

Time to get wired

Newfoundland has the lowest Internet usage in the country, and needs high-speed access. Some worry those twin factors could impede the province's growth.

BY STEVE BARTLETT, The Express

Newfoundlanders are among the Canadians least likely to drive the information highway, a recent Statistics Canada paper says. And that, some worry, may impede this province's future growth.

The Statistics Canada report, Changing Our Ways: Why and How Canadians Use the Internet, states that this province shares the title of lowest Internet usage with New Brunswick.

From January to December 2000, 44 per cent of residents in those two Atlantic provinces went on-line at home, work, or somewhere else, the report says.

British Columbia and Alberta had the highest number of users, at 61 per cent apiece.

Ontario was third-highest, slightly over the national 53 per cent average.

Not everyone in Newfoundland buys the findings of the report, released in late March.

Jack Botsford is the president and CEO of Operation ONLINE, a not-for-profit entity established to spur Newfoundland's information technology sector.

"I'm a little bit skeptical," he says of the report.

Through his work, Botsford often speaks to school groups.

He always asks how many students have home Internet access, and says it is common for everyone to raise their hands.

"I think (the number of users) could be higher," says Botsford, noting Newfoundland was one of the first provinces to get schools on-line.

"I'm a little bit skeptical that the numbers are not higher than what the report said, at least now in 2001."

But the report's size and timing likely lends to its accuracy.

Its author, Heather Dryburgh, says that, of the 25,090 Canadians asked about Internet use during the 2000 General Social Survey, 1,536 were from Newfoundland.

As well, it was compiled just a few months ago.

According to Statistics Canada, the main reasons non-users don't go on-line are cost and lack of access to computers and/or the 'Net.

Across the country, the results show, these factors are more significant in rural areas.

This is especially relevant in this province.

"The gap (between rural and urban users) seems to be bigger in Newfoundland," notes Dryburgh.

Elizabeth Murphy is an associate professor of education at Memorial University.

Technology is among her areas of expertise, and she finds the Statistics Canada study revealing.

"It also makes perfect sense," says Murphy, who writes a technology column for The Express Monthly Extra.

She notes that the three provinces with the highest Internet usage have the highest average income and are above Canada's mean education.

"So (in Newfoundland) we have low income and low education, yet high income and high education are better predictors (of Internet usage)," explains Murphy.

The educator considers the situation somewhat of a "catch-22."

"The lower your income and the lower your education, the less likely you are to use to Internet," she elaborates.

"But yet having access to the Internet can increase your education and your employment opportunities... The thing is, if we don't have access, then how are we ever going to hope to increase our income levels and levels of education?"

Botsford agrees, calling the educational options provided by the Internet "critical."

But affordable access may not be good enough.

With technology seeming to evolve -- and transmit -- at the speed of light, simply connecting will not help Newfoundlanders fully avail of the Internet's opportunities.

What's required -- both Murphy, Botsford, and many others say -- is high-speed access, which is not readily available across the province.

"In Newfoundland, if you want to have high-speed access, you need to live in a major city," says Murphy.

"If you live in a rural area, you're not going to get it. Whether or not you'll get it ever, I don't know."

A big factor in bringing high-speed -- or broadband, as it's known -- access to rural areas is cost.

Murphy figures Newfoundland is one of the most expensive places in the country to provide cutting-edge Internet services.

"It's just like building roads here," she says.

"It's more expensive to build roads here than it is anywhere else. You've got so many communities spread over such a large area, and you've got such dispersion of the population."

The issue of who should fund better Internet access -- or close the "digital divide" -- was part of the Statistics Canada paper.

People in Newfoundland, more than in any other province, suggest the federal government is responsible.

"Newfoundlanders who express a view are more likely than those from other provinces to believe the federal government is responsible (for removing barriers to Internet access)," the report reads.

The feds do have initiatives that encourage and promote Internet usage, but arguably too few know of the projects.

There is the Community Access Program, a 1995 plan that aimed to make Canada the most connected country on Earth by 2001.

That joint federal-provincial project aimed to establish 160 rural and urban Internet centres in Newfoundland by March 31.

Another federal project is the National Broadband Task Force, announced by federal Industry Minister, and Newfoundland cabinet rep, Brian Tobin, in January.

According to the kick-off release, the task force "intends to advise government on how to make high-speed broadband Internet services available to all Canadians by 2004."

Based on the results of a March workshop, Botsford and a group of Newfoundland stakeholders made a submission to the national task force in April.

While he applauds the federal initiative, Botsford says he tells people in small communities that, when it comes to high-speed access, they may be the masters of their own destiny.

"If you sit and wait for the carriers to do it for you or if you wait for government to sort you out, you'll wait for a long time," he says.

"There are very interesting examples right across Canada of communities taking new approaches; borrowing or using a government grant to buy the equipment and then leasing it back to the carrier or, in some cases, making it co-operative."

Murphy doesn't feel wiring Newfoundland is solely the responsibility of government, nor just the responsibility of businesses. She does have a suggestion though, and it involves both.

"When a company applies to the federal government for a licence to deliver wireless or some type of broadband access... there can be (a) requirement attached to that licence," Murphy suggests.

"Saying things like, 'OK, 10 or 15 per cent of your licensing fees have to be used to provide access in areas where there is not a good rate of return.' "

According to Murphy, one route Newfoundland could take is wireless Internet.

Botsford also feels wireless is an option, and notes a group in Port aux Basques uses the technology with some success.

But he cautions, wireless is not the be-all and end-all.

"Wireless is not the final answer," he says, "but it is an answer. It's an interim measure until communities get what they are ultimately going to need, which is fibre."

Having more fibre in Newfoundland's technology diet is vital to economic growth too.

With computer applications playing such a crucial role in today's business world, Murphy suggests there won't be an incentive for businesses to establish in Newfoundland if the digital infrastructure is not there.

Botsford echoes her sentiments.

"It is an issue of competitiveness from the learning aspects, from the sense of business growth through e-commerce, and also there's a whole IT sector growth aspect itself," he says.

"Companies are growing... through software development, and all of that requires Internet connectivity and more and more of it."

Botsford considers it "very important" to get high-speed access in outport communities. He says it is crucial in attracting new business.

"If you don't build it," he theorizes, "they will definitely not come."

Botsford could not provide specific examples of businesses which did not set up in Newfoundland due to a lack of high-speed Internet.

But he knows of "discussions of projects in places like Clarenville which may have slipped away because the right connectivity wasn't there."

To ensure the province takes the right on-ramp to the information highway, Botsford sees the need for an Internet bureaucrat.

"I strongly believe government needs to put in place a chief information officer, responsible for policy around IT, connectivity, and also around procurement," he says.

As the Newfoundland public learns more about issues surrounding connectivity, Murphy knows there will be detractors.

She sees technology as a means of overcoming the province's isolation, and hopes the importance of the high-speed access transmits to the nay-sayers.

"A lot of people are going to say, 'Forget it. Can we afford in Newfoundland, where some communities don't have sewage and roads, to put in place this big digital infrastructure? You can also ask this question: 'Can we afford not to do it?'"

"Years ago, we worried about getting roads built," Murphy continues. "Maybe today, it's the same thing. These are the roads that have (to) be built, but they are not paved with asphalt."

"I'm concerned about, and I care about, the future. And I see an opportunity here. I see an opportunity as well for us to miss the boat and that really scares me. I hope we can get it together."