

Riding the Slump

At the start of June, Lasa ran its fifth annual Circuit Rider Conference for over 50 voluntary sector ICT support and development workers. Lasa's Ian Runeckles reports from the circuit rider conference.

Gathering in the splendid surroundings of IBM's Bedfont Lakes conference facility (which featured in the James Bond film *Tomorrow Never Dies*) the conference was a mixture of debate, breakouts and showcases.

Fishing for collaboration

After a brief welcome we plunged into the Great Fishbowl Debate and Spectrogramme session. With facilitation by Marc Osten (Summit Collaborative), Richard Cooper (CTX), Julie Harris (Cosmic), Terry Stokes (Lasa), Mark Wakefield (IBM) and Kate White (Superhighways) were the "fish" debating collaboration and funding for ICT support. The fish were placed in a circle (the fishbowl) surrounded by the conference delegates who were able to individually join the debate at any time being granted temporary fish status by the facilitator.

Asked whether collaboration is in the best interests of organisations and is true collaboration possible, it was generally thought to be a good thing but that organisations should not sell themselves down the river (enough of the fish stuff already!) if the collaborative venture did not fit with their mission. Voluntary sector

organisations (VCOs) can be swept into collaborating through the nature of the funding - funders often feel that collaborations bring about cost savings but this is not usually the case - it was felt that the funder should be supporting the costs of collaboration which normally entails a high degree of managing. Collaboration was seen as hard work, which needs a high level of trust between the partners, passion and drive to succeed.

Money, money, money

Marc then posed the second question - where should money for ICT flow? Should it go directly to front-line service-delivering VCO or to second-tier organisations and support providers? It was acknowledged that there is not enough money around not to fund both. Directly funding front-line organisations with funding that is not ring-fenced means that other immediate needs, such as fundraising, is likely to be prioritised to the detriment of the ICT systems. Funders should be using the expertise of vetted second-tier ICT providers to help their funded groups.

Small organisations need to be able to get trusted advice as they may not know what questions to ask, what's

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Contribute

Disagree with an article?

Believe there's an issue we should be looking at?

Know of an initiative we should mention?

We welcome all feedback about *Computanews* so if we've missed something out send us your thoughts or news, or submit an article for inclusion in a future issue.

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is produced by Lasa

Editorial & Production:
Miles Maier & Ian Runeckles



Universal House
88-94 Wentworth Street
London E1 7SA

020 7426 4473

computanews@lasa.org.uk

www.lasa.org.uk

<http://ukriders.lasa.org.uk>

www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk

www.suppliersdirectory.org.uk

<http://ictchampion.lasa.org.uk>

Lasa has been providing the voluntary and community sector with high quality and impartial ICT advice since 1984.



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newsbits

RuralNetcloses down

ruralnet|uk has become the latest casualty of the current economic climate, and ceased trading at the end of July 2009.

ruralnet|uk was also commissioned by Capacity Builders to deliver net:gain, a project to capacity build the ICT skills and knowledge of VCS managers and senior staff.

net:gain received considerable financial support from Capacity Builders, and was troubled by a lack of take-up in many regions. NAVCA has been handed responsibility for delivering net:gain's outstanding deliverables for 2009/10.

6 in 10 companies won't take up Windows 7

A US survey has revealed that 6 out of every 10 companies plan to skip Windows 7 in concern over its cost, the time it'll take to deploy, and compatibility with existing software. Many companies have said that they're going to wait for the first service pack before implementing the OS. 39% said that they were concerned about compatibility problems with existing apps, despite the promise of an XP compatibility mode.

<http://tinyurl.com/mb7yau>

Google operating system

Hot on the heels of its Chrome web browser, Google has announced it is developing an operating system. Chrome OS is an open source, lightweight operating system that will initially be targeted at netbooks.

<http://tinyurl.com/mkt6lv>

New domain name .ngo would be for charities only

Human rights charity Article 25 proposes internet scheme to be funded by philanthropists

<http://tinyurl.com/n855ee>

Social Network Users Reportedly Concerned About Privacy, but Behavior Says Otherwise

New data from security solutions company Webroot revealed that a majority of users (78%) reported concerns about their social network profiles' privacy, but when asked about specific behaviors it was apparent that "concern" didn't translate into action.

