

London Circuit Rider Conference 2004

Conference report

A New Approach to Voluntary Sector ICT Support and Development

Co-hosted by [N-TEN](#)

Monday 13 - Tuesday 14 September 2004
Waterloo Campus, King's College London

Who Attended?

Almost ninety people were delegates at the event.

Most people came from the UK, but fourteen delegates came from countries including Australia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Canada, Georgia, Ireland, the Netherlands, South Africa and the US.

Delegates described their main work role as follows:

- Circuit Rider - 25%
- Voluntary sector, managing technology full-time - 16%
- Voluntary sector, managing technology part-time as part of a wider role - 13%
- Voluntary sector manager - 12%
- Self-employed consultant - 13%
- For-profit vendor of technical services to the voluntary sector - 2%
- Funder - 1%
- Local or national government - 4%
- Other - 14%

The Agenda

Plenary sessions began and ended the conference, and Tuesday morning began (at 9am!) with a lively plenary about Open Source software. The rest of the agenda consisted of thirteen smaller workshops. Nine organisations which provide ICT services to small voluntary organisations took part in an exhibition. Opportunities to network and socialise included a reception in IBM's building, where many delegates enjoyed a drink in the evening overlooking the Thames. For details of all the events, and speaker biographies, see the agenda page.

Agenda

Monday 13 September

1300-1700

Exhibition

ICT products and services for small voluntary organisations

1300-1330

Registration, coffee

1330-1415

Opening Session

1445-1600

Workshops Session 1

- **Rider Tools: What's Here, What's Missing**
Olaposi Abiola, oneVillage Foundation, Nigeria
Marcus Otite, Superhighways Partnership
Track A - for Circuit Riders

What is a Rider? The History and Values of Circuit Riding

by Bill Lester, Engender Health, New York

Session notes

Questions asked by participants:

- How can I hook into this movement?
- Am I a circuit rider?
- Are funders jumping on the bandwagon by using the term e-rider?
- What is the relationship between IT consultants and circuit riders? – How can they profit from each other?
- Is there an EU perspective?
- Is an e-rider different in different cultures?

Bill introduced the circuit rider movement by saying that a very good history of the circuit-rider movement could be found on the LASA website. He said that today 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.

Overhead: Principles

A consultant may work in the sector however an e-rider understands the organisational problems and has skills in planning and assessment as well as technical skills.

Someone asked if an e-rider has to have worked in the sector to be called an e-rider. Bill answered that an e-rider is more valuable if they understand the mission of the organisation they are supporting and Teresa Crawford added that it is better again if the e-rider is from the community they are supporting.

As an e-rider you may for example recommend that they don't go for an IT solution – communication is the key. A computer might come later.

An e-rider has a commitment to sharing information.

Overhead: Values

There is a commonality between not-for-profits, for example, lack of funds. E-riders look at long term strategic technology plans and support an organisation to implement cultural change. This is one of the most difficult aspects of e-riding.

At the 2000 US Rider Round-Up people began to document the movement – Sean O'Brien made a documentary of the Round-up which we were shown at the workshop.

A Round-Up is a get together of e-riders many of whom are geographically isolated. It is a time for e-riders to regenerate themselves and also offer a "day of service" to the local community. A "day of service" works by e-riders arriving to the Round-Up a day early and offering a half day's service to the local community.

Overhead: **Circuit Riding Today – Models of Financial Support**

3 models: Membership model
 Fully Funded model
 Hybrid model

Circuit riding often starts with funding and then moves to a sustainability model. Teresa gave an example of the New York Link model where their strategy is 100% funded because they are serving a particular community (i.e. disadvantaged women led organisations).

Teresa also reported that there has been a massive shift in the USA to organisations budgeting for their own internal ICT staff. She said this was particularly apparent at the most recent Round-up.

Overhead: **Circuit Riding Today – Community**

Teresa has written a paper which has not yet been released; "eRiders Starter Kit". It was written for Tactical Tech and should be available soon on the www.eriders.net site.

Teresa also noted that on the film we saw of the 2000 Round-up, most of the e-riders interviewed were white and male. She reported that this has changed dramatically since N-TEN realised that e-riders were not representative of the communities they served.

Overhead: **Circuit Riding Today – Models of Operation**

There are 3 models:

Mission-related

- Environmental
- Health
- Advocacy

Foundation grantees

- Subsidised
- Full service
- Ad-hoc service

Geographical

- Building
- City
- Country

Teresa added a fourth; e-riding around networks of organisations

There was a discussion about identifying e-riders. They are often the accidental techie e.g. the admin worker. Teresa talked about cultural differences and gave an example of an African woman whom she had worked with and the difficulties and issues that she faced e.g. she was still expected to wear her traditional dress which made crawling around on the floor plugging in cables cumbersome.

