

Going virtual - online meetings

In the second of a two part article we look at the hardware and software needed to take part in virtual meetings. We also review a selection of virtual meeting tools to suit all budgets.

Software and hardware requirements

Although the technology 'under the bonnet of virtual meetings' is continually evolving to work across PCs, Mac and Linux, you'll need to check the minimum software and possibly hardware requirements for everyone to take part.

- Some tools don't support Macs or Linux
- Almost all tools support Internet Explorer browser
- Most also support Firefox browser

You may also need participants to check they have the following installed:

- Flash - recent version which most people will probably have
- Java - may need to download a Java applet (small piece of Java based software)
- Proprietary software application (vendor's software – this would be a big issue when presenting to

large audiences so best avoided if possible)

Some virtual meeting tools

These are some of the most popular tools for organising virtual meetings, with features and prices correct at time of writing. All are suitable for Mac, Windows and Linux unless otherwise noted.

Skype (www.skype.com) - is the most popular tool for basic instant messaging, VOIP calls, video and audio conferencing, and you'll need to download and install Skype's free software. Conference calls are free for a maximum of 5 people.

Oovoo (www.oovoo.com) - is Mac and PC only software you'll need to download and install if you're hosting the meeting. The free version supports two-way video calls, text chat and file sending. Only the business version

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is produced by Lasa

Editorial & Production:

Miles Maier & Ian Runeckles

Cartoons:

Phil Evans



Universal House
88-94 Wentworth Street
London E1 7SA

Editorial:

Tel: 020 7426 4473

Email: computanews@lasa.org.uk

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



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editorial

Development workers have a significant role to play in helping organisations with building their technology capacity.

We're in tough economic times, with a huge government deficit and potentially drastic cut backs in funding for the third sector. Development workers have a vital role to play because the third sector organisations that survive and prosper will be those who make best of use of their resources, especially ICT, as it underpins service delivery, marketing and communications.

Development workers aim to build the capacity (or build up the ability) of organisations they work with to better deliver their mission. In the process they've become 'jacks of all trades' - part small business adviser, part marketing and communications guru, and part fundraiser. Consequently to help the organisations they work with, development workers need to know the right questions to ask and where to signpost people.

Over the years development workers have repeatedly told us that they felt out of their depth when groups asked them about ICT. What they really needed was just enough knowledge to understand the issues in order to help them signpost groups to sources of quality advice and support.

Research into how small groups use technology in Lambeth by our own London ICT Champion shows how development workers can make a difference in signposting ICT resources. The survey revealed that whilst 90% of our respondents rate computers and the internet as "vital" or "fairly important", 55% lacked an ICT budget; 65% didn't back-up data on a regular basis and 33% said their staff didn't have access to networked computers or email.

These are serious barriers for smaller organisations and those most in need of capacity building. Knowing a few ICT basics or trusted sources of advice and information can go a long way towards helping them engage with the mainstream.

NAVCA also recognises the problem and recently commissioned Lasa to deliver a one day ICT workshop as part of its SKILD programme for development workers. SKILD provides training for development workers who support local third sector organisations. You can download the workshop from here (www.slideshare.net/ictchamp/ict-for-development-workers).

Make no mistake, the funding squeeze is here to stay so development workers have a crucial role to play in showing where to go for quality ICT help and support.

Links

Lasa ICT Champion research: (<http://ictchampion.lasa.org.uk/2009/06/research-accessing-and-using-ict-in-lambeth/>)

NAVCA: (www.navca.org.uk)

SKILD programme: (www.navca.org.uk/services/learningopps/skild)

This article first appeared on Andy Gregg's blog on www.lasa.org.uk

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...cont'd from p 1

at \$40/£26 per month supports screen sharing. Participants without oovoo can join a video call from their web browser. Critics have mentioned oovoo's low sound quality and tendency to crash.

DimDim (www.dimdim.com) - is web browser based and the free, ad-supported version of DimDim allows up to 20 people to participate with support for chat, slide sharing, emoticons, white-boarding, voice conferencing, video conferencing and screen sharing. Paid for versions start at \$25/£17 per month and add options for more participants, personalisation and advanced reporting.

Yugma (www.yugma.com) - Yugma is browser based and the free version provides desktop sharing, chat, white-boarding and VOIP conferencing for up to 20 people. It also allows Skype users to share their screens. Paid for versions start at \$15/£10 per month.

GoToMeeting/ GoToWebinar/ GoToTraining (www.gotomeeting.com) - GoToMeeting starts at \$465/£305 per year for up to 15 people. It supports phone or VOIP conferencing, but not white-boarding or video conferencing, with full support for presenters on Windows and Macs. There's a 30 day free trial version.

Adobe Acrobat Connect (www.adobe.com/products/acrobatconnect) - provides for desktop sharing, white-boarding, emoticons, video conferencing and VOIP conferencing. Participants can use any browser that runs Flash. The tool is free for up to three participants, or \$39 per month for up to 20. For more participants, you'll need Acrobat Connect Pro.

