



**WINNER OF UNITED NATIONS
PUBLIC SERVICE AWARDS**

Information Technology Authority
Sultanate of Oman



We have always emphasised the importance of learning and knowledge and we have always been open to the adoption of new developments in this field. Information technology and communications have now become the main elements that move forward the development process in this third millennium; therefore, we have accorded our attention to finding a national strategy to develop the skills and abilities of citizens in this domain with the aim of further developing e-government services. We are closely following the important steps that we have made in this regard. We call upon all government institutions to speedily enhance their performance, and to facilitate their services, by applying digital technology in order to usher the Sultanate into the constantly evolving spheres for applying knowledge.



His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said.



Introduction:

The Digital Oman Strategy/e.oman strategy outlines the blueprint for several key IT initiatives in the Sultanate of Oman which aim to empower the citizens by providing meaningful interaction through eServices. The e.oman strategy addresses eGovernment as well as Digital Society issues. It aims to create an effective government-community-citizen infrastructure that provides better public services to its people. Through eServices, the government seeks new and innovative ways to better engage and interact with citizens in the delivery of public service. Using the latest Information Technology solutions, citizens would be able to view information, pay bills, apply for services and monitor application status right in the comfort of their own homes, offices and from their mobile devices. Businesses could also reach out to the global marketplace and compete effectively and efficiently. The eServices would truly transform the way citizens interact and transact with the government. However, the Information Technology Authority (ITA) faced a mammoth task in the following areas.



Challenges:

The most important challenge of all was that of public awareness. Without clear understanding on the benefits and the consequences of the e.oman strategy and its related eServices, the target users would not be able to appreciate the need to be IT literate and to use those eServices. The social groups include the community at large, businesses, private sector workforce, civil servants and students as well. These were the key problems faced by ITA in transforming the Sultanate into an information society. Without a comprehensive public awareness programme in the e.oman strategy and its benefits to the country, the target audience would not be able to adopt the e.oman vision and be IT-savvy to meet the demand of the knowledge-based economy.



Key strategy in promoting the e.oman strategy

The key strategy in promoting the e.oman strategy is through conducting public awareness and communication programmes to reach out to the various strata of the society in collaboration with the operational divisions. Since 2006, ITA has launched, organized and participated in more 220 events locally and regionally to communicate e.oman strategy and its projects and initiatives. The following strategies are used to reach out to the community and masses throughout the Sultanate:

- e.oman Roadshow to various parts of the regions, governorates and wilayats (municipalities). Oman has 8 regions and is sub-divided into 67 wilayats. The aim of the road show was to drive home the importance of being IT-literate and how citizens can be empowered in the digital economy. e.oman awareness roadshows enabled ITA to reach out to communities in Oman through information and education on the use of IT and the progress of e.oman initiatives.
- Promoting eCulture Programmes which aimed to increase the use of electronic services and e.oman initiatives in the way the citizens work, live, learn and play. Some key initiatives include cyber security, ePurse, ePayment, etc.

- Conferences and Exhibitions – ITA took this opportunity to showcase all the new eServices developed by the various government ministries and organizations and educate the citizens on how to use these services to communicate, transform and transact in this knowledge-based economy. Such events present unique opportunities to reach out to the public and deliver e.oman messages in a customised manner to focus groups within the target audience.
- Key Festivals in the Country – Such festivals usually attracted thousands of citizens from all walks of life. Hence, amid such festivities, ITA took the opportunity to spread the e.oman strategy and its projects and initiatives to the masses.
- World Telecommunication and Information Society Day – Since 2006, Oman has been celebrating the World Telecommunication and Information Society Day on 17th May as per the year's theme to spread awareness in the society. During such events, ITA focused on the theme for each year and adapted it to the overall e.oman strategy. Such events indicate the emphasis that the world has placed, in the urgency to transform countries and societies to embrace ICT in a knowledge-based economy or remain lagging behind.
- Public launches of electronic services usually provided an open platform for target users to congregate and witness how such services would improve the way of life. During such launches, ITA also used its communication mandate to reach out and educate the masses on the e.oman strategy, showcasing key initiatives which will transform their way of life. The launch of the Official eGovernment Services Portal for example showed that citizens can now interact, transact and communicate with any government agency through the G2C services.
- Information Kiosks at public places – The ITA facilitated the installation of information kiosks at major malls and public access areas to bring electronic services closer to the citizens. Currently a total 5 kiosks have been installed in public places.
- Award and Competitions – Such strategies are effective in encouraging the adaption of electronic services and web presence in the Sultanate. The most prestigious award is the HM Award which started in 2010.
- Publications in local and regional press, televisions and internet – Various forms of media used to communicate e.oman messages are well-utilized and effectively conveyed the message to the target audience.