Chris Bailey from Cambridge Independent Advice Centre said that he thought it is better if you can train some-one up from within your own organisation. He gave an example of a mid-wife from the trade union United Nurses of Alberta, who trained herself up and was very successful.

Overhead: What is the Need?

What happens after the technology is set up?

- Ongoing training for technology in support of operations
- Leveraging the tools of technology in support of programmes
- Ongoing issue of costs and management

Bill introduced the concept of an i-rider. This is an information person. For example an e-rider can install the tool, maybe a financial package, but can't necessarily use it. This is where the i-rider comes in as the person who knows how to use the tool but isn't necessarily a techie. N-TEN is developing the idea of i-riders.

Overhead: Discussion

- Questions
- What wasn't clear
- Dreaming big
- The rest of the conference

Workshop participants from Scotland reported that funding was a major issue for them.

There was a discussion around the terms that people use for e-riding. Teresa said there was a problem with definitions. Are circuit riders specific and specialist or generalist – Teresa said she didn't have the answer.

Bill Lester closed the workshop by saying that you should think "if I had all the money, time and resources in the world what would I do with it?" – Dream big and start there.

- [Helping Community Organisations with IT Planning](#)
Mark Walker, SCIP, Brighton
Track C - for Voluntary Sector Staff with Responsibility for ICT

Tuesday 14 September

0900-1030

Plenary: Open Source Software for Voluntary and Community Groups

Dan McQuillan, Lasa, London

Max Hertzberg, Seeds for Change/SCN Consulting, Lancaster

Adam Jollans, IBM, London

Michelle Murrain, Aspiration, Massachusetts

Dave Nichols, BVSC, Birmingham

followed by Q&A and discussion

1100-1215

Workshops Session 2

- **Getting Support - Isolated Riders or Work in Teams?**
Tea Kharitonashvili, Open Society-Georgia Foundation, Georgia
Ian Runeckles, Lasa, London
Track A - for Circuit Riders
- **Circuit Rider Project Development**
Teresa Crawford, Independent Consultant, New York
Kate White, Superhighways Partnership, London
Track B - Setting Up a Circuit Rider Project
- **ICT and Disabled People**
Mike Williams, AbilityNet, London
Track D - ICT for All

1315-1430

Workshops Session 3

- **Client Centred Consulting**
John Kenyon, Groundspring, San Francisco
Track A - for Circuit Riders
- **Comparing, Contrasting and Evaluating Voluntary Sector ICT Projects**
Nick Plant, University of the West of England, Bristol
Track B - Setting Up a Circuit Rider Project
- **Getting Security Right**
Lynette Turnbull-Grant, LTG Consulting, UK
Track C - for Voluntary Sector Staff with Responsibility for ICT

ICT Support in Rural Areas

Session Notes:

Presenters: Sian Basker, Herefordshire Partnership & Jocelyn England, ACRE.

Group participants from voluntary sector were from various rural areas both in the UK and overseas other participants were from the public and private sector.

1. What's the voluntary sector like in rural areas?

- Predominance of smaller organisations. Recent survey in Herefordshire and Worcestershire found over 50% of groups have a turnover of less than 10K and no paid staff. A further 30% have less than 5 staff and a turn over of 100K. Interesting to contrast with recent Virtual Promise research which describes small organisations as having less than 100 staff – a size of organisation almost unheard of in rural areas.
- Lower resourced organisations: worse pay levels; lots of part time staff, often limited opening times for services, difficulty getting skilled staff, high staff turnover (might be true across sector urban too).
- Lower levels of training: NCVO 2001 survey on skills, training and workforce development showed lower levels of training and 'reluctance to accept' training. Very often no budget for training of any kind.
- Even if the organisation is not based in rural area, i.e. the office is in a market town, they still work in rural areas and have a rural client group. Very often lots of outreach work/mobile services and high levels of home working or organisations (larger ones) working from multiple offices.
- Higher levels of volunteering. 2000 research in Hereford suggested around 1 in 7 people.

