



**Microsoft Unlimited Potential
Case Study: Bringing the last
mile closer**



Bringing the last mile closer

The Common Services Center (CSC), a business process outsourcing (BPO) unit adjacent to a secondary school in Thirukkuvalai village in the Maiyladhurai District of Tamil Nadu, is a gleaming new structure with five computers and the most modern software. CSC offers Internet access and video chat. Village women who cannot read or write can use computers to talk to their husbands working abroad. Students who have dreamt of becoming “techies” can go to CSC to build their computer skills.

Running the center is D Sugitha, 24, a bright, articulate young woman who studied and worked in bigger cities before she returned to her village with an urge to contribute to her community. The rural BPO initiative inspires her—and through her, several others in the village—to dream big. At the same time, rural BPOs give them a means of realizing their dreams.

The rural BPO initiative was envisioned by the Telecommunications and Networking group (TeNeT), a faculty think tank at the Indian Institute of Technology Madras (IIT-M). One of the many TeNeT projects aimed at using information and communications technology (ICT) in rural communities, this initiative works toward building the rural equivalent of the hugely successful urban Indian BPOs, which have American and European clients. At rural BPO units such as Sugitha’s, the clients are urban enterprises in India. The employees are local villagers, who benefit from the opportunity to generate income and enhance their skills.

The rural BPO program is implemented by DesiCrew Solutions Pvt. Ltd., a company supported and funded by TeNeT. The dynamic and energetic team at DesiCrew works tirelessly to negotiate with urban clients and procure work for their BPOs. DesiCrew acts as a one-point contact for the client and takes responsibility for assuring quality and delivery within the required timelines. Though work at Sugitha’s center began only one month ago, large volumes of work have already been completed.

One of Sugitha’s first assignments was the computerization of civic records such as births and deaths, land-holding certificates, and income certificates of people from 34 villages of the district. Eight young women worked 8-hour



The employees are local villagers, who benefit from the opportunity to generate income and enhance their skills.



days to digitize 17,000 records in just 13 days. At the end of the activity, each woman took home Rs 1,300 (US\$30) to surprised and proud families.

These women became icons of the community—examples of the power that ICT has to not only provide economic gain but also to build social status and change power and hierarchy equations.

“I have to increase my speed and get more work so that I can earn more,” says Sudha, one of the employees at the BPO. She supports her widowed mother with her earnings and also sets aside money for insurance and savings.

Kavitha, 25, is the mother of two small children. Her husband is a construction worker. Kavitha uses half her earnings to run the household, and the rest she saves in a bank. Her husband is happy to have an educated, working wife. “That is real development for this village,” explains Sugitha. Kavitha works the morning shift from 10 am–3 Pm so that she can spend the rest of the day with her family.

And then there is Themizhselvi, 18, who has saved Rs 1,000 (US\$23) from her earnings at the BPO. She plans to use this money to study nursing, her chosen profession.

Sugitha and her team are proof of a belief that DesiCrew, IIT-M, and their partner Microsoft all hold firmly—that ICT can transform lives beyond skill-building and earning opportunities. These organizations think that this revolution is not about products and technology alone, but also about changes in attitudes, perceptions, and gender and class biases.

For Microsoft, this is the motivation behind its drive to use ICT to help underserved rural communities realize their potential while accelerating socioeconomic development. It is this drive that has led to a partnership with IIT-M and active participation in several of its projects. These projects range from e-service concept development to creating sustainable and scalable business models for rural e-service delivery. Microsoft and IIT-M have also worked to adapt globally standardized products like the Windows® operating system and the Microsoft® Office system for use by communities that are unfamiliar with English or computers. The partnership is even committed to developing new technologies that help entrepreneurs like Sugitha use their computers more effectively and maintain them more easily.

Her husband is happy to have an educated, working wife. “That is real development for this village,” explains Sugitha.



Anandanayaki, 19, has completed schooling and holds a diploma in computer applications. For her, the BPO affords the opportunity to follow her dream of working and being economically independent—while at the same time allowing her to respect her parents' wishes that she live in the village and not look for a job elsewhere.

Microsoft began its involvement in the rural BPO initiative with the data-entry component of an extensive two-year research study covering 150 rural kiosks and 6000 kiosk customers. The study involved surveys repeated at these kiosks every quarter, which meant regular, high-volume data entry. This task was outsourced to rural kiosks that TeNeT judged to be capable of handling the work. Today, Microsoft has created a linkage between another of its partners—a premier, global research agency—and DesiCrew, facilitating the outsourcing to the rural BPO kiosks of all data entry associated with current Microsoft rural research projects. The hope is that this alliance will evolve into longer-term partnerships for DesiCrew and research agencies across the country, ensuring regular streams of work.

For Microsoft, as for IIT-M and DesiCrew, the rewards lie in the ever-increasing confidence and capability of Sugitha and others like her, and the high standards of quality and reliability repeatedly demonstrated by these rural business ventures.



Microsoft[®]