

Digital Peninsula Network Penzance

Digital Peninsula Network was founded in 1999 to support IT and creative businesses in west Cornwall and campaign for broadband. It has well over 200 member businesses, many of who use it for training and collaboration

The building

Digital Peninsula Network (DPN) took over a two story granite building in a courtyard just behind the main shopping street in Penzance in 2000. It now rents more space around the courtyard from a local commercial landlord who supports the project.

On the ground floor is a reception area, hotdesking space and a bookable meeting room that can be closed off. Upstairs, once used full-time by members hotdesking is a new training zone. Lack of space has restricted DPN's ability to also offer open plan space for collaborative working. The internal layout has undergone many changes over its 10 years. Outside is a pleasant sunny yard with seating and sub tropical plants supplied by members.

What's special

Digital Peninsula Network has become the official voice of Cornwall's ICT sector in Cornwall. Many of its members are micros, reflecting the nature of the local business community. But from its inception in 1999, DPN has always had a wide membership encompassing the full spectrum of the ICT and digital sectors.

'Our organisation is unique to the ICT and digital sector in Cornwall,' says director Janus Howard. 'Our hub serves the Penzance area and a good radius of businesses and freelancers in west Cornwall. All provide ICT or digital media services – website designers, programmers and internet marketing specialists for example. Or they support ICT and digital media providers, such as accountancy and legal services.'

'We also have many members further afield in the county. They mainly use us virtually, to train staff and find specialist skills. In more recent years we have seen large companies joining. In Cornwall that can mean 10 staff! What was once a mainly freelance network has expanded.'

DPN's success has led to it taking on responsibility for other networks, notably Network Cornwall – a 4,000 strong group of women running their own businesses, again mostly home-based.

Measuring the value of collaboration

Between 2001 and 2005 DPN used an annual online survey to measure the economic benefits of collaboration as part of its monitoring requirements for Objective One ERDF funding. Members were asked how much turnover that year was down to projects where they collaborated with other DPN members. This could be estimated by reviewing invoices for contracts where a member had subcontracted significantly to others. And they were asked the total amount subcontracted to or from DPN members.

This figure was de-duplicated and showed inter-business trading totals. In 2002 to 2005, just 35 (of over 200) members voluntarily reported a total of **£1.23 million** of collaborative work in their turnover, with £510,000 directly subcontracted from member to member. Had all members completed the survey the figure would have been significantly higher. The result led the Government Office to score DPN higher than many much more expensive Objective One-funded projects.

Today performance against different contracted targets are monitored by external agencies, so DPN has ceased to track members' turnover. It is however looking to do so again, recognising that this information is also a selling point for recruiting new members. Put simply, why not advertise the potential financial benefits of membership rather than just the costs?



Training and business support

EU-funded revenue support has dried up, so DPN has in recent years had to look to other sources to supplement its membership-based income (see finance, over). The answer came in training. Today it is one of the leading venues for and suppliers of specialist ICT training in Cornwall.

It offers a convenient venue for trainers to reach larger numbers of micro businesses who would otherwise be very difficult to train separately. Courses are advertised by email newsletter.

'Many home-based businesses and digital professionals won't go to a college campus or a stuffy business park on the edge of a dual carriageway,' says Howard. 'Our members want to be in the town centre and they combine training with other things like shopping or having a good choice of places for lunch or a coffee – on foot.'

Raoul Humphreys, deputy director at Cornwall College in Camborne, which co-funds the training, concurs. 'We recognised some time ago that colleges

Darren McNally

Darren McNally is a graphic designer and photographer and, these days, an affiliate of DPN. He settled in Cornwall about 10 years ago to work on websites for holiday companies. Early on he encountered a problem then common in the county: a 56KB dial up internet connection. Having heard about DPN from the manager of a company he worked for in St Ives, McNally moved to Penzance and signed up.