2. Where's the rural VCS @ with respect to ICT?

- Recent research in Herefordshire & Worcestershire found:
- ICT is very well established & most organisations use computers
- ICT is central to the sector's activities, although amongst smaller organisations the use of computers and the internet is often on an informal basis with people using personal equipment at home.
- Organisations with staff and offices are pretty good at updating equipment and replacing older equipment
- Generally make considered decision about where and how to use ICT. Most are reasonably confident they're managing current ICT well and have necessary skills.
- Very poor awareness of information security and protection.
- Low levels of strategy and planning

- Under-using technology – over ½ organisations with multiple PC's not networked
- Broadband uptake stands at between 15-20%

3. What are the key differences/issues for rural Circuit Riders?

- Home-working/teleworking/mobile means more focus on distributed ICT systems e.g. mobile, web based services and virtual private networks important. Some organisations with broadband have had success in delivering some support remotely over the Internet e.g. Using 'Go to my assist' tool for delivering technical support and training to users.
- Tackling Rural Social Isolation. Whilst remote support could be a useful tool several participants agreed that rural Circuit Riders perform an important social support role. Many organisations, often those that are volunteer run or have only one part-time member of staff working from home are socially isolated. The face to face work is therefore more important to the client and this, and indeed travel, can take a long time but are critical to building trust and good relations with the sector.
- Broadband availability is still poor but there are some good examples of community broadband projects√√√ e.g. Cybermoor Cumbria
- Access to alternative and emerging technologies is poor, slower to reach critical mass, difficult to access commercial suppliers and support (e.g. Open Source, Novell, Wireless). One of the group did point out that there were communities of Open Source and Linux User Groups all over the country – rural and urban. Circuit Riders should therefore search the net to find any local resources and expertise.
- Choice and quality of commercial IT maintenance and support companies can be limited and variable. Often the companies will also be small and prone to major changes in quality if key staff leave.
- Size of voluntary and community organisations makes a big difference to what they need. This means it's important to recognise the target audience and tailor support to the differing needs of groups.
- Collaborative work with other sectors is quite common – good examples of joining up voluntary sector work with commercial sector IT businesses – E.G. Digital Peninsula Network in Cornwall
- Sign-posting to other services and pooling resources is even more important as the target market is not huge and is widely dispersed.
- Online support networks for people with ICT responsibilities and interests in the sector can be useful for sharing information and experience.

1500-1615

Workshops Session 4

- **Sustainability: The Business of Keeping Your Circuit Rider Project Going**
Jody Mahoney, CompuMentor, San Francisco
Track A - for Circuit Riders
- **Lessons Learned: Lasa's Circuit Rider Project**
Phil Woodall and Ian Runeckles, Lasa, London
Track B - Setting Up a Circuit Rider Project
- **Technology on a Shoestring: Tools that Make a Big Difference for a Small Cost**
Michelle Murrain, Aspiration, Massachusetts
Track C - for Voluntary Sector Staff with Responsibility for ICT

1615-1700

Closing Session: Building the Circuit Rider Movement

Speakers tbc

What Did Delegates Think of the Event?

In October we surveyed delegates: most agreed or agreed strongly with the following statements:

- The agenda fitted well with my current work – 81%
- The sessions that actually took place fitted their descriptions in the agenda – 92%
- The CONTENT of the conference was good value for the registration fee – 92%
- The OVERALL conference was good value for the registration fee – 100%
- At the conference I was able to make useful contacts, which strengthened my professional support network – 85%
- At the conference I was able to learn about key issues for my work – 85%
- Attending the conference has made me more effective in my work with voluntary organisations – 77%
- If Lasa organise a similar event in 2005, I am likely to attend – 77%

Workshop Presentation Materials

Lots of people asked if we could make available handouts, Powerpoint presentations and so on. Notes are now available from:

- [History and Values of Circuit Riding](#) (RTF file, 37kB)

More should be available soon.

Dan McQuillan suggests that if you want to follow up his presentation on Open Source, have a look at the Wiki for the [Voluntary and Community Sector Open Source Initiative](#).

Two documents - which were both in the delegate pack - are also available:

- Evaluation of the [Lasa Circuit Rider Project: Experiences and insights into running a developmental ICT project](#) (this is a 334kB PDF file).
- Lasa's [Guide to Circuit Riding](#) (this is a 132kB PDF file)

Our Approach

We are interested in technology because we believe it can help voluntary organisations achieve their missions - not for its own sake. So we organised an event where people could:

- talk in plain English and avoid jargon.
- offer solutions which were relevant to small voluntary organisations.
- discuss issues and learn from each other, even if they didn't have much technical knowledge, rather than passively listening to "ICT experts"
- celebrate the diversity of the voluntary sector

The Conference Organisers

- **Lasa** organised the event: we have provided ICT advice to the voluntary sector in the UK for twenty years. Lasa plays a leading role in developing the UK Circuit Rider movement.
- **N-TEN**, who co-hosted the conference, supports ICT staff working with the US voluntary sector and internationally. They organise Tech Clubs for voluntary ICT staff in fourteen cities, run regional conferences around the US, and host the annual Nonprofit Technology Conference, attended by over 600 people this year in Philadelphia.