

13th VSSN/NCVO "Researching the Voluntary Sector" Conference

5th – 6th September 2007
University of Warwick

Is the voluntary sector getting its act together on ICT?

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(based on work carried out by Paul Ticher & Andrea Eaves)

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The full reports on which this paper is based (ICT Hub Baseline Research 2007 & 2004) can be obtained from the ICT Hub web site:
(www.ictHub.org.uk/research).

Short abstract

This paper highlights the key findings and emerging issues from a longitudinal study, begun in 2004 and followed up with the same organisations in 2007. The survey is supported by an extensive literature survey. The report finds that progress is being made, although not uniformly, and not as fast as many people would like. There is consistent evidence that convergence between information *and communications* technology is, in effect, complete, although take-up of Web 2.0 technologies is still low. Management support for and involvement in ICT is still a key differentiating factor in whether organisations use ICT effectively, but awareness of external sources of support and use of effective technical advice and support appears to be growing. Funders appear to be lagging behind in their appreciation of the importance of ICT to organisations of all sizes in the sector.

Introduction & background

This is one of the few known examples of longitudinal research into the development of ICT usage in the voluntary sector.

In July 2004 the (then) ICT Consortium — now the ICT Hub — commissioned a piece of 'baseline' research, which comprised:

- a survey to give a snapshot of how organisations are using ICT , and to form the baseline for follow-up research;
- a small amount of qualitative research to provide additional context to the baseline survey;
- a literature review, to identify useful sources of additional relevant information and analysis;
- development of a proposed evaluation framework for the Consortium's programme of work.

The evaluation framework has subsequently formed an important element of the evaluation process for the ICT Hub's work.

Despite a tight timescale, 960 responses were received in time to be analysed for the report, which was published in September 2004.

For the current research, 913 of the organisations that had responded previously were again approached, so that the results were directly comparable without having to make allowances for differences in the sample. This time, 250 usable responses were received, a response rate of 28%. Sixteen telephone interviews with selected individuals, from organisations of various sizes, provided additional insights into the factors which help to determine whether a voluntary organisation makes progress in its use of ICT or not.

In addition a new literature review, covering the period 2004 – 2007 was compiled. This looks at evidence about the use of ICT in the sector and how it

is supported — providing a reassuringly consistent picture despite the variety of perspectives, methodologies and specific topics covered in the various publications. The review also covers work on support options for ICT in the voluntary sector.

Key developments

The main findings from the research indicate that change has taken place in the organisations being surveyed, but in most areas at a slower speed than one might expect. Most of the trends identified in this research are echoed and supported by the other research covered in the literature review.

Importance and relevance of ICT

We really are talking about information *and communications* technology, as the internet is now perceived to be almost as important as computers in general.

ICT importance increases with the size of the organisation.

Policies, strategy and spending

The trends are positive in terms of the number of organisations with written policies and their confidence in their decision-making (organisational and personal), but the improvements are slight.

There are strong links between having a strategy and good decision-making, but a strategy does not automatically mean good decision-making.

Organisations that have a strategy and/or a budget are more likely to be spending money on ICT (but the direction of the link cannot be assumed).

Fewer organisations spent money in each ICT category in 2007 than in 2004, with internet connection seeing the greatest fall.

Funders appear to be hardening their attitudes: either they will or they won't give money for ICT expenditure, but with no clear improvement in their willingness to cover the costs of ICT realistically.

Our respondents are slightly less likely than they were in 2004 to say that they are using ICT 'much more' effectively now than two or three years ago. Taken with the fall in spending reported on elsewhere, this suggests the current trend could well be one of a general slow-down in ICT investment and progress.

Decision-making, and sources of expertise and information

Organisations with internal ICT expertise make better decisions. All organisations should be encouraged and assisted to develop their in-house ICT expertise, with an unpaid ICT expert being considerably better than nothing.

Our figures seem to represent a genuine dramatic increase in awareness and use of what is available in terms of external information and expertise, at least among the part of the voluntary sector represented by our respondents.

The level of use of the ICT Hub is worth noting, given that it had really only been in full operation for about a year at the time of the survey.

The use of external sources of strategic support varies with the size of organisation. Small organisations are more likely than average to use local services aimed at the sector, volunteers, and local educational institutions. Large organisations are much more likely to use paid-for resources (consultancy and shops), ICT Hub resources and circuit riders.

Accessibility, training and health & safety

It appears that there is a reasonable awareness of the selected key accessibility issues but a disappointing follow-through.

Formal approaches to training have declined slightly, but the approach which leads to the most satisfaction, by far, with staff and volunteers' skills is to carry out a regular training needs analysis.