<http://tinyurl.com/lxfao8>

Nonprofit Groups Outpace Businesses in Adopting Social-Networking Tools

A forthcoming study by the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Center for Marketing Research shows non-profit groups are actually well ahead of businesses in their use of social-media tools such as Twitter, Facebook, and blogs. The soon-to-be-released study found that 89% of non-profit organisations are using some form of social media.

<http://philanthropy.com/giveandtake/index.php?id=1079>

Computanews now accepts advertisements

If you offer a technology product, service or event aimed specifically at the voluntary sector you can draw attention to it through the pages of **Computanews**.

Computanews is a specialised magazine covering the use of technology within the voluntary sector. It has a key audience of:

- organisation managers and trustees
- staff responsible for their own organisation's IT
- Circuit Riders who provide advice and technology support to other organisations

Computanews rates:

- 1/8 page £60
- 1/4 page £100
- 1/2 page £180
- 1 full page £300

A 10% discount applies if advertising in multiple issues.

The circulation of **Computanews** is currently around 2,500 copies per issue, distributed 4–6 times a year. We anticipate that the circulation will increase now that it is becoming available as a free, downloadable file.

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Events

1 September: NetSquared NetTuesday meetup

This month's topic is youth engagement and social networking

<http://netsquared.meetup.com/31/>

15 September: Government ICT goes Green

Update on the Greening Government ICT agenda. Go to: <http://www.govnet.co.uk/greenict/index.php>

24 September: Data Protection and Communications for the Voluntary Sector

Find out how to ensure your organisation's communications are lawful. www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/events/latest/?id=13092

29 September: NCVO Collaborative Working Conference

Discussion of current practice in collaborative working across civil society organisations. www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/events/latest/?id=14390

10th & 11th November: Green IT Expo 2009

More information and registration at www.greenitexpo.com/

Tips153 E-Communications

In Computanews 153 we looked at Lasa's adoption of the CTTM@il email marketing service. Maria Diaz, E-Communications Manager at CTT gives the following advice on using e-communications:

- 1 Ask your audience if they want to receive email from you, how frequently, what about and in what format (html, text)
- 2 Be creative with your template design to make it stand out from the crowd but align it with current visual identity (of your website or paper publications)
- 3 Personalise the email, be clear, provide something extra, be concise
- 4 Have a clear "call to action" at the top of the email
- 5 Avoid exclamation and question marks and words like free, save, marketing, click here in order to beat spam filters
- 6 Don't exceed 700 pixels in width for your template
- 7 Try to avoid the recipient having to scroll the email
- 8 Avoid thick borders, use alt tags on images, think about colour combinations and consider the visual balance of the mail as you would with any other media
- 9 Don't use style sheets (CSS) if possible as different email clients interpret them in different ways.
- 10 Use a popular font type
- 11 Test before sending – send to colleagues before your list of 1,000 members to check the links work, spelling is correct and different email clients if possible e.g. Outlook, Hotmail, Gmail etc
- 12 Send at core days (Tuesday to Thursday) and hours (mid morning or afternoon) or before lunch when it's raining or cold

CTTM@il – www.ctt.org/products__services/ctt_mail/default.asp

Lasa ICT Knowledgebase

Choosing Bulk Email Software - <http://www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk/bulkemailsoftware>

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available, the benefits or who has the right ethos. The VCS needs people, infrastructure organisations and intermediaries in the sector to provide unbiased information. As an example, it was suggested that if you give ten organisations £1,000 each for ICT the shopping list will probably be a laptop and a projector without appropriate software or anti-virus. The alternative is to or give one second-tier organisation £10,000 to help them spend appropriately.

Stand in line

Following the debate, there was a chance for conference delegates to state their position through the spectrogramme, a kind of human graphical representation of opinion. Marc asked should a serious push be made by funders to increase collaborative efforts? Delegates were asked to position



Photos: Ian Runeckles and Marc Osten

themselves somewhere along a low tech duct tape line down the room with one end being for complete agreement, the other for full disagreement. Although there was an even split of people throughout the range, there was no one really at the extreme “yes” end.

Breaking into web 2.0

After a welcome coffee, the

Conference split into two for the first breakouts. Marc Osten and Laura Whitehead (Popokatea) looked at how web 2.0 and social media can assist organisations through hard times.

