Bridging the Gap: Community Organizations and Computers

Peter Miller gave the main presentation at the Social Impact group's September meeting. He coordinates PACRAT Associates, a group of computer and desktop-publishing volunteers and consultants working with community groups. He is involved with developing four community publications and computer resource and training centers in the Boston area.

By Peter Miller

I've been working and consulting with non-profits and community organizations using and developing computerized resources, especially desktop publishing, for over four years now, and what constantly amazes me is that computerized technology is used less by small community organizations than by any other kind of organization. I find this astonishing because the microcomputer, especially as a desktop publishing system, is the appropriate technology par excellence for small community groups.

The situation is surprisingly acute in eastern Massachusetts where the number and vitality of community groups is as great as anywhere else in the country. Yet, here inside the Route 128 belt, where the quantity and quality of technological resources and services is also unmatched—save perhaps for California's Silicon Valley—there are comparatively few grants from and inquiries to the Community Affairs program of Apple Computer, an indication of the disparity.

The gap is not solely a local one. Apple itself builds and bills its major product, the Macintosh, as the "computer for the rest of us," yet more and more it's becoming a machine for businesses of all sizes, and for larger-sized organizations and institutions of all kinds, but not for small community groups. When the Mac's major achievement, desktop publishing, first appeared and then later spread to other systems, the development was heralded with a slogan one can imagine was targeted specifically to community groups: "Freedom of the press belongs to those who own one!" Yet community groups have been the last to take advantage of this cost-effective, powerful and empowering technology. At the first national Progressive Printers Conference, which took place in Cleveland this summer, only one of 36 collectives from around the country had desktop-publishing capabilities.

Reasons for the Gap

Perhaps the major reason for community-group failure to adopt computer technology is financial. Although many businesses and some larger non-profits and community organizations can well afford the initial financial outlay for hardware and software, startup costs have been prohibitive to many smaller ones. Frequently equipment or software, obtained as a donation, is

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Community Groups

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outmoded and has little available support.

Given initial financial hardships and lack of knowledge about computers, arrangements for peripherals, supplies and service contracts are frequently not budgeted and are often overlooked entirely. Often a machine lies unused when there's a maintenance problem. Training costs—like training itself—are commonly overlooked, too, and groups frequently prefer to muddle by or leave software unused altogether. One community group consultant told me that her main competition didn't really come from other individuals or groups: "My biggest competition is nothing."

A lot of these explanations go beyond being simply financial, and they suggest other reasons for community-group hesitancy to embrace computerization. Unlike businesses, community groups tend not to be very good at the kind of cost/benefit analyses which help companies decide to opt for various computerized alternatives; they have characteristic board-staff relations that complicate computerization decisions; they retain and lose staff in unique ways, which makes developing technological resources difficult.

With community organizations especially, updating technology is a variation of "How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb?" (Only one, but the light bulb really has to want to change.) I've seen the same situation occur frequently: needs assessment, systems and/or software recommendations and preparation for training go nowhere until there's a change in staff. If the staff person to be trained is uninterested or even ambivalent, adoption of computerized technology can easily fail.

Regardless of all the reasons that adoption of computerized technology fails or isn't tried, a common thread running through all of them is an uneasiness, a suspicion, a mistrust, an anxiety, a fear—of something that is considered alien and oppressive. Hardly a liberating tool, the new technology is seen to have a life of its own, a hostile and dominating one at that. Rather than having organizational needs drive the hardware and software selection, community groups often face their tasks backwards—they come by their tools first and then look at what they can do.

Consultants and trainers are clearly outsiders, too, and can easily add to the problem when they bring along their technical lingo and strange culture, and seem determined to make the resources of the community group serve the computer rather than vice versa. The gap can be especially wide with low-income women, native American, brown and black, Third World and bilingual groups and their issues.

Certainly the general political culture of computer technology gives credence to uneasiness and suspicion. High-tech companies are hardly in the forefront of community concerns. Their employee practices are not models of progressivism, and they hardly attract workers from low-income or minority communities. Their headquarters and corporate workplaces are not designed to be part of any community, and the corporate technological-utopian image they project is equally devoid of community awareness. High technology is generally the epitome of yuppie consumerism, and it's no accident that the computer isn't immediately identified as appropriate technology for community groups.

