

ICT needs – an easy plan

An extract from *A Guide to Managing ICT in the Voluntary and Community Sector*, by **Mark Walker** of SCIP.

This article has been compiled by Paul Webster from NAVCA and is an extract from the 'Getting started' section of the new publication *A Guide to Managing ICT in the Voluntary and Community Sector* by Mark Walker of SCIP and published by the ICT Hub. Details of how to obtain copies are at the end of this article.

Many people in our communities benefit from the use of information communication technology (ICT) by voluntary and community organisations (VCOs). Older people in day centres use the internet to contact relatives or order shopping online. Local people are using webpages and email to initiate support for, and raise the profile of, campaigns in their communities. People with disabilities connect with people from whom they would otherwise be excluded.

It is easy to brush over ICT as an area left to the experts or to put it fourth on your top three priority areas; however by following simple planning and costing guidelines it is easy to take back the control.

But is ICT really helping?

Whatever you do with your ICT, keep your eye on the real reason why you're doing it. Make sure you're clear about the overall goals of your organisation and that they are guiding the decisions and choices you're making. When you decide what to do with ICT you must be able to answer:

- Does this help us achieve our goals? How? If not, why are we doing it?
- Does it save us time or money if we do this? How? If not, why are we doing it?
- Does it help us do new and more valuable things? How? If not, why are we doing it?

Planning

If you know you need to use ICT then it is vital to have a plan. Whether you're thinking about getting your very first computer, networking the office, setting up a corporate email system or producing a community video, you'll need a plan. Many people think they need detailed technical knowledge before making decisions about ICT, or are confused about what it can do because they're not familiar with it. Working on an ICT plan helps overcome that problem.

Preparing an ICT plan is a collaborative process that everyone can help with – irrespective of their technical skills. It's about working with others to decide where you want to go and how ICT can help get you there.

Planning helps you focus on your administration, information, communication and management needs, rather than the technology for its own sake. The plan that emerges can be as long or as short as you like. It's up to you to decide

which bits are relevant or useful and to discard or adapt things as you go along.

You should be clear about priorities and have some idea of the scale of resources you need, but you may find you have unanswered questions and issues that need further investigation.

At any point you may ask for expert help, to make sure you're on course or to focus on specific issues, but remember that the planning process is a management issue. Ideally it will be led by a manager or senior decision-maker, rather than being handed over to a 'techie' in a darkened room. This helps make sure it is focused on addressing wider organisational issues, rather than being simply a technology shopping list.

The new guide from the ICT Hub *Managing ICT in the Voluntary and Community Sector* explains that to effectively plan your ICT and no matter how elaborate the final document, any ICT plan must be able to answer three questions:

Where are you now?

- What is your current ICT doing – give it a 'health-check'

Where are you going?

- What are your organisational aims and objectives?
- Are there new ideas? Could ICT help you 'do better things'?

How can ICT help you get there?

- How could ICT help with these aims, to 'do things better'?

- How can we correctly cost and then fund the planned ICT?

Template

A template for an organisational ICT plan could include:

- Who is responsible for ICT planning and who else is involved in decision-making?
- The current overall goals and direction of your organisation
- A summary of your current use of ICT
- Key issues to be addressed
- Goals for the use of ICT in the next three years
- Identify each specific ICT initiative you will undertake
 1. a brief outline of this initiative (one-paragraph version)
 2. objective for this initiative, for example:
 - a) "It will save us time by ..."
 - b) "It will save us money by ..."
 - c) "It will improve the quality of our service by ..."
 3. What you think you need:
 - a) hardware, software, network, cables, etc
 - b) money, time, people
 4. Known training and support issues
 5. Likely suppliers and/or procurement processes
 6. Proposed budget and timescale for this initiative
- Summary of all initiatives

- Summary budget and timescale for all initiatives
- Risks associated with this plan and what you can do about them
- Overall schedule, next steps and roles for carrying out this plan
- Links between this plan and other plans

Costing

Once you have a technology plan, you then need to look at how to accurately cost and fund it. Getting the most from limited funding means choosing the right hardware and software at the right price without forgetting to allow for training, upgrades, ICT support and other running costs. It's no good squeezing the budget to get the latest must-have gadgets if you can't afford to learn how to use them or there's no money to get them fixed when they go wrong.

Total cost of ownership – you're not just buying a box

Budgeting for a new car means thinking about the initial purchase price, road tax, insurance, MOTs, servicing, fuel and depreciation. Buying a computer, video camera or website requires the same approach to budgeting.

This can include:

- Initial capital costs – The cost of the hardware, software and specialist equipment you require.
- Installation costs – You want to pay for someone to set up your new hardware and software in the right order and make sure it's all working. Or you might need equipment to be connected to a network, adding costs such as cabling and wireless networking. You will also need to consider which of your staff use laptops and who will need to access this network.
- Software and upgrades – Your budget must allow for the fact that all software is updated and improved from time to time, often requiring upgrade fees.
- Training – The cost of buying training for your staff or volunteers, as well as an allowance for time set aside to attend courses and practise new skills.
- ICT support for staff or volunteers – Budget for the salaries of ICT support staff, time needed to manage a volunteer or a proportion of the salary of your Accidental Techie (see Chapter 3 of the guide).
- Making donations useable – Second-hand equipment may be cheaper than new but it could also require repairs and upgrades, such as extra memory or a new screen.
- Maintenance costs – Without regular maintenance, failures and repair costs are likely to increase.
- Staying connected – The monthly cost of your broadband, plus any use of your mobile for internet access when you're out of the office.

More and more funders now look for bids with a realistic assessment of the costs of ICT. They want to know that the funds they're providing will deliver the benefits expected and the ICT Hub and others are working with them to encourage this approach.

Remember

- You don't need to be an ICT expert to write an ICT plan.
- Planning helps you to work out where you want your organisation to be, before deciding what technology you need to get there.

- Focus on key goals and benefits for your clients or community and identify ICT solutions that deliver those benefits.
- Get help when you need it and make sure, through a small working party of staff, volunteers, trustees, or partners, there is a sense of ICT being part of the organisational glue.
- Keep it simple; it helps keep your planning focused!
- When working out the cost of your planned ICT solution remember to fully cost and fund it. Even things like replacement toner cartridges for the new laser printer need to be factored in.

To download or obtain a free hard copy of this guide or any of the range of other practical resources and research reports from the ICT Hub visit the website at:

www.icthub.org.uk/publications

Comment from Paul Webster

I provide regional ICT infrastructure support for the ICT Hub at NAVCA. I meet organisations who have the will to embrace ICT and can see the benefits, but don't know where to start.

Addressing ICT and making long-term plans often just gets put into the 'too hard' tray. With this guide and the support and signposting that the regional ICT champions are providing it is now possible to dust down ICT and move it over to the 'in progress' tray

The ICT Hub theme for October focuses on understanding what your ICT needs are and planning to accommodate them. More details can be found on the ICT Hub website:

www.icthub.org.uk.

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