eKrishok
Farmers wise up online

NAHID AKHTER

A big chunk on the map of Bangladesh happens to comprise of rural areas. Thus, the dream of a 'Digital Bangladesh' can never be achieved by leaving behind the interests of our rural co-habitants. Everyone has the right to information and development. But Bangladesh Institute of ICT in Development (BIID) took the provision of this right one step further by providing them with a very modern solution to the problems of our rural farmers by launching their e-krishok campaign. The campaign provides farmers with information and advisory services, so that the farmers can increase their income as well as generate new sources of income.

Bangladeshi farmers have to go through numerous hardships. Natural calamities cannot be avoided. However, if the farmer knew when to expect one and thereby take appropriate preventive measures, maybe some of his crops could be saved. Besides natural calamities, he is always running the risk of crop infestations and rainfall that is either too low or too high, thereby producing poor yields. Due to poor education, many farmers may be following the practices of his fore-fathers blindly, without looking for better agricultural methods or practices.

Without proper information, a farmer whose crops have been infested by pests, for example, would think that this is the end and that his crops are only destined to die. This would mean a bad income that year, and no food for his family.

So what if this farmer was armed with easy access to the correct information at the correct time? This could lighten his load by ridding him of numerous uncertainties during his agricultural process and thereby raise his family's living standards. A better living standard for the farmers would mean a more developed Bangladesh. This is the prime aim of the e-Krishok campaign.

Through e-Krishok, farmers can get information and advice not just on agricultural issues, but also on other issues relevant to the Bangladeshi farmer, like animal husbandry, fisheries, rural cottage industry and handicrafts.

BIID, with support from UNDP, has teamed up with Grameenphone by setting up Community Information Centres all over the country. In the pilot phase, 10 Centres had been opened in various locations, but the aim is to scale this up to more than 1000 locations in the country.

So how does this e-krishok campaign work? When a farmer faces a problem or needs information relating to an agricultural or animal husbandry issue, he only has to visit his nearest community information center and using the e-Krishok agricultural services, the farmer can get reliable and correct information as to what he should do. The farmer has to inform the entrepreneur of the CIC the nature of his problem or the kind of information he is looking for. The entrepreneur then searches for the solution on http://www.ruralinfobd.com or if the solution is not available there, he e-mails the information of the problem to the agricultural expert of e-Krishok. The agricultural expert will get back to him with a solution via an e-mail. This way, the farmer can get a solution to his problem within a 24 hour time span.

BIID is also engaged in the process to build the capacity of the CIC entrepreneurs to provide better services and facilities to the customers thereby adding value to the user experience of the customers. The District Commissioner Offices are leading the initiative of training on using the Computer, Internet and all other ICTs with the support of a 150 trainers pool. More and more people are getting trained on how they will run their telecentre and what will be their role. This again would help in raising employment opportunities in the rural areas.

The achievements of this campaign are after setting up more than 100 information centres were as follows:

Around 1400 farmers could be reached either directly or indirectly through the campaign. They now have around 1200 registered members. A total of around 6000 queries of framers have been handled by the CICs and around 1800 farmers have reported to have benefited from applying the information or advice of the CICs.

Initially, it is but natural for the farmers to be cautious and mistrustful of anything new, especially something that they do not understand. However, the e-Krishok campaign has shown the farmers that they can rely on ICT to improve their livelihoods through better techniques and practices.

Here's to a greener 'Digital Bangladesh'.

Facebook adds location-sharing feature

AFP, San Francisco

Facebook on Wednesday threw the switch on a new feature that lets US members of the social networking service share their whereabouts with friends while on the move.

Facebook Places marks the firm's hotly anticipated first step into "location-based" services that have been catching on with people who own smartphones equipped with satellite position tracking capabilities.

"Starting today, you can immediately tell people about that favorite spot with Facebook Places," said Places product manager Michael Eyal Sharon.

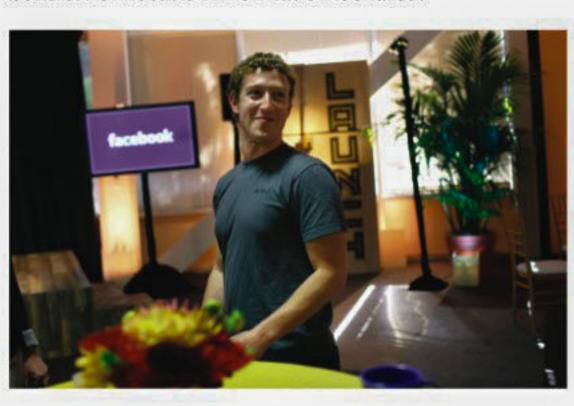"You can share where you are and the friends you're with in real time from your mobile device."

Facebook members can "check-in" at restaurants, bars, or other social venues and let their friends at the social network instantly know where they are and with whom.

A Places application for iPhone handsets was released, and social network members with smartphones with Web browser software that supports geo-location and HTML5 could use Places at the mobile website touch.facebook.com.

"If you are not in the US you can still see if friends are using it here but you will not be able to check-in," Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg said at a festive Places launch event at the firm's headquarters in Northern California.

