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CHAPTER 12

Finding a Home for Communications Technologies

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A s Derek,* Monica, and Trevor thought back on the last two days, they were clearly pleased. They had just finished several training and orientation sessions with a group of nonprofit leaders and local government officials about the use of multiple new communication technologies. These individuals worked for different organizations, but all of them focused to some extent on providing various services to the homeless in the community. They also represented organizations that often lacked key communication tools that could greatly assist them in their work, which was part of the reason Derek, Monica, and Trevor were so enthusiastic about the opportunity to bring various communication technologies to these homeless service providers.

Even getting to this point had not been easy. The three project consultants had been working with this set of organizations for several months before the key members began to realize they were serious about a project to provide them with these technologies. As Monica had remarked to Derek, "I think they thought we'd swoop in, be overwhelmed with the challenges these providers face, and then quietly leave." These consultants were convinced that the community's homeless service providers were in great need of new communication technologies, and when many of the agencies learned they would be eligible to receive high-speed Internet services, computing equipment they could keep, and free training and technical support, their interest perked. Attending the orientation and training was a condition for getting the equipment, and it also provided a chance to learn how to use some of the software and hardware provided. Though both the homeless service providers and consultants seemed pleased with the project at the training, none of

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*This case has been developed based on real organization(s) and real organizational experiences. Names, facts, and situations have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals and organizations.

them could have predicted the ways in which the technology would, and would not, be used in this community of service providers.

ADDRESSING REAL PROBLEMS

Derek had some experience working with organizations serving the homeless and knew the seriousness of the homelessness problem. Recent research done by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty estimated 3.5 million homeless people in this country in the mid-2000s, with the Partnership for the Homeless noting that the number of homeless is rising annually. Monica and Derek had seen other estimates in a newspaper survey indicating that 1 of every 400 Americans experienced homelessness. In the specific midsized metropolitan city where the project consultants lived, the average daily estimate of homeless persons was 4,000. The fastest-growing population of homeless was families (43 percent of the homeless population in this area on any given day); additionally, unaccompanied youth accounted for 7 percent of the total homeless population.

With her expertise as a trainer and consultant in interorganizational dynamics, Monica was very sensitive to the specific organizations involved. The homeless service providers ranged from food pantries and soup kitchens to shelters for immigrants and victims of domestic violence. They included organizations providing low-cost housing and legal aid to those assisting with education and basic health services. The individual work of these organizations in the community included helping homeless kids stay in school; helping homeless families navigate the system to secure affordable housing and achieve job training; counseling homeless victims of domestic violence and protecting them from threatening behavior of abusers; helping abandoned and abused teens to redirect their lives and complete the GED; helping mentally ill homeless persons to gain access to appropriate health care; providing safe and appropriate shelter and transitional housing for those who were seeking to recover from crisis and obtain permanent affordable housing; and providing the most basic of life's needs: showers, laundry, lockers, phone access, food, clothes, diapers, and dental care.

Clearly no single service provider could address all the needs alone, and thus a patchwork of service provision existed—sometimes with minimal awareness of other agencies and offices. Furthermore, the environment of dwindling financial resources had created a scarcity-induced competitiveness among many providers, evidenced by some mutual protectiveness about sources of funding. Additionally, several disagreements existed in terms of philosophy of service delivery, desire to participate in advocacy efforts, beliefs about how to target the overall mission of the community of providers, and degree of desire to work independently versus collectively on matters related to homelessness. The only formal connection among the provider organizations was the Task Force on Homelessness (TFH), which worked as an organizing and planning body.

SECURING TECHNOLOGY

Monica and Derek believed this community of service providers could benefit from better tools for coordination, collaboration, and communication. Monica and Derek perceived an opportunity to help with the situation by drawing on their past experiences. They secured external grant funding and community support to launch a project to help the organizations work together more effectively through the use of various communications technologies. They hoped to fill the gaps in the continuum of care that moves homeless persons through a series of steps from crisis to eventual stability and self-sufficiency. Each of the approximately 25 nonprofit and government organizations involved was equipped with the appropriate infrastructure (e.g., high-speed Internet connections, powerful desktop computers, collaborative software) and provided with training and ongoing technical support. Trevor was hired as the technical support person, and he helped conduct the training that introduced the users to an instant messaging tool, file-sharing programs, and a customized website he created for them. The homeless service providers also had access to an online electronic meeting tool for decision making, planning, and surveys. Additionally, an email list was made available to anyone associated with the homeless provider network in the community.

LITTLE ROOM FOR SOME TECHNOLOGIES

Despite Trevor's thorough training, some technologies clearly never caught on. The instant messaging tool that automatically launched rarely saw any activity. Follow-up surveys with community members reported no use of the file sharing. Derek even convinced an electronic meeting software vendor to provide the group with free access to its expensive tools. Even after several pitches to the group members about how they might best use the tools, they did so only one time—and that was just for an online survey they did to help with the preparation of a grant. As one agency head explained to Trevor, "Life is about who shows up. People are just not ready for the disconnect technology creates. We are in a high-touch business. A lot of what we do is consensus work; not a lot of formal voting."

Trevor and Derek were frustrated. As the homeless service coordinator for the city explained to Monica,

"Among providers, people in homeless services are the least apt to jump into new technology, because we are so used to working with people who don't have access to a lot of technology, that everything we do is so paper and pencil or here's a phone number, you know, just call them or actually just go over and visit them, you know. It is much less computer-oriented work that we do. And part of it is, again, because our clients don't have access to that kind of thing, so we don't get in the habit of really using this either."

