



Infochange Australia

Enabling the nonprofit sector

Infochange Australia is a nonprofit social enterprise company focusing on community development.

Founded in 1988, Infochange Australia's mission is to create social equality and opportunity by empowering people through access to information technology and enabling the exchange of information and ideas. It offers services to the nonprofit sector including computer recycling, Internet service provision, service directories and databases, online information and content management systems, website design and hosting and a wide curriculum of computer training.

Holistic ICT services

Infochange Australia provides services nationwide from its head office in Victoria, and currently employs more than 65 people in business units in Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia and the Australian Capital Territory.

An evaluation of the Australian Government Family and Community Networks Initiative found that projects supporting organisations whose mission is capacity building for the sector can have profitable outcomes. Intermediary enabling organisations have a significant influence on take-up rates for new practices within the sector and they are examples of ICT having a demonstrably positive effect.

Over the last decade Infochange has focused on the delivery of a range of information and communications technology (ICT) solutions for community building purposes. It has developed public, private and non-government partnerships to this end, and has an impressive track record in successfully using ICT for social justice outcomes. Infochange emphasises interactivity and a two-way communication flow.

Infochange's broad social agenda to benefit the homeless, disadvantaged, poor, powerless and disenfranchised people in the community is facilitated by:

- pursuing a 'whole of community' approach to the provision of health, welfare and community services through developing electronic referral and assessment systems, a community support services directory, websites, portals and the first electronic information broadcast to the health and welfare sector
- directly providing computers and information technology through Green PC that has refurbished over 9000 PCs and created over 160 jobs and low-cost Internet access to the health and welfare sector



- providing training and education in computer technology
- creating employment opportunities in computer technology.

Three business units support these achievements: Affordable Access, through Green PC; Electronic Service Partnerships (e-SP), supported by the Infoxchange Service Seeker; and Grassroots Networking, supporting local community information systems like the Parenting Xchange.

Benefits

Infoxchange provides a platform that enables information technology solutions to be customised and to meet a range of requirements for community-based organisations, from single isolated functions to comprehensive solutions.



Infoxchange also develops partnerships with local communities and government to provide information on local community services.

One example is the Parenting Xchange, a partnership in South Australia between Infoxchange Australia, the City of Playford, Para West Adult Re-entry School and the Adelaide Women's and Children's Hospital.

The Parenting Xchange works with new mothers in the Peachey Belt area, improving the quality and extent of their social networks, and giving access to information technology for women who are normally excluded owing to social and economic disadvantage.

Infoxchange has provided Green PCs and developed a Service Seeker with service information for the Peachy Belt area. It gives the young mothers easily-accessed information on the availability of support services for them and their children.

In New South Wales, the Northern Rivers Infoxchange provides details of a wide range of services available in the Northern Rivers region, including information on government and non-government agencies, private human services providers, local support groups and sporting, volunteer and interest groups.

Infoxchange actively works to help other nonprofit organisations develop a variety of applications. One is an emergency accommodation booking and resource allocation system. It gives organisations current information on crisis and respite

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accommodation. A linked system allows online assessment and referral between partnering agencies. It is currently being used by over 230 services in eastern metropolitan Melbourne.

The emergency accommodation system operates to rigorous professional project management procedures and on a small budget. The impact of the service has been reduced cycle-time and productivity benefits within the agencies using the system, and improved business processes. Carers and those in their care benefit from greater quality of service.

Both Southern Family Life and the South West Respite Network, which are studied separately in this series, engaged Infoxchange to help develop their services.

The Respite South West respite planner links to Infoxchange's accommodation vacancy register. It allows carers and support services to directly identify suitable vacancies. It helps service providers use the available accommodation more efficiently, by enabling demand for accommodation to be tracked and so improving the targeting of resources.

Infoxchange is looking at current and future projects where a 'total service offering' will be developed for nonprofit organisations. This means bundling everything needed to use ICT and get online: acquiring PCs through Green PC, training, ICT help and support, and online access through the Infoxchange Internet service provider.

In keeping with its philosophy of holistic ICT provision, Infoxchange provides basic support services. Online ICT help and support at IXA Assist includes a series of factsheets on everything from using Windows to how to clean a mouse. A national helpdesk provides ICT help to organisations nationwide on a 1300 number for the cost of a local phone call.



Affordable access

Green PC provides health care card holders, community based organisations, schools and other charitable organisations with high quality refurbished computers at minimal cost.

Green PC recycles and refurbishes used computers donated by government and business organisations. As a Microsoft authorised refurbisher (MAR), Green PC is able to provide cost-free Windows 98 licences for distribution with Green PCs. This enables Infoxchange to keep the cost of the refurbished computers at an acceptable level for people on low incomes, while at the same time giving them access to a widely-used operating system.

Grassroots Networking develops and implements direct action strategies to address such issues as affordable access to information tools, economic development of communities through community enterprise initiatives and increasing skills, provision of content that is relevant to and produced by communities and a society devoted to lifelong learning.

Electronic Service Partnerships (e-SP)

For over a decade, Infoxchange Australia has been developing the Infoxchange Service Seeker, an extensive directory of community support services provided to enhance the wellbeing and welfare of individuals and communities. The directory is provided in each state and territory in Australia. The Victorian directory is the most mature with listings of over 100 000 services and agencies.



Barriers

Andrew Mahar, Infoxchange's executive director, says that the 'IT skill trap' is a risk for small organisations. ICT systems are often built and maintained by one person, sometimes a volunteer. If this person moves on, the organisation may lose access to vital systems. Because of this, Infoxchange advocates and is encouraging standardisation across the nonprofit sector.

Key lessons

- The success of many community IT projects depends on Infoxchange to facilitate collaboration between organisations and develop systems that meet the various work process requirements.
- Infoxchange believes that organisations that are newly embarking on ICT projects need holistic, beginning-to-end support.

References

Infoxchange Australia www.infoxchange.net.au

Emergency accommodation system
<http://chirs.vacancyseeker.org.au/>

Grassroots Networking www.grassroots.org.au

Green PC www.greenpc.com.au

Infoxchange Service Seeker www.serviceseeker.com.au.

IXA Assist www.ixa.net.au/

Parenting Xchange www.parentingxchange.infoxchange.net.au

Electronic Service Partnerships www.esp.infoxchange.net.au

COMMUNITY CONNECTIVITY

More information

In these case studies, communities, nonprofit organisations and groups share their experiences and lessons they have learnt using ICT: enhancing capability and service delivery; supporting and building communities, networks and connections; and overcoming barriers and challenges.

Australia's Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004–2006 emphasises the need to ensure that all Australians can participate in the benefits of the information economy.

Key strategies in 2004–06 will be to strengthen collaboration and capabilities in nonprofit organisations, facilitate the creative use of ICT for building stronger communities and social cohesion, and develop networks, capabilities and tools to enable participation by people who are facing economic, geographic or social barriers.

For more information visit the DCITA website www.dcita.gov.au or email community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au.

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