This workshop covered using web based tools to aid fundraising and to achieve gains in efficiency and effectiveness. Examples included the Blandin Foundation which is using a blog platform to create a shared online workspace for an environmental network. The

Skidder Online at <http://blandinfoundation.typepad.com/skidder> is built around a blogging platform for ease of use and is designed to centralise shared resources and be very low capacity to learn. The workspace was introduced in carefully managed stages to help members of the community gain familiarity with the concept of shared online space. With just four face to face meetings per year, using audio and

video tools was vital in building trust and creating a sense of community.

In other examples, the RSPB www.rspb.org.uk created a virtual meeting area on its Intranet. It has around 15 users, with RSPB estimating that it has saved around £3,500 on travel costs. Bolton CAB identified a problem with managing internal information. To address this they used the free and open source WordPress content management software to create an

Intranet, centralising information. This led to reduced internal email and reduced duplication of information.

Anne Stafford from iT4Communities www.it4communities.org.uk ran her session addressing how organisations can best be prepared to work with an IT volunteer. This is covered in detail in an article in the next Computanews.

Showing off

After lunch in IBM's cashless canteen where

the salad is priced by weight and the apple crumble sadly ran out too fast, delegates were subjected to an hour of short twenty minute demonstrations of technologies and initiatives. With eight showcase sessions to choose from, delegates were free to attend whichever they wanted to. Sessions included the Lasa Learning Programme for circuit riders, Lotus Symphony office suite, cloud computing, CiviCRM, technology donation

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programmes, VoIP, the ICT Champions ICT Answers in a box and Ubuntu's LTSP thin client.

Risky business

The second round of breakouts included a session by Paul Ticher on risk management. Individuals and organisations have a different attitude when it comes to risk. It is a matter of judgement and need to fit with organisation and people within it. Everyone has a "risk thermostat" determining the level of risk that they are comfortable with - people are not generally good at estimating risk.

In terms of technology the constantly changing environment brings bring new risk; for example, if new technology is introduced into an existing system then it is important as well as measuring the benefit of that technology to also look at the risk.

It is also crucial to examine external relationships when thinking about risk. For example, if using an external organisation for data back-up examine the risks associated with relationship with that external provider e.g. provider starts charging a lot more for the service, stops offering the service etc

Here are some examples of some of the thoughts of people in the room and their experience of risk in relation to ICT:

Most organisations with ICT support contracts simply transfer the risk to that company without making a realistic assessment of risk. It is difficult to get organisations to recognise the trade off between different risks, for example the associated risks of

data back-up and then taking that data off-site.

Many organisations concentrate on the risk associated with technology and not the risk involved with individuals and their use of technology.

The VCS is not exempt from individuals acting inappropriately Experience has show that the risk of internal ICT staff breaching security is higher than anticipated People are always the weakest link,



numerous examples of voluntary and community sector staff giving out passwords over the phone without verifying who they are giving passwords to

The three aitches

In their session, Mike Veitch (The Helpful Helpdesk) and Mark Walker (SCIP) examined healthchecks, handbooks and helpdesks. SCIP's model for delivering support to VCS organisations consists of:

- Find out - outreach visit, healthcheck or audit
- Reporting – report back to client on issues, costs, timescales
- Deliver support - about holding, sharing, using information

Some healthcheck issues observed by the delegates were noted:

- There are different modes of healthcheck - self assessment, audit, etc. They can be longer or shorter dependent on size of client organisation.
- Smaller organisations often want you to fix the technology, not plan or manage their ICT. However, health-checks often are a foot in the door for getting them to think about managing their ICT
- Health-checks also vary in style depending on the skills of those delivering them. Common problems such as the lack of back-up and licence compliance can be sorted fairly easily and are quick 'wins'. Organisations with ICT support are more likely to buy into the healthcheck - they understand the importance and have the capacity to engage.

Whichever mode of healthcheck is used, the client needs to clearly understand the benefits. Mike then went on to present his ICT handbook project. Working with smaller organisations can be difficult because important information (passwords, router settings, etc) is not written down or kept in one place. The handbook was conceived as a way of overcoming this and as it is a supported, low-cost, low-tech – paper-based solution, it is simple to use and accessible by anyone in the organisation.

The IT handbook will come in two flavours - WEknow IT, aimed at paying tech support companies and MYknow IT, a free PDF download for unsupported micro

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How free online tools are making it easier than ever to build websites

For this issue of Computanews we asked two ICT development workers about their research into helping organisations build simple websites. Tom Green at the Refugee Council used the online web service offered by Weebly to host sites for the Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) he was working with whilst Mark Walker of SCIP (Sussex Community Internet Project) who had delivered many hours of DreamWeaver training, is an advocate of WordPress. Tom and Mark presented their thoughts and experiences to the London Circuit Rider Forum meeting earlier this year – we thought that Computanews readers would also benefit from their thoughts.