The project website for this provider community was launched in the spring right around the time of the training; nevertheless, many organizational members reported difficulties in accessing and using the site. So, Monica and Derek

decided to start over, and the site was redone as an MSN Groups site later that year, with periodic upgrades over the following months/years. The new homeless service provider website included a list of the providers, contact information for each, a community calendar, a bulletin board, and a document-posting site. Derek was able to get communication and journalism students at a local university to write online *spotlight* articles over the course of the project. These articles focused on specific provider organizations, special projects, programs, and key personnel working with homeless in the community. Articles and pictures were posted to the website as a way to both lure members to the site and then to educate them about other organizations once they arrived.

The spotlight articles did seem to capture interest, and there were spikes in hits to the website after announcements about each new spotlight article. A director of one of the organizations felt the spotlight articles "brought a personal touch to the organization or the person they were interviewing." However, other aspects of the website were rarely used, and those who did use them did so less often over the course of the project. One agency director indicated that she didn't visit the website "unless there is a spotlight that comes out that I want to read. Then I have gone and read the article, but I haven't used the [rest of the] website." In addition, some people posted to the calendar tool but when only a few did this there was less incentive for others to do the same. A similar situation existed with the discussion/bulletin board on the site. Even efforts to get community members to update their contact information were generally unsuccessful amid competing client demands. As one of the nonprofit directors confessed to the consultants, "Let me just say that I used to use the calendar, and I never got any response from anything I posted, so I felt that no one else was using it, so I just stopped using it. That was it. I don't know if it was a fair thing, I used it for about eight months in the beginning, and I don't know if people use the calendar now or not." Within three years, the TFH, in conjunction with a larger body overseeing social concerns in the community, decided to develop its own website. Although the TFH did copy over the spotlight articles to the new site, no other part of the website was incorporated into the new one, and the initial project website for the community eventually was abandoned.

FINDING A HOME ON THE EMAIL LIST

Derek and Trevor launched a community email list in April as a means for individuals within the community of homeless service providers or others interested in receiving information about that community's activities to post and receive messages. The list was unmoderated but open to subscribers only. Initially the list was configured so that all replies went back to everyone on the list as a way to facilitate community awareness; but after a series of unintended personal replies went back to all subscribers, community members requested that replies only go back to the sender (replies to all would still go back to the entire list). Despite Derek's concern that this might discourage online discussion (thus resulting in the tool not being used in certain desirable ways), this change was made in July, with no other major

changes made to the list configuration afterward. Unlike the other technologies provided, email list usage grew. Even though the list was started with approximately 60 individuals whom the city homeless coordinator had as part of a set of relevant email addresses she would use to communicate announcements, it eventually grew to twice that size—incorporating a much wider range of organizations and concerned individuals in the process. Over the course of the project there was a clear growth in the number of posts: 234 in the first year, 314 in the second year, and 438 in the third year.

Despite all the energy the consultants had put into state-of-the-art equipment, sophisticated software, and collaboration tools, it was the simple list that served this community best. Email list users confirmed in feedback surveys and discussion that this was the single most effective means they had for disseminating and collecting information from other homeless service providers. As one nonprofit coordinator told Monica, "I find the listserv to be pretty helpful because I am constantly in the loop about things." Even the city's homeless service coordinator who initially expressed reservations about the usefulness of these tools for this group admitted, "I did get a lot of feedback from a lot of people that they really appreciated the things that I sent to the list and it helped them keep at least somewhat abreast of things that they wouldn't ordinarily seek out." Another told the consultants that when people asked about how to learn more about homelessness in this community, he would tell them "If you want information, get on the list."

Derek noticed that most users were not submitting to the list, but were actually lurking. In none of the three years were there more posters than lurkers. Although some in the community expressed concern about this, Monica and Derek assured them that this form of use is not necessarily problematic and may even be construed as a beneficial form of use. As Trevor noted, "there may be real benefit that not all 100+ subscribes were regularly posting to the list!"

Unexpectedly, the email list also took on substantial symbolic value among the homeless service providers as membership on the list began to demarcate this otherwise dispersed and ill-defined community of professionals and organizations. You were part of this community if you were on the list and not part of it if you were not. As a result, the list also created a stronger and clearer sense of community among these organizations serving the homeless. As two individuals in smaller nonprofit organizations told Monica, "People are more connected. There is probably much more understanding of what is happening on a macro level. Before, people operated more in their silos. The listserv has brought people together" and "The list provides more cohesion to our community of service providers."

TAKE-HOMES AND LESSONS LEARNED

As their project with the homeless service providers officially ended, Monica, Derek, and Trevor had mixed reactions. In one sense, much of what they had tried to do failed. Several key technologies they thought should have been useful never caught on in this community. Some aspects of the website were barely utilized

and ultimately abandoned. The computers provided were only sometimes utilized for communicating with other providers. However, the group also felt there were successes. The exposure to high-speed Internet made a real difference for those otherwise without it (and when the project ended, most organizations found a way to continue this use despite limited operating budgets). The spotlight articles were valued and were included in the new TFH website. Most important was the email list. Though it did not often generate elaborate discussion of key issues, it did serve as an information and solicitation tool that was highly valued by community members; furthermore, it served to redefine who this community was. Thus, the consultants arranged for Kayla, who operated several email lists in the community, to manage this one even after the remainder of the project ended. As one provider posted to the email list at the project's end, "Thanks to you for all your work with the task force over the years—especially helping us to get a little more computer savvy and utilize at least the listserv."

At one point Derek admitted, "I initially thought our project was about training people to use technology and then expecting them to comply. It turned out to be about providing opportunities for people, seeing what worked for them in their situation, and then learning from that." The consultants already knew that sometimes technology helps solve problems and sometimes it does not—but what they discovered was that sometimes people's work can be so demanding that it often prevents them from ever utilizing anything but the most basic tools (which can be learned quickly without interfering with one's direct work with clients).

Perhaps the most important lessons were not really about technology at all.