



Community Information Strategies Australia Inc.

Enabling the nonprofit sector

Community Information Strategies Australia Inc. (CISA) is the peak body for the community information sector in South Australia. A nonprofit organisation, CISA has operated for more than 23 years, providing information management and technology consultancy services to community organisations. The Common Knowledge and CommuNIT projects are among its services.

CISA also has a commercial arm, InfoPartners Pty Ltd, through which it provides consultancy services to government and business organisations.

An evaluation of the Australian Government Family and Community Networks Initiative (FACS 2002) found that projects supporting organisations whose mission is capacity building for the sector are successful. These intermediary, enabling organisations have a significant influence on the take-up of new practices by sector organisations. They are also examples where ICT has a demonstrable positive effect.

CISA is actively working to help nonprofit organisations through a variety of services. It also operates an information management consultancy service. The kind of consultancy service CISA provides is illustrated by the Mental Health Resource Centre demand aggregation project.

ICT support and knowledge sharing

The Common Knowledge community project provides a single access point where South Australian communities can share information and improve their knowledge and awareness of the community services sector in South Australia. Common Knowledge encourages community services organisations to cooperate in a partnered approach to information management.

The CISA CommuNIT project's main aim is to provide information, training, access to resources and discussion forums as strategies to help develop cost-effective ICT solutions for community sector agencies. The project design arose out of community workshops and discussions with the government and business sectors over two years.

The core challenge was to find sustainable ways for the three sectors to work together to make ICT access easier and cheaper for cash-strapped community groups and agencies, which in turn would allow them to deliver their services more effectively to the clients



they serve. The CommuNIT project has received funding from the Australian Government Stronger Families and Communities Strategy and the Government of South Australian.

Benefits

The main benefits and outcomes so far have been:

- Community sector organisations have access to ICT advice and services from an organisation that they already know and trust.
- The project has been able to negotiate low or no cost access to high quality information and training, as well as hardware and software discounts.
- There is a growing alliance between the community sector, government and business, committed to practical solutions to the 'digital divide' challenges. This was highlighted by the success of CISA's national 'Connecting Up' conference held in May 2004, which attracted 270 delegates from across Australia.
- Community organisations who felt overwhelmed by ICT issues are developing confidence that they can move forward with

the support of the project but without losing control of CommuNIT.

Success factors and lessons

Through CommuNIT, CISA helps agencies working in the nonprofit sector achieve effective ICT solutions and savings. CommuNIT is successful because:

- Ideas and proposals are extensively tested with the intended customers and were initially based on a detailed survey of their current ICT situation.
- There is careful relationship building with funding bodies and major corporates. Sponsors were recruited to the planning process early and are kept in touch with proposals.
- Client needs are met and different learning styles are accommodated in several different ways.
- Genuine sustainability and tangible outcomes for projects such as CommuNIT require a longer government funding commitment than a one-off grant. A minimum of three years is suggested for grants.
- Government grants are valuable leverage in attracting corporate supporters who are looking for credible projects to back, which stretches the government funding dollar further.

In retrospect, CISA would do more research on similar projects interstate and overseas and would resource such a project with a full-time staff member from the beginning. Arising from this the CEO recently attended the community IT focused UK Circuit Rider conference in London (www.lasa.org.uk) in September 2004.



Mental Health Resource Centre demand aggregation

CISA has recently completed a pilot project with the Mental Health Resource Centre (MHRC) which hosts five organisations that all deal with mental health issues. Over time, each had evolved its own computer system ranging from a server based system with eight machines networked to stand-alone personal computers. Each agency had its own dial-up Internet connection with different Internet service providers (ISPs) and the associated cost of ISP access fees, call costs, line rental, virus control and computer maintenance. None of these systems had an automated backup capacity.

Each organisation was faced with the same situation. Their machines were four or five years old and their operating systems were all Windows 98 or older. The cost to upgrade all of the operating systems was prohibitive and would in turn require new hardware which compounded the problem. Through the CommuniT project, CISA proposed a new approach using open source software to provide a stable and secure server environment that in turn allowed a low cost open source desktop which would make use of existing desktop hardware.

A collaborative approach was adopted between MHRC, the CommuniT project, and an open source software integrator, Open Oz, to design and implement a more efficient and cost effective model.

The solution

A Linux server was installed to provide a link to the Internet. This server acts as a firewall, router and email server. There was no network cabling between the organisations so this was installed to link each office with the server via



a 100MB switch. The server is partitioned and organisations have their 'own' space (or virtual drive) on the server. The data stored on the server is backed up daily and has the facility for remote server maintenance. A single broadband Internet connection was also provided through an ADSL modem to bring considerable savings by disconnecting four telephone lines which each cost \$30 a month rental and four separate ISP accounts.

The cost savings

The savings on set-up costs were approximately \$18 000 and the ongoing operational cost savings identified so far are approximately \$7000 a year.

Observations

- Overall it has been a relatively painless process with positive outcomes.
- This type of restructure requires reliable and affordable technical support.
- Consideration of a wireless option rather than a cabling infrastructure will be assessed for future projects.
- This type of infrastructure is not a 'one-size fits all' model.



Key lessons

- The nonprofit sector is growing in confidence as a result of access to technical training and support from an organisation it trusts.
- Genuine sustainability and tangible outcomes for projects such as CommuniT require a longer government funding commitment than a one-off grant.
- Providing centralised services, enabling organisations to participate in an online community environment, provided by an organisation they trust, without burden of development or cost overheads, significantly increases online participation.

References

CISA www.cisa.asn.au/

www.communIT.info

www.sacomcommunity.info/

www.commonknowledge.net.au/

'Connecting Up' conference website: www.communIT.info/conference

FACS 2002 www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/aboutfacs/programs/community.fcni.htm

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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