Vs



WordPress for beginners

with Mark Walker

I've been helping people build websites since the day after I created my first webpage. It was back in 1997 and a colleague and I had spent a couple of days working out html, ftp and domains to create a page about SCIP. The next day we ran a session in the local library, sharing what we'd learned with people from local charities and community groups. Since then SCIP has delivered web design training to hundreds of people, including a run of about five years offering free DreamWeaver (proprietary website creation software www.adobe.com/products/

dreamweaver) workshops.

We stopped teaching DreamWeaver a few years ago, not least because many other organisations now offer it, including local FE colleges, community-based learning organisations and UK Online centres. We were also very sceptical that teaching DreamWeaver actually led to the creation of community websites.

We noticed that many learners saw the training as a stepping stone to a better job and a life as a web designer – which is fair enough

but our goal is better websites for local community groups. Too many people failed to complete the courses, or created test sites but never created a real site. Or they created a site which remained largely empty, slowly deteriorating, along with their skills.

We also found that few did any work between sessions and even fewer had the authority to build a site on behalf of their organisation, or the support needed for other staff or volunteers to keep it up to date. Finally the cost of DreamWeaver was prohibitive for

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some, especially if they were trying to do this work at home

Blogging first, website second

About seven years ago I created my own blog, using Blogger (www.blogger.com), and quickly realised that it offered a new kind of stepping stone towards running a sustainable website.

Gone was the need to learn about ftp, html or php. Gone was the need to learn about frames, tables and site structures. Now I could concentrate on the lifeblood of any good website: the content.

Because it's easy to add words, pictures and videos I quickly had a bunch of stories about what I was doing, and links to people doing similar stuff. I also started to get in the flow of thinking of my website as part of my work, rather than an advertisement. I could use it to offer updates on progress, announce activities and provide feedback.

Even as the first flush of my enthusiasm receded I still maintained an average of one new story a week. I tinkered monthly or so to tweak the navigation and add features, such as email subscriptions, but unlike previous sites I created in DreamWeaver I spent most of my time with the story editor open, rather than wading through reams of code to try to move a picture a few pixels to the left.

And so to WordPress

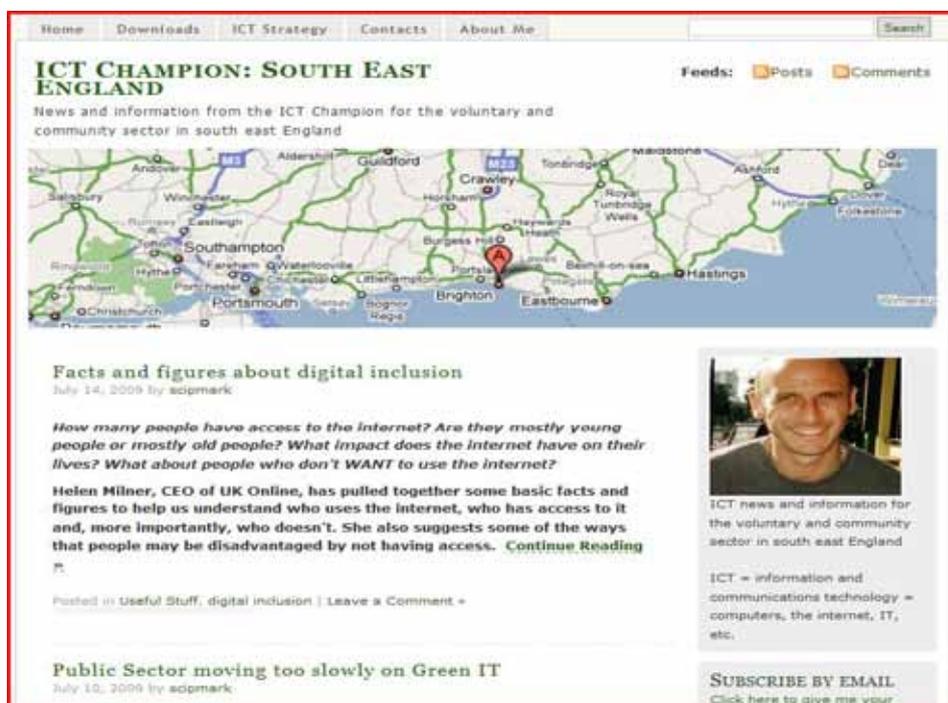
The main reason I moved on from Blogger because I wanted to be able to add pages to my site. The simplicity of adding stories in

chronological order is great, but I wanted extra pages to say more about who I am, what I am doing and specific aspects of my work.

