

# **The Lehava Project – Development, Operation & Satisfaction / Avishai Simon**

## **Abstract**

The research inspects the various aspects of the establishment, operation and outcome of the governmental project LEHAVA (narrowing the digital gap in Israel), which was founded in 2001 with a decision by the minister of finance, and which became a statutory law on May 2012. The services that the project offers to the public are given within community centers with computer classes and permanent internet connection. Those centers which were erected initially, as well as those are planned to be operational in 2012, are all placed in cities that have low socioeconomic rating.

The research main goal is to examine the causes which lead to the establishment of this governmental-social project, its activities, and the unique properties of each center. Furthermore it will address the issue of satisfaction levels among the random visitors and the participants in a variety of courses. The time frame of the research begins with the planning of the project in the year 2000, and through a decade of operations as well as the future planning of opening new centers in 2012.

The research questions address the identity of the main actors in the initiating of the project, its primary goals, the stages of its development and the distinctive turning points. The research examines the consideration for the geographic distribution of the centers, the suggested model of operation and the key difference between its implantation in each center. Furthermore, the research examines the standards used for employing managers, the connections with the local communities and the supervision and inspection process within the project. Finally it inspects the satisfaction level of the center's visitors divided to two age groups. The methodology includes an array of interviews with relevant employees in various levels within Lehava. In addition, there was a depth review of protocols, newspaper's reports and articles and different publication related to the project. For finding the satisfaction levels, Questionnaires were distributed to those who completed the courses as well as occasional visitors. It included open-ended questions in which respondents write their opinion about Lehava activity and implications, as well as a central part in which they had to rate statements concerning the degree of their satisfaction with specific aspects regarding content, staff and the center in general.

Conceptual and actual commencement of the project came following a government attempt to deal with the problem of the digital gap in Israel. Budgeting of the project was the result of a coalition compromise which led to redirecting a part of the government income from the media. The Knesset initiated in the early 2000's a law in which twenty percent of the government's communication and media royalties will be allocated directly to the benefit of neighborhoods and development towns. Therefore, the Ministry of Finance is to transfer part of its income from the royalties for a project which will operate exclusively in low socio-economic cities in attempt to narrow the digital gap. Two individuals, more than others, are identified with the promotion of the project, the first is Michael Eitan who conceived the idea and helped to achieve the necessary budgets and Silvan Shalom, who was the Minister of Finance in the time of the official establishment.

In the beginning of the project there was immediate construction of 15 centers throughout the country. After harsh criticism in 2004, from the state comptroller as well as internal criticism within the Ministry of Finance, on the project effectiveness and activity, the administration comity was disbanded and a new administrative system was established. This criticism also led to a total stop of the expansion plans of the project for half a decade and even caused the closing of two centers during this period. Despite the desire of opening hundreds of centers, which was heard frequently in early stages of the project, no new centers had ever been established, until a new tender in 2011 whose goal is to find 2 new operators for 17 new centers. Since its inception and over a decade of operation, the 13 centers were the grounds for the entire project's efforts to narrow the digital gap in Israel.

The decision regarding the cities where the centers will be is based on three criteria set by the project managers. The city's population is to be larger than 20,000 people; it should be in lower than the 6th socio-economic cluster and it should contain the existence of a community known to be suffering from a digital gap. These criteria were often criticized by various committees of the Knesset, mainly due to lack of relevance of the size of the population and the potential contribution to the project, the loose connection alleged between the socio-economic status of the CBS and scope of the digital gap, and also ignoring the main disadvantage of duplication efforts that were created due to the presence of other agencies which operate for the same purpose in these areas

Each center, which includes 40 computer stations, is active from 8:00 to 22:00 straight and its staff includes a team of four instructors and a single manager. The various activities in the centers are divided by visitor's age and by nature of activity. The children's activities take place from the opening until the afternoon (usually up to 17:00) and evening courses are dedicated for adults. The Center activities are divided to two categories, special one-time activities and free use of a computer by random visitors on the one hand and long-term courses on weekly basis on the other. The most common course that best meets the objective of the project is a four-month course called "computer and internet basics".

This proposed model of activity is taking place in the same way in all the centers, and there is no special reference to the nature and requirements of the local population in each city. The only exception is using Arabic as the main language of the contents and teaching in the Arab cities. Collaborations with local bodies are minimal and do not constitute a significant part of the project task plan. The volume of activity is measured using the project's internal systems and the data are submitted upon request to the Knesset committees dealing with the project. The study shows that the output of the project presented to the Committee of Science and Technology (in 2009, 1168 courses were made which included about 7,000 children and 14,486 adults) indicates that the number of courses which actually took place in compared to the center's capacity shows effectiveness level of just few percent. On the project's primary objective, i.e. narrowing the digital gap, data is not available, since the subject was not tested until now. An external company was hired on 2011 to examine the effects of Lehava on the digital gap, results and recommendations are due to be submitted in 2012.

Examining the process of hiring a center's manager revealed that the search for candidates was not carried out by tender but by regular publication on Lehava's Web site. Also, despite the minimum requirements published, such as minimal training in computers, the actual roles were stationed by people who did not meet some of these requirements. Even when other candidates were residence of the city which the center is located in (marked as a preferability) and which had a preferable professional background. The final decision on hiring and the considerations relating to that decision is kept exclusively by Yossi Tobol, the project manager.

Regarding the degree of satisfaction of visitors, analysis of both verbal responses and the rated scores (a score of 4.5 out of 5 on average) indicates very high satisfaction

