# VAADA: Adding Value to Information

**Case Study Report 1 for the Doing IT Better Project of the Victorian Council of Social Service and the Centre for Community Networking Research Monash University.**

## Background

This is the first case study report for the Doing IT Better Project.  The goal of the project is to enable community organizations to significantly improve both their organizational technological expertise and their ability to transmit that expertise to their clients—ultimately empowering both.   For information about the Doing IT Better project, see http://www.doingitbetter.net.au/.

There are 3 core reasons for conducting the case studies for the Doing IT Better project:

- To provide information and assistance to participating organizations and their communities about issues to do with ICTs in their work, and to help them to implement a change strategy
- To use the case studies with the Doing IT Better project as a means of developing a body of knowledge and skills base about ICT issues with community based organizations
- To present the case studies to the community sector and other interested parties as information about  how to work with community-based organizations to understand ICT possibilities and bring about change for social good.

These case studies have been conducted as part of Doing IT Better project  (Victorian Council of Social Service and the Centre for Community Networking Research, Monash University).

## Methodology

In depth interviews were conducted with staff and stakeholders and the first part of the report consultatively developed on the basis of this.

The report was then workshopped, as reported in the second part of this case study.  The work was conducted in the  period August-October 2007 with the permission of VADA.

## About VAADA

Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association  is the peak body representing Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) services in Victoria; and provides leadership, representation, advocacy and information to both AOD and non-AOD related sectors.

VAADA's purpose is to ensure that the issues for people experiencing the harms associated with alcohol and other drug use and the organizations that support them are well represented in policy and program development and public discussion

VAADA has 3 paid staff, and is thus a very small organization that serves many members.

## I  The Consultation with staff and stakeholders

*In its purest sense, providing through the work we do better outcomes for those who we serve. In this case, it's Victorians who have issues with drug use.*

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*It means achieving change for justice and social equity. It's working with people, often you have to advocate for people, hopefully that's an empowerment process, to engage, and resource people to achieve outcomes for people who are disadvantaged.[1]*

Advocacy can also happen in informal ways, not just formal channels. VAADA does a lot of work over cups of coffee.

VAADA would like to 'knit' the Drug and Alcohol sector together more effectively. Electronics are part of this process, but it will take some careful planning and decision making, as well as independent knowledge.

While VAADA is working with its organization client based, there is a connection with how online information can help individuals and families. This anecdote was enlightening as to how people are using information (and some services are using online chat as well for direct service) and perhaps an indicator of how online information empowers people:

*Families are diverse. But mainly, our counsellors see families where there is a teenager or young adult offspring. who is using drugs of one form or the other, or we also see families where one partner comes in because the other is using…typically, as stats show, alcohol is the major drug of concern, followed then by cannabis and heroin….They are also working with families mainly through their outreach services, and community development, where there are little kids. So 'families' has various combinations and ways it is impacting upon the families. So families, sometime, in all those diversities, have so little money that they can't afford a computer, or it's been knocked off and hocked. But computers are becoming so common, that generally the families they see [and with internet access] have that. The kids will go online too [and look up stuff]*

Communication and particularly consultation with members of different types and sizes around the organization is very important, so that Drug and Alcohol issues can be represented adequately. Communication appears to be primarily (at this time) around the E-bulletin, the newsletter, and policy/submission development (formulating, communicating, and making available policy/submissions). There is a concern to add

value to the communications activity that VAADA undertakes.

*It's all about communication, it's a resource issue.*

*The advocacy role needs to be strong, advocacy for D&A users as well as for their membership. Membership is often small and rural agencies who don't have clout*

*It's a very large sector and the funding is substantial—hundreds of millions— the range of issues is many—difficult for VAADA to consult adequately with all its members, and particularly for an under-resourced organization.*

Yet the importance of face-to-face interaction cannot be ignored or underestimated.

