

SeniorNet History

SeniorNet was founded in the USA in 1986 and Telecom NZ introduced SeniorNet to New Zealand by establishing the first Learning Centre in Wellington in 1992. SeniorNet North Shore Inc. opened in 1996.

“SeniorNet Inc. is a global non-profit organization based in San Francisco, California. Begun in 1986, SeniorNet is the world's largest technology trainer of older adults with a mission to provide its members with education for and access to computer and the Internet to enhance their lives and enable them to share their wisdom. With an international network of more than 230 Learning Centers staffed by over 5,000 volunteer instructors throughout the world, SeniorNet has educated millions of older adults about computers and the Internet, and continues to grow in numbers and world-wide reputation.”
Origins of the SeniorNet Movement : Article by Founding Member - Bob Tillett

In 1991, overseas telecommunications companies were taking an interest in buying into Telecom New Zealand Ltd., then an SOE (State Owned Enterprise) "corporatised" by the Government in place of the previous telephone operations of the NZ Post Office. The selling off of SOE's was a controversial development by Government, then seeking to attract overseas ownership of a number of former government departments, thereby bringing capital into the country and indirectly improve the efficiencies of many operations which were by then crying out for restructuring. [Another topic, with which NZ has been more successful than some other countries, due to less entrenched Trade Union control, and determined political resolve.]

The Bell Ameritech telephone company in the USA, and others, made pitches to the NZ Government to purchase the NZ telephone network but there was considerable consumer resistance, many of whom were against corporatism, including the large work force then employed by the company. Contemporaneously, limited competition in the telephone services market had commenced by a new company, Clear Communications, jointly owned by British/Canadian interests, but Clear was having a difficult time as NZ Telecom owned the lines, the numbers and the directory services. The full detail of the acquisition of Telecom was described in a book by former cabinet minister Richard Prebble, but as part of its presentation Bell/Ameritech included the possibility of establishing the SeniorNet movement in New Zealand, should they be the eventual purchaser.

SeniorNet in the United States was well established with many hundreds of clubs of senior citizens who set up networks of like minded people, using their telephones to keep in touch and further their interests. These networks pre-dated the onset of the 'Internet', which although dependent on telephone connections, uses Service Providers with large banks of computers and high speed modem equipped PC's in the homes of users. (Indeed it is a common misunderstanding these days that SeniorNet clubs are only concerned with the Internet, which is far from the case!) The NZ Government sold to the US interests, and not long after the new owners sent an official to Wellington to help NZ Telecom establish the first NZ SeniorNet club in that city.

The SeniorNet philosophy is to encourage the "Over-55's" to take an interest in home and small business computing, enabling members (who are mostly retired) to develop certain basic computer skills, and provide a community resource, training club secretaries, treasurers and administrators to present their reports, newsletters etc., in the modern manner. Most home computers are sold "bundled" with a game or two, so young children, visiting grandparents on a boring winter Sunday, may do their own thing, and grandparents themselves become addicted to computer Bridge or Solitaire (good mouse practice for the arthritic hand!) Tutors are all volunteers from the same age group, as many older people keen to buy home computers were frequently put off by the almost sleight of hand slick demonstrations by young salespeople demonstrating the apparent simplicity of it all!

One of the clubs early established outside the Wellington district was SeniorNet North Shore Inc., being the second in the greater Auckland area, and started in February 1996. Within three months the highly motivated steering committee had rented premises, obtained "seeding" grants and secured Incorporated Society status. They also borrowed five Pentium 90 PC's from a North Shore dealer, which enabled the club to commence the first training courses in MS Works 3, word processing and spreadsheets in mid June. (All computers are IBM compatibles, using Microsoft programs.)

Because of Telecom's desire to foster its PR image within the NZ community, SeniorNet Clubs were advised that certain sponsorship assistance would be forthcoming, but in the event this was poorly coordinated by Telecom and the North Shore Steering committee found it necessary to approach several different departments. They were eventually successful in not only securing two free line connections to the club's training room but also \$3,000 as a room rent subsidy, surplus chairs and tables, plus the loan of five obsolete 386 computers. (These proved to be faulty and virus infected, but enabled the club to keep going after their first vendor sponsor went into receivership and withdrew the hardware.) In 1997 the club, which by then had 100 members, embarked on a fund raising campaign to buy five new Pentium 120 machines, and is now established on a firm footing. By June 1998 membership stood at over 300, probably maximum for the available willing tutors, the North Shore Club being one of 23 now established throughout the country.

Telecom NZ has sponsored all these clubs to some extent, and with the introduction of Telecom's own Internet Service Provider "Xtra", offers two years free phone line and ISP service to the clubs, for training purposes. It no longer provides cash grants and furniture! The North Shore Club also enjoys sponsored discounts for Microsoft software, and two computer vendors now offer discounts to SeniorNet members.

Telecom's interest in SeniorNet groups no doubt costs them very little, but it is true to say that had it not been for the importation of the concept at the time of the American acquisition of the company, SeniorNet might not have been taken up quite so enthusiastically.

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June 1998