



making IT personal

joining the DOTs

Making IT Personal: Joining the DOTs is a scheme which creates Digital Outreach Trainers (DOTs) from volunteers.

DOTs deliver informal mentoring in digital technologies in a work, community or home setting.

The DOTs scheme is a European Commission funded initiative to address digital inclusion.

DOT Story – Rachel Tew



Rachel Tew helps people use computers every day at Sheffield Libraries, and becoming a Digital Outreach Trainer (DOT) has complimented her experience. She has been able to make a valuable contribution to the DOT community, and found that being a mentor has made her reflect on her own approach to helping others.

Because Rachel has been part of the library since 1980, using IT on a daily basis has become an increasingly important aspect of her job. She currently works in the busy IT suite at the central building, assisting users with their everyday needs, questions and problems relating to computer use. "I had never used computers until about ten years ago, so everything I've learnt has been through this job. What I need to know and help with is driven by what the users want to do, and this means I need to know about a wide variety of things.

"A lot of the people who come in are looking for help using IT for the first time, and the library provides a safe environment for them to get to grips with it. These days, you see people coming to computing for all sorts of things—job hunting, using skype to talk to relatives overseas, setting up a profile on Facebook, listening to the radio or catching up on television."

Rachel has been a DOT since January 2011, following a suggestion from her manager: “I saw it as an opportunity to learn more, and perhaps get a qualification. And it had a lot in common with the work I do here, so I thought ‘why not get involved?’”

Despite her experience, Rachel felt some trepidation initially: “I thought that keeping a journal would take up a lot of time. And I assumed that the online community on the forums would all be experts and that I’d have nothing useful to contribute and know very little in comparison. But my perception was wrong—it’s a very friendly and committed group, I do have interesting things to contribute and other DOTs can pick up tips from me, and me from them in return.

“For most things I need help with, there’s an example I can learn from in the community because most people have helped others to do most things at some time. And by keeping a journal of your mentoring—which doesn’t actually take up much time—you end up with an overview of everything you’ve done, which you wouldn’t have otherwise, so you can see how much help you’re giving. The whole thing has been far more useful than I had anticipated.”

‘It’s given me more confidence in my work, and made me realise that I always know a bit more than I think.’

Like many other DOTs, Rachel found that the guidance she has been offered from her eMentor has changed the way in which she works with others: “Often at the library I’ve been in the position of just doing things for people, because it’s easier for some users, and they sometimes expect that from you. Being a DOT has changed my approach, and I keep in mind that my job is to assist them in getting to where they want to be, but not to do it for them. I remember this now when I’m helping people.

“I do sometimes experience resistance to this type of learning. I calmly insist that they do it for themselves with my help, because a little bit of time invested at the beginning can save a lot more later on. Sometimes it does take a long time because people’s IT experience is varied or their needs are more complicated.”

Because of the unpredictable requirements of her customers, Rachel’s DOT-informed approach sees her working alongside the users to reach a conclusion. “One of my first journal entries after becoming a DOT was helping a user to book a stay at a Swiss hotel online. When we got to the website, we found it was in German. We got around this by getting a German to English dictionary off the library shelf. Next we had to set up an email address so he could communicate with the hotel owner as well as an online bank account so he could pay. The whole process took a lot of time, but it was a great learning experience for the customer and showed me that I can work through these problems using the knowledge that I have.

“The whole process has been surprising. I thought it would take up too much time and I wouldn’t interact with the online community, but this hasn’t been the case at all. I know I can always go to the forums for help, and I feel like I’ve got a backup network now, if I have a problem with anything. It’s given me more confidence in my work, and made me realise that I always know a bit more than I think.”

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