lasa

Circuit riders 2.0

The evolution of ICT development and support for the voluntary sector

- **What is circuit riding?**
- **What do circuit riders do?**
- **How do circuit rider projects work?**
- **How do circuit riders benefit the voluntary sector?**

A guide for voluntary sector managers, development workers, policy makers and funders

Introduction

A lot has changed in the voluntary sector technology landscape since the previous version of this guide was published two years ago. A huge investment was made through the ChangeUp agenda, the biggest ever in ICT infrastructure development, which significantly raised the importance of the issue.

Circuit riding has become a familiar term in parts of the sector particularly since ChangeUp was originally launched in the Regions, by getting a specific mention as an appropriate solution. The ICT Hub has also highlighted circuit riding through the work we have been doing to build the network, support practitioners and promote the idea to frontline organisations around the country.

Following this investment many ICT development workers, capacity builders with an ICT remit and individuals working primarily with the sector, have identified themselves as circuit riders. Now with the Suppliers Directory coming on stream it is easier to find this appropriate ICT support at a local level.

Lasa has been working to support the circuit rider network for a number of years. Why do we do it? Simply, we want to help organisations access support that is flexible, affordable, and supplied in plain English by people who have the groups' efficiency at heart. To continue this theme we will be looking into standards of work and establishing a training program for circuit riders in the next year.

However, as we know there is still a lot of work to do. There are many organisations that are not in a transparent, trusting relationship with a supplier. In fact, it's usually the opposite. The essential investment in ICT as an infrastructure issue has started the ball rolling, but the sea change will only happen when frontline groups acknowledge that ICT needs facing realistically. Appropriate budget allocations must be made, and funders must accept the ongoing cost of ICT as necessary grant expenditure.

We are getting there. Full Cost Recovery has helped by drawing attention to ICT as a true organisational cost in managers' minds and there should be real improvements in the medium to long term. And circuit riders can keep up their end by continuing to raise awareness of ICT issues; brokering good relationships with technical support companies, keeping funders on board with the idea, building websites, fixing the printer….

Assumptions

Technology has enormous potential for small voluntary organisations. It can help them work more efficiently, communicate with clients, partners and stakeholders, demonstrate the value of the work they do, and provide innovative services to new groups of users. It is hard to think of a voluntary sector organisation which does not make use of technology in the way it operates or delivers its services.

However, this guide is set in an environment where use of technology by most organisations is identified by:

- the lack an ICT budget
- difficulty in obtaining funding for technology
- the lack of strategy about how technology can be used to improve services
- lack of a staff member with ICT in their job description
- dependence on ad-hoc technical support from whatever source it can be obtained.

We believe that in these conditions circuit riders have an important role to play in the development of the voluntary sector.

ict hub

So what is a circuit rider?

Staff in voluntary sector organisations have various different roles in connection with technology. This includes:

- **IT workers**
  technical staff who are employed by an individual organisation to support their own use technology

- **Accidental techies**
  often admin or information workers who end up looking after their organisations technology by default because there is nobody else to do it

- **Project managers**
  who are responsible for the provision of services which make use of technology.

Alongside these there is another further category of people who have a role in helping the voluntary sector make better use of ICT. These are people who support other organisations to make the best use of technology – we refer to them as '**circuit riders**'.

Professionals such as ICT Capacity Builders, ICT Development Workers or ICT Project Workers are all covered by the term circuit rider.

Rationale

Circuit rider is an umbrella term for ICT professionals working in the voluntary and community sector. Their skills are on a spectrum from strategic through to technical, covering supporting, developing, training and action planning in the process.

These individuals may be working from within infrastructure organisations like a CVS, networks such as Age Concern, operating as a social or community enterprise company, or indeed as an independent self-employed consultant who works primarily with the sector.

Significantly, circuit riders want to support the organisations they are working with to help them deliver their services in an effective and efficient way, and have the values of the sector at heart.

"The term circuit rider refers to individuals who help not-for-profit organisations to make strategic use of technology and new media tools in service of their mission"

**Bill Lester,
Circuit Rider Conference 2005**

"eRiders are many things to many people but their main aim is to make organizations more effective, efficient and innovative through the use of all forms of technology"

eriders.org

"Circuit riding is the provision of part time and temporary IT development services"

Lewis Atkinson

Definition

Put simply, a circuit rider is a **mobile** worker who provides ICT support and development to a **caseload** of **small** voluntary organisations and who works in **collaboration** with other circuit riders.

The term 'circuit rider' originated in the US and referred to those who travelled around a sparsely populated geographical area dispensing law, medicine and religion. In the early '90s it was adopted by technology workers who had a 'patch' of organisations as they had to do a little bit with each!

Mobile

Circuit riders aren't based in the organisations with which they work: they travel from one to another, if necessary taking the resources they need to do their work with them.

Caseload

Like other voluntary sector development workers, circuit riders have an ongoing involvement with the organisations with which they work: they don't just visit an organisation when there's a problem but try to encourage its long-term development.