See www.adobe.com/products/acrobatconnectpro/compare/

ReadyTalk (www.readytalk.com) - ReadyTalk provides a standard feature set of desktop sharing, remote control, chat and conference calls. It operates on a subscription basis, with one web subscription providing unlimited meetings for up to 15 participants from \$39/£25 per month. The free trial version provides unlimited web meetings with up to 15 people for 30 days.

Elluminate (www.illuminate.com) - is feature-rich and comes with a price tag beyond the reach of most non-profits. Elluminate says that it meets US web accessibility standards. Prices obviously vary depending on your volume, but these seem to run in the \$750 - \$1000+ / £490 - £654 per month.

Cisco WebEx Meeting Centre (www.webex.co.uk) - is browser based with a full set of features for business users, such as recorded meetings and advanced analytics. Prices start at £24 per month for unlimited meetings with up to 25 people at a time. The free trial version runs for 14 days for up to 25 people in a meeting.

Live Meeting (<http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/live-meeting/>) Microsoft Office Live Meeting is an online meeting space that your organisation subscribes to or hosts internally. Mac and Linux users will need Office Live Meeting Web Access (MWA) installed. Prices start at \$4.50/£3 per user per month.

WebHuddle (www.webhuddle.com) - is a free open source alternative that supports VOIP calls and screen sharing.

Summing Up

Although it's not for everyone or situations where face to face is essential, virtual meetings can be a great way of taking the hassle out of organising physical meetings, and saving time and money on travel and venue hire.

There are plenty of options ranging from basic audio conference calls for five people to corporate training tools for over 1,000 participants. Skype and oovoo are fine for basic audio conference calls for five or six people, but tools like DimDim and Yugma provide free versions with most of the features you'll need to run a virtual meeting for up to 20 people.

About the author

Miles Maier works for Lasa and is a frequent contributor on web based technology to Computanews and the Lasa ICT Knowledgebase.

Knowledgebase

www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk/virtualoffice
www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk/howtelecomsischangingwork
www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk/projectmanagementpeopleside

Acknowledgements

We'd like to thank TechSoup (www.techsoup.org) and Idealware (www.idealware.org) for the inspiration and some of the content for this article.

COSMIC – Digital Mentors in Action

As a result of funding from a number of different sources, east Devon based social enterprise COSMIC has been able to bring IT training and support to local people, organisations and business through a new project called “Digital Mentors”. Sarah Stevenson, Projects Manager, Tim Evans and Andy Thompson, Digital Mentors, and some of their mentees, reveal all.

What is a Digital Mentor?

Tim and Andy are COSMIC’s Digital Mentors aiming to provide technology training, support, workshops and advice to local people, organisations, sole traders and SMEs (small and medium sized enterprises) in east Devon and the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The support and guidance on offer includes the use of standard ‘Office’ software, social media, simple website creation and promotion demonstrations, tips on online selling, computer maintenance and support.

The support offered is flexible and covers content relevant to the beneficiaries. Individuals can benefit from one-to-one sessions, with up to the total of eight hours allowed for each individual under the scheme, whilst three hour workshops are available for organisations, groups and SMEs.

Whilst some funding has been achieved to subsidise the project, a small charge is made for each

person attending a session/ workshop. These are kept as low as possible and are from as little as £5 per hour

Tim and Andy have a huge enthusiasm for their work. Tim notes that “Digital Mentors is a fabulous concept and it’s extremely exciting to be making a difference to the lives of people in the area in which we can work. Many small businesses and organisations are missing out on the benefits that digital services can bring, either through lack of knowledge or the affordability of support that is available. To be able to take the time to find out what it is that is really needed and then provide advice, assistance and support, rather than making assumptions is what really makes this an incredibly valuable project”

Andy reflects on the fact that “Everyone is being told to run their whole lives on the internet; tax their cars, fill in their tax returns, shop and bank and communicate online... but it’s not going to work for everyone. Recently I have come

across three cases of retired ladies, all with a similar story. Two were widows and had the experience

‘my husband did all that’ syndrome is a real problem

of “my husband did all that”, the third’s husband has Parkinson’s - all initially saw little use for the internet.”

This ‘my husband did all that’ syndrome is a real problem. Being told they can sort their pensions out online after their local post office was closed is not always going to work if they don’t know how to use a computer because their ‘husbands did that’.