'It had broadband, technical support and it was a networking centre. It had all the tools I needed and that's why I and 250 others kept going back to it,' he says. Eight years on his regular clients include many met through DPN. 'It was a good incubator for everyone to establish themselves, which is what I did.'

When broadband and computer equipment became cheaply available I had less need to use the centre' McNally says. 'I still use the centre occasionally for meetings with clients and networking. And it has changed with the times and is now very successful providing training as well as workspace, and that's to the credit of everyone involved. It gave me what I needed at the time and I honestly believe there are maybe 60-70 companies that wouldn't be around today if DPN hadn't been there.'

Contract and tender alerts

ICT scout is a service pioneered by DPN to match website designers, software developers, photographers, researchers etc with those needing their services in Cornwall. This has been a very popular with DPN members, but its benefits have been hard to track in detail. It works by enabling members to sign up for email alerts of contracts or jobs needing their expertise. Companies and public sector agencies use ICT scout as a cost effective way to get tenders or applicants for jobs or tasks. The system is very suited to an area like Cornwall where skills are more easily sourced from local specialist micros than mainstream providers outside the area.

have to go out to business, not vice versa. Places like DPN mean we are not forced to try to go to every single business to train them on site. Cornwall has so many skilled micro businesses, we simply haven't got the resources.'

The training courses also offer a chance to network and they have attracted new members. Between January and October 2009 over 300 businesses attended training sessions, roughly one-third of them self-employed. 'We have shifted from being a grant-funded project into being a service provider,' says chair Nick Harpley. 'The benefit to our funders is we reach the parts others don't reach. We have excellent links to home-based businesses and freelancers and a reputation as the voice of the ICT sector in Cornwall.'

DPN also runs many special knowledge transfer events and networking meetings. In 2009 it held over 40 events of this kind, at the workhub and further afield. It believes this is a key selling point for workhubs. Trying to train or advise large numbers of micro businesses in their premises is costly and time-consuming. Many feel comfortable in a workhub so take up is higher and outreach costs lower.





Management

Digital Peninsula Network is a not-for-profit company run by a board of up to 12. Current managing director Janus Howard led its bid to become a leading provider of ICT training in Cornwall.

The finances

DPN was originally funded via EU ERDF programmes to deliver outputs such as 43 jobs created and 100 businesses trained over two years.

Core running costs are around £200,000 pa including staff. Membership income is around £25,000 with additional income from meetings and equipment hire. The main income source now is training, with DPN one of the main ICT training for small businesses in Cornwall, with £1.3 million for two and a half years of training work agreed in June 2008. This money is provided by the Learning and Skills Council and the European Social Fund, with further funding possible from January 2011.

Staff

Seven full-time equivalent staff running five training programmes with a combined value of over £1 million, three membership networks, the network centre plus IT support:

- managing director
- network coordinator (inc Network Cornwall), training consultant
- administrator/receptionist
- book keeper – part-time
- trainer/assessors x4 – part-time
- IT contractors x2 – one responsible for email news and website.

Businesses and members

- 240 DPN members – a large number thought to be home-based
- Businesses range from website design and internet marketing companies to software development and hardware systems installers
- 4,050 Network Cornwall members (women in business)
- 350 Cornwall Media Focus (mainly film makers).

The challenges

DPN links up otherwise **isolated** businesses (especially homeworkers). But although it runs networks such as Network Cornwall, their members do not yet seem to see the workhub as their HQ. 'This is something we can work on,' says Janus Howard. 'There is a lot of scope there.'

When DPN first opened it was the only place in Penzance with broadband and was awash with PC terminals. The big difference today is very little **equipment**. 'Most members now have broadband and their own equipment at home,' says Howard. 'When DPN started it was the first place in west Cornwall to have broadband aside from the police station!

'Members had to come to use the web. We were showcasing new technology and what were then pioneering ideas, like email. Things have moved on. We may be getting fibre optic in Penzance and people are using Twitter etc, on their mobiles. We just don't need lots of PC and Mac terminals any more.'

