citizens with training, advice and support in ICT
- Often focus on more general digital skill development
- Location: Often in public buildings, but can be co-located with a business or in a business district
- Sometimes run alongside a PIAP
- Scale: Regional

Sector-specific Space

- Aim: Provide access to a specific range of technology that can be experimented with by users, often from a specific sector
- Often includes technology such as 3D printers, scanners, robotics
- Location: Typically within a business or research setting
- Scale: Regional

Figure 1: Types of digital hubs (Ashmore, Price, & Deville , 2019)

4.- How does digital hubs create opportunities for young entrepreneurs in rural areas?

Particular problems that affect how people live and work in rural locations include low population density and a lack of public service provision. By giving rural populations new means to access services, generating new business opportunities for rural firms, enhancing transportation networks, and establishing better social and commercial networks, digital technology can answer to these difficulties. However, relatively limited internet coverage continues to limit rural communities' capacity to take use of these opportunities. For rural areas, the digital divide is still quite present; in the EU, 13% of houses are still unconnected to a fixed broadband network.

In addition, it might be difficult for rural communities to obtain the digital skills necessary to properly utilize technology. For instance, rural businesses have found it difficult to find employees with the right digital abilities, obtain relevant external IT training, and the existing workforce does not possess the necessary digital skills.

According to research, digital hubs have the ability to spur good change in rural areas and can serve as a springboard for overcoming the issues of the digital divide:

- Hubs can build collaborative communities that foster both social connectivity and economic change
- Hubs can attract diverse members who can collaborate and exchange knowledge
- Hubs can localise global entrepreneurial culture and support the diversification of rural economies
- Hubs can facilitate creativity, giving individuals and businesses/entrepreneurs the chance to both learn and engage with digital technology for a range of skill levels.

The most typical elements of digital hubs include offering internet access, meeting and networking spaces, and opportunity to test new technology. Digital hubs can perform a variety of tasks. All rural digital hubs must have internet access because it supports the support and

services that hubs can offer. The possibility to interact with other firms, people who share your interests, and/or specialists who could offer guidance or training is provided by meeting room availability. Digital hubs, however, have the ability to do more than this; they may also promote economic and community growth while also enhancing digital skills for both individuals and organizations.

It's critical to first comprehend your local digital ecosystem before creating a digital hub. This entails evaluating the regional digital skills, broadband adoption rates, and broadband infrastructure. It is important to take into account the local community's and/or businesses' needs for skills development. Key target groups should be involved in the creation and development of the services offered by a digital hub wherever possible.

5. How to become a digital hub/digital space?

Creating an online or physical rural digital hub requires careful planning and implementation. Here are some steps a municipality can take to create such a hub:

- Identify the purpose and goals: Determine the purpose and goals of the rural digital hub. This could include fostering digital literacy, promoting entrepreneurship, providing access to digital resources, or bridging the digital divide. Clearly define what you aim to achieve through the hub.

- Conduct a needs assessment: Assess the needs and challenges of the rural community. Identify the gaps in digital infrastructure, technology access, skills, and resources. Understand the specific requirements of the community members to tailor the hub's offerings accordingly.

- Secure funding and resources: Seek funding from government grants, private donors, or local businesses to support the establishment and maintenance of the digital hub.

Allocate resources for infrastructure, equipment, software, staffing, and ongoing operations.

- Establish physical or virtual space: Decide whether the digital hub will have a physical space, such as a community center or a designated building, or if it will be primarily virtual. In the case of a physical space, ensure it is equipped with necessary technology, high-speed internet access, and comfortable work areas. For a virtual hub, create a website or online platform that serves as a central hub for digital resources and activities.

- Provide technology and internet access: Ensure that the rural community has access to technology and reliable internet connections. Consider offering computer stations, laptops, tablets, or mobile devices within the physical hub. Explore partnerships with local internet service providers to improve internet access in the area.

- Offer digital literacy training: Develop digital literacy programs and training sessions to empower community members with essential digital skills. Provide training on topics such as basic computer skills, internet usage, online safety, social media, digital marketing, and e-commerce. Encourage participation from residents of all ages.