Capacity Building

The Sultanate's educational sector has made impressive progress, maintaining traditional values while embracing the science and culture of the modern world. For more than three decades education has been a priority sector for the government, taking the Sultanate from the era of the "kuttab" (traditional Qur'an school) often conducted under the shade of a tree to the high tech university age. Literacy rate among 15-25 age range is at 88%, as per 2010 census results. Education is free and available to all Omanis. During the school year 2009-2010, there were 553,000 students in Oman's 1,052 government schools, staffed by some 42,000 teachers.

The Ministry of Education also regards the private education sector as being within its remit and monitors the country's private schools regularly to ensure they comply with standards and regulations. Today there are 174 private schools with 37,000 students and 2,484 teachers. Under the revised education system, Information Technology is incorporated into the curriculum. Some 292 schools in various parts of the country are now equipped with a modern wireless system, giving students easy access to computer facilities and a computer network and creating links between students, teachers and the electronic course syllabus. Today 62% of schools have internet facilities, some with ADSL/Broadband, and students can obtain their general certificate examination results via the internet.



ICT in Education and Training

Information Technology is now taught in all schools as a separate subject from Grade 1 to Grade 10 in Basic Education. In Grade 11, the ICDL (International Computer Driving License) is a required course and each student has the opportunity to learn IT skills. There are units in many subjects that require application through exercises in IT. Students in the Basic Education program make use of the Learning Resource Centres at their schools to practice their IT skills. Students in Grades 5 to 9 of Basic Education have access to computer laboratories where both PCs and laptops are available.

Education plays a critical role in the two aims of e.oman: developing awareness and building capacity. The majority of the Sultanate's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) offer programs in IT or Computer Science, with Sultan Qaboos University and the Ministry of Higher Education Colleges of Applied Sciences, as well as many private universities and colleges, offering major or degrees in IT. And there are two exclusively technology-oriented colleges, namely the Middle East College of Information Technology (MECIT) and the new Oman-German University of Technology. A total of 15 Institutes of Higher Learning in Oman provide IT and ICT-related programs.



ICT for Special Needs Education

The Petroleum Development of Oman funded the setting up of a state-of-the-art computer facility at the Al Wafa Technical Centre at Omar Ibn al Khatab Institute for visually impaired. The fully equipped computer laboratory serves the educational needs of the visually impaired students using the latest trends in hardware and software including the Text-to-Speech (TTS) technology, which displays Arabic text in Braille language. So far, 19 students have been trained on content enlargement to read books and documents and another 123 students and 7 teachers are trained on the Super Nova (TTS) where they learn to write using the keyboard. Technology is providing new opportunities for the visually impaired to learn, to communicate and to work.

It provides them with a tool that allows them to fulfill their potentials. ITA has donated laptops with visual software to 20 high school graduates of Omar Ibn Khatab School to pursue their higher studies.



Women in Technology Program

The Women in Technology program organized by the Omani Women’s Association – Muscat (OWAN), along with Microsoft and the Institute of International Education, has trained and certified a total of 1,163 women with 33 trainers at 11 centers across the Sultanate. The program delivers IT training through Microsoft’s Unlimited Potential (UP) curriculum alongside Professional Development workshops that aim to improve women’s standard of living and quality of life, by building their knowledge and skills and eliminating illiteracy in information technology (IT).



Training programmes for capacity building in the use of ICT

The National IT Training & Awareness Framework (NITTA) initiative is a governmental nation-wide e.oman initiative aimed at developing Information Communication Technology skills and capability and, increasing ICT awareness and proficiency within the Government, the community and the private sector. The NITTA Framework covers a wide range of ICT competency and skills development projects. Based on the NITTA Framework, ITA has implemented the following projects.