A third of respondents' organisations have either never carried out an ICT health and safety risk assessment, or cannot remember when they last did so.

Use of specific technologies

There has been progress, if slow, towards getting computers networked. The larger the organisation, the more likely it is to have laptops and multiple office locations, but these are commonplace even in small organisations.

There has been a more marked increase in the proportion of organisations where all staff have access to the network and the internet, at least when they are in the office.

In all cases there has been an enormous increase in awareness of a range of up-and-coming technologies, as well as a large increase in their use. It would be hard to argue that this is unconnected with the ChangeUp programme in general and the work of the ICT Hub in particular.

There have been improvements in the application of security measures, especially those which are technologically-based (such as firewalls) rather than those which require staff intervention and commitment (such as backups, good password behaviour and training in security and confidentiality).

In line with the findings that connectivity generally is still growing in importance, we see that more organisations are using the internet for more things.

Willingness to use communications technologies shows a clear link to having a senior source of ICT expertise within the organisation.

Technical support

The most common sources of technical support are the same in 2007 as in 2004, but there have been notable declines for approaches which are not ideal: the shop, the “accidental techie” and “staff fix their own problems”. This suggests a more strategic approach to ICT support is bearing fruit.

The sources of support which are declining in popularity are also those with which respondents are least satisfied — the shop, ‘accidental techies’ and ‘staff fix their own problems’. The solution with which respondents are most satisfied is to have an internal support person.

Some emerging issues

How fast is the voluntary sector moving?

Our sample was originally comprised of individuals who had responded to an invitation to participate, which was circulated largely to organisations known to have an interest in ICT. To at least some extent, therefore, we can assume that the sample is biased towards those with a higher level of knowledge and who collectively follow better practice than average.

If this is the case, the overall picture is somewhat discouraging. Despite years of advice and encouragement, many of the organisations in our sample have still not adopted approaches to ICT which are known to work — managing ICT as part of the intrinsic business of the organisation, not as a ‘technical’ add-on.

If these organisations are not doing it, the probability is that many others are doing even less well — still struggling to get their basic infrastructure working properly, facing not just daily frustration but also the strategic risks of losing crucial data through human error, equipment malfunction, or disaster.

This is not to say that no progress is being made — there were improvements on most of the indicators set out in the 2004 report — but in many areas there is still a long way to go.

Why do organisations not take seemingly obvious steps to improve their use of ICT? Many of the measures that appear in our evaluation framework as indicators of good practice — instituting a reliable backup system, for example — are inexpensive, yet despite a noticeable improvement a substantial minority of those we surveyed still do not back up their data adequately.

Anecdotal evidence — for example from the qualitative interviews in our research, suggests that the reason is much more likely to be a combination of lack of confidence, lack of technical advice, and fear of unravelling the whole system if, for example, the 'backup' thread is pulled. These three elements recur often:

- Managers, even when they recognise the importance of ICT, do not always have enough confidence, either in their own decision-making capacity or in the advice they are given. The ICT industry does not do itself any favours with its highly partisan technical arguments about products and approaches, and predictions of doom if the wrong decision is made. When a manager is afraid of making the wrong decision, they may well choose not to make any decision at all.
- Reliable technical advice is increasingly available, but not always to the smaller organisations or those with less ICT experience. The need for this advice to be made available, either at no charge or at subsidised rates, will continue for the foreseeable future.
- It is often the case that a seemingly small change requires (or would substantially benefit from) another change, which itself is dependent on some other change, and so on. Managers are quite rightly wary of the disruption and risk from upsetting a functioning, but inadequate, system in the long-term interest of a more stable and effective one. Often, with the pressure they are under, they do not even have the time to think through the consequences and options, let alone to manage the change process and cope with the short-term loss of productivity. The result is that ICT gets left on the 'too difficult' list.

What are the largest sources of influence on ICT development in the sector?

In a previous piece of research [*Leading the way to ICT Success*, Paul Ticher with Aba Maison and Martin Jones, Baring Foundation, 2002], it emerged that for non-technical managers the two commonest sources of information about ICT were personal contacts, often family members, and the general media. Is this still the case, or have voluntary sector sources of information taken over?

On the one hand, among the aspects of ICT which demonstrated the largest change were reliance on the internet, take-up of broadband and awareness about open source software. It seems fairly safe to say that these would have happened anyway, because of the level of publicity and discussion in the general media.

On the other hand, there is also a substantial increase in awareness and take-up of different forms of support — including paid consultancy, but also support aimed specifically at the voluntary sector, such as the ICT Hub, circuit riders and other national or local services. This must be due to efforts within the sector.