The lady with the husband with Parkinson’s had a dial-up internet connection and so had a distorted view of what the internet could offer her. She very rarely used it, couldn’t really see what she was getting for her money and had almost dismissed it. Andy was able to explain to her that with a faster

With sessions on:

- Tools of the trade - the technologies
- Planning for the cloud
- Project management - can cloud help?
- Change Management - preparing for outsourcing
- Supporting distributed organisations and homeworkers
- Accessibility and the cloud
- Data protection
- Volunteers and the cloud

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Venue: Garden Museum • Lambeth Palace Road • London SE1 7LB

connection she'd see a completely different internet and options such as shopping and banking would be open to her. It took some time but she did make the move, but only with Digital Mentoring support. She's now doing her 'heavy' supermarket shopping online and buying the rest in the village. She plans to bank online and has discovered the iPlayer,

Swinging into action

In the SME world, Martin Young of Sitting Spiritually, a joiner making garden swing seats (www.sittingspiritually.co.uk) has been engaged with the project for some time now. He notes that "Tim has systematically worked his way through my shopping list of things

I needed to learn. As with most computer programmes, a little knowledge can sometimes be a dangerous thing and I am certainly very grateful for all the patient guidance given."

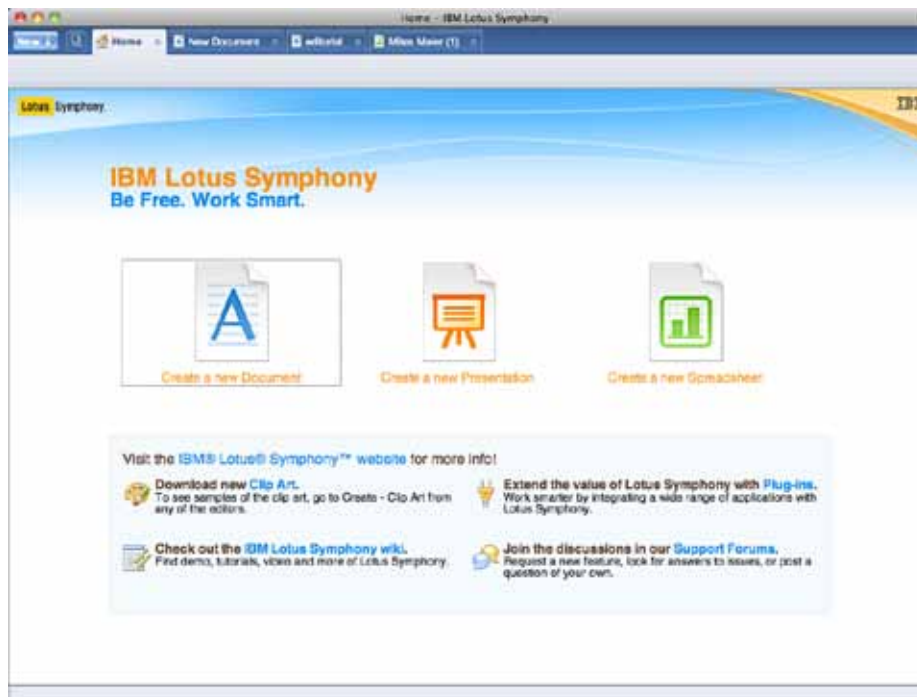
Sarah of Sarah Rhodes Design, jeweller and designer (www.sarahrhodesdesign.com) adds "COSMIC has given me help to set up my social networking Ning site. The recommendation of using Ning was spot on as it gives our group the possibilities for networking, sharing information and communicating easily. After my session with Andy I have been able to make the site look as I would like and link it to other sites."

Julie Harris, CEO at COSMIC, explains "It's such a great project to

be piloting during these uncertain economic times. There is so much need out there for people to get the support they need to develop ICT in ways which directly benefit their business and organisation. The mentoring approach allows us to provide this support which makes their job more effective, more profitable and more sustainable. We've recently had interest from Google UK and we will be working with them to trial new online tools and generate case studies from the digital mentoring projects – so watch this space!"

More about COSMIC's Digital Mentors at www.cosmic.org.uk/services/projects/digital-mentors

I Can Hear Music – Lotus's office suite gets a makeover



Paul R Band at IBM describes Symphony's new feature-set as version 3 beta 3 is released.

IBM Lotus Symphony is a rich set of office productivity tools that are intuitive and easy to use and provided at no charge. There are three applications that make up Lotus Symphony: Lotus Symphony Documents, Lotus Symphony Spreadsheets, Lotus Symphony Presentations. Platform support comprehensively covers Windows, several Linux distributions including Red hat, Ubuntu and SUSE and Mac OS X.

Recently available, this new version represents a major new advancement for Symphony users. Based on current OpenOffice.org 3 code stream, it offers loads of new features and capabilities and improved file fidelity. Symphony

can save documents, spreadsheets, and presentations in a variety of file formats, including Open Document Format (ODF) and Microsoft Office 2007 formats. Symphony can also convert documents, spreadsheets, and presentations into Adobe PDF files.