The first thing to say is that WordPress (www.wordpress.com) is not the only option. Lots of similar tools have been launched in the past few years, including Weebly (www.weebly.com), Typepad (www.typepad.com) and lots more. WordPress appeared on many people's recommended lists around the same time. I've stuck with it for the past 18 months or so and now run a couple of sites

course and spend the rest of their time thinking about content and tweaking the look and feel.

This hosted version has several limitations, some of which can be frustrating, but it is an ideal place to start building your skills in owning and managing a site. It allows you to create pages, add video, pictures and links very easily, and become familiar with a simple but powerful dashboard with which to control your site. You can pay for extras, including adding your own domain name and access to CSS (cascading style sheet)



using it. SCIP is also using it for the web design training we have now resurrected.

Hosted @ Wordpress.com

It has several key features which I think work well for the people we're teaching. Firstly, WordPress.com offers a free website, hosted at a subdomain of wordpress.com, which is easy to sign up to. All our learners create their sites within an hour of starting our

code, but the costs are low and easy to use

Wordpress.com is not the end of the story however, as the software which drives it is open source and available for download from a sister site at www.wordpress.org. Having installed wordpress.org on your own hosted space you open up a much bigger range of themes, plug-ins and other extras which add functionality. Many hosts have a one-click wordpress.org setup,

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which removes some of the more intimidating aspects of the process for a non-techie learner and the dashboard remains the same even as you add plug-ins and other extras.

Looking ahead

We can see SCIP using WordPress.com and wordpress.org to deliver training and web design services, from beginner level through to sophisticated sites such as www.ictchampions.org.uk. We will also continue to mention options such as Weebly, CMSimple (www.cmsimple.org) and Typepad, as well as Joomla (www.joomla.org), Drupal (www.drupal.org), Plone (www.plone.org) and the other variations of more advanced options which may be suitable.

Wordpress resources

Download and install your own copy of the WordPress software from www.wordpress.org/

Go to www.wordpress.com to set up a free, hosted website

Knowledgebase

www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk/
[youronlinepresence](http://youronlinepresence.org.uk/)
www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk/whatdoesacmsdo
www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk/choosingacms

Author

Mark Walker is ICT Champion for the south east of England, and is based at SCIP (www.scip.org.uk), in Brighton. His favourite films are Jungle Book and Chitty Chitty Bang Bang.

For more details about how SCIP is using WordPress see www.scipdiy.wordpress.com/



www.ictchampions.org.uk



www.yhictchampion.org.uk



<http://watfordgap.wordpress.com/>

Why choose WordPress for people who want to learn web design

We think WordPress hosted and self-hosted is easy to use, and here's why.

Pros

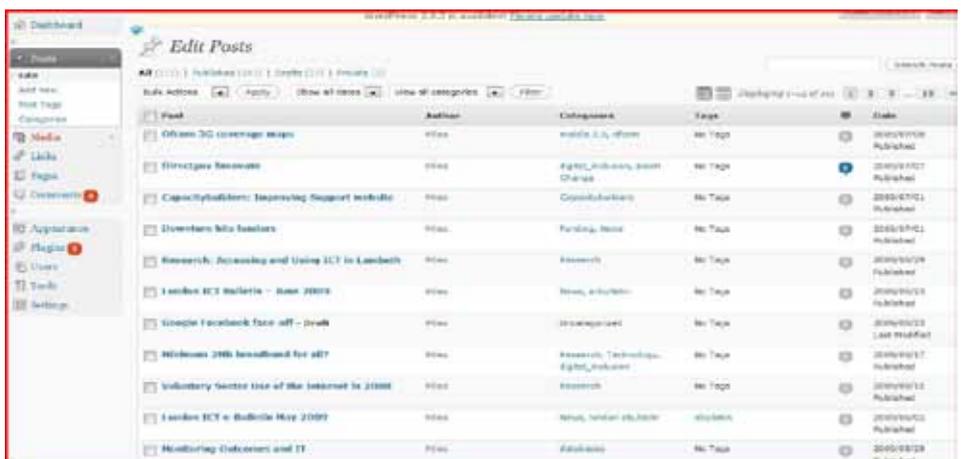
- WordPress sites are easy to set up and use;
- WordPress.com offers free hosting if you don't want to host your own site;
- WordPress is open source and can be used to host your own site;
- active well-managed support community;
- WordPress dashboard is easy to learn;
- good progression routes for learners.