Small

Circuit riders generally work with small organisations who cannot justify having their own ICT staff, either because of their size or because they cannot afford them. Some might work with larger organisations if they provide more specialised services or work on short-term projects.

Collaboration

Circuit riders support and share information with each other. Technology is a very wide, expanding and changing field: no one person can keep up-to-date with every field. Circuit riders are able to share ideas, suggestions and recommendations between each other. As they often work individually this peer support enables learning from similar work in different organisations.

Network

As circuit riders share a similar ethos it enables them to make their voices heard among such stakeholders as funders, policy makers, suppliers and voluntary sector networks.

International

There are people who identify themselves as circuit riders throughout the world. "Circuit rider" is a term that is used in the US and the UK. Internationally the terms "eRider" or "iRider" are often used. Both terms refer to a similar type of technology worker.

DISCUSSION POINT

Some people find the term *"circuit rider"* off-putting or confusing because they associate it with a particular religion or it feels too US-centric. But now that it has been used in ChangeUp proposals, it's a term funders and policy makers are familiar with.

? **Is the term confusing for client organisations Is there a better term to use with clients**

Attitude

Unlike some commercial ICT companies, circuit riders traditionally aim to make the organisations they work with

become self-reliant in their use of technology. This enables the circuit rider to move on and help other organisations develop their ICT use.

Assisting them to set up systems and procedures, training staff and raising their awareness of planning and budgeting helps organisations to be in a position to take charge and develop their use of technology further.

However, as circuit riders generally work with small organisations, which will usually not have the necessary range of skills and experience for every situation, they will inevitably need to get outside advice and support at some stage.

Also, as they become more in control of their ICT most organisations gain confidence and see potential in new uses for technology. Sometimes what a circuit rider can achieve is to make the organisation self supporting on a specific issue or area of use.

In addition, many circuit rider projects struggle with funding and earning enough income from organisations, so they rely on building on-going relationships with their clients. Others are funded to work with as many organisations as possible.

Sometimes the difference between commercial ICT support and circuit riders comes down to one of *attitude*. Circuit riders have a wider aim of seeing voluntary sector organisations develop their use of technology rather than providing purely technical support services.

London Advice Services Alliance

case study

[www.lasa.org.uk/circuitriderproject]

How did the project start?

It is a two year project working with sixteen London-based Bridge House Trust and Big Lottery Fund grantee organisations until April 2007, supporting and developing their ICT capacity. It is a continuation of Lasa's first circuit rider Project (2002–2004) although it works with different organisations.

How has the project developed?

Following the evaluation of the first project, there were a number of recommendations which have been incorporated into the continuation project, such as:

- Ensuring the project advisory group have a clear remit
- Including where possible the organisations' management committees
- Providing training on using the information resources
- Instigating ICT teams or working groups
- Making resources available in a more accessible format
- Considering the impact of changes recommended in the action plan and what new support this might require
- Identifying small changes which are not funding-dependent and can have significant impact
- Ensuring clarity about the role of the circuit rider especially with regard to technical support provision.

How many staff does the project have?

The project is run by 1.2 full time equivalent staff. This comprises a project manager and 3 part-time circuit riders. There is also a project advisory group which includes representatives from the funders, development workers and circuit riders.

What services does the project provide?

The project provides the following services:

- an initial site visit consisting of an IT Healthcheck, consultation on strategy and project plans
- assistance with IT problems
- technical support (through a contracted technical support company)
- development of individual recommendations and action plans
- periodic follow up visits, usually around 6 per organisation
- training sessions and seminars
- subscription to Lasa's Computanews including Guides
- telephone and email help-line, website and private email discussion list.

Where does the project get its income from?

It is entirely funded by Bridge House Trust and the Big Lottery Fund for a two year period.

On what basis do you charge?

There is no charge to the participating organisations as the project is fully funded.

Do you differentiate between different types of client?

The project is mainly working with grantees of the Bridge House Trust with the exception of one organisation which is Big Lottery funded. They are all registered charities and range in size from 3 to 15 staff.

How do you see the project developing?

Lasa is looking to extend its work in the future with Bridge House Trust by developing a project that will benefit the funder and the sector. This may include resources to help grant assessors for example.

Are there any particular factors that have contributed to your current success?

- availability of internal knowledge on ICT issues from Lasa's Information Systems team and improved and expanded resources on the ICT Hub Knowledgebase
- "one stop shop" for all ICT issues and problems via the circuit rider who acts as a gatekeeper/adviser
- quality of workshops delivered by external leading figures in their fields
- high quality, fast technical assistance.

Sustainability

A traditional view of a circuit rider is that they provide technical support for an organisation's ongoing use of ICT. In order to make this sustainable they have increasingly got involved in planning, strategy and budgeting for technology.

They might also be involved in developing new projects for organisations such as websites or databases, or helping them to commission them from commercial suppliers.

In whatever work area they are dealing with, circuit riders aim to help organisations take control of their own use of technology and ensure that systems and processes are sustainable.

DISCUSSION POINT

Circuit riders differ from commercial ICT support companies because they are more interested in passing on skills to the organisations they work with.