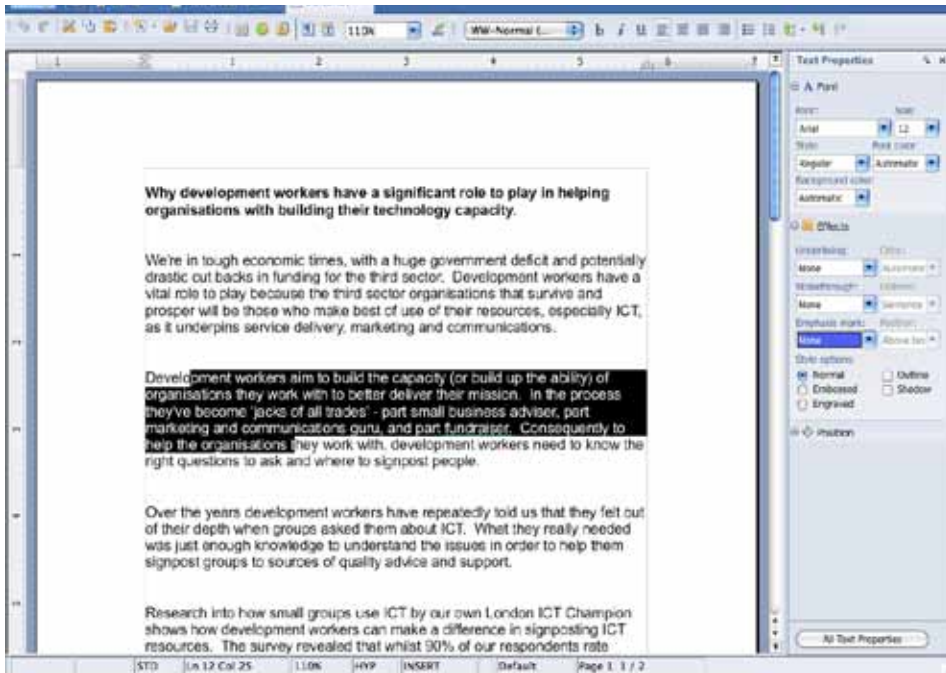
Lotus Symphony 3 Beta 3 adds some exciting new enhancements. You can now customise the toolbars and arrange them as you like. Creating pdf files based on your work is even easier with a one click export to pdf icon that you can add to your toolbar. You also have the option to create toolbars to support your individual work style.

Files you are working on appear as

tabs along the top of Symphony so all types of file (document, spreadsheet or presentation) appear together.

Symphony even has a built-in web browser. Why is that important you might ask? For web-based mail that updates the title bar, you can load up your mail in a tab, then continue on your documents, spreadsheets or presentation while at the same time easily seeing if any new mail comes in. Going to your mail is just a tab away.

Symphony's functionality can also be extended. There is a plug-in available that will automatically convert MS Office files into Symphony ODF files. The plug-in is



forums are a great place to share your experience and to help others like you. There are also install guides and FAQs to provide assistance. Reference cards are available to assist Microsoft Office users to perform common tasks in Symphony. Other chargeable support options are available should your organisation require a higher level of support.

The Lotus Symphony web site's Gallery contains a plethora of Clip Art items and templates that can be downloaded and you can of course create your own.

very efficient. You specify a source folder which contains all of your files you want to convert. Then you specify a target folder where you want the converted files placed. The plug-in will then convert all files in source folders and its sub-folders. You can specify to convert presentations, documents, or spreadsheets. Your source files are preserved.

For developers, the publicly available Development Kit provides a detailed Developer's Guide, API Documentation and a number of examples of simple plug-ins.

Support is provided via discussions in the moderated Symphony support forums. There you can request a new feature, look for answers to issues, or post a question of your own. The support

For further information or to download IBM Lotus Symphony, visit <http://symphony.lotus.com>

About the author

Paul R Band is a Messaging and Collaboration Consultant with IBM Software Service for Lotus. www.ibm.com/uk/en

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Green ICT Handbook – A Guide to Green ICT

Published by Global Action Plan
(27 pages)

Download pdf from www.globalactionplan.org.uk/green-it

This new Global Action Plan (GAP) guide aims to provide up to date information on green ICT and to be a toolkit which can be used to minimise the environmental impact of technology infrastructure and processes.

This well structured guide focuses on both the causes and solutions with clear step-by-step guidance on how to make real change and implement a greener approach to using ICT within your organisation. There are good pointers on what you need to do, how to do it and what tools you can use.

There is a wealth of information, with references to the latest findings and figures from around the globe on the impacts of ICT on the environment. This is useful for both those with a basic understanding and also for total beginners, only just starting on the path to implementing greener ICT.

Whilst the information is excellent, I did find that much of it was only really relevant to very large organisations or companies with hundreds or thousands

of computers and very large networks. Most small to medium sized third sector organisations will have a maximum of one or two servers, for which many of the solutions suggested will not work as they can be both costly and time consuming to implement. This is difficult if you have a small number of staff and nobody who can give the appropriate amount of time to this task.