Cons

There are limitations with embedding some content on the hosted WordPress.com sites

Examples sites:

www.ictchampions.org.uk
<http://ictchampion.lasa.org.uk>
www.yhictchampion.org.uk
<http://watfordgap.wordpress.com/>



Lasa ict learning programme launches September 2009

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- Circuit riders who work in capacity building organisations

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What you will cover:

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 - ICT systems, tools, resource use and support, and their potential impact in small to medium sized VCOs
 - ICT Sustainability - policy and procedure development, training, costing and funding
 - Consulting skills, ICT assessment, planning and project management
- Additional learning resources

Support you will receive:

- Tools to design your own Personal Learning Plan
- A professional advisor to support you as you follow your customised learning path
- A private, personalised online learning environment
- Access to 'springboard' classes focusing on exactly what you need
- Facilitated interaction with your peers who are also in the programme

More information:

See the YouTube video at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_FlbwsNVBw

To learn more please e-mail Sarah Lord-Soares at: slord-soares@lasa.org.uk



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business for an organisation. Content needs to be planned, audiences considered, confidentiality policies written – even for a simple site.

Again, despite my best efforts to offer advice and support, many organisations seemed unwilling or unable to take this forward.

My new strategy is to take a few steps back and get people used to using even simpler online tools like Flickr (www.flickr.com), Blogger (www.blogger.com) and Twitter (www.twitter.com). Hopefully, if they can learn some of the common practices in working online they will be better placed to take the next step and develop their own simple website.

Resources

www.webnode.com
www.yola.com
www.weebly.com

Author

Tom Green works for the Refugee Council (www.refugeecouncil.org.uk)

BOOK REVIEW

Here Comes Everybody

By Clay Shirky

Published Penguin Books 2009
(UK) £9.99

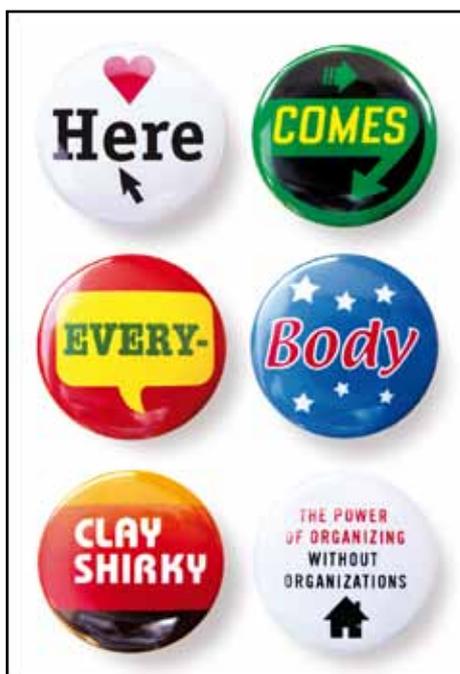
<http://www.herecomeseverybody.org>

Straplined “How change happens when people come together” it almost comes as a surprise that this book has been written. Seeing as the subject of the book is all about things internet one would expect it to be a blog rather than printed on ye olde fashioned paper. I, for one, am glad that it is though, as it made a couple of long train journeys pass very quickly (books go where 3G or wireless sometimes can't ...).

The format of the book is set in the first chapter where Shirky recounts the tale of a woman in New York who leaves her flashy \$300 mobile phone in a taxi and eventually gets it back after a friend uses the web to tell the story which encourages a huge outburst of support and venom directed against the teenager who is holding it to ransom (see <http://www.evanwashere.com/StolenSidekick/>) Shirky then analyses the story in terms of how

society has organised around the issue and the tools involved.