? **Should circuit riders aim to make the organisations they work with self-reliant**

Branding

Much of the significance of circuit riders comes from the ethos which informs their work, their attitude to clients and their aims in working with organisations. This is not always immediately apparent to funders, policy makers or clients when considering technology options.

However the strength of circuit riding comes from the variety of people who support voluntary sector use of ICT in different ways and share different strengths.

DISCUSSION POINT

Would developing a circuit rider ethos statement, standards and logo help to highlight the concept and improve the identity, recognition and benefit to the sector of circuit riders
Or would it make the concept too exclusive and restrictive

So what do circuit riders actually do

Depending upon their own specialisms and the needs of the organisation that they are working with at the time, a circuit rider might:

- repair and fix hardware
- install and configure software
- train and support staff
- manage existing ICT resources more effectively
- advise project managers on ICT development and implementation
- draw up a technology strategy.

Although an individual circuit rider may not be involved in all of the following activities, at different times the work they undertake might be:

- resolving technical issues
- auditing their current ICT equipment and systems
- helping to keeping PCs healthy, backing up files, updating anti-virus etc.
- training groups on using applications
- identifying ICT needs
- determining strategies for improving ICT practice
- assisting with the tendering process for system installations
- defining and sourcing support contracts
- researching and drawing up a database requirements specification
- drawing up server and network requirements documents
- advising on website design and strategy
- helping draw up ICT budgets
- assisting with grant applications
- general strategic advice and action plan discussion
- raising awareness of relevant technological developments.

Organisational needs

So what kind of ICT help do organisations need Most fall into one of four key areas which circuit riders can assist with:

- **Technical support**
  Often the only time organisations pay any attention to their ICT systems is when they go wrong – files get lost, email stops working, systems get infected with viruses or equipment fails to operate.

  Circuit riders can usually get the system working again, or else can locate somebody who else who can. But they can also help the organisation to avoid the situation from occurring again.

- **Signposting**
  There are many ICT resources which could greatly help small voluntary organisations if they were aware of them. However, these are not always easily identifiable from the mass of technical information available.

  Circuit riders can help by signposting organisations to useful resources based on experience of working with similar organisations, or by getting recommendations from other circuit riders.

- **Advice**
  Often voluntary sector organisations rely on suppliers to provide them with technical advice, or from visiting technical websites. Staff sometimes find it hard to judge how reliable, appropriate and unbiased this advice might be. Often this is not explained in everyday language understandable by non-technical staff.

  Circuit riders can provide relevant advice which is explained in everyday language without relying on jargon in an attempt to amaze or confuse.

- **Managing technology**
  Staff with responsibility for ICT often feel they do not have sufficient skills to manage their organisation's technology effectively. But just as managers understand something about finance or employment law without having to become accountants or solicitors, so they can also manage technology without having to become technical experts. These issues are as much about organisational development as they are about technology, and more about people than they are about computers.

  Whilst there is plenty of training available on how to use specific software, such as word processing or creating a spreadsheet, very little is available in how to manage

technology itself. Circuit riders can often help organisations realise that technology is something they can take control of in order to make it more useful and reliable.

Ethos

Different circuit riders work in different ways depending on factors like their own skills, their locality and the needs of the organisations they work with.

However, rather than simply being a job description, circuit riding is more about an ethos. Circuit riders are committed to working with the sector in order to help build the capacity of organisations to deliver their services better in order to produce greater social benefits.

DISCUSSION POINT

The ethos of collaboration and sharing between circuit riders in order achieve wider social benefit is similar to that of the Open Source community, where software is produced collaboratively and shared with other people.

? **Due to this shared ethos, should circuit riders be advocates for the use of open source software**

Concept

The term 'circuit rider' is a relatively recent one. Self-employed consultants and staff in small private companies or voluntary organisations have been working on voluntary sector technology for many years, some approaching their work in a similar way.

Circuit riders do not seek to be the only solution to voluntary organisations ICT needs. Rather it is a particular way of describing this area of work in order to make it easier to refer to, for funders and policy makers to better understand organisations' technology needs, and for voluntary sector technology workers to identify themselves and their peers.

Community IT Academy

[www.communityitacademy.org]

case study

How did the project start

We started in 2003 with training long-term unemployed people to be IT technicians. The idea was to get them into employment but we had trouble finding enough placements for them all so we started a technical support service for voluntary organisations so they could get practical experience. We even started a recycling project to provide computers to organisations which didn't already have them.

How has the project developed

Alongside technical support, we started offering services such as training and healthchecks, although we've now finished doing our recycling work.

We were recently commissioned by ChangeUp to do a research study on the ICT needs of local organisations, and have built links with infrastructure organisations within the region.

We also now use open source software and are involved in advocating its use by the voluntary sector.

How many staff does the project have

The project has 4 staff and we've had up to 12 trainees every six months.

What services does the project provide

The process starts with a free healthcheck which aims to help organisations improve their IT environment, and we commit to helping an organisation for half a day per week for six weeks. This can include technical support, but can also cover advice on areas such as web design, training, procurement and IT management and policy.