Government IT Training & Certification in IT (GITTC)

ITA selected Certiport Internet and Computing Core Certification (IC³) for nationwide implementation. The Government IT Training and Certification program (GITTC) was formally sealed with a contract between the ITA and Certiport Inc. and commenced its training schedule at the end of February 2009. This contract is to train about 93,507 civil employees in cooperation with the Ministry of Civil Service (MoCS) and the Ministry of Education (MoE) over a period of three years. The project is designed to improve the skills and performance of the civil servants, empower them with ICT knowledge and skills to enable delivery of public sector e-services and most importantly, prepare them for the knowledge-based economy. The course is conducted in 3 phases: Phase 1 – trainees will undergo qualification exams to determine their entry level for the course; Phase 2 – trainees will be trained on the various prescribed modules; and, Phase 3 – trainees will take the certification examinations. As of December 2010, a total of 34,356 civil servants had attended the qualification examinations, 21,678 attended the training and 9,910 attained the IC3 certifications.



The Community IT Training Project

Community Knowledge Centers (CKCs) are the key to Community IT Training project. A total of 4,984 participants have been trained in Salalah, Muscat, Sur and Sohar. The CKC participants received digital literacy certification, which is based on Microsoft's Unlimited Potential Curriculum. The ITA collaborates synergistically with both the Government and private institutions to open new CKCs since ITA aims to establish a total of 25 CKCs, to ensure the training of at least 60,000 nationals during the next 3 – 5 years through such partnerships. In addition, ITA in collaboration with the Omani Women Association (OWA) will set-up another 9 CKCs in OWA premises. The aim of this project is to train about 1,890 women by the end of 2011 in basic ICT skills. The centers have also trained and qualified 18 Omani female trainers from the Omani Women's Associations.

By engaging the private sector and non-government organisations to support the development of the Community Knowledge Centers (CKCs), the ITA ensures that the CKC will become the center of learning in the various regions throughout the Sultanate. Harnessing the support of the Wali (Mayor) in each region and district, ITA worked with regional administrative structure to eradicate digital illiteracy in each region. Digital literacy is one of the key visions of the e.oman which has followed closely the WSIS declaration. Empowering citizens with ICT is another sacred mission which is embodied in the deliverance of electronic services at all levels and in all aspects of living, learning, working and entertainment.



e.oman awareness events

Another key component of capacity building is the on-going e.oman awareness programmes. An integrated ongoing e.oman awareness campaign consists of seminars, presentations and programmes conducted across the Sultanate. ITA targets all segments of the society to enhance awareness of government eServices, the importance of IT, opportunities to benefit from IT and encourage individuals to gain digital literacy skills. Face to face interaction with the community is possible by participating in public events such as Muscat Festival, Khareef Salalah Festival, and COMEX. The thematic roadshows provide awareness on digital literacy, promoting digital culture and, as the maturity of e.oman initiatives progresses, the eLifestyle theme is added. These roadshows include a series of educational sessions on averting online security risks, eLaw protection, ePayment and eLearning services for the public and private sectors and industry in general.



Through awareness programmes and skill-building workshops, ITA raises public awareness about the secured use of information communication technologies (ICT), progress of e.oman projects and the benefits they are to bring for the community. With a special focus on children and women, ITA also hosted a series of plays and competitions. The plays depicted the newly emerging digital culture and the benefits of using technology in various walks of life. During the events, weekly raffle draws were also conducted through television programmes and laptops were given away as prizes especially to the children. The IT Talent corner in the family village created during the roadshows was equipped with computers loaded with interactive software especially for the children to interact and learn.

In addition, since 2006, Oman has been celebrating the World Information Society Day on 17th May as per the theme each year to spread awareness in the society. During such event, ITA focused on the theme for each year and adapted it to the overall e.oman strategy.

- I. 2007 – ‘Empower every citizen with ICT’. This was the ‘year in which the first series of e.oman awareness campaign was launched. The campaign included several roadshows were organized in different regions of Oman. Between May 2006 and February 2007, a total of 11,225 citizens participated in the roadshows.