The impact of computers on the environment is a serious issue, and smaller organisations can make real change by following some of the advice given. This guide is a useful starter but it would be helpful to see a guide produced for smaller organisations with more limited budgets, staff and resources. There are free tools out there that you can use and simple changes you can make that will make a real difference, such as installing good power management software, purchasing more energy-efficient computer technology and, above

all, buying only what you really need. Changing your procurement process to include ethical and environmental performance is a good place to start.

GAP have done a great job with this guide and although as mentioned above some of the information may not be relevant, it's still worth a read as there is some valuable advice. GAP also produced another document called *An Inefficient Truth* that really helped to raise awareness and get the environmental impacts of technology more widely recognised. I would advise downloading a copy of this too, if you really want to get a better understanding of Green IT.

GAP should be applauded for creating another document that keeps this subject rightly in the spotlight as the global impacts of technology are set to increase if we do not change the way we do things. Green ICT can be smarter computing and there are financial, ethical and environmental benefits to be gained. However, this is not always made easy and it can be time consuming without the right guidance or support. This is the real value of guides such as the Green ICT Handbook.

About the author

Reviewed by Adam Clamp of The Green IT Company. Adam is an independent Green IT Consultant who has been working to promote Greener Computing for over 10 years. He started The Green IT Company to try to make greener technology options more widely and easily available as well as providing advice on how to make real Green changes within organisations and companies. www.greenitcompany.co.uk

Georgia on my mind

In April Laura Whitehead of Popokatea attended NTEN's tenth annual Non-Profit Technology Conference (NTC) in Atlanta, Georgia, USA for three days of informational sessions, presentations, discussions, meetings, socialising – and Bohemian Rhapsody...

Over 1400 people from the non-profit technology community attended the conference from across the globe coming together to share, learn and connect. There was a vibrant mix of staff and volunteers from organisations of all sizes and services and a diverse mix of roles ranging from the IT techies, the accidental techies, communications, marketing, fundraising and media professionals, along with those like myself, who work as a provider of services to non-profits and other providers and suppliers too.

As a woman working in technology, I'm aware that in the past women have often been under represented at some technology associated events. Whilst that hasn't ever mattered to me, nor stopped my going to anything, NTC is totally different to many of the other tech events ranging from hack days, unconferences/barcamps where women attending in the past have been more of a rarity (but are now finally becoming more, if not yet totally, commonplace). At NTC there was a vibrant mix of men and women presenters and participants, which may say something about the sector we serve and the robust inclusive community that NTEN has nurtured over the years.

Possibly also it's the intermingling

of communications and marketing and the rise of social media alongside the traditional IT that has bridged the divide a little more. In addition everyone I encountered was refreshingly enthusiastic and passionate about their work and the mission of their organisation, and also eager to share, support and celebrate others.

The content

The first day offers a 'Day of Service' for the non-profit techies to give back to the community that hosts the NTC, affinity group meetings and more. The We Are Media sessions gave attendees hands-on introductions to social media. I co-presented two blogging workshops to a wide range of organisations with Dawn Crawford, social media consultant at BC/DC Ideas (www.slideshare.net/dawnacrawford), which was great fun. The day continued with the Science fair and the entertaining Ignite sessions providing a fun way to show off new, innovative ideas. All the pre-conference activities enabled the community to come together and connect.

On the second and third days, the main conference offered over 100 sessions designed, chosen and led by the non-profit tech community.

The trouble with Slacktivism

'Slacktivism' is the term that has been coined to describe quick actions, like texting to make a donation or signing an online petition and has a mixed and debated history. The session offered a debate with examples of how best to convert online activism to offline action and signalled the pitfalls to avoid. One example showed what American Red Cross learned from their experience of using text2donate (<http://mobilegive.us/text2pledge>) to raise funds after the disaster in Haiti.

Bringing community organising into online campaigns

This session explored the basis of community organising and why it's important to online campaigns. During the session we split into groups to explore both community organising principles and social media tools in order to create an online social media campaign.

Forget the tech, lets talk mission

This session provided great debate and insight into the common disconnect between the objectives



the risk while taking advantage of the potential ease of maintenance and stability of hosted applications and peer sharing amongst the group on what works for them.

Although a technology conference, a key emphasis throughout was the mission of an organisation. The focus was not on the gadgets or fads, or usage of the latest

of technologists and the direction of an organisation's leadership team and some of the tactics to help and provide actionable forward steps.

social networks but rather the purposeful use of technology and the impact technology was having on community building and on the communities being served.

Collaborative problem solving for consultants

As a consultant myself, this was a useful session, providing a space for questions and sharing and learning from others about starting out, marketing, contracting, collaboration, tools, and managing difficult projects, clients, and yourself.