Many organisations do not have IT budgets so we then advise them when making funding applications for technology projects.

Where does the project get its income from?

All our work is at least part funded, with recent funders including ChangeUp and ESF. Following funding from the Lottery we have been able to set up our technical support service so that it now operates on a social enterprise basis and generates its own income. Our recycling project has finished but used to generate enough income to cover its own costs.

On what basis will you charge?

We try to keep things simple. We work almost exclusively with small to medium

sized voluntary organisations so we charge them all the same rates, although occasional individual or commercial clients we charge at different rates. We provide training on on a free, subsidised or paid basis depending upon what it is and what funding is available.

How do you see the project developing?

We've now got a large body of case study evidence about what works which we want to use to convince funders about how to get the most benefit from their funding.

We also see the use of open source software becoming more widespread and important to voluntary sector organisations.

Are there any particular factors that have contributed to your current success?

We've always tried to be pretty joined-up in what we offer so that organisations can progress through from getting hardware to training how to use it, maintaining systems and planning how to use technology in their work.

A voluntary sector solution

Circuit riders have a particular relationship with the voluntary sector which is not generally shared by those working with technology in other sectors. Their involvement with the sector goes beyond simply promoting the use of more computers. Their aim is to contribute to the development of the sector and they regard the expansion of the use of technology as one way of doing this.

However, although circuit riders are committed to working mainly with voluntary sector organisations, due to the lack of ICT budget of many organisations it is sometimes necessary for them to work for public or commercial sector clients.

Benefits

The benefits that circuit riders bring to the voluntary sector include:

- they understand and share the ethos of the sector and are committed to seeing it thrive and grow
- they are independent of ICT suppliers and companies and so can offer advice that is specific to the organisation they are working with
- they belong to a network of individuals from different organisations with which they can collaborate or refer organisations to
- they have links with other voluntary sector development workers; if the organisations they are working with has other issues that need attention they can refer them to other specialised voluntary sector staff, and vice versa
- they share the voluntary sector's commitment to equal opportunities and diversity; in particular they are aware of accessibility issues and the need to make sure that any technology work they implement is as accessible as possible to all staff and clients.

Mentoring

Matching circuit riders with development workers can harness some of their skills and embed them into infrastructure organisations, enabling them to:

- explore the commonalities in the posts
- share the variety of skills
- shadow a day's work
- look at improving sign-posting and referrals to one another.

In an attempt to promote this further we will be establishing a Mentoring Programme in spring 2007. The benefits to front-line groups will be huge as we aim to create a 'seamless' development plan that is able to meet all organisational needs and will work at a very local level.

Volunteering

Many organisations make use of volunteers to help them with their ICT needs and especially for short-term projects they can be a useful additional technical resource.

The benefits of volunteers can be limited if they provide technical support and are not available when there is a problem, they only implement short-term fixes

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CapacITy

[www.val.org.uk/framesetcapacity.htm]

How did the project start?

It was established in 1998 by Voluntary Action Leeds with 3 years funding from the National Lottery Charities Board.

How has the project developed?

For the first three years the focus of the work was on providing technical support and on producing a directory of local voluntary sector organisations. The project was then refunded for a further three years which included the development of a training suite.

How many staff does the project have?

We have always had two staff.

What services does the project provide?

We offer technical support, training and web/email hosting to voluntary organisations within Leeds.

Where does the project get its income from?

The project generates all its own income from client organisations. We are currently in the first year of the a three business plan approved by the board of Voluntary Action Leeds on the basis that the project will be self-sufficient throughout the three years.

On what basis do you charge?

We provide technical support only on an annual contract basis so that we can predict what income we will have in order to show we are sustainable. We have two levels of contract depending upon the number of computers the organisation has. Each provides the organisation with a certain package of services and anything they require on top of this is chargeable at an hourly rate.

How do you see the project developing?

We are moving into supporting servers for larger organisations. We still aim to work with the smaller organisations that we have built up a good relationship with and which we were first established to support, but we also need larger clients to ensure our long-term sustainability.

Are there any particular factors that have contributed to your current success?

We were fortunate to have 6 years funding during which time we were able to establish ourselves, build relationships and prove our effectiveness so that we have now become self-supporting without external funding. It has helped that Leeds is a large city with a concentration of voluntary organisations.

without considering long-term plans and sustainability, or they are asked to undertake large or critical projects.

Circuit riders differ from staff from commercial ICT support companies in that they are usually more used to working with volunteers. Many have previously undertaken various voluntary sector roles as volunteers themselves, or are doing so concurrently.

Independence

As circuit riders are part of the voluntary sector they are independent of technology companies. This means that they can provide independent advice and are not tied to promoting the technology of any one particular company.

Peer support

Providing ICT support to voluntary organisations can be very isolating. Other voluntary sector workers often do not appreciate the benefits of using technology or alternatively take them for granted. Other technology workers do not appreciate some of the restrictions, difficulties or opportunities that working within the voluntary sector brings.

