

## **Off Centre – Upgrading their ICT systems**

### **About Off Centre**

Off Centre is a charity that provides counselling, advice and information for young people in the London Borough of Hackney. It was established in the 1970s and currently employs 11 paid staff and has 10 volunteers. Principal funders are London Borough of Hackney, City & Hackney Primary Care Trust, European Regional Development Fund and various trusts. Off Centre are involved in Connexions and employ a mental health personal adviser in the agency.

### **The ICT set up**

At the time of the Circuit Rider Project Healthcheck in January 2003, Off Centre's set up consisted of 10 PCs with the majority on a peer-to-peer network with pay-as-you-go ISDN Internet access. An ICT contracting company had provided a quotation to upgrade the network.

Off Centre had already identified a number of ICT needs:

- Increasing the size and capacity of the network
- Possibility of installing a Windows 2000 server
- Upgrading internet access to ADSL
- Developing the website so it can be easily updated, more interactivity
- Using AIMS case management software
- Publishing leaflets in-house
- Technical support

### **Plans for upgrading**

Prior to the Healthcheck, Off Centre had made an application to the Hackney Neighbourhood Renewal Fund to improve the range of and access to information for service users. This bid was based on three main issues: lack of computer hardware; capacity of the advice and information service to keep up with demand because of outdated equipment; and a wish to involve the young people who are service users in designing and producing information. A bid for £9,950 was submitted for 3 PCs, an Apple Mac G4, 3 Lexmark printers, a digital camera and upgrading the network.

In February 2003, Off Centre were informed that they had been successful in their bid. However, to be able to claim the grant, all work had to have been completed by the end of March, giving Off Centre around 7 weeks to obtain quotations, procure the equipment and have it installed and working.

### **Circuit Rider involvement**

Their first action was to contact the Circuit Riders at Lasa. After further discussion it became apparent that the initial bid was based on thinking that, post-Healthcheck, was going in the wrong direction. The addition of a Mac to the system would have been difficult for Off Centre to support and use – there was no-one on site with Mac skills – and the policy of one printer per PC was not recommended. Lasa came up with two different scenarios which would fit the budget:

- (a) *the server option* - upgrading and extending the network, a Windows 2000 and Exchange server, 2 new PCs, installing broadband and firewall and PageMaker DTP software.
- (b) *the publishing option* - upgrading and extending the network, 3 new PCs, installing broadband and firewall, a networked colour laser printer, anti-virus, PageMaker DTP and Paint Shop Pro software, a digital camera and an annual support contract for the network.

After a meeting where the options were discussed and explored, Off Centre decided that the second option would be the way to go as this fitted more closely with the bid criteria and objectives – the server would have to wait... The ICT contractor that had previously provided a quote was contacted and asked to quote on the “publishing” scenario. Once the quote was received, Lasa examined it to check for value for money and suggested a few alterations – the ADSL router/firewall combination was replaced with separate units so as to allow for future remote access via VPN and the external hard drive back-up option changed to a CD Writer as this did not allow for backup media to be taken off site.

### **The work gets done**

At the start of March the order was placed and work commenced fairly soon afterwards. Off Centre were impressed with the pre-installation service that the contractor had given them – the cabling and PC and ADSL installation all went according to plan – and was complete by the deadline of the end of the month. They had concerns that staff responsible for ICT at Off Centre were not involved with the process and that no satisfactory explanations of what had been done were given or documented.

There was also a feeling that the contractor lost interest in them after the work had been carried out and that the support contract was a waste of money – faults reported all seemed to come outside the terms of the contract. When a monitor failed whilst under warranty on one of the new PCs it took a very long time to get it replaced and virus eradication from an affected machine cost Off Centre £400 to sort out.

### **Outcomes of the upgrade**

A year on from the work being carried out, Off Centre reflected on how the upgrade had affected them:

- Having all the PCs on the network and broadband had made a huge difference to the way in which information was being accessed. The advice and information workers regularly turned to the web to research for clients and were downloading material which was being stored for reference. For example, it was easier to find the organisation’s company and charity information on the web rather than searching through filing cabinets in the office! The fact that it is a fixed monthly cost changed the way staff thought about using the web.

- Off Centre is now much more reliant on email communication, both internally and externally. However, the ease of email and the ability to send off messages as things or ideas occur rather than as organised “blocks” meant that staff were in danger of being bombarded with chaotic information streams.
- Some further thought on lines of communication was needed – the ability to email made it simple to include other members of staff on a “need to know” basis.
- Email made certain office practices so much quicker – for example references for a new member of staff were received within the day rather than being at the mercy of the post, office mail sorting systems and in-trays. Similarly recruitment packs were often sent out by email although job applications were still required on paper.
- Where in the past the phone had been the main method of contacting people, email was now more often used rather than leaving voicemail or answerphone messages.
- The colour laser printer produced fantastic quality material but there was a perception that it was costing a lot to run – cartridges are around £80 each to replace and there are four of them. However, there had not been a systematic attempt to work out a cost per page.
- The PageMaker software had not been exploited yet and it was recognised that training was necessary. Also, although the digital camera had proved useful, it had not been much used for publicity materials to date.
- Some of the aims of the project bid had not yet been met – whilst information provision and quality had improved significantly, there had been little involvement of young people or opportunities for them to develop new skills.

### **Other issues**

Despite the upgrade, there are still some concerns around a number of issues:

- Security – Off Centre weren’t convinced that the anti-virus was updating as often as necessary (one machine had been subject to an attack which had cost a considerable amount to sort out) and they weren’t sure if the firewall was up to date with firmware patches.
- Some computers are showing their age and there is still a requirement for staff to share PCs occasionally. Staff expansion meant that in addition to PCs more mailboxes were needed.
- The support contract had now run out and Off Centre were in the process of choosing a new contractor. They were looking at purchasing support hours upfront to be spent as necessary to resolve whatever

problems occurred rather than the uncertainty of an "insurance" type contract as they'd had previously.

- The need for a server was becoming increasingly apparent – the organisation's data which was held on one shared drive on a PC was now over the capacity of a CDR so backing up was becoming more of a chore. Security concerns meant that some staff were having to store data on their own PCs which weren't being backed up.
- Off Centre were aware that they needed to standardise on operating systems to make it easier to support.
- With increasing staff numbers and mobile working being necessary for an outreach project, Off Centre needs to accommodate laptops but still have them link into the network.

### **Off Centre and the Circuit Rider Project**

The Project has helped Off Centre with their ICT development by:

- Drawing attention to routine tasks such "housekeeping" PCs, backing up and updating virus definitions on a regular basis
- Encouraging strategic thought processes about ICT development
- Helping with budgeting
- Having the Circuit Rider with an independent viewpoint on assisting with assessing quotes from contractors
- Ability to bounce ideas off the Rider
- Being fed ideas, reminders and pulling together disparate threads
- Reminding about good practice and ways of working
- Visiting on regular basis to check progress
- Informing through the seminars
- Acting as a conscience!

Thanks to Coralie Mattys, Finance & Office Manager for her invaluable input to this case study. Off Centre's web site is [www.offcentre.org.uk](http://www.offcentre.org.uk)