Earth to cloud: when, why and how to outsource apps

This session explored and discussed pros and cons of cloud computing, sharing how to assess and mitigate

Be part of the community

The event is very social, from the pre event chat and connecting on online networks and websites, to the event itself, providing many ways to meet and connect. Whether a veteran NTC attendee or a 'newbie' (I was a NTC newbie, it was the first time I'd attended the event) the connecting of so many like-minded people at one event was a great experience, akin to being part of a big family; the knowledge shared and learnt reinforces and strengthens what we do when we return to our daily work.

The event provided me with a wealth of wisdom and friendships. I met a lot of people I've been connected to online but had never met face to face. I met familiar faces that I'd met at previous events and a lot of new people too.

Useful Links

www.nten.org/ntc
www.slideshare.net/event/2010-nonprofit-technology-conference

Afterword

(So where does a dodgy old Queen song fit into all this? Ed) The NTC has a scholarship fund, which helped to enable nearly 70 small organisations to attend this year. You can see the video created which captures the essence of NTC and the nonprofit technology community. Have fun while doing good!

www.nten.org/blog/2010/04/09/ntens-remake-bohemian-rhapsody

Next years NTC takes places in Washington, DC on 17-19 March 2011. Plan, budget, get a scholarship or a sponsor but be there.

About the author

Laura Whitehead is a creative web and print designer, trainer and enabler specialising in the use of new and innovative technologies to further the development of effective communications for the non-profit/third sector. www.popokatea.co.uk

AIMS: Free at last

Eighteen months ago, Lasa decided to make a version of AIMS, their client contact and case management system, available free of charge. Phil Woodall, AIMS Services Manager at Lasa, looks at why they did it, what the impact was on their work and for the sector, and lessons learnt.

In November 2008 Lasa provided the third sector with an early Christmas present, by making the entry-level version of AIMS Core (a Microsoft Access based relational database) available free of charge as a download from our website. Since that time over 600 groups have downloaded the software and a recent user survey shows that a third of these are currently in use.

AIMS is a case management tool that provides users with considerable freedom to add fields, amend code lists, design their own reports and generally “bespoke” their system, without the need to ask Lasa’s permission. For that reason, the general architecture of the database lends itself to being tailored to meet the needs of a wide range of organisations offering a variety of services. Originally designed for agencies giving advice to the public, AIMS is now used by all sorts of groups to capture information relating to visitors to various clubs and classes, groups doing capacity building, a gardening project and so on. It’s very flexible and versatile.

The free version comes with all features working but limited to a maximum of five log-ins at one time. In addition to the free version, other paid-for versions are also available - the Access based Core and Extra which are limited to 15 users on a single site, and the Firebird or Microsoft SQL server back-end version for larger numbers of users.

Meeting our mission

So, why make AIMS free when it’s been a chargeable product since its inception? We did this because we were particularly interested in supporting small

VCS organisations in taking their first steps towards recording the work and outcomes they were achieving. As part of Lasa’s mission we seek to support the third sector in improving its management of technology – enabling the sector to do things better.

It is also fair to say that we hoped to raise awareness amongst funders and policy makers of our position as one of the key second tier support providers across the

About our free users

- 40% of users came from agencies with six to ten staff and 30% from 11 – 30 staff
- Only 20% of users had fewer than three workers
- 86% of surveyed organisations had been going for over five years
- 50% of downloads by front line workers, not managers or administrators
- 25% were personally recommended to use AIMS
- 35% never used Lasa before enabling us to reach a brand new audience

sector.

We did not believe that the free version would drive much business towards the paid-for AIMS products, as we were aware that even quite small sums of money are an absolute barrier to acquisition for many small groups. We were correct in our assumption and less than five organisations have moved from a free version to a paid-for package.

Support needs generated

We were very clear that as a very small team we were not able to provide free support for the download, installation or subsequent set up phase. We hoped the self extracting zip file, which then runs an automated installation program would be sufficient. Our survey showed that 85% of users found the process very easy or fairly easy to download and install. As a consequence we had hardly any support calls, and the ones we did were almost always about Windows 7 permission problems.

A key indicator was also the conversion rate from having downloaded to actually using. If downloading the database can be seen as an aspirational act, actually using it requires greater determination. We were aware of the daunting list of hurdles faced by groups setting up their free database. Lack of time and resources, no money for training or support, technical problems and being unable to interest other staff all appeared as replies to our survey.

Remarkably though, for a free download, a third of respondents said they were using the database. No matter how simple the installation process, moving on to the next step of setting up, configuring and learning about the database does take time and effort. Finding that time and engaging other users are hurdles faced by both the free users and our paid for AIMS users alike.

Where next?

