


Jacob Rabinow (1910 - 1999)

Jacob Rabinow was an engineer who led a truly prolific career as an inventor. He earned a total of 230 U.S. patents on a variety of mechanical, optical and electrical devices. Among them are the first disc-shaped magnetic storage media for computers (1954), the magnetic particle clutch (1956), the first straight-line phonograph (1959), the first self-regulating clock (1960) and his famous "reading machine" (1960) which was the first to use the "best match" principle and was the basis for the reading, sorting and processing machines used today by banks and post offices. Rabinow was inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame in 2005.



TECHSPOTLIGHT

# 'Mobile Women' of Mongla bridging digital divide

BARNABY SKINNER, back from Mongla

THE remote villages of Mongla are experiencing a mobile phone frenzy. Algae in shrimp farms are disappearing, the pharmacist knows which medication to buy and the Hindu carpenter and his wife can finally talk to somebody about the nasty disease of their guava tree. All thanks to mobile phones.

At the beginning of 2005, the Bangladesh organisation 'Development through Access to Network Resources' (Dnet) selected four women from remote villages, gave them a mobile phone and said: "Bring it to your neighbours. Call us in Dhaka and tell them to ask us anything they want to know about farming, education, health or law."

Ten months on, the Dnet-project 'Mobile Women' has finalised its piloting phase. The project was so successful that the mobile network market leader GrameenPhone has approached Dnet and wants to supply 60,000 women with a mobile phone and set up just as many regional information centres all over the country based on the Dnet model.

Yamin Bakht, GrameenPhone spokes person, says, "We are at a very preliminary stage, but Dnet's project is very impressive. We are interested in picking up the model, yes."

How does this project work? *The Daily Star* spent a day with the mobile woman in Mongla, Nayan Mondol, to see what hat caught GrameenPhone's attention on such a large scale.

Nayan Mondol is 21 years old, she's Hindu and she was all set for a life working in her parent's vegetable garden before she heard about the mobile women project. "I didn't leave home much", she says. Now, where ever she goes, people greet her with a friendly smile and ask: "When will you be visiting us next?"

Mondol is the second mobile woman in Mongla. The first one, Ebika Biswas (29), had



PHOTO: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

The tailor, Dipali Mazumder, finally discusses her daughter's health issues with an expert on the phone.

morning for South Kainmari. The trip means a shaky one-hour van-ride on the neatly cobbled roads that link the 77 villages of Mongla.

She starts her tour of South Kainmari at the village doctor, Ashish Biswas. Sitting in his tight stall, surrounded by medication

minutes he knows what he wants. The health office in Dhaka promises to send him a detailed price list within a week.

Biswas pays by the minute for the call. In total Tk 12. Before the mobile woman service, he would have had to travel to the next largest city Khulna; time consuming and very costly.

Then Mondol goes to see the carpenter Arabunda Bagchi and his wife Mamata. "The guava tree in front of our house is dying. It has these funny white spots and doesn't bear fruit anymore", Arabundi Bagchi says. "An agricultural question", Mondol confirms and hands Mamata the phone. "My wife's better

illiterate. Mondol does the writing for them. However, she complains: "Letters take too long. Especially for health issues. And sometimes, in the case of minor questions, people have forgotten their original question, when I get the answer to them." Dnet have high hopes that this will soon change. By the end of the year GrameenPhone will cover the whole country with EDGE-technology, a step up from simple GSM. AKTEL already has GPRS, also a technology that offers simpler and quicker access to the Internet and email.

Back in Dhaka Ananya Raihan, the director in-charge of all Dnet activities, is very happy with the mobile women and their work. Shortly before leaving for Tunis to present his project at the World Summit of Information Society (WSIS) in Tunis (November 16-17), he said: "It seems, we have finally found a way to bridge the digital divide using a very limited infrastructure." He points out that this service is far more valuable than just setting up an internet connection in a village. It is also a counselling line. Dnet tells people, how to implement the information they can acquire.

However, maintaining the information centres is the central problem. Raihan explains: "We are a research centre, we don't do business. We understand that there is a demand for this service. But we are not yet sure, how to finance the maintenance of the information and our central and regional call centres long term."

Mobile women currently earn Tk 2,200 a month. Then there are the phone and calling costs to take into account. "The current pricing at Tk 4 per minute covers this", Raihan says and adds, "but now we need to find a way to cover the costs of the information centres." This can only be achieved by raising the price of each call substantially. And will villages be able to afford the service then?

Raihan estimates set-up costs of a regional centres gathering at around Tk 30,000, operating costs are Tk 12,000 a month. "We



From left: Ebika Biswas, the first Mobile Women talks to *The Daily Star* about how she convinced the villager to use her service. Nayan Mandal documents the questions while the village doctor speaks to the health desk at the information centre in Dhaka. Nayan Mandal goes around the village to offer her service.

a tough time promoting her service at first. Nobody trusted her and her phone. She, however, made a breakthrough, when she helped shrimp farmers to reduce the algae in their ponds by breeding fish with shrimps. Since then, Biswas and Mondol are welcome everywhere.

