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'Nerd City' Solution

A new, made-in-Canada idea could provide free, computerized training for poor people

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ONLY THE LUCKY few have at least nine working lives. So John Bulloch counts himself among the blessed as he prowls amid the flickering computers and silk-leaved plants of his bustling Mississauga, Ont., business. At 70, he has the same effusive, opinionated force that he deployed to rally small business against a damaging tax overhaul more than 30 years ago. That successful campaign led to the creation of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business where, as president until 1996, the feisty Bulloch often preached against government folly as a lobbyist for small business. His refusal to turn political disagreements into personal attacks won the respect of his frequent targets, including Pierre Trudeau. The former PM, who loathed the very mention of tax policy, actually listened when Bulloch expounded on his members' woes. "I liked him," Bulloch says simply.

Now Bulloch is CEO of a small business with a big idea that the federal Liberals, cobbling together their last-minute platform, may grab for the coming election. Bulloch's Vubiz Ltd. is an e-learning firm that is expected to make its first profit this year on revenue of \$2 million. Created in late 1995, the company offers about 60 training courses to students who can perch in front of their own computers to learn everything from management to sales training; clients range from Bank of Nova Scotia to Legal Aid Ontario. Its offerings are homemade: it supplies the platform, creates the content -- and even offers technology that enables clients to produce their own course material. "We want to ensure content creation is not outsourced to countries like India," says Bulloch.

His site has always mixed free instruction in such public interest areas as computer usage with other courses costing up to \$100. But it was only last year that he had "His Idea." Ottawa maintains 6,800 Community Access Program sites across Canada that allow lower-income people to use computers. Although Ottawa is winding down its support for CAP, the last budget set aside \$50 million over the next two years.

So why not find a way to ensure the centres are self-supporting, but also provide free instruction to the disadvantaged? As Bulloch explains it, each centre could charge for courses in such fields as small business management and retain half of the proceeds for itself. It could also offer free training to the unemployed, seniors or low-income workers upgrading their skills.

Bulloch figures more than 1,000 of the existing CAP sites have enough computers and sufficient space to allow conversion into what he dubs "Canada Learning Centres." Ottawa could pay for the promotion. The provinces could join as partners. Private firms such as Vubiz could compete to offer content -- and take profits from the paid-for courses. (Bulloch figures the centres would need to tap about 20 private firms for content, including region-specific material.) Community colleges could oversee the work. "We have to bring learning to the community level," he says. "It is an efficient, economic way to make people's lives worthwhile."

It is also politically alluring. After all, every riding has at least one usable CAP site, often in libraries, so each MP could cut a ribbon. The notion is percolating through the Prime Minister's Office. After careers as an engineer, college professor and CEO, Bulloch says he just wants to do good. He gestures at his office: "I like the challenge: this is nerd city." In other words, his new life is a joy.

Mary Janigan is a political and policy writer.