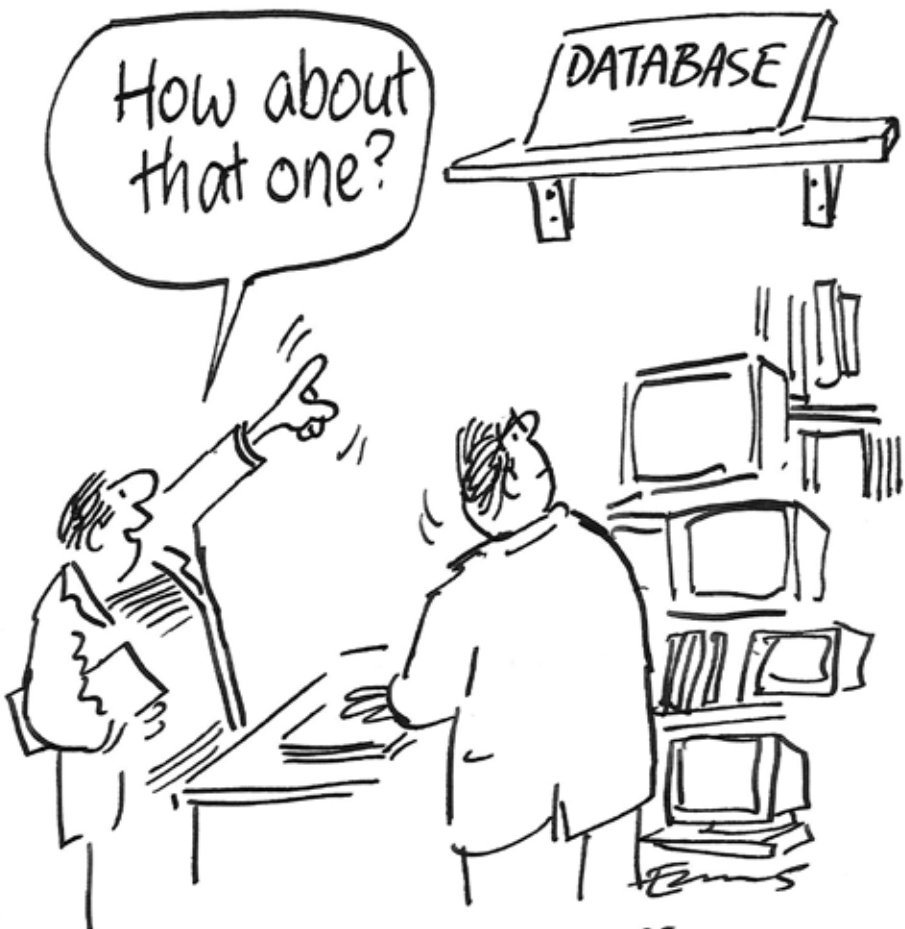
In recognising all the barriers to successful implementation, we are aware that having access to a free database is only the start of the process. The full cost of ownership, including support, training and the time spent managing and using the data need somehow to be addressed.

Lasa has put forward funding applications to try and provide for these additional areas of support, with no success to date. Interestingly, we have also been approached by two different consortia, one

representing groups of agencies in the same geographic area, and the other from groups sharing the same client group. Each consortium is applying for funds to get the training and support on behalf of their members. Now there's an idea...

Free download

For more information about AIMS and the free download go to www.lasa.org.uk/aims/ or contact Phil Woodall on 020 7377 2806 pwoodall@lasa.org.uk



**“OFF THE SHELF” – SOMETIMES
A GOOD CHOICE**



'THERE ARE ALTERNATIVES'

Ubuntu Lucid Lynx - Linux for non-profits

In issue 154 of *Computanews*, Paula Graham looked at the then latest version of the open source operating system Ubuntu. Hot on its heels comes the new release, 10.04, aka Lucid Lynx. Paula looks at how it shapes up...

For those of you unfamiliar with Ubuntu, it's a complete system offering an alternative to Microsoft Windows and Mac OS. Lucid Lynx (10.04) is the latest Ubuntu release and it's a real leap forward. Ubuntu is going for a glossy 'Mac-like' feel and the new widgets and muted tones not only look great but also reduce tiring glare. The Desktop is very configurable and the design so clever that everything is just a click or two away. No quaintly named options in maze-like menus – on Ubuntu you just click 'Places' in the top menu to find all your stuff sensibly organised and connect to shared folders and servers. Click 'Applications' to find all your software neatly organised in categories and 'System' to, well, manage the system.

Download, install and relax

Lucid is a long-term-service release - the desktop version will be fully

supported for three years and the server version for five years (upgrades after that will still be free). Ubuntu is robust and stable and doesn't slow down over time, even with minimal maintenance. This means you won't have to worry too much about it for three to five years once it's installed. On most PCs and laptops it takes half an hour to install and hardware plugs and plays out of the box. You can check whether installation will be this smooth on your own particular PC/laptop by running the 'live' CD first. If it boots up and everything works, it'll also install without bother. Running the 'live' CD won't affect your existing Windows system so you can still back out.

On the server, web, file-sharing, print and mail servers can be set up as part of the automated installation with very good security. Lucid also offers easy terminal server installation.

