

Islam, ICT and the computer professional

Prof. Simon Rogerson

Mohamed Mahmood Begg

**Originally published as ETHicol in the IMIS Journal Volume 9
No 4 (August 1999)**

One of the greatest changes caused by Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is that people around the world communicate regularly sharing their information, ideas, hopes and aspirations. This global village is a rich community comprising people from different faiths, cultures, nations, and ethnic origins. The guest author of this edition of ETHicol, Mohamed Mahmood Begg discusses some of the broader community issues specifically regarding Muslims. Why is this important for ICT professionals? ICT professionals must never lose sight of the fact that they are members of a wider community first and foremost, and that membership of the profession is secondary. Understanding the community and individuals within that community will help the ICT professional uphold his or her community obligations.

It is important to appreciate that a large number of people belonging to the Islamic faith are now citizens of the UK, the rest of Europe and the USA. According to figures quoted by the Union of Muslim Organisations in UK & Eire, there are about 2 million Muslims in the UK, approximately 12.5 million in Western Europe and 5 million in the USA. These figures include a substantial number of indigenous citizens who have embraced Islam as their faith. It has taken over 30 years for these Muslim communities to mature and settle within a Western environment. Community work has been most difficult due to the range of ethnic origins of the Muslims even though the majority appear to be from the Indian sub-continent and the Arab world.

Economically it appears that the Muslim community in the USA is much healthier than the UK and the rest of Europe. One reason for this is that the majority of the Muslims who emigrated to the USA were educated and professional people. Consequently, there is a large number of Muslim doctors, lawyers and other professionals in the USA. They have been exposed to the computer revolution much longer than the Muslims in UK and the rest of Europe, the majority of whom were economic migrants and have only recently started feeling the affects of the computer revolution. Thus the Muslim community and the associated community workers in the UK and the rest of Europe can learn much from their counterparts in the USA who appear to utilise ICT widely and beneficially in both religious work and community work. In the USA the application of ICT seems to have

successfully crossed the cultural and religious barriers still being felt in the wider Muslim world, where, for example, the general public still does not have access to the Internet in Saudi Arabia due to religious arguments.

Some interesting details regarding how the Muslim community in the USA organises itself have been made collected when attending the second International Islamic Peace Conference in Washington in August 1998 and the Annual Conference of the Muslim Social Scientists in USA held in Chicago in November 1998. Almost all the Islamic organisations have their own web sites and majority of their members have email addresses. Every Muslim organisation in the USA advertises its activities and functions on the Internet. This has enabled most organisations to hold three or four annual week-end conventions. There are, therefore, many conventions to choose from each year.

The usual format is that an organisation advertises its week-end conventions on the Internet specifying the dates and venue. Members and visitors, who may be more than a thousand miles away, then make their bookings and arrange their accommodation at the hotel through the Internet. Most of the members, families and visitors arrive on a Friday night having taken their flights from different cities. The convention usually starts with a dinner on Friday night with perhaps a speech followed by prayers. The next two days (Saturday and Sunday) are spent at the hotel venue participating in a programme of events, speeches, prayers, lunches, dinners and very often there is also a bazaar where anything can be bought from audio cassettes to expensive outfits to even Islamic computer programs.

Furthermore, in the USA computers are used extensively not only by the adults but also by children who learn most of the Islamic rituals and knowledge through computer programs such as the ALIM, AL-USTADH and AL-QARI. A vast wealth of Islamic information is now available through computer facilities. Supplementary teaching has been revolutionised by using these facilities.

It is clear that the Muslim community in the UK and the rest of Europe could similarly improve its communications through the use of the Internet facilities. Indeed these facilities would enable the participation of a vast cross-section of the Muslim community and possibly many of the social and religious issues would then be tackled more effectively. The use of ICT in general could benefit Muslim children with, for example, Islamic computer programs being available locally which would enhance the Madrassa teaching at the supplementary school.

The economic demands of being able to only take unskilled factory work and the religious demands of obtaining scarcely available Halal meat are indicative of the first and second generation emigrants' demise in the UK and the rest of Europe. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that ICT literacy was not prevalent. However, the next generation cannot afford to be ICT illiterate as this technology is progressing and developing at an unprecedented rate and ICT skills are now a mandatory life skill alongside numeracy and

literacy. Indeed the Imams too will have to be ICT literate if they are to function to their full capacity. In addition to giving answers to questions in person, they ought to be able to reply to email questions from people who may be at the other side of the world. Islam is portrayed as a global religion, it will therefore demand global Imams only the new technologies can provide such a capacity when positively used and without disregarding the social responsibility issues that have arisen through the computing revolution.

It is clear from this account of the Muslim community that ICT provides many positive opportunities in a context that most computer professionals might not have thought about. It is indicative of the overall goal to realise a democratic and empowering technology rather than an enslaving or debilitating one - a goal that all computer professionals should subscribe to.

Please send your views on ethical and social responsibility issues and cases of ethical dilemmas to:

Professor Simon Rogerson
Director
Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility
Faculty of Computing Sciences and Engineering
De Montfort University
The Gateway
Leicester
LE1 9BH
Tel:(+44) 116 257 7475
Fax:(+44) 116 207 8159
Email:<srog@dmu.ac.uk>
Home Page: (<http://www.ccsr.cse.dmu.ac.uk>)