



## The Smith Family 'Virtual volunteering' and collaboration

The Smith Family is a major nonprofit organisation established early last century. It has 600 permanent staff and over 2000 regular volunteers. Ninety-nine per cent of Smith Family clients are also Centrelink clients.

The Smith Family is increasingly focused on early intervention and prevention through education to address long-term disadvantage rather than just treating the symptoms. Its core program, 'Learning for Life', provides education support through sponsorship.

### Streamlining client management

The Smith Family has streamlined its client management through a major ICT systems upgrade. The ENCORE (Enterprise Client Operations and Reporting) system is an integrated client management system with 350 users across the organisation. The main business drivers behind the system are integration and efficiency and a desire to 'change the way we work'.

ENCORE enables ongoing, holistic case management. It provides a single view of each client family, so case managers can see services provided to individual family members and identify gaps that need to be addressed through targeted service delivery.

ENCORE also supports emergency help for the disadvantaged through more irregular or one-off transactions.

The Smith Family has come from a very low technology online base to a situation where significant information is now available. The delivery of frontline services has improved, helped by a large reduction in paperwork.

The underlying system is flexible and can be used to create other business systems. The platform is a customer relationship management system called Visual Elk from StayinFront Inc. It can be configured to create system-to-system connections. For example, an interface could be built in the future that allows eligibility checks to be performed automatically with Centrelink using direct data exchange via web services.

Another example of streamlining using electronic processes is Community Connect. The Smith Family and Centrelink are developing a streamlined way of serving joint clients. The providers working with Centrelink on Community Connect include The Smith Family, The Salvation Army and the Benevolent Society.



Concerned about problems small agencies were having with referrals for people in need, the Parramatta office of The Smith Family implemented a trial in late 2003 to streamline manual referrals. For Centrelink, this trial was an early start to its Community Connect program.

With permission from a customer, Centrelink can forward information electronically to The Smith Family. To streamline the referral process even more, The Smith Family set up a hotline for Centrelink customers so they could assess eligibility on the spot. Both initiatives reduced customers' frustration in going back and forth between the agencies.

Centrelink recognises the concept of streamlined referrals as a valuable, generic model for community service providers. Both organisations are committed to exploring cooperation nationally.

### Benefits and keys to success

ENCORE's success is made possible by the wider availability of personal computers and a virtual private network (VPN) based on broadband connectivity. With the help of equipment from Cisco Systems, more than 60 locations including 50 small regional offices are now linked via a wide area network (WAN).



Program expansion is made possible by ICT efficiencies. In the Learning for Life program, child sponsors receive annual progress reports. Quality checking the reports used to take a lot of staff time. Now more than 370 'virtual' volunteers from corporate sponsors do the checking and correcting online.

Innovative processes like these can lead to a quantum increase in efficiency and, through a continuous improvement cycle of efficiency and review, transform an organisation's operations.

The Smith Family identifies wider community outcomes from its use of ICT. A centralised administration project is staffed by people on the Work for the Dole program, who get exposure to working with ICT. These people have a higher than average transition rate to paid employment. In turn, this project helps take the administrative load from education support workers so they can spend more time supporting families.

Fifty per cent of users of ENCORE had never used a computer before, so training and change management were key. A valuable lesson is the need to match the skills of volunteers to organisational needs.

The ENCORE project was well planned in the context of a rapidly changing business environment. It had a steering committee, with day-to-day management of the project through a vendor as well as a Smith Family project manager. The project was 'owned' by the national community programs manager, who was also the chair of the steering committee by virtue of being the chief stakeholder. Also on the committee was a senior manager from Accenture who provided pro bono project management advice.

Following implementation, proposals for enhancements and changes to systems go to a committee of middle managers from across the organisation. Transferring technical skills to the organisation's IT staff was an important



factor in ensuring cost-effective implementation and maintaining alignment with business change and growth.

Future plans include extending ENCORE into other business areas, such as using it to manage relationship with supporters or sponsors better. This would allow for more integrated relationships with donors, individual sponsors on the Learning For Life program and corporate supporters.

The Community Connect trial between Centrelink Parramatta and The Smith Family shows how relationships that develop from small servicing problems between agencies can grow into strong partnerships.

The two participants recognise that each organisation has a different relationship with the client in providing assistance to them. The trial highlights the role of nonprofit organisations as trusted intermediaries in this respect. Nonprofit community providers have very strong personal relationships with their clients, usually developed over time and focusing on individual personal needs and circumstances. Clients trust community providers to identify the range of services relevant to their circumstances.

Centrelink's role is essentially administrative, focusing on client payments and participation activities. Clients and community providers regard Centrelink highly as an organisation that securely holds information, adheres to the Privacy Act, and appropriately discharges its duty of care to customers. As such it is an organisation that is trusted to manage its customers' information, including appropriate and timely referrals (with the customer's consent) through to providers. Clients place a high level of transactional trust in Centrelink. When the two are combined a more holistic service is developed for the client, built on the strengths of each agency.

Other social benefits resulted from increased collaboration and networking between the two local offices. The success of the trial led to



The Smith Family/Centrelink Community Connect trial was a fine example of just what can be achieved when organisations work collaboratively to achieve common goals. The enthusiasm, commitment and camaraderie expressed by staff from both organisations was a clear indication that the time for working in silos is past.

Elaine Henry, The Smith Family CEO

several other joint activities. The Smith Family will add some of its resources to a project to assist a group of very isolated women who have long-term difficulties forging relationships due to family, language, cultural and educational factors. The program involves Parramatta Centrelink, Granville Community Centre, Parramatta Council and the local Migrant Resources Centre. The women now have a place to meet one day a week and discuss possible business outlets for their handicrafts.

## Barriers

The ENCORE project reinforces the need to carefully plan the implementation of enterprise wide ICT systems and to be prepared to implement on a flexible basis. Few barriers were encountered because of the investment in planning. Even delays can be worthwhile if they result from ensuring that appropriate effort is devoted to change management, and to the needs of staff and other participants whose acceptance and enthusiasm is important for success.



## Key lessons

- The integration project has made it possible to form a holistic view of the client and family unit for the first time, resulting in improved client focus and management
- Greater efficiency allows the whole work process to be reviewed, resulting in work practice improvements
- The architected approach using open or interoperable systems makes the product robust, and allows for easier connections with external agencies such as Centrelink.

## References

The Smith Family [www.smithfamily.com.au/](http://www.smithfamily.com.au/)

Centrelink (2003) Annual Report 2002-2003 Chapter 6 Community Connect Case Study, [www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/ar0203/6\\_2\\_02.htm](http://www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/ar0203/6_2_02.htm), visited March 2004.

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# 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](http://www.dcita.gov.au) or email [community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au](mailto:community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au).**

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