*We like to work more closely with the membership—you can have all the technology in the world, but the relationships, conferences, forums, sector events are important. Another way is to value add to the membership of VAADA in some way —they are all poor, but we want to reach the them—but it's hard to know what we should give members that we shouldn't give to the general public. Why shouldn't they have access to our submissions and website?*

**The E-bulletin/Newsletter**

The E-bulletin, an email sent to members is thought of as timely, well-presented for example, (the used of careful headings is very useful to readers), and 'it is very immediate, quick and easy to read'. It can also bypass managers who may not want to pass on written information because it goes directly to people's email accounts.

The quality of *current* communications is quite high, and apparently respected as a resource for what is going on.

This means in fact that the E-bulletin is thought of as authoritative and credible, even though there are many different lists on Drug and Alcohol issues and the organization can work with this credibility.

There is also the potential to develop new lists, but resources are always an issue, though this problem could be solved if an organization like VCOSS 'hosted' an e-lists service for community-based organizations. it is an interesting possibility for the sector as a whole. There are also issues of Intellectual Property

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[1] All quotes from interviews are in italics.

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that need to be sorted out in sharing copyrighted materials more broadly

VAADA's paper  Newsletter is important as well, because it lands on people's desks, but it is a lot of work to produce.  But a better and more effective publishing system is needed (again, resources, skills) to reduce the time and effort taken to produce it.

**Electronic Records Management.**

VAADA, like many small organizations, is challenged about how to organization its paper and electronic records.  There is a lack of structure which makes finding documents time-consuming and difficult.   Record Management skills should become part of the organizational routine,  and the knowledge passed onto whoever becomes involved in the organization in the future as part of its daily practice and development of institutional memory.  Backups should be made regularly.

**Preparation of policy/submission documents and other organizational communication**

Document creation and management could be made far more effective through:

1) Better use of advanced features in Word and other Office applications such as PowerPoint for document creation and formatting, and document management  such as version control to make the electronic 'trail' more efficient and documents much easier to locate.
2) Investment made in software such as Endnote to create and electronic library of references (on and offline) which could be accessed within and exported to others relatively easily.
3) Overall, paper and electronic records integrated into  an effective Records Management System.

**The Website  (www.vaada.org.au)  and an online presence**

As an Advocacy tool.

> *A manageable communications staging that isn't dependent on high expertise, that allows [us]  to improve how they advocate and communicate [up and across], and not a technology that creates more work, but is efficient, not just technology for its own sake*

Of course, resource constraints must be kept in mind, but in terms of what is, and what might realistically be, particularly to the current and broader constituency:

Value adding online

One comment was that to whom value adding through better information is still needs some discussion.  One person said that it is hard to know what VAADA should give members that you shouldn't give to the general public.  So what goes on a public web interface as distinct from passworded material needs to be thought through.  So while an online 'archive' is important, does anything go?

There is also interest in having web-space made available for other affiliate groups, but again, this is dependent on support and skills, though different Content Management Systems make this (theoretically) easy to achieve.

Furthermore, whatever system is ultimately chosen for an online archive or database, it will only be as good as its backend management, which will determine the accuracy, currency, and comprehensiveness of the material.

Sensitive environments

The other issue to be born in mind is the sensitivity of some of the issues VAADA deals with—how open can you be, and this was raised by one interviewee who said that advocacy is double-edged:

> *VAADA aren't that powerful. It it is a big issue they could hide behind VCOSS …. But if they are seen as making too many waves, there can be weak and nasty retribution.  They can advocate for their clients, but can't rock the boat too much. Even the word advocacy is bad.*

Data collection, snapshots

Credible data is necessary for effective advocacy, and the use of polls through systems such as Webmonkey was discussed.  Being able to say 'the evidence shows…' is a powerful tool.

With some CMS polls it is also possible to conduct simple polls on issues, but of course, you are dependent on people voting.

As a sector coordination tool

An online Calendar for internal scheduling would be of great help in helping staff to know where and what they are doing as a group. This could be run though an internal network or via the web. Second, an online directory of events could leader to both internal efficiency and secondly, to help with sector event coordination. This could be self-managed

through a passworded Content Management System so that people in different organizations could add events themselves rather than having scheduling dependent on VAADA staff.