The circuit rider network provides peer support and networking opportunities for circuit riders, including:

- an email list
- regional meetings
- a national conference
- a circuit rider website.

Due to the shared ethos of circuit riders, this network can provide access to technical advice from others doing similar work, as well as news, ideas, opinions and developments concerning the use of technology within the voluntary sector.

Circuit rider projects

Circuit riders work in various types of organisations including:

- in independent voluntary sector technology organisations
- as part of infrastructure organisations which operate ICT projects
- in social enterprises
- as self-employed consultants.

Client types

Circuit rider projects are usually setup to meet the needs of a particular type of organisation. This can be based on:

- **Locality**
  Circuit riders are often funded to work with organisations in a particular geographical area, or even a particular building shared by many voluntary sector organisations. One advantage of selecting client organisations geographically is that travel time is reduced if organisations are close together.

- **Mission**
  Organisations may work in a particular field, such as environmental or refugee organisations for example. The circuit rider might well combine technical knowledge with a detailed understanding of the organisation's work and share a commitment to it.

- **Clients**
  It may be useful for circuit riders to have an in-depth knowledge of certain clients. For instance, specialised knowledge about accessibility technologies used by people with disabilities, or the ability to speak the same community language as the groups they are working with.

- **Networks**
  A circuit rider project might work to support all the members of a particular network or membership organisation. They might help with the development of technical services for use by all members, such as installing and supporting a database used by all organisations.

- **Funders**
  Funders have set up circuit rider projects to support the use of technology by the organisations to which they grant funds. This can ensure they use ICT effectively in meeting their reporting requirements as well as their project aims.

Funding models

The sources from which circuit rider projects receive their income are very varied. Often it is from several sources, including:

- being funded to provide a free service to local organisations

- being funded to work with a specific network or group of organisations
- charging organisations an hourly rate for work undertaken
- charging a fixed fee for work on a particular project
- charging organisations for an annual package that includes a specified amount or number of services.

Generally these fall into one of three categories:

- a circuit rider receives funding to provide support to a client
- an organisation receives funding to pay a circuit rider for support
- an organisation charges for services and earns income to pay a circuit rider for support.

See diagram overleaf.

Valuing work

Even in models where circuit riders provide services for free or at a subsidised rate, they often provide a dummy invoice to organisations. This gives the cost of the work done on their behalf but shows a discount, sometimes up to 100%. This helps the organisation put a value on the work done and gives them a guide on how much they should be budgeting for technology in the future.
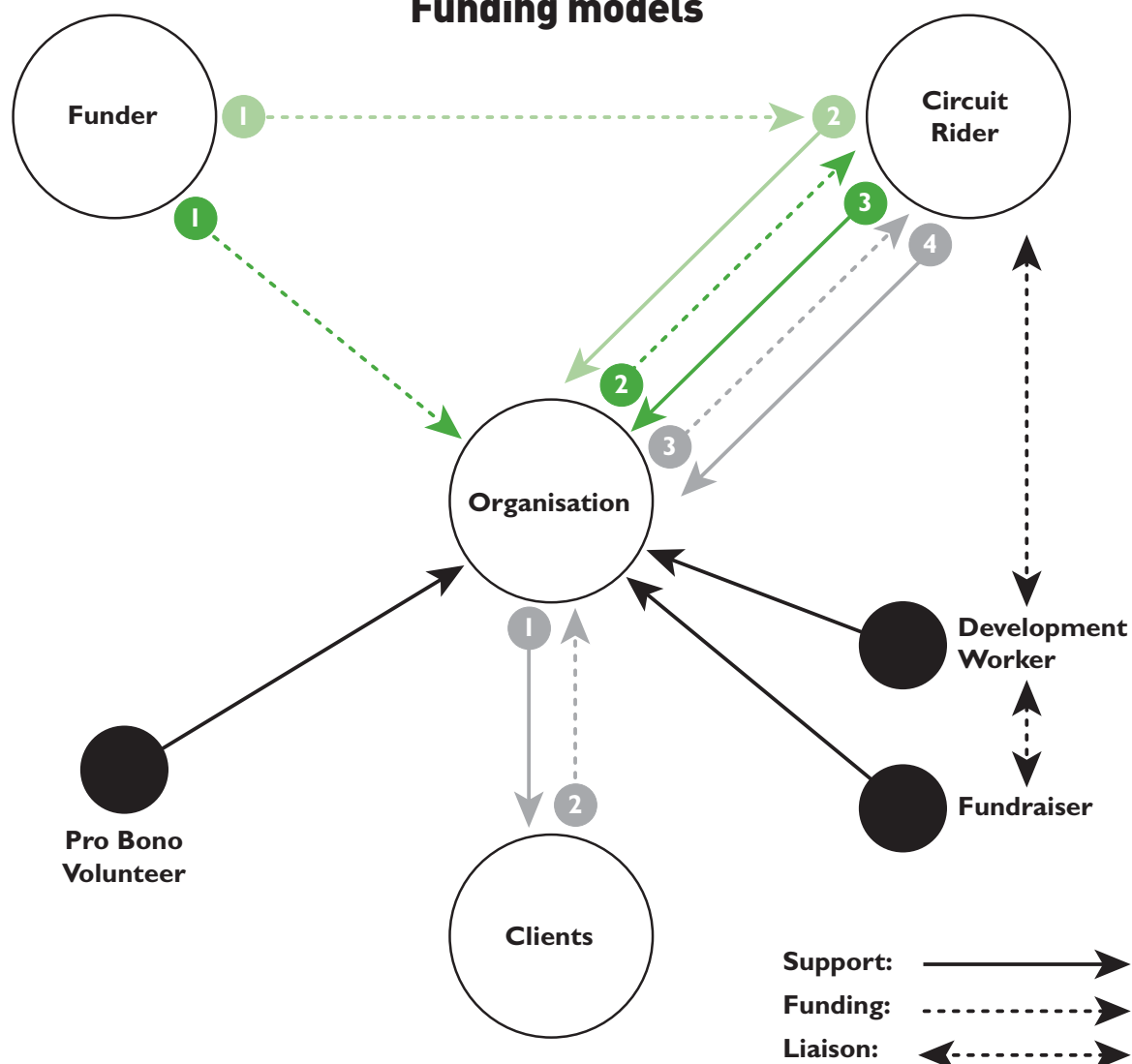
? **In the long-term, does providing a free service mean organisations do not budget or include technology in funding applications Does making a nominal charge make circuit rider projects more sustainable in the future**