Recent Bridges

Despite the financial and political/cultural barriers, the situation is in fact changing dramatically. Several months ago, in the first issue of Connect, a newsletter published specifically for non-profit computer users, I noted several community newspapers that were desktop-published, the most advanced application of desktop publishing which is itself the computer's most public and visible application. The Co-op Times, produced by Northeast Cooperatives; Community Connections, by the Committee for Boston Public Housing; Survival News by ARMS, a resource branch of the Coalition for Basic Human Needs. Omitted from that list were the South End News and Bay Windows and Housing Matters, out of the Mass Poverty Law Center. Since then, Boston Urban Gardeners (BUG) has developed a desktop published broadside, and the Dorchester Community News has begun the conversion process. Red Sun Press shares space with City Life/Vida Urbana's community layout room where Jamaica Plain's community newspaper of the same name (formerly Community News/Noticias de la Comunidad) has just started to be produced with the group's desktop-publishing system.

There is now a critical mass of community-organizational experience so that groups can learn from one another. There's a growing network of community computer consultants to refer to and use. It's an exciting time for growth and development.

This article is the first in a two-part series on the impact of desktop publishing on community organizations. Next: What Can Be Done—Tips for Volunteers and Consultants

Miller edits the Brookline Pax Newsletter and Social Justice News, the newsletter of the Backman Center for Social Justice at UMass/Boston's College of Public and Community Service. He can be reached at 734-1910.

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Computers and the Making of a Presidential Candidate

By Alisa Wolf

Did it seem that during the final months of the presidential campaign, thirty-second television spots, one liners, personal attacks and media events had more to do with our impressions of the candidates than the issues at stake?

If this was a common perception, it did not accurately reflect the candidates' efforts to define the issues, said Michael Lawson, Education Advisor to the Dukakis campaign. "There are position papers on almost everything you can imagine—there isn't an important issue that the Governor hasn't written on extensively," said Lawson, who spoke at the October joint meeting of the Social Impact and Training & Documentation groups about the role of computers in the Dukakis campaign. Associate Professor of Economics and Chairman of Boston University's Master of Science/MIS program, Lawson admitted that while database software and desktop publishing helped to push Dukakis out front during the primaries, he was unable to utilize computer technology strategically during the general election.

The essential contribution made by computers in the Dukakis campaign was in database management, said Lawson. Organizing detailed information about vital people such as supporters and local politicians, tracking the delegates at the convention and their concerns, coordinating schedules, and fund raising were functions that computers efficiently performed for Dukakis during the primaries. Computer networks that were easily set up and broken down aided in smooth field operations, and information became readily accessible to people working up and down the campaign hierarchy. Despite the advantages Dukakis gained by using computers in the primaries, using computers to gather, report and organize information, the technology provided no competitive edge during the general election, said Lawson. He told the group that Dukakis' biggest problem was making his views on the issues understood, a difficulty which position papers in computer files could not address. Lawson indicated that Dukakis did not get his message across using the visual and sound mediums of TV, and was unable to effectively address the concerns of voters as they were reported through the polls.

In light of Dukakis's inability to fashion a platform that would have provided him with an advantage, Lawson sees future opportunities for computer professionals to find new ways to utilize electronic information-processing technology to give a candidate the winning edge. Politicians, Lawson said, are "still looking for those magic bullets that can do big damage to the opposition." Like company innovations such as American Airlines Saver System and the BayBanks ATM network, the new application Lawson envisions would advance one candidate beyond the competition by using existing technologies in new ways.

Lawson pointed out, however, that unlike businesses, "[political campaigns] spring out of the dust overnight and when the sun sets...they disappear; they're phantoms." Although it's too late to help Dukakis, Lawson urged members of the audience to support other politicians by working toward the development of an innovation that could break the competition during a campaign, as many businesses have done in the marketplace. Whether it takes the form of electronic information sharing or utilizes other technologies such as videotape or cable TV, a strategic application would be as instrumental to a candidate's success as database software proved to be in Dukakis' win during the primaries. It would be one of the most powerful elements determining a candidate's victory or defeat.