- II. 2008 – ‘Connecting Persons with Disabilities: ICT Opportunities for All’. With the focus on meeting the ICT needs of persons with disabilities, ITA addressed the special requirements of disabled people. The visually-challenged were given laptops, screen-reading software and training during the events.
- III. 2009 – ‘Protecting Children in Cyber Space’. ITA visited several schools to spread awareness about protecting children in cyberspace and produced pamphlets and held workshops for students and their parents. Students from Ministry of Education schools contributed their efforts in conveying the need to surf, communicate and transact online safely.
- IV. 2010 – ‘Better City, Better Life with ICTs’. ICTs (Information Communication Technologies) provide solutions to many of the problems facing cities. There was a short film shown in which the many practical applications of ICTs in Oman were outlined.

Also on the agenda were a number of creative yet very functional student and presentations. One such presentation was by a group of students from Al Zahra Al Soqtria School from the Al Sharqiya region in Oman. Their project, titled ‘Safe City’, has already won accolades across the GCC region, having won 1st place at a competition in Kuwait. ITA’s e.oman initiatives such as the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Manpower were both recipients of the prestigious 2010 United Nations Public Service Awards (UNPSA). These projects are testimonies to the emphasis given in the development of a knowledge-based economy. In addition, ITA also held the Web Accessibility Workshop to enhance disabled children’s learning process.

The workshop allowed teachers to acquire knowledge on how to teach disabled children to use ICT tools so that these children can also interact, communicate and eventually transact using the web just like any other citizens in a knowledge-based economy. The National PC initiative aims to address two main issues in ITA’s strategy, namely, capacity building and PC penetration. The program intends to build capacity in the general population by creating a PC bundle offer that is affordable, provides value and includes a basic training module. The latter is designed to get the citizen off to a ‘fast start’ in his ability to use the core system and the Internet and in doing so increase the PC penetration rate.



PC Initiatives

In Feb 2011, 1,541 laptop bundles were distributed to the beneficiaries of the social welfare in a number of wilayats in the Sultanate as part of the Royal Grant in Support of e.oman, bestowed by HM Sultan Qaboos. This grant will enable the different categories and segments of the society to use computers and internet and to promote their participation in the building of Oman's Digital Society. A total of 3,395 PCs were distributed by end Feb 2011 to the beneficiaries of the social welfare. In line with the PC Initiative, Omantel also offered free-of-charge internet services to the recipients of the Royal Grant. It will also provide them with free modems and exempt them from the internet connection fees and monthly charges estimated at 12 Rials. This is in addition to granting a monthly 1 GB free download service for families and students belonging to the social welfare category for a period of one year. Higher education students and teachers will also benefit from the Royal Grant will also receive the same for a period of three months.

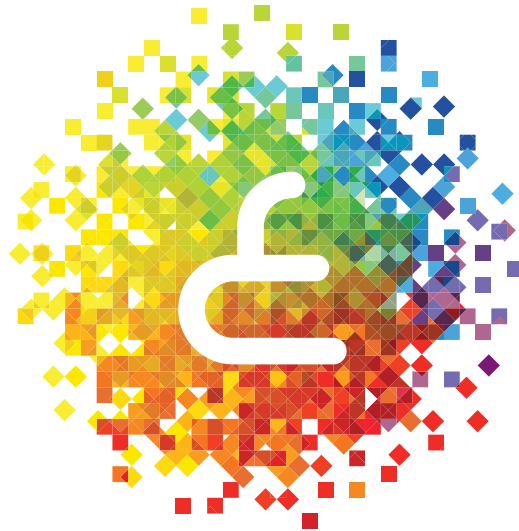
Through the PC Initiative, every strata of society in Oman will have access to a computer and the internet, enabling them to be able to interact, transact and communicate effectively in a digital society.



Accessibility Workshops for Disabled Children

ITA also works closely with the Association for Disabled Children. ITA held the Accessibility Workshop in November 2010 to enhance disabled children's learning process. The workshop allowed teachers to acquire knowledge on how to teach disabled children to use ICT tools so that these children can also interact, communicate and eventually transact using the web just like any other citizens in a knowledge based economy.

It is ITA's belief that every effort is made to provide teachers with a wide range of ICT skills and competencies to assist special needs children. ITA has a long-range plan for the Association for Disabled Children to equip them with proper ICT tools and skills that can be used for the rest of his/her life in an effort to fully integrate with society and become an equal member of society. The success of the first workshop has enabled ITA to conduct another 3 more Web Accessibility Workshops in the 1st Quarter of 2011.



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