DISCUSSION POINT

Many circuit riders assist organisations in drawing up costings to cover ongoing maintenance of ICT systems and for new technology developments. Due to the lack of ICT budgets in many organisations, some circuit riders also devote time to helping client organisations obtain funding in order to carry out these projects.

? **Is it part of a circuit rider's role to help obtain funding for technology projects**

Funding models

Funder

Circuit Rider

Organisation

Development Worker

Pro Bono Volunteer

Clients

Fundraiser

Support:	→
Funding:	----→
Liaison:	←----→

Each model has its own advantages and disadvantages, and in practice there is usually more than one model operating at the same time.

NB: Circuit rider, Development Worker and Fundraiser could be in same organisation.

COLOUR KEY:	organisation receives funding to pay circuit rider for support	circuit rider receives funding to provide support to organisation	organisation charges for services and earns income to pay circuit rider for support
Advantages	• Organisation in control of what support it obtains • Greater buy-in from organisation	• Funder can be assured of the quality of support provided • Removes onus on organisation to identify support • Works best when circuit rider is providing support to several organisations within a locality or network	• Organisation in control of what support it obtains • Greater buy-in from organisation
Disadvantages	• Organisation may not be in a position to make best use of the funding • Income to circuit rider may be inconsistent and haphazard making sustainability difficult • Circuit rider may not be available at the same time as the funding is	• Potentially less buy-in to work with circuit rider	• Income to circuit rider may be inconsistent and haphazard making sustainability difficult • May not produce a large enough income at a specific time to cover cost of major projects

Setting up a circuit rider project

So if we wanted to start our own circuit rider project how would we go about it

The case studies throughout this guide include an explanation of how some circuit rider projects got started, but every project is slightly different so it's not possible to write a checklist or timetable that will apply to every one.

However, these are some of the issues that will need considering:

Project aims

Circuit rider projects can have a variety of ways of working depending upon what they are trying to achieve.

For example, some might aim to provide ongoing technical support to client organisations throughout the life of the project, whilst others might aim to train managers so they can develop a technology strategy for their organisations.

Some might aim to be support organisations by getting their technology working again whenever they have a problem, but others might hope to work with clients to help them become self-sufficient.

Some might try to get all the organisations they work with to a certain minimum level of usage of ICT or stage of development. Others might want to allocate a set amount of time aside to work with each one.

Client numbers

The number of organisations the project aims to work with will obviously depend on what you aim to achieve. Some funders will expect the project to support any organisations within a specific locality, so the amount of work that can be done with each will obviously be limited.

If the project aims to provide on-going support and advice over a long time period in order to assist them in taking a strategic approach to technology then between 20 and 30 organisations might be realistic.

In particular, allow plenty of time for delays and to document work. Having

Superhighways   case study

[www.superhighways.org.uk]

How did the project start?

The project started in 1997 when two London CVS (Kingston and Merton) got funding from the Training and Enterprise Council to support voluntary organisations using email and the internet.

How has the project developed?

We now cover seven London boroughs, which includes the south London ChangeUp sub-region. We aim to provide services at a very local level by working with the CVS in each district. We have always been an Information and Communications Technology project rather than an IT project.

How many staff does the project have?

The project has generally had between 4 and 7 staff.

What services does the project provide?

We deliver technical support, ICT healthchecks, strategic planning and budgeting for ICT to local organisations. We offer accredited training programs when funding is available and just recently we have begun delivering a wireless project making use of recycled computers gathered by the CVS furniture collection project.

Where does the project get its income from?

