



Our Community

Enabling the nonprofit sector

Our Community Pty Ltd is a self-sustaining social enterprise organisation. Its overall vision is building stronger communities and greater social cohesion through stronger community organisations. Our Community works with individual community groups and their members, peak associations, business and government, offering a one-stop shop of essential resources and tools.

The Our Community website helps nonprofit organisations with advice on administration, fund-raising and best practice use of ICT, including how to service members online and raise online donations. Our Community was established in 2001 and is based in Melbourne. It has 17 paid staff, with two staff working on the online membership service.

Enabling online donations and improved member administration

Intermediary or enabling organisations which share the values of the nonprofit sector are an important part of building the sector's capacity. The Ovum report into productivity and ICT pointed out that the community welfare sector in particular is dependent on the policies and programs of governments, and on corporate, community and individual sponsorship and donations (NOIE 2002). This means that the sector operates under different market pressures from the norm, and its key driver is to stretch resources to

cover demand for services and deliver the best possible outcomes for clients.

An evaluation of the Australian Government Family and Community Networks Initiative found that projects that support organisations whose mission is capacity building for the sector are successful. These intermediary enabling organisations have a significant influence on take-up rates of new practices in the sector. They are also examples where ICT has a demonstrably positive effect.

Rhonda Galbally, Our Community's chief executive officer, points out that one of the key challenges to the sector is that solutions are often duplicated or reinvented because nonprofit organisations operate in relative isolation.

A networked environment using ICT can minimise such waste. ICT can advance strategic knowledge transfer by tackling the unnecessary building and rebuilding of projects of state and national relevance. Experiences can be shared strategically.

By facilitating such information sharing, ICT contributes to the capacity of the whole sector.



Our Community is actively working to help nonprofit organisations partner in the development of a variety of applications. Recently it has developed an online donations service and a membership processing application.

Capitalising on the popularity of the Internet, Our Community runs the Australian Giving Centre, where Australians can give in a new way. The Giving Centre website helps nonprofit organisations raise funds and collect donations online. The service gathers and processes online donations to community groups, allowing, for example, immediate giving or monthly deductions from credit cards. More than \$500 000 has already been donated to community groups through this facility.

The Giving Centre's back-end application has been taken up by Brisbane City Council as a B2B solution for all Brisbane community groups, and it is featured on their website. There is potential to offer this to other local government authorities across Australia.

A major opportunity being pursued by Our Community is that it is working with local government to act as a conduit between community groups, business and the general public—getting people 'giving' and 'joining up' through joining community groups. Our Community is developing a graphic icon for 'joining up' and 'giving', similar in concept to the tick icon used for the heart/health message.

Our Community has gained Australian Government funding through the Information Technology Online (ITOL) program, to develop and extend the online donation and payments service to member administration. The new service will provide online processing and payment for memberships, resulting in more efficient processing for the participating organisations. It is being developed in partnership with Netball Victoria, the Genetic Support Network, the Sustainable Living Foundation, Vicsport, Youth Performing Arts Australia, Museums Australia and the Gould League.

Our Community contributes the major part of the funding, and ITOL contributes 43 per cent of the project cost. Long-term financial sustainability is still to be worked out, but demand for the service is strong: at least 30 other organisations have expressed interest in joining the service.

Our Community will make the membership service available to any Australian nonprofit organisation on a fee-for-service basis. It is too early for participants to estimate cost savings, but Our Community intends to make such information available in the future.



Our Community believe engagement in the community rewards the individual.



One of the project's aims is to automate paper-based membership systems for nonprofit organisations. The original idea came partly from Our Community and partly from member organisations. The idea was refereed by a project board consisting of 22 people across the sector, from basketball clubs to the environment movement. The participating stakeholders steer the project, and this involvement will be a critical success factor.

Benefits and success factors

Our Community believes engagement in the community rewards the individual. Rhonda Galbally describes the potential social benefits of making it easier to join a community organisation:

Our Community passionately believes that people who become members of community organisations as a life friend or general member help build or contribute to the generation of social capital by being engaged in that group's objectives, which are generally about community participation or building.

A very important outcome from the membership project has been sharing, with the participants learning from each other. The project led to a total review of members' business processes, and a restructuring of the ways participating organisations consider and process memberships. These work practice improvements can result in greater efficiency, reduced processing time and reduced wastage, and contained or reduced costs. This means improved business efficiencies for participant organisations and more efficient services to members.

Standardisation of how each organisation considers and defines membership is a significant but unexpected outcome.



Successful collaborations between different-sized community organisations such as between community organisations, bureaucracy, and business require trust, mutual respect, a non-competitive modus operandi, an openness to share resources, learning and knowledge, and a respect for the legitimacy of community-controlled approaches.

Community Manifesto, Our Community 2003

Each group had its own historical description and understandings of membership. This has been refined and standardised throughout the project, and the language used to describe membership has been simplified for the public who will use the site.

The overriding success factor was participants' willingness to share and change work practices, resulting in a simplification of the way participating organisations process membership applications. The project was aided by the engagement of champions from participating organisations and Our Community.

Success also arises from keeping the people who will use the service, the general public, in mind when reviewing processes and designing web information.



Barriers

Participating organisations' existing processes and ICT applications sometimes do not support interfacing to the new system. Bringing participants up to the point where they can participate sometimes causes delays, and not all have reached this position as yet. In hindsight, more time would be spent on initial scoping and planning, and reviewing participants' internal business processes.

This may have been better done prior to the scoping and design of the membership system, although the technical input to this process was valuable.

Key lessons

- The success of both projects depends on encouraging collaboration between stakeholders in the specification of system improvements that meet their various work process requirements.
- An intermediary organisation can add value by fostering collaboration between nonprofit organisations.

References

Our Community Pty Ltd www.ourcommunity.com.au/

Our Brisbane www.ourbrisbane.com/community/bris_gives/donors/

Productivity and Organisational Transformation: Optimising Investment in ICT Ovum
www.dcita.gov.au/ie/publications/2003/03/ovum_report

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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