There are specialised Lucid versions for *netbooks*, *older PCs and laptops*, *education* and *multi-media*. All of them can generally be installed from a CD, USB device or over a network. Ubuntu can even be installed as a Windows program to run alongside of an existing Windows operating system.

What's new in this version?

Software centre

Lucid has a software centre where you can browse around by category. It offers a description of the applications, often with screenshots, and a big, shiny automatic 'install' button – a huge help for migrating Windows users.

Cloud services, social networking, multi-media

Lucid has social networking and cloud services built-in to both the Desktop and Server editions. On the server, *Eucalyptus cloud*

services are easy to install and well-supported.

The desktop offers consumer cloud services through '*Ubuntu One*' which includes syncing files and address books between Ubuntu PCs and laptops over the internet. Lucid also provides integration with third-party social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter through Gwibber and multiple Instant Messengers such as MS Messenger and Yahoo through Empathy.

Lucid's multi-media capabilities overall are impressive. Pre-installed photo-library software handles digital cameras, albums and easy photo-processing. There's even pre-installed and easy-to-use video-editing software. YouTube and other music and video-streaming all work well in Firefox.

Compatibility

Whilst there is still hardware being manufactured that doesn't run well under Ubuntu, almost all mainstream manufacturers now produce passable Linux drivers. Most printers, cameras, bluetooth, wifi, and USB storage devices genuinely plug 'n' play on Ubuntu – without any faff with CDs. Routers from most broadband suppliers also 'just work'. Even proprietary software producers are starting to offer Linux versions, from Skype to Adobe Reader, Flash, etc.

What's in it for the third sector?

In these tough times, it's increasingly difficult to get funding

to replace ICT equipment. Ubuntu can step into the breach – it can run comfortably on most PCs and laptops designed for WinXP (Minimum requirement for a full desktop is four to ten Gb hard drive space, 500Mb of memory (RAM) and any Pentium 4 or equivalent processor whilst Xubuntu (the slimline version) can run on 256Mb RAM). This means that switching to Ubuntu could save many organisations thousands of pounds on hardware upgrades whilst significantly increasing reliability and reducing maintenance overhead. Ubuntu runs well on netbooks and low-power PCs (10–20W) thus reducing running cost and carbon footprint too. Even on new hardware, buying PCs or laptops without Windows installed saves around £90 per machine.

Without any further expenditure on software, Lucid allows you to fill in pdf forms, make pdfs in one click, produce high-quality commercial-print-ready publicity materials, handle spreadsheets and documents, email, contacts and calendars, multimedia, one-click scanning, seamless image import and editing, creating podcasts, social networking on the desktop, synchronising and sharing folders between PCs over the internet and much more. It doesn't offer a substitute for Microsoft Access databases but, increasingly, organisations are moving to web-based contacts and case management systems whilst smaller organisations can usually handle recording more comfortably in a spreadsheet.

The remaining issues are nothing to do with open source software itself – funders and third sector

infrastructure organisations are still slow to provide software and tools which avoid lock-in but this is starting to improve and, as it improves, the only remaining barrier to adopting Ubuntu in the sector will be a mild learning-curve.

What about accessibility?

Ubuntu uses the *GNOME* desktop environment by default with its strong commitment to accessibility. Tools for visually or mobility impaired users (including high-contrast desktops, screen reader, voice-activated commands and keyboard modifiers) come pre-installed. *Dasher* (predictive text entry software) can be installed from the software centre. There is more information in Ubuntu's free Accessibility Guide <https://help.ubuntu.com/community/Accessibility>. You can also download more detailed guides and manuals at the *GNOME Accessibility project*.

Sounds great – where can I get it?

Download Ubuntu Lucid Lynx from www.ubuntu.com/

About the author

Paula Graham runs Fossbox, a sustainable IT consultancy based in East London, and has been advocating Free Software, sustainable IT, and equal representation for women in ICT for the past decade.

Email: info@fossbox.org.uk
Web: www.fossbox.org.uk

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information + advice in community languages
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rightsnet

the welfare rights website for advisors
www.rightsnet.org.uk

About Lasa

Established in 1984, Lasa has provided ICT advice to the third sector for 25 years. Its two main aims are to promote social inclusion through access to social welfare law, information, advice and guidance; and to promote an efficient and effective sector through improving access to impartial technology advice and support resources – such as Computanews and the London e-bulletin (www.lasa.org.uk/lasa/mailling-lists)

Our online ICT Knowledgebase (www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk) is a comprehensive source of independent expert technology advice for third sector organisations, now containing over 300 articles. The Suppliers Directory (www.suppliersdirectory.org.uk) connects third sector organisations with over 150 approved suppliers of technology products and support services across England. Lasa is also noted for its consultancy work and leadership in developing the Circuit Rider model of local ICT support. (<http://ukriders.lasa.org.uk/>)

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Credits

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Web: www.lasa.org.uk/ict
Email: computanews@lasa.org.uk
Tel: 020 7426 4496

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for a stronger third sector