Facebook said it plans to eventually extend the feature to all smartphones and to the social networks more than 500 million members worldwide.

As if anticipating backlash that seems to come with each change at Facebook, executives and engineers there stressed that privacy was being respected and that users control how location information is shared.

Diaz tops list of riskiest celeb searches

AP, San Francisco

If you're looking for Cameron Diaz, Julia Roberts or Jessica Biel online, look out!

The movie stars top the latest list of the most dangerous celebrities to search for online, according to new research by computer-security software maker McAfee Inc.

It's far from an Oscar, but landing atop McAfee's annual list carries a distinction all its own: It means that criminals believe those celebs are the perfect lures to sucker people into visiting malicious websites.

Clicking onto strange sites is sketchy to begin with. But many people do, and their computers get infected. Once a computer is infected, criminals can steal victims' online banking passwords, e-mail passwords, and do other kinds of nasty deeds.

Attaching famous people's names to malicious sites is a well-worn ruse, to fool people looking at search results into thinking they're heading to a legitimate site.

The other most-dangerous celebrities to look for online, according to McAfee, are Gisele Bundchen, Brad Pitt, Adriana Lima, Jennifer Love Hewitt, Nicole Kidman, Tom Cruise, Heidi Klum, Penelope Cruz and Anna Paquin.

McAfee performed its tests in July using the company's technology for identifying dangerous websites. The rankings measure the likelihood that someone looking for things such as photos and videos of those celebrities would land on a malicious site.

ZWCAD now available in local market

IT.TELECOM DESK

Star Computer System Limited, authorised distributer of ZWCAD software in Bangladesh, recently announced the availability of licensed ZWCAD 2010 software in an affordable price.
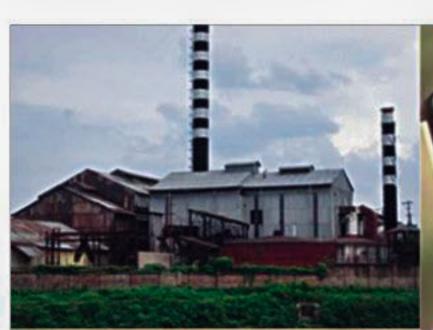
ZWCAD is a 3D modeling tool for architects and interior designers.

With this licensed product users will be able to switch files from AutoCAD to ZWCAD and vice-versa without hiccups.

Star Computer System also provides demo software to evaluate the product before buying it.

National e-content and ICT4D Award 2010 winner

ePurjee ends sugarcane farmers' misery

ADIL MAHMOOD

This week, we focus on the winner of the e-enterprise and livelihood category.

Farmers of the subcontinent have started to grow sugarcane commercially since the colonial era and the process of procuring sugarcane, founded by the British, was a bit messy and lengthy since then.

The then governments gave estimations to the farmers according to the capacity of their lands through a 'Purjee'- a hand-written purchase order- and the system had not been improved till 2008 when there are around 2.5 lakh sugarcane farmers in the country.

'Purjee' is a legal permit for the sugarcane growers given by the sugar mill, which help them to supply produces and receive payment against it.

A 'Purjee' validity remains only for three days in which growers must supply their produces to the sugar mills. The criticality of this period gives certain groups of people an opportunity to foster corruption, thus depriving the growers of their rights to access information.

Besides, the growers need to wait in the mill gate for several days after which the mill management buy their crop. As a result, the sugarcane lose its weight reducing returns for the farmers.

Against the backdrop of various sufferings of the farmers, Forhad Zahid Shaikh, a visionary system analyst of the Access to Information (A2I) Programme at Prime Minister's Office, realised the urgency of improving the existing system in 2008.

In his voice, "I have a first-hand experience of how sugarcane farmers suffer during the harvesting".

"I wanted to do help the farmers in a way that serves the best and then the idea of digitising the 'Purjee' system came to my mind", said Shaikh.

The Digital Sugarcane Procurement and Development System or Digital Purjee Information Service, a joint initiative of A2I programme and Bangladesh Sugar and Food Industries Corporation (BSFIC) was preliminarily introduced in two sugar mills out of 15 across the country -- Faridpur and Mobarakganj sugar mills.

The SMS based "Purjee Management System" sends text messages from authorise centre of the sugar mills to the listed growers' mobile phone, notifying them the beginning of the harvesting season in late October.

More importantly, the system relieves the farmers from queuing in front of the sugar mills.

"In case of emergency, like information of Purjee cancellation, stoppage of cane supply or inclement weather, the notifying system is very efficient, cost and time effective", Shaikh stated.

Shahidul Islam, a Sugarcane grower of Magura said, "This service not only acted as a confirmation of Purjee issuance, but also reduced our challenges in supplying Sugarcane on time."

"We are going to implement the system in all sugar mills from October this year. And we are taking all the field level preparations right now", Shaikh told this reporter.

Hats off to A2I and BSFIC for the initiative.

TECHPHOTO

Gamescom

A woman plays with a playstation at their exhibition stand at the Gamescom 2010 fair in Cologne August 18. The Gamescom convention, Europe's largest video games trade fair, runs from August 18 to August 22.

PHOTO: AFP