



The Computerworld Honors Program

Honoring those who use Information Technology to benefit society

Final Copy of Case Study

YEAR:
2012

STATUS:
Laureate

Organization:
Skype

Organization URL:
www.skype.com

Project Name:
Low-bandwidth version of Skype for NGOs

What social/humanitarian issue was the project designed to address? What specific metrics did you use to measure the project's success?

A recent strategic partnership between UNHCR, the Government of Luxembourg and communications software provider Skype is keeping UNHCR staff in hardship locations in touch with their families and friends. The partners are now considering how the technology might be adapted for use by other humanitarian organisations (such as ICRC, IFRC, NetHope).

Please describe the technologies used and how those technologies were deployed in an innovative way. Also, please include any technical or other challenges that were overcome for the successful implementation of the project.

Skype has developed a bespoke, low-bandwidth version of its software for both Windows and Mac. This customised version of Skype was developed to provide free or low-cost voice and video calls over the Internet that worked on low-bandwidth connectivity to avoid jeopardising existing corporate business applications and that could be fully integrated with all partners' firewalls and other security aspects. Skype had been developing the technology to offer this and was keen to support the humanitarian community; in return, Skype would gain visibility and a huge testing ground for innovative applications in both remote areas and difficult conditions.

Please list the specific humanitarian benefits the project has yielded so far.

Some 44% of UNHCR staff work in the field, often in remote, "hardship" duty stations. They may be separated from their families and friends for months at a time, sometimes at very short notice, and have limited or occasionally no opportunities for communication. UNHCR has always been concerned and has a responsibility to address staff isolation and stress, not only for the sake of staff well-being but to ensure staff productivity and, ultimately, the quality of UNHCR's operational response. In late 2008, UNHCR decided to invest internally in measures to improve living and working conditions in remote field duty stations, measures ranging from revised policies for work-life balance and team-building retreats to the introduction of technology support. One such measure was the proposal to enable staff to use Skype to keep in closer touch with their colleagues, families and friends by being able to talk with them. Skype software enables families, friends and colleagues to get together for free with instant messaging, voice and video over the Internet. At low cost, they can also call landlines or mobiles almost anywhere in the world. It is one, maybe the largest, of such companies enabling communication over the Internet.

Please provide the best example of how the project has benefited a specific individual, enterprise or organization. Feel free to include personal quotes from individuals who have directly benefited from the work.

"Skype has removed, at a very practical level, some of the most challenging barriers to communications that we experience in these locations," said Antonio Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees. "This will benefit not only UNHCR staff and their families at home but, potentially, the tens of millions of refugees and other displaced people in the world today." "For us, helping the world's displaced is not just about delivering the basics of food and shelter but ensuring they are able to access all the benefits of modernity, including the ability to communicate regularly with friends and family. Our partnership with a technological innovator like Skype significantly advances our aspirations in this regard." "Skype is the main mode of communication to keep in touch with my family," says Haridass Sriram, UNHCR field protection officer in the UN compound in Aweil, South Sudan. "Every day I call them using Skype. I can see my twins who are now four and a half months old and talk to my wife every day." He laughs. "If not for Skype, my wife would have left me by now!" Simplice Kpandji works for UNHCR in its base in Goma, eastern DRC. "My family lives in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire. I see them every eight weeks," says Simplice. "Between visits, I use Skype to communicate with them. My children can talk to me and ask me questions about what I have done during the day. They also talk about their activities and their friends. Through Skype, I see them playing and joking around. It is so important to us."