

## ***Managing IT as a Not-for-Profit***

You face unique challenges that commercial enterprises often don't face: you have no IT staff, no IT budget, very uneven levels of technical skills in staff, high turnover and volunteer staff, distributed teams with only the internet connecting them, no long term IT planning or vision, and project-based funding models. This creates a high level of uncertainty and unpredictability around your IT needs. Most IT vendors are not equipped to deal with uncertainty, they're equipped to deal with an in-house IT department, and well-defined needs.

### ***Things to think about when managing IT: three roles/perspectives***

Every project, even an ongoing “general support” contract, or an equipment procurement contract, involves people in each of these roles. Here's what those people should be thinking about and doing, in order to minimize the effects of uncertainty, and provide value in the typical not-for-profit situation:

**As an Engineer:** someone who designs and implements systems

- **Create flexible, expandable systems**, that use open standards and open file formats, and can be altered or added on to, to meet future needs
- **Use open source software** to leverage as much existing work and expertise as possible, and eliminate licensing fees, and improve expandability/adaptability of systems
- **Participate in a “development commons”** around the open source software you do use, to get the most value from the software, and **benefit from the work of others**
- **Use Agile development techniques**, to build systems efficiently, increase/speed up the value delivered to users, reduce the risks inherent in development, and avoid “over-engineering”

**As a User or Manager:** someone who has IT needs, who collaborates in system development as a “subject matter expert”, and possibly owns the vision for the project

- **Do not prescribe solutions, seek help with problems.**
- **Focus on your needs and forget about the technology** – you understand what you need, and you must make sure the system provides for those needs
- **Collaborate with a development partner** who knows the technology (so you don't have to), and who listens to your needs
- **Beware of products that claim to solve your problems** – products don't solve problems, people do

**As an Executive:** someone who plans how the needs of the organization are going to be met, manages the resources, takes on the risks, and possibly owns the vision for the project

- **Have a plan** – treat IT as a resource, not overhead, plan the systems you need, and how they will work together to improve how people get their jobs done
- **Budget accordingly**, IT is complicated and not cheap – 5% to 10% of your operating budget could reasonably go to IT, and it would save you money in the long run
- **Stuff happens**, so skill up your staff, and have a plan for the unexpected (and maybe an IT partner to help with it)
- **Beware of RFPs** – quotes aren't accurate, and too often they prescribe solutions instead of seeking to understand problems/needs
- **IT is messy and complicated**, fixed prices and packaged solutions are not always possible. Accept some uncertainty and **use Agile methods to manage the risk and maximize the value** for the dollars spent.

#### **Links:**

Freeform Solutions, a not-for-profit organization that helps with IT:

<http://www.freeformsolutions.ca>

Agile Project Management, an approach to dealing with uncertainty and risk in IT:

<http://www.ccpaace.com/Resources/documents/AgileProjectManagement.pdf>

Why this is not a Powerpoint Presentation: <http://norvig.com/Gettysburg/>