We've had funding from a variety of sources, including two rounds of funding from the Lottery, DfES, ESF (which was co-financed by the Learning and Skills Council), Change Up and Capacity Builders.

How do you see the project developing?

Following an extensive study we've conducted, we're about to launch ourselves as a hybrid social enterprise. Having established ourselves with local organisations, we are confident that we will generate sufficient income to keep ourselves going.

On what basis will you charge?

We will offer a range of packages from which organisations will be able to make their own choice about the level of support they want.

Are there any particular factors that have contributed to your current success?

We have always worked closely with the local CVS and networked well with statutory bodies. We are very tied into sub-regional voluntary sector strategies, which includes communications technology as one of the key priorities on which local organisations need development support.

good records of the work done with each organisation is invaluable.

Client selection

If the project will be funded then there will probably be criteria for selecting the client organisations. If the aim is to be self-sustaining through income generation then the criteria will be the organisation's ability to pay.

However, the demand for ICT support from small voluntary sector organisations is high, so it is wise to

consider the criteria for selecting which organisations you will work with, or devise an application procedure.

Organisations should understand that the project will demand a substantial commitment from them, particularly of staff time. Organisations that have done development work before may have a better understanding of what they are taking on.

Criteria for accepting an organisation into the project might include:

- network membership

- the ability to identify a need for IT support and development

- the size and capacity to be involved

- the commitment of senior management and board members

- attendance at the project launch meeting

- identification of a Key Worker who would be the main contact and conduit for communication on issues related to the project

- willingness to agree to and implement an action plan as a result of the healthcheck.

Consider asking organisations to sign a contract which lays out what both sides can expect.

Cambridge Independent Advice Centre   case study

[www.ciac.org.uk]

How did the project start?

We started in 2005 with funding from ChangeUp to provide a circuit rider facility to meet the ICT needs of front-line organisations for the Cambridgeshire sub-region. Through building relationships with an initial cross section of 15 typical front-line organisations in the county we planned to develop with them an ICT strategy tailored to their own specific needs and also gain invaluable information necessary to:

- develop an overall ICT strategy for the sub-region that meets the concrete needs of the sub-region's front-line organisations

- pinpoint the most important priorities for investing capital on ICT in the county

- lay the basis for creating further ongoing circuit rider projects with new cross sections of front-line organisations.

How has the project developed?

We have been overwhelmed with requests for advice on a range of ICT issues (purchasing, websites, etc) from a much wider circle of VCS organisations than our immediate clients. We believe we have clearly shown that there is a great need in the sub-region for the independent ICT advice and services we have been providing to the sector and that answering this need would greatly improve its overall efficiency.

How many staff does the project have?

We have two full-time and three part-time staff: a project manager, two circuit riders, an administrator and a web designer. We also have a group of six people who we use on an ad hoc basis to provide technical support

What services does the project provide?

In the first year we managed to achieve the following:

- 14 of the 15 organisations received visit/audit/advice and capital funding resulting in the improved use of ICT in their organisation

- 250 ICT training courses were provided to the sector

- websites were built and utilised

- equipment was standardised and procured with considerable savings

- a Newsletter and information were sent out at regular intervals

- research and development of such items as VOIP use, remote access via web mail, remote back up of systems

- less fear of ICT from the sector resulting from people coming forward with problems assumed to be difficult but were in fact minor and easy to sort out.

Where does the project get its income from?

We have received funding from Capacity Builders and ESF. We also get sponsorship from private Companies and generate our own income.

How do you see the project developing?

The potential long term benefits of the circuit rider project go far beyond the immediate clients of the project, not only in terms of enabling us to provide important ICT services economically to the sector, but also through the wider knowledge we have gained. We have become a trusted source for ICT advice to the VCS in the region.

Although further development of this work partially requires further funding, we think much of it, certainly in the long term, can be developed on a Social Enterprise basis. We have built partnerships with a wide range of infrastructure organisations within both the region and sub-region to plan how the work we have been doing can be taken forward.

Are there any particular factors that have contributed to your current success?

We have built a good level of trust from the local voluntary sector by being there to help when organisations have neither the capacity or the knowledge, and by providing quality services and equipment. We have also received regional and national recognition, both for our circuit rider project and our work with free and open source software [http://foss.ciac.org.uk]. Getting involved at all levels enables us to learn from and help other similar projects.

Communication

The circuit rider might need to work with several different people within a client organisation. An office manager or admin worker might have day-to-day responsibility for ICT, but for decisions about strategy and spending the circuit rider might need to talk with managers and board members who might have less knowledge and interest in technology.

It's useful to identify a key worker within each organisation that the circuit rider can use to contact in case of any difficulties and to have a single person to report to on progress.

Websites and email are quick, easy and efficient ways of communicating but organisations may not necessarily be used to working in this way. Travel is time-consuming but visiting organisations is crucial, especially when initially building a relationship with a new organisation.

Part of a project's aims might be to build a co-operation between the groups involved. In this case, include ways for the organisations to meet, share information and support each other from early on in the life of the project.