In the following chapters Shirky looks at tools and communities such as blogging platforms, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Meetup, Flickr, YouTube, open source and wikis but does not ignore the older (I almost typed traditional) tools such as email, newsgroups, bulletin boards



and discussion lists. There's a fascinating look at how Wikipedia came into being from its initial incarnation as Nupedia where

“experts” would author articles (which failed) to the Wikipedia we know and love today. He makes the point that in many cases protests using social tools are “stop energy” – Wikipedia is an example of how groups can create and challenge the status quo (protesting to Encyclopaedia Britannica that they should make it freely available would have been a much harder job).

He also looks at phenomena such as flashmobs which use social tools to create what can be mindless activities but can have significant political impact when used in repressive regimes such as Belarus is highlighted here. He acknowledges that most tweets are “inane” but accentuates the fact that they are not aimed at the public at large but for small groups of friends despite their public accessibility. This is countered with an example of how it was used to spread the news of Egyptian pro-democracy activists.

Shirky returns again and again to the power law distribution (alternatively known as the long tail) which effectively makes social networking, er, work – very

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few people contribute a lot to a Wikipedia article (or photo sites, or open source projects) but a lot of people are involved to a much lesser extent (there's a bunch of stuff about means, modes and medians which I won't bore you with but it is fascinating, trust me). In another example, of the 100,000 or so open source projects listed on SourceForge, 75% have never progressed to any degree of "completeness or utility" and so have not had any downloads at all. Proprietary software developers can't exist with that level of failure – they have to pay staff, run marketing campaigns, etc and so tend to play safe.

Shirky recently addressed the NTEN NonProfit Technology Conference in San Francisco, opening with an example from the book about how HSBC failed in their attempt to extract bank charges for overdrafts from students having first enticed them into signing up for free accounts – see <http://blip.tv/file/2148546> - through use of Facebook, student co-ordination forced HSBC to climb down.

Although Shirky is an academic (he's a professor at NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Department amongst other things) the book is very readable and accessible. I'll finish up with this, which is typical of Shirky's language and approach: "Instead, a good social tool... must help people do something they actually want to do. If you designed a better shovel, people would not rush out to dig more ditches."

Author

Ian Runeckles is circuit rider at large for Lasa

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organisations. It will soon be available a download from www.knowit.org.uk

What's next?

With the Lasa Circuit Rider Conference only taking place once a year, the main method of communication between Riders is through the UKRiders list <http://lists.lasa.org.uk/lists/info/ukriders>. In the closing session, delegates broke into small groups and were asked to come up with topics that they would like to see discussed on the list during the next few months. In addition to coming up with ideas, someone had to put their name to it so as to initiate and maintain the conversation on the list. They were then put onto the whiteboard for all delegates to vote on. Over the next few months you can expect discussion, sharing and debate on what a (UKRiders) list 2.0 could look like, ICT success stories, top ten free software tools for VCOs, sustaining Circuit Riding in the

current climate, charging for support services, the future of the Circuit Rider conference, a supplemental forum to bring together best content of the UKRiders list.

And finally...

Following the session, the conference retired to the bar courtesy of CTX (www.ctxchange.org/) and delegates then struggled home as the Tube went on strike.

If you want to read and see more of the conference, presentations have been uploaded to Slideshare and can be seen at:

www.slideshare.net/ukriders

Photos tagged crconf09 are on Flickr at <http://tinyurl.com/n9lstv>

The full report can be downloaded from www.lasa.org.uk/circuitriders



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What's the support person to computer ratio these days?

A recent discussion on the UKRiders mailing list was sparked by a comment made by presenter at a British Computer Society meeting on Green IT saying that Sun Microsystems only had 12 support staff for 30,000-odd computers on their ultra thin client network. This article rounds up those postings which raised some valuable points.

Some years back the yardstick ratio for voluntary sector support was estimated to be about one support person for 50 staff. Where did this come from? Paul Ticher: "The 1:50 ratio might be my fault. I did a bit of finger-in-the-wind research years ago - looking at support desks in large commercial organisations as well as in a range of different voluntary organisations - and the ratios that came back were between 1:30 and 1:80, so I split the difference."

Here at Lasa we've gone along with this for our own support needs and also in advising other organisations through our consultancy and circuit rider project work. It worked proportionately - if the organisation only had 10 staff then it needed only a fifth of a post to look after its IT (no C intentionally) in other words a day a week of someone's time.

