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Introduction

This report reviews the work of the City Bridge Trust on building ICT capacity in London's third sector organisations through Circuit Riding.

The third in a series of occasional papers from the City Bridge Trust, it may be downloaded from our website: www.citybridgetrust.org.uk

Information and communication technology (ICT) in all its forms is now an intrinsic part of the 21st century third sector organisation.

ICT is essential to the work that organisations carry out, from general administration through to mission delivery, from membership databases to online engagement, from fundraising and reporting to convergence with phone systems.

But if ICT is essential it is also expensive and complex; small to medium sized organisations often don't have the technical, managerial or strategic capacity in-house to support and develop their ICT systems.

Recognising that the modern third sector organisation has to engage with technology to survive, the City Bridge Trust has recently funded a project which directly impacted on the ICT capacity of its grantees. Using a model known as Circuit Riding, which has seen success in the US, the City Bridge Trust wanted to see whether a long-term strategic and technical ICT intervention would help grantees with their ICT capacity.

A Circuit Rider is a peripatetic worker who provides voluntary and community organisations with ICT support and development. Their role is multi-faceted, combining technical, strategic, training and facilitation skills with an in-depth knowledge of the third sector.

The Circuit Rider Project

In 2005 the City Bridge Trust and the Big Lottery joint-funded Lasa (London Advice Services Alliance) to work directly with up to 20 organisations funded by the Trust to help them build their ICT capacity. This would provide the organisations with direct ICT support and development and add value to the work we were funding. We knew we were in a position to quickly identify organisations in need of this intervention.

The key aims of the project were to:

- Increase the capacity of small to medium-sized third sector organisations to sustainably manage and support their ICT systems.
- Enable organisations to make more effective use of funding received for ICT equipment and projects.
- Assist organisations to develop strategies to improve their services through the effective use of IT.
- Promote best practice for effective management and support of ICT with the third sector and funders.

The project sought to address these issues through the provision of a range of services to participating organisations that included:

- An ICT self-assessment exercise to establish their current position.
- A site visit consisting of an ICT health check and consultation on strategic development and project action plans.
- Assistance with ICT technical problems.
- Follow up meetings (average of 6 per organisation).
- Training sessions and seminars.
- Information resources.
- Telephone and email help line, website and email discussion list.

Key findings

An independent evaluation[1] of the project has proved timely and useful, not least for the Trust's Five Year Review, and its findings are being fed into our consultation exercise. Its main conclusions confirmed this had been a very successful approach:

- Organisations improved their effectiveness by addressing specific ICT issues such as upgrading old equipment, developing policies and improving networks and databases.
- Awareness and knowledge of ICT increased, with those staff most involved much better able to identify current and future ICT needs.
- Awareness of the need to include ICT costs in budgets and funding applications increased substantially.
- Smaller third sector organisations need to access technical, telephone and email support, as well as training and information resources, in order to develop their ICT capacity.
- Competing priorities for time and resources hamper how well organisations understand the need to address immediate ICT priorities and longer term planning.
- Competing priorities and a lack of confidence in addressing ICT issues affect the extent to which other staff, management and trustees are prepared to engage with ICT capacity building.
- Understanding of the benefits of the Circuit Riding approach to ICT development, especially for second tier agencies increased.
- More work is needed with funders and frontline agencies to promote the Circuit Rider approach and importance of ICT more generally.
- A quality assurance system and accreditation for those involved in Circuit Riding would help convince funders, policy makers and the voluntary and community sector of the benefits of ICT.

Problems and barriers to achievement

Whilst the evaluation found many positive outcomes to the project, it also identified some of the barriers that impact on organisations' capacity to engage with ICT:

- A lack of strategic understanding of ICT and of strategic planning in the organisation.
- A lack of understanding of the full costs of ICT, reluctance by funders to meet these costs and an unstable funding environment.
- Difficulties for organisations in accessing affordable, reliable and relevant advice, information and support on ICT issues.
- Staff turnover and changes in key personnel.
- A lack of commitment to ICT from senior management and governing bodies.
- A lack of awareness of the benefits or interest in ICT from other staff.
- Staff reluctance to accept change.
- Competing priorities taking priority over work on ICT and making it difficult to keep developments up to date.
- A lack of resources for strategic development of ICT and, where they were available, a preference to spend the money on securing technical support rather than directly on ICT development.
- No one in the organisation with specific responsibility for ICT.

There is no simple solution to removing the barriers to successful ICT development. Whilst some organisations thought that the situation wouldn't improve until there was sufficient funding to dedicate staff resources specifically to ICT, most thought that the situation might improve over time particularly in relation to the commitment of staff, managers and governing bodies.

Top tips for the Third Sector

Strategic planning Work towards having a regularly reviewed ICT plan which relates to your overall business objectives. This will not only guide development but save money – and can help when applying for funding.

Staffing Have someone responsible for ICT in the organisation but also have a contingency plan.

Budgeting Create an annual ICT budget which covers the full cost of maintaining and replacing your systems, staffing, training and support. Ensure ICT costs are included in all funding requests.

Backing up Backing up data on a regular basis is the single most important thing an organisation can do to protect itself – it has been estimated that 70% of organisations fail if there is a catastrophic loss of data.

Security Keep computer operating systems up to date, install and maintain anti-virus software, firewall the broadband connection, password protect access to data.

Software licensing Charities and some non-profits can benefit from discounted software licenses – never run pirated or unlicensed software.

Support and advice All organisations need some form of technical support for when things go wrong. Utilise resources such as the ICT Hub Knowledgebase (www.icthubknowledgebase.org.uk).

Networking Organisations with more than one computer should have a network in order to share data resources, internet access, printer and so on. Centralising data will make back ups easier to manage.

Online presence Websites must be kept up to date, accessible and appropriate – you never know who's going to be looking at it, including funders!

Policies It is important to develop policies such as acceptable use of ICT systems and data protection.

Green computing Employ energy and resource saving measures to reduce the impact of your ICT. Ensure life-expired equipment is recycled.

Conclusion

Third sector organisations today cannot exist without ICT. Service users, funders, supporters and staff expect to be able to communicate electronically. If the network, server or Internet goes down for just a few hours, work grinds to a halt. Client databases cannot be accessed, email stops flowing, monitoring reports cannot be written and websites cannot be updated. So it is perhaps surprising that, as this project has shown, there is still a gulf between the importance organisations place on their ICT and their capacity to manage it.

This project has illustrated that targeted, long term developmental support using a Circuit Riding model does have an impact on organisational effectiveness and mission delivery. The City Bridge Trust will continue to assist organisations to develop their full potential through their capacity to use and develop ICT and to influence other London-wide and national funders to recognise this through the work that has been done so far.

Participating organisations

The project participants were:

Advisory Centre for Education
Age Concern Hounslow
Age Concern Lewisham
Arachne Greek Cypriot Women's Group
Black and Ethnic Minority Community
Care Forum
CARIS Haringey
Disability Action in the Borough of Barnet
Disability Advice Service Lambeth
Disability Law Service
Environmental Law Foundation
Iranian Association
New Avenues Youth and Community Project
Nubian Life
Southwark Diocesan Welcare
Victim Support Wandsworth
Women's Environmental Network