Why be concerned about managing ICT

by Lasa

Managers increasingly face important decisions about IT. It is too important to be ignored, even by people who feel they don't know much about it. But why do we single out IT? Why not write about managing filing cabinets, or managing notice-boards?

There are several reasons:

- IT is expensive. It isn't just the cost of computers, but also the training and support needs that are so necessary if the equipment is to be used successfully. Nowadays, IT and the staff who use it can be among the most important resources in an agency, and IT may well be the area which absorbs the largest share of available capital.
- IT is complicated. As we know all too well, IT can be a difficult and awkward technical area, and exploiting its potential requires specialist skills.
- IT is important. Most organisations use IT extensively, and are likely to become more dependent on computers in future.
- IT is used to manage information. This is the key issue: few people would argue with the fact that information is the lifeblood of our organisations. For many of us, particularly those in information and advice agencies, information is our business; it is the reason for our existence. Our success in managing information will go a long way to determining how successful we are in delivering high quality services to the public.

Focusing on Your Goals
No matter how important and difficult IT can be, we must not lose sight of the fact that it is only a means to an end; it isn't an end in itself. We have to devote time and energy to managing IT; we need technical skills to get the best from it; we spend a lot of money on it - but the use we make of it should not be driven by IT itself, but by the needs of our agency. It is too easy to get lost in the complexities and technicalities of IT and forget what we are trying to achieve. It is too easy for managers to let IT staff baffle them with technicalities, and in effect withdraw from the planning process. And technical staff can become too absorbed in the technology and lose sight of the broader goals. So, in developing our approach to managing IT, we must ensure that our use of IT is driven by the goals of the organisation and doesn't begin to take on a false logic of its own. At worst, IT policy can become little more than the preface to a shopping list for new equipment. The old adage still holds true:

- Decide what you want to do.
- Choose software that will achieve that end.
- Select hardware to run the software.

Your goals must come first and they will determine your decisions on the right course of action. A catch-phrase from the commercial world says that there are no IT projects, only business projects.

We can translate that into the world of the voluntary sector by saying there are no IT projects, only projects to improve service delivery. Goals don't have to be broad and ambitious - the aim could be something as simple as:

- to produce written documents more efficiently
- to manage your accounting and budgeting so that you have better information about your financial situation
- to record your contacts with clients more accurately and in more detail
- to improve communications within the agency and with others.

You must express your goals in non-technical terms, and they must be set by people who can see the wider picture. Otherwise you run the risk of missing a crucial piece of the jig-saw.

About the author

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