- Facilitate entrepreneurship and innovation: Foster entrepreneurship and innovation within the rural community by offering support programs, workshops, and mentorship opportunities. Encourage local businesses and startups to utilize digital tools and platforms for growth. Consider organizing networking events and business development initiatives.

- Collaborate with local stakeholders: Collaborate with local schools, libraries, community organizations, and businesses to leverage their resources and expertise. Partner with educational institutions to offer specialized training or workshops. Engage local businesses to provide mentorship, sponsorships, or internship opportunities for hub participants.

- Promote community engagement: Create a sense of community and encourage collaboration among hub participants. Organize events, workshops, or seminars that facilitate knowledge sharing and networking. Encourage community members to actively contribute content, ideas, and initiatives to the hub.

- Evaluate and adapt: Regularly assess the effectiveness of the rural digital hub and gather feedback from community members. Measure the impact of the hub on digital skills, local businesses, and community development. Use this feedback to make necessary adjustments, improve offerings, and expand the hub's reach.

Remember, the success of a rural digital hub depends on ongoing support, engagement, and collaboration with the community. Continuously evaluate the needs of the rural area and adapt the hub's initiatives to ensure they remain relevant and effective in meeting the community's evolving digital requirements.

6. How to support entrepreneurs that want to become a digital hub/space

To support entrepreneurs who want to start their businesses from a rural digital hub or space, here are some strategies that can be implemented:

- Provide business incubation services: Offer dedicated business incubation services within the rural digital hub. This can include providing access to office space, shared facilities, and equipment. Additionally, offer mentoring and coaching programs to help entrepreneurs develop their business ideas, refine their strategies, and navigate challenges.

- Facilitate access to resources: Ensure entrepreneurs have access to essential resources such as high-speed internet, computers, software, and business tools. This could be achieved by equipping the digital hub with the necessary technology infrastructure or partnering with local businesses or institutions to provide access to such resources.

- Offer training and workshops: Conduct training sessions and workshops specifically designed for entrepreneurs. Topics may include business planning, marketing, financial management, legal considerations, and digital skills. Invite industry experts, experienced entrepreneurs, and professionals to share their knowledge and provide guidance.

- Foster networking and collaboration: Organize networking events, meetups, and forums where entrepreneurs can connect, collaborate, and share ideas. Encourage the formation of peer support networks where entrepreneurs can learn from each other, seek advice, and build valuable partnerships.

- Provide access to funding and grants: Help entrepreneurs access funding and grants by partnering with financial institutions, government agencies, and private organizations. Provide guidance on how to apply for funding opportunities, connect entrepreneurs with potential investors, and offer support in developing strong business proposals.

- Create mentorship programs: Establish mentorship programs that pair entrepreneurs with experienced mentors who can provide guidance, share industry insights, and offer support. Encourage entrepreneurs to seek mentorship from individuals who have relevant expertise or have successfully started businesses in similar rural contexts.

- Support marketing and digital presence: Assist entrepreneurs in developing their marketing strategies and establishing a strong online presence. Offer guidance on website development, social media marketing, search engine optimization, and other digital marketing techniques. Encourage entrepreneurs to leverage the digital hub's platform to promote their businesses.

- Connect with business support organizations: Collaborate with regional or national business support organizations that can provide additional resources, expertise, and networking opportunities for entrepreneurs. Leverage their programs and services to enhance the support offered within the rural digital hub.

- Monitor progress and provide ongoing support: Continuously monitor the progress of entrepreneurs and provide ongoing support as needed. Offer regular check-ins, feedback sessions, and opportunities for entrepreneurs to share their challenges and successes. Adapt and refine the support services based on the specific needs and feedback from entrepreneurs.

- Celebrate successes and showcase entrepreneurs: Recognize and celebrate the achievements of entrepreneurs who have started successful businesses from the rural digital hub. Highlight their stories, organize events to showcase their products or services, and create opportunities for them to gain visibility and access new markets.

By implementing these strategies, a rural digital hub can provide a nurturing and supportive environment for entrepreneurs, enabling them to start and grow their businesses successfully.

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