

Comparing Apples with Apples

Delivering a centralised e-reporting system to support community funding

The Project

Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) is the umbrella body for all voluntary organisations in Wales, coordinating the activities of largely independent regional organisations called County Voluntary Council's (CVCs).

April 2004; WCVA and its consortium of Objective 3 CVCs were encountering a number of issues with the collection and manipulation of data. As CVCs were collecting and using data in day-to-day operations, they had independently developed systems to collect and use data. These systems were typically fit for purpose for the CVCs, using a variety of electronic and paper based methods. The disparate nature of these systems, however, did not allow them to produce activity reports in a consistent format.

Conversely, WCVA had a requirement to report these activities in a comparable format to a variety of Welsh, UK and European funding providers in order to secure new funding and to report back on current funding usage.

WCVA therefore identified the need for a common system that would both allow the CVCs to collect and use their data on a day-to-day basis whilst offering a consistent reporting format for their operations.

Therefore, the system had to deliver:

- Complex contact relationship management facilities
- Interaction logging facilities, enabling the tracking of all communications in and out of each CVC
- Ability to associate interactions and contacts with project and funds
- Top level management reporting of the above

Challenges and Constraints

A number of providers were approached to propose a database solution that could be implemented by each CVC and run by their staff from office locations. The original project brief identified a number of major issues that would ultimately shape the nature of Senior's solution. These issues were:

- Some CVCs operated from a number of locations throughout each region
- There was a wide IT skills gap among the CVCs, some having dedicated IT departments, some having no IT staff at all
- The provision of ICT infrastructure was varied throughout

The language used in the tender document described a system that required internal servers, networks, back-up regimes and IT staff at each location. Given the issues, Senior identified that these requirements would be difficult and costly to implement.



The Solution

It became obvious that the massive IT skills and infrastructure gap between the CVCs made installing traditional individual LAN based databases less applicable.

Senior's solution was therefore innovative: we proposed a web-based online application that was served from a central location, accessible from anywhere with a web browser and an Internet connection. This immediately removed the infrastructure and IT staff barrier from the CVCs. Because the system and the data were being held 'off-site', system setup costs were minimal and regular back-ups, security and system maintenance became possible cost effectively.

With the operational requirements fulfilled, the system could therefore fulfil the managerial requirements with relative ease. With all data immediately accessible from a single source, it would be possible for WCVA to pull down common reports and rapidly compare up-to-date information.

Development

The solution that Senior Internet proposed was immediately recognised by all parties as being the most cost effective and technically capable and Senior was offered the contract in July 2004. During the initial scoping of the project, Senior immediately identified the value and potential of the system and made the decision to invest heavily in its development to enhance the product further, taking the specification far beyond the scope originally intended. From this basis, Senior was able to specify an online application that would form the basis of an enterprise strength management information system. Development of what would later be branded as **e-Vol** began in August 2004; 10 months later and the system was introduced to the 6 CVC consortium members.

e-Vol is now in regular use across the consortium, with administrators and front-line staff alike benefiting from its simplicity and power. Services that have been provided to the CVCs include training, online support and manuals.

The Benefits

Because the core code for **e-Vol** is served from a central location, installation of and updates to the software and functionality are immediate and do not require costly onsite visits from Senior. Management of the system is also entirely remote.

The centralisation of all data has the added benefit of providing a real-time, single source of authority to every member of staff, regardless of their location. The long-term benefits are obvious: being able to offer third party access to data for inclusion on publicly accessible websites and allowing future proofed access via PDAs and other mobile technology.

With all the data being stored in one location, WCVA can now generate any set of reports from any or all CVCs whenever they were required. And because the system is common for all users, WCVA could be sure that the data they are viewing is comparable across the regions they are responsible for.

Finally, freeing the organisations from the responsibility of having to install and maintain expensive networks and provide ongoing security and backup means that IT budgets can be kept under control with cost savings becoming a reality.



Summary

The solution that Senior proposed and subsequently delivered offers a product designed specifically to meet the needs of the organisations involved. Being based around the two central requirements of organisational data collection and managerial reporting ensures that the system is focussed entirely on the needs of the user and the wider organisation. The simple but fundamental decision to serve the database across the Internet means that the system can be deployed and distributed easily, remaining cost effective and reducing organisational costs year on year.

Development on **e-Vol** was completed in the Summer of 2005 with the system being launched shortly afterwards across all Objective 3 areas of Wales. Phase 2 of the rollout will see Objective 1 CVCs utilising the product by the end of November 2005. The success of **e-Vol** in Wales has led to intense Voluntary Sector interest in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.