Notes from the Director...

- Vin McLellan, a science writer and editor of The Privacy Guild, will lead a discussion on the development and impact of computer viruses at the February 15th meeting of the Social Impact Group. McLellan wrote a January 1988 New York Times article which introduced the computer virus threat in the popular press. The meeting, which is being held in conjunction with the new BCS Computer Security Group, will take place at 7:30pm in Room 315 of Boston University's Sherman Union, 775 Commonwealth Avenue.

- Modern users: Social Impact On-line invites you to download sample copies of Computers And Society Digest and the GACM RISKS Digest — two on-line newsletters. Download these from the BCS Telecommunications Bulletin Board File section 12. Call 617-786-9788 with your telecommunications software set at 8 bits, no parity, 1 stop bit, XON/XOFF enabled.

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News from the Home-Based Enterprise Group

By Janine LaBak

The Home-Based Enterprise Group, a new subgroup of the Social Impact Group, was formed in response to an increasing interest of many members who are currently working out of their homes or plan to do so sometime in the future. The general purpose of the new "HBE" group is to provide resources and services to these members that would include: formal meetings focusing on specific topics of interest; exchange of information between individuals by regional meetings or electronically; access to a database of information on colleagues and consultants; and workshops on pertinent topics.

At our September meeting at the 128 Entrepreneurs' Institute, we traced the life of a home business from startup issues to later-stage issues, with four speakers followed by small group discussions. The speakers were Michael Krugman, Gabriel Lanyi, Melissa Mutuski and David Strickler. Many good ideas were shared and some very novel ones also. Following is a potpourri of tips and ideas for the different stages of a home business.

Start-up issues:
- Do as much planning as possible before leaving your corporate job.
- Be prepared to cover living expenses during the startup period.
- Acquiring clients is obviously very important. Keep in mind that you need to have the correct credentials; you really need to be able to do the job; and you have to be able to prove to your prospective client that you can indeed do the job.
- A formal, professional image is very important to maintain. Keep in mind when answering the phone and when meeting clients.
- Be prepared to transfer knowledge from one area to another, often quickly and under pressure.
- Keep open the possibility of staying involved in a side job such as writing or temporary work to help meet expenses.

Transition issues:
- Advertising is expensive. Plan it carefully. Target your market and focus your advertising campaign.
- Be prepared to work hard, often nights and weekends, to meet deadlines.
- Be prepared for erratic income and cash-flow problems. The money may not always be there at the time you need it.
- Meeting clients in person is very important. Deliver your work in person if appropriate.
- A separate telephone line is recommended. An answering machine is a must. You may even want to consider a beeper.
- You may not want to use your home address. Look into new services being offered such as a Postal Center which you could also use as a delivery address.
- Written contracts are a must. A paralegal could design a basic format for you to include job description, cost, guarantees, etc.
- Spreadsheet programs are very helpful to conjecture possibilities for your business.
- Charging by the hour or by the job depends on the circumstances, type of work, and how confident you are in what you can do.
- Keep in the mind all the new expenses: health insurance; taxes; social security; delivery charges; copying; new equipment, unbillable hours.
- Salesmanship is important and you may discover you like it more than you thought you would.

Later stage issues:
- Be careful not to let your business grow too fast.
- If you are putting in 60 or more hours a week, it may be time to hire someone. Think about part-time or temporary help or college students to start out with.
- And also be open to the idea of people working at their own homes for you.
- If you are getting so busy that clients are calling constantly, you may consider charging extra for calling at odd hours.
- If it looks like you are getting too big for your home, remember that competition is tough. Try moving to a small office space with a short-term lease, first. And keep in mind the added expenses of a new place.
- If you are really under pressure, you may consider hiring a temporary "boss" to manage your time and perform other organizational duties for you. (Of course, this could get complicated if your "boss" decides to fire you!)
- Then there is the question of whether to incorporate or not. You should definitely be in contact with a lawyer and an accountant throughout the life of your business, and you should consult them regarding this question.

Future meetings for the Home-Based Enterprise Group are being planned. This group is in the startup stage, and we are looking for resources, ideas and volunteers. Please contact Gary Trujillo at 776-0121, if you have anything to share.