Doing IT Better

Doing IT Better is a three-year project to build information and communications technology (ICT) capacity in the Victorian community services sector

A three-way approach has been adopted:

- Undertaking case studies with a number of organisations to identify issues and trial solutions
- Providing information resources to build know-how and assist decision-making and planning
- Identifying systemic issues that are holding the sector back, and working to change them

Visit this website for more information: http://www.doingitbetter.net.au/

About the project

Background

In 2004, with Randy Stoecker, a small scale participatory research project identified many of the information, training, and support needs of Neighbourhood Houses, the archetypical neighbourhood centre, in a deprived part of Melbourne. Knowledge and information links were weak between members of the service network, despite the availability of ICTs. Something else was missing—group understanding of the issues and a capacity to move forward. The centres, on the basis of a draft report prepared through an interactive and participatory research methodology, were able to use it as an advocacy tool. Public servants and parliamentarians who saw the report were stunned to read peoples' actual words, rather than the bland filtering that occurs in traditional consultants' reports. Evidence was presented to parliamentary committees, and while it cannot proved that the project had a direct causal effect, in 2004, additional funds were provided by government for technology infrastructure and the May 2006 Victorian State budget greatly increased overall support for Neighbourhood Houses.

Continuing interest in working with the community sector led to discussions in 2005-6 with the Victorian Council of Social Service, a lead service organisation with many hundreds of member organisations who work with the most disadvantaged people in the community.

Project aims

VCOSS organisations have a rich depth of knowledge about social-technological issues, but lack a vehicle and forum to express them (and the needs that they have. They feel that the linkages between many organisations are weak, despite on-the-surface familiarity with the potential linking and sharing effects of ICTs. While government is building large, centralized databases of information, these are of little help to local information and networking needs. Outside assistance-or at least an empathetic partnership-is required to help draw out their own knowledge, build independent capacity, and to help them locate funding for long-term sustainability of such a project. This project aims to build that capacity.

Research funding (grants, etc)

Private foundation. $450,000

Research methods

A three-way approach has been adopted:

- Undertaking case studies with a number of organisations to
- Providing information resources to build know-how and assist decision-making and planning
- Identifying systemic issues that are holding the sector back, and working to change them

From a research perspective, Case studies are a core component of the Doing IT Better project. Undertaken on action research principles, case studies:

- take the form of an intensive on-site workshop with key staff of an organisation, plus some follow up interviews to clarify things if necessary
- identify communication and information issues, obstacles, frustrations , needs and opportunities with regard to advocacy, service delivery, and organisational management
- document identified issues and recommend some initial steps and strategies for dealing with or resolving them

We expect to undertake about eight or nine case studies during the life of the project. But because the methodology is designed to take learnings from a small group of organisations and share them more widely around the sector, case study findings will feed into the overall project and help meet our overall objectives.

People

Project participants:

- Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association (VAADA)
- Springvale Community Aid and Advice Bureau (SCAAB)
- Travellers Aid
- Northcote Community Information and Support Service (NCISS)
- Women's Health Loddon Mallee
- Bayside Youth Accommodation

Industrial partners:

- Victorian Council of Social Service

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Project progress

Project timetable and outcomes

Timeframe: 2007-2010

A body of practical knowledge is being shared with the sector through the project website and through project workshops and presentations at sector conference.

3 full day conferences have been held so far for the sector.

Publications

Academic publications:

Stillman, L. and R. French (2007). 'Doing It Better': How Does the Welfare Sector Act with Technology? Community Informatics-Prospects for Communities and Action L. Stillman and G. Johanson. Newcastle, UK, Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Stillman, L., S. Kethers, R. French and D. Lombard (2008). Representing Practice Wisdom: Adapting Corporate Modelling for Better Welfare Practice. 10th Australian Conference for Knowledge Management & Intelligent Decision Support. Ballarat.

Stillman, L. and H. Linger (2009). 'Community Informatics and Information Systems: How Can They Be Better Connected?' Information Society 25(4).

Stillman, L. and J. McGrath (2008). 'Is It Web 2.0 or Is It Better Information and Knowledge That We Need?' Australian Social Work 61(4): 421-428.

A major report will be prepared by the conclusion of the project. Research relationships are being cultivated with the community sector.

Contact us

Dr Larry Stillman
Senior Research Fellow
Centre for Community Networking Research
Caulfield School of Information Technology, Monash University
Phone: (03) 9903 1801

Dean Lombard
ICT Projects Coordinator
Victorian Council of Social Service
Phone: (03) 9654 5050
Email: dean.lombard@vcoss.org.au

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