Today, dressed in white and blue garments, wearing plastic sandals and golden ear rings Nayan Mondol sets out in the late

against diarrhoea, headache and fever he greets her warmly. He wants to know, if there are any new products against diarrhoea and how expensive they are. Mondol takes out the phone she had carefully stashed in her handbag before the van-ride and says: "A health issue." She looks up the health number in the phone directory and connects the doctor with the information offices in Dhaka. He places his request and within three

Mondol's next stop is at the tailor's. Last week, Dipali Mazumder wanted to know, if their might be any connection between her daughter's headache and hearing problems. Mondol has the answer of Mazumder's request in her bag in a printout from the regional office at Mongla port. Every day the Dhaka office sends answers to more complex questions on CD-ROM, which are then printed and delivered.

at using it", the carpenter says. However, he does get a little nervous as she seems to have picked up chatting on the phone quite quickly. Considering the cost of Tk 4 per minute a costly habit for the Bagchis.

Not all villagers are as easy with the phone as Mamata Bagchi. Their neighbour, Sabita Roy, who has a question concerning her own health, prefers to submit her question in a letter. Half of Mongla's population are

need another year to work out, how to make a business case out of this", says Raihan. "as soon as we have done this, I will be quite happy with GrameenPhone modelling our project."

At present, Raihan believes that implementation of Dnet's model by GrameenPhone should be taken slowly as the business case has not been sorted out as of yet.

PHOTOTECH

## ONE LAPTOP PER CHILD



United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Media Lab's Professor Nicholas Negroponte (R) unveil the "One Laptop per Child" initiative during a press conference at the World Summit on the Internet Society (WSIS) on November 16 at the Kram Palexo in Tunis. The initiative is a partner in ITU's Connect the World Programme, which has been developing a "one-hundred dollar laptop", assisted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Lab, led by Professor Nicholas Negroponte. The computers are designed for use by schoolchildren in developing countries.

PHOTO: AFP



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## Online admission test guide

SYED TASHFIN CHOWDHURY

STUDENTS planning to sit for admission tests in Dhaka University no longer need to buy books offering model tests or go to private tutors. emodeltest.com, the latest online service in town, is allowing the same services at a cheaper rate.

The site, developed by a group of students, offers Model tests for potential students eager for admission to the Medical and other Universities of the nation.

Students can sit for 100 model tests grouped in the two sections of 'Ka' Unit. Students will be able to view their scores and mistakes instantaneously after taking their re-tests.

For the benefit of the students and to get them acquainted to the system, a free model test is already available at the site. The other 100 Model tests can be purchased by any examinee through a card at a price of Tk 1,000.

The cards, which has been distributed to a number of stationary stores in Gulshan 2 Intersection, Shantinagar, Farmgate and Uttara, contains unique Personal Identification Number (PIN) and ID. Through these essential keys, an examinee can log into his account and sit for the exams at his convenience.

There are 100 questions for Medical model tests and 120 for the other section. The model

tests focused toward Medical examinees are timed at 1 hour while the exam for the other sections has been timed at 1 hour 30 minutes.

The tests were prepared by two groups of students. The model tests for the medical sections were prepared, selected and arranged by Tuhin Talukder, Raisul Islam Parag, Sajjad Samad, who are all in their 5<sup>th</sup> year and Doctors Rubel and Korobi.

The other group consists of 2<sup>nd</sup> year students like Mustaqim Billah, Rustam Bapari, Ayub Sarkar, Rezaul Karim and 3<sup>rd</sup> year students Sami Farid Chowdhury and Tushtar Kamal of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet).

Saifuddin Md. Tarik, Assistant Professor of the Computer Science and Engineering Department of Dhaka University conducted and was in charge of the overall administration of the project.

"A question bank was created based on the different chapters. Standard questions were selected from these and prepared into five different protocols," said the Assistant Professor, while discussing about thee-tests.

The system is compatible with Windows XP and Internet Explorer. XP users can download fonts from the site and into their fonts folder, if any visual problems are encountered.

TECHNEWS

SOFTTEXPO 2005

## Country's largest software gala starts Nov 27

STARTECH DESK

SOFTTEXPO, the biggest showcase for software products, ICT enabled services (ITES) and ICT systems solutions in Bangladesh will start from November 27 at the Bangladesh China Friendship Conference Centre, Dhaka.

This was announced at a press conference on November 16 at a city hotel by the President of Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services (Basis) Sarwar Alam and convener of SOFTTEXPO 2005 Syed Faruque Ahmed.

Basis, the largest representative trade body of Software and ITES industry in the country will organise this mega exposition while GrameenPhone Ltd, the largest telecommunications company in the country, will be the main sponsor of the event. SOFTTEXPO 2005 will continue upto December 01, 2005.

More than 125 companies with more than 180 stalls will be participating in the 5-day event. Over 100,000 visitors and delegates are expected to visit the exposition and the number of foreign participants is also

expected to be more than last year, including over 50 representatives of European companies looking for ICT partnerships and participating in seminars and workshops.



SOFTTEXPO 2005 will also play host to a number of special programs that will take place during the exposition like ICT Innovation Search Program, IT Job Fair, Best IT Use Awards -- 2005, Software Product Catalogue 2006 and IT Buyer's Database. A number of seminar and workshops will also take place during SOFTTEXPO 2005, where more than 15 international IT experts from Europe, North America and Asia will share their expert views with the key government policy-makers, head of development agencies, leading academician, industry leaders, head of financial organisation, entrepreneurs and ICT professionals.