Paul again: "That (the ratio) was OK, because the point was not about posts in an organisation, but to give managers some sort of idea of how much they should budget annually for IT specialists of all kinds, and to get away from the idea that IT was just a one-off capital expenditure. We knew they would be unlikely to find enough

money, but wanted to make the case. For that purpose 'support' covered anything you might need from an IT person during the year, other than the development or installation costs of a new project (database, web site, network ...). So it could cover fault-finding on a work station, network and password management, small enhancements to the system, supporting staff with using applications, you name it. The point was to budget for these; it doesn't matter whether they are done in-house or out-sourced, you still have to pay for them."

But has the fact that IT has been superseded by ICT made a difference to the ratio? Has the Communications element of ICT increased support workloads? Or made it easier? Does the average ICT support worker, accidental or otherwise, need a greater range of skills than ever before? The fact is that operating systems of all flavours have become far more reliable and generally easier to fix - remember how relatively unstable Windows 95 and 98 were in comparison to XP. And while we're here, what exactly is "support"?

Mike Veitch, somewhat controversially: "Support is

what you provide to correct the mistakes you made in the specification, design, implementation and testing phases of your IT project or to cover for the fact you have inadequate change management or control. I would contend that the ratio we need to focus on is the planning to support figure. For most small organisations and many larger ones, particularly in the third sector, that ratio is probably 1:50. A few hours planning and hundreds of hours of support sorting out the mess."

Mike goes on to advise: "Whether it is websites, databases, network infrastructures or a client server network we need to stop and think and plan. Our users and even ourselves are too easily seduced by the tools that we forget the elegant sculptures we initially envisaged."

Of course there's support and support. Richard Cooper: "In a previous role, I spent a number of years doing detailed analysis of IT costs in a whole range of organisations. One of the key things that taught me was never to take a quoted support ratio at face value. My experience was that organisations that claimed very low support ratios were

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usually focussing on a very small piece of the support picture. In particular they ignored two key points – quality of support and who is involved in the support process.”

Richard continues: “These factors play into another key dynamic - who is the user’s first point of call for support? In many organisations, it is the person nearest them that they deem to be a technical “guru” (the accidental techie, perhaps).

which has limited (albeit very clever) functionality, which acts as a fairly closed system, and which does something that people actually want to do, so they are motivated to learn from other users, will need nowhere near as many support staff as 1:50. Some voluntary organisations may be able to do a lot with web-based SaaS, where the Facebook model might reduce their support needs.”

“But systems that most voluntary

still need telling that the money must be found to ensure that all these things are sorted before the system starts to degrade into (sic) unusability. The 1:50 ratio works out at something like £500 per user per year. That still seems like a reasonable target to me.”

We’ll give the last word to Mike Veitch: “I spent many years trying to convince budding systems administrators that they should think more like architects rather

“systems administrators should think more like architects rather than fire-fighters...but unfortunately many turn out to be arsonists.”

Mike Veitch, The Helpful Helpdesk

If I perceive my local guru to be better and more accessible than the support on the phone, that’s where I’ll go first. Consequently much of the support resource is hidden in the organisation. It’s been an ongoing debate for years as to how you deal with this and many organisations have incorporated the local gurus into their support processes and therefore count them, others don’t.”

So, if we know what support is, what is a computer? Back in the good old days we had relatively simple structures, a PC and printer, say – then came networks, the Internet and a whole bunch of new devices to support.

Paul again: “I think the situation might be changing a bit. Some software/hardware combinations definitely don’t need so much support. Something like Facebook,

organisations use are much more complex. The individual components may be simple, but put them all together and you get complexity. Whether it’s open source or proprietary, someone has to keep the whole show on the road - and nothing is ever static. Hardware fails, software needs to be upgraded, people start using the system in new (and possibly unpredictable or IT illiterate) ways, or the outside environment changes and the system has to adapt.”

Richard Cooper again: “What I found makes the biggest difference to support ratios (and IT costs generally) when you actually get down to enough detail to make meaningful comparisons, is standardisation, centralisation and consolidation. The impact on costs and quality can be dramatic.

Paul Ticher concludes: “Managers

than fire-fighters. Unfortunately many actually turn out to be arsonists.”

So, does the 1:50 rule still apply? Why not discuss this online on the ICT Knowledgebase etc etc

Authors

Compiled and edited by Ian Runeckles at Lasa – with thanks to Paul Ticher, Mike Veitch, Richard Cooper and others on the UKRiders list who contributed to this discussion.

ICT knowledgebase discussion forum

You can join the UKRiders list by signing up at <http://lists.lasa.org.uk/lists/info/ukriders>