Digital Divide Deepens
By Suzanne Deffree -- 3/1/2006
Electronic News
http://www.edn.com/article/CA6311858.html?partner=enews

As the prevalence of technology advances increases, so does the "digital divide," a term used to describe the gap between the technology haves and have nots.

Historically, the digital divide has been most noticeable between developed and developing countries. While this is likely to continue in 2006, Eric Openshaw a principal and the leader for Deloitte Consulting's Technology, Media and Telecommunications Industry practice in the Americas, notes that the divide won't stop there. Instead, he and his firm believe the digital divide is spreading in developed nations at an alarming rate as economic, political and social issues push those on the "losing" end of the divide to become increasingly disadvantaged by their lack of access to the media, to the Internet, to electronic communications, and to information.

"Technology is invasive and pervasive. Either you are onboard with it, you have access to it and you're learning, or you aren't," Openshaw said. "It would be very easy to browse through this at a surface level and say it's just a function of a little bit more Wi-Fi and cheaper computers, and then everyone is there. But there's all the fundamental underlying infrastructure things that have to happen, both socially, politically and economically, for the have nots to catch up with the haves."

Recent Deloitte research has reported that as chips continue to advance once common-knowledge or mechanically based consumer electronics and appliances, those that are unfamiliar with newer technologies get left behind.

"There's a crack at this [digital divide], which is the Internet and related mobile technologies and the like. There's also another crack at this, which is the fundamental technology that exists in almost every product we build and the ability of those that aren't familiar, aren't comfortable and aren't constantly learning technology to fall more and more behind with things we might view as so mundane as automobile repair, appliance repair and the like because electronic chipsets are finding their way into just about everything now," Openshaw said.

At the moment, Openshaw does not expect this to have an impact on the evolution of consumer electronics and appliances. He does, however, expect adoption rates to be affected as the amount of people falling into the digital divide within developed nations and in developing nations continues to increase. Examples of those in this gap in developed nations include the elderly, the working poor, or anyone whose career training or education may not have included the latest technologies.

"What about the repairman who isn't able to stay current with the computer chips that drive a refrigerator?" Openshaw asks. "It's not just about the little old lady who struggles to figure out how a refrigerator works, it's really about the guy who's trying to be actively

employed repairing a refrigerator who now has to become a computer technician in addition to understanding that a compressor needs Freon and all of mechanical things. Now it's all the electro-mechanical chip driven things that are going on."

Can the Digital Divide Be Bridged?

Deloitte isn't alone in its recognition of the problem. Various charities and high-tech companies have been addressing the digital divide for years through technology introduction and education programs. In late February, for example, Microsoft announced it has allocated an estimated $8.2 million in grants to fund basic technology and job training in Asia.

The $8.2 million in cash and software planned for Asia is part of Microsoft's $25.5 million additional funding for the company's on-going "Unlimited Potential" program, a global program that focuses on improving lifelong learning for underserved young people and adults by providing technology skills through community-based organizations.

Deloitte's Openshaw points to the need for better technology integration in education as a step toward bridging the digital divide. Better and more inclusive education on the Internet, basic computer applications like Word and e-mail, keyboard familiarities, and English reading and writing skills, as most of the Internet is presented in English, are a must, he said.

"It's not just about giving someone a cheap computer or even access to a cheap computer, there's all the rest of the underlying infrastructure that goes with it. For those who don't have the online access through the Internet to data, that's an immediate point. But it's this broader or underlying issue with technology and its pervasiveness in every product or service that we accumulate today is where I think we are going to have this even bigger collision."