In the middle are changes which result in increased connectivity — not just networking within offices, but also use of Virtual Private Networks, wireless networks and e-mail servers. Because these are not the subject of everyday discussion or publicity, the increased take-up of technical advice and support must be playing a role here.

Overall, therefore, while the wider environment undoubtedly has an effect, the concrete changes that have been recorded are likely to be based on the availability and use of appropriate technical advice and support. This strongly suggests a continuing need for sector-specific information, aimed at non-technical managers, both to inform them of the possibilities and reassure them that the decisions they need to make are within their capabilities — especially if they make use of the support and advice available.

What stops voluntary organisations from using ICT effectively?

Larger organisations are more dependent on ICT than smaller ones. They are also much more likely to have internal sources of expertise and support than smaller ones. These features are associated across the board with greater confidence in decision-making on ICT, more investment in ICT and higher levels of staff skill in using ICT. The relevant features include:

- having ICT expertise on the board;
- having an internal ICT expert, paid or unpaid;
- using internal as well as external ICT support;
- having written ICT strategies and policies;
- basing training decisions on a training needs analysis.

Effective ICT use is therefore as much a question of management attitude as anything. This was borne out in the telephone interviews carried out in 2007, where organisations that reported improvements in the effectiveness of their ICT use almost all attributed it to the approach taken by their managers. Equally, where management had little enthusiasm for ICT or confidence in their decision-making, use of ICT was less effective.

One encouraging trend is for organisations increasingly to be moving away from the types of support they are least satisfied with — the shop where they bought their computer, and expecting staff to fix their own problems. This suggests that organisations are learning from experience, and are starting to recognise the need for a strategic approach to ICT.

This should be encouraged. While the technical aspects can be delegated (as they frequently are with finance or personnel, for example), the board and senior management need to be persuaded that decision-making about ICT can and must be part of their routine remit, and that they need to acquire the necessary knowledge and confidence themselves or bring someone in with those attributes, either to the board or to the management team.

Are funders behaving appropriately?

Between 2004 and 2007, the proportion of respondents saying that funders were receptive to bids for both capital and running costs for ICT increased by almost a third, from 20% to 26%. However, the proportion saying that their funders were unwilling to support ICT at all also increased by about a third, from 13% to 18%.

This was supported in the qualitative interviews, where several interviewees said that their funders were increasingly reluctant to fund specific ICT projects. Others pointed out the difficulty of investing in ICT systems that may well have a longer life-span than the short-term projects they were required to support. The general volatility of funding in the sector is therefore perhaps even a more important constraint on ICT investment than the immediate cost of buying and installing equipment.

While some funders are clearly supportive of full cost recovery, others appear to have given up on ICT. When virtually every organisation responding to the survey is heavily dependent on ICT, this seems a very short-sighted and, in the long term, harmful approach.

Funders therefore need to be persuaded to accept that:

- ICT is a fundamental part of an organisation's infrastructure, not an optional extra.
- ICT is a system. There is no realistic alternative to treating ICT as a system and allocating a proportion of the costs to each staff member.
- ICT systems have to be periodically renewed, which takes time and money over and above everyday running costs.
- ICT is complex, and things go wrong. An organisation may do its best and still suffer an ICT disaster — for example if a key supplier fails to deliver. A proportion of project failures should be accepted.

In return, the voluntary sector has to reassure funders that it has learned from experience, and made appropriate advice and information available, so that any money they put into ICT has the best possible chance of being used wisely.

Is Web 2.0 over-hyped?

Despite a lot being talked about Web 2.0 — and the reported mushrooming in the number of users of social networking sites, blogs and other collaborative tools — voluntary organisations appear to be hesitant about using these technologies. Only 8% of respondents in 2007 were using wikis, blogs or other online collaboration tools as part of their service delivery. This low take-up is echoed in many of the other research reports included in the literature review — many of which point out that an organisation struggling with its existing technology is less likely to adopt a new one enthusiastically. It will be interesting to see how this changes over the coming years.

In line with the comments above, it is notable that the proportion using Web 2.0 technology increases to 12% in those organisations where the main source of ICT expertise is a member of the senior management team. Enthusiasm is clearly important in promoting take-up but, as with any new technology, caution is probably a reasonable attitude for many organisations in the early stages, so that they can benefit from the lessons learned by the pioneers.

Conclusion

So, is the voluntary sector getting its act together on ICT? Despite some of the negative comments about slow progress above, it is clear that some organisations certainly are getting their act together, and that collectively the sector is consolidating its thinking on what it takes to use ICT effectively. The direction is broadly right:

- recognising the importance of ICT to the sector;
- persuading managers that they can make good decisions about it;
- making appropriate technical advice and support available;
- persuading funders that if they want to see the results on the ground they have to be willing to put up the money for ICT.

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