Staff support

Where will the circuit riders be based, who will employ them and how will they be supported

Staff based with an organisation that specialises in ICT will have access to technical support, but they will also need to be able to liaise with other organisational development workers. Those based in an infrastructure organisation will need access to peer support from other technology workers.

If the staff member is new to working as a circuit rider they may not initially have the combination of skills required for the work, and if they are working individually it is essential that they have access to technical, professional and personal support.

Part of the solution can be provided by the circuit rider network, through email lists, meetings and conferences.

Management

How will the project be managed?

When many organisations are stakeholders in a project there will also be inevitable disagreements and misunderstandings. One approach is to set up a Project Board with representatives of all

stakeholders. Being clear about who is a member and why is essential, especially if it includes client organisations and a conflict of interests is possible.

The Project Board's first task should be to agree a detailed plan for the work of the project. Although this can be bureaucratic, it is crucial to ensure effective communication and common understanding of what the project will and won't do.

Evaluation

Consider how the project will be evaluated before it starts, rather than waiting until it is about to finish. The results should help improve your work in the future, and will hopefully add credibility to further funding bids.

It's also very useful for other circuit rider projects to find out what works and what doesn't.

Funding

The funding of technology is a problematic area for the voluntary sector as a whole. Sometimes organisations are not able to implement the changes that are proposed because they have a lack of funds available for technology.

Many circuit rider projects have found it useful to have a small budget they can use with each client in order to avoid delays and prevent energy being diverted into obtaining funds for small items of hardware or a piece of specialised software.

No one person can be proficient in every area of technology, so there might sometimes be a need to bring in a specialist. It is also often easier and cheaper to pay for a technology service rather than buying hardware or software. If possible, ensure the project is not restricted from using this option by the type of funding that was requested.

The ICT Hub keeps a list of funders who might support technology projects aimed at developing the capacity of the sector. It is also aims to work with funders on how they handle applications which include the use of technology.

In the longer-term this will hopefully ensure that local organisations have realistic ICT budgets and can purchase services directly from circuit rider projects.

So what happens next

OK, so I've seen how useful circuit riders can be in helping organisations make better use of technology, but what could I do about it

There is further action that different types of organisation can take to support or take advantage of the growth of circuit riding:

Frontline organisations

Frontline organisations can get support from circuit riders by:

- lobbying a local infrastructure organisation to setup a circuit rider project to provide ICT development support, if it does not do so already – technology is just as much of an organisational development need as other issues on which they might provide support

- finding other similar organisations to consider setting up your own circuit rider project

- referring to the ICT Hub suppliers directory and the circuit rider map in order to get support or advice about technology

- reading articles on the KnowledgeBase for ideas and advice about how to use technology

- viewing the information about the funding of technology available from the ICT Hub website [www.icthub.org.uk/funders].

Infrastructure organisations

Infrastructure organisations can have an important role in developing better use of technology within the voluntary sector by:

- setting up a circuit rider project to support local organisations so they can be more effective in their work

- viewing technology as an essential organisational development issue

- developing the skills of organisational development workers so that they can recognise issues that could

benefit from the use of technology in the organisations which they support

- integrating any IT project workers they have with other organisational development staff, rather than internal administration staff

- making themselves aware of suitable technology resources and services to which they can refer local organisations.

Funders

Funders have a key role in making the voluntary sector more effective and can support the spread of circuit riding as a way of providing support by:

- supporting applications for circuit rider projects

- setting up a circuit rider project to support the organisations that you fund so that they operate more efficiently

- being pro-active in providing funding for technology by viewing it as a core need of organisations and not as an optional extra

- allowing revenue as well as capital costs in applications – often purchasing ICT services can be more cost-effective than purchasing equipment

- investing in training and development so that staff that assess applications are able to recognise a realistic ICT budget and projects that make good use of technology

- monitoring how much of your grant funding is allocated to technology in order to inform future decision making

- pointing organisations to sources of ICT support they might need to undertake their project effectively

- viewing the information about the funding of technology available from the ICT Hub website [www.icthub.org.uk/funders].

Policy makers

Policy makers can ensure small voluntary sector organisations benefit form better use of technology by:

- allowing for the technology needs of small voluntary sector organisations in their proposals

- recognising the way small organisations can be supported in their use of technology in programs.

Circuit riders

Circuit riding can sometimes be a lonely and unappreciated task. If you're already doing circuit rider work then you can:

- subscribe to our email list in order to get news, support, ideas, recommendations and peer support

- attend one of our regional meetings or annual conference

- put yourself on our circuit rider map so that other circuit riders and potential clients can find you

- get in touch with us at [info@lasa.org.uk] as we like to hear about what circuit riders are doing in the UK.

Further information

For more information go to:

www.lasa.org.uk/circuitriders

www.icthub.org.uk/circuitriders

www.ukriders.info

www.eriders.org

Thanks

Thanks to all the projects that have provided case studies and all the circuit riders who have contributed to discussions about how to assist the sector make better use technology.
Keep on keeping on….

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