<u>Interactivity</u>

We asked interviewees about the Web 2.0 which enable organizations and individuals to use different software for much easier publication of material (in print, or multimedia) on line.

A variety of opinions were offered. Common to a number of people was concern over the resources that use of such systems take (skills, time, people, cost), as well as questions over the utility of more interactive websites—was this practical or relevant (for example chat).

On the other hand, a number of people thought that uploading of  pods (MP3 files of talks and interviews could be something to trial. Put here more about its potential.

## II Taking Action:  The workshop

On the basis of the report prepared for VAADA (and summarised above), a workshop was held in September 2007.  The major tool used in this workshop was the Making The Net Work strategic planning tool (www.makingthenetwork.org).

Even with only 3 people, as was the case in this workshop, many ideas and action were generated.

We are quoting here directly from a document developed by Making the Network about why such creative methods are important.  We would add that many of us lack—through no fault of our own, an adequate vocabulary to describe many of the interactions we have with technology, and sometimes, a more 'kinaesthetic' way of working through an issue —using all the sense, is a good way to get to capture a problem.

> *Current ways of thinking about, and developing, user involvement and partnership processes do not always reflect the complexity and inherent "messiness" of planning – whether in neighbourhood renewal or technology system development. Everyone may be doing things "by the book " yet fail because each party sees things from their own perspective. They may not get the whole picture until conflicts or delays create a crisis.*
> *Technology planners may accept that system success or failure will ultimate depend on user understanding and commitment – yet somehow end up focusing on 'wires and boxes' not people.*
> *We believe that 'try harder' isn't going to be enough: we need both skills development for the different interests, and ways for participants to work through together the kinds of issues they must address.*
> *Games and simulations provide one way in which both agencies and communities can build real co-operation in a safe, experimental environment. The "play" will not necessarily be predictive - but will yield insights that help people see what may happen, and understand each other's point of view.*
> *Workshops and games also provide informal settings for people to get to know each other and develop relationships outside the formality of committee meetings.[2]*

The Game is only one part of a more complex set of strategic planning steps—a very detailed roadmap from start to implementation to evaluation-- that could be undertaken, depending on time and resources available. However, it may not be necessarily to undertake detailed work on each of the aspects —just going through the exercise may be enough to get the ball rolling.

**Workshop Tools**

Everyone taking part was given a copy of a chart or map to fill in priorities matched against timelines during the workshop.  We also did a quick environmental scan of VAADA's environment, as with many smaller organizations,  future funding is never clear and this affects what organizations can do.

Once the scan was completed, bundles of cards were handed out.  Each card highlights actions, technologies, and issues involved with ICT Information and Communication Technologies. While the cards were taken from previous versions of the game, there were also blanks to fill in, to match VAADA's particular needs.  The participants then made decisions about which cards were relevant to their needs. Some were annotated, while some new cards, highlighting particular issues, were developed.

As the 'game' proceeded, cards were then stuck onto a large version of an action planning sheet, and discussion ensued.*.*

**High Priority, Short-term issues**
- In-house office technology skills.

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[2] www.makingthenetwork.org/pgame/whygames.pdf

- Website Skills, capacity, time, resource, maintenance are fundamental to anything that is done.
- Information strategies. Email Bulletin —an important avenue for advocacy
- Electronic news: the relationship with stakeholders needs to be clear before developing it further.
- The E-bulletin— could include a training calendar, and should be part of a broader strategy around advocacy and communication
- E-polling-snapshots for decisions, policy, advocacy needs
- Different e-mail lists Strategy for membership: how to use creative information; contacts; issues of maintenance growth and how to attract people to sign up to an e-list
- Electronic archive and records management
- Internal Intranet with home access for staff: needs to be reliable, with access to projects.

An observation: It's clear that we tend to put many priorities into the immediate time and priority zone. Perhaps these need to be unpacked some more second time around (using a tool like the table below) to decide what to do, realistically.

**In discussion**

There is strong recognition that a better database of members and associated information is very important and the right product should be sourced. It would be great to increase the utility and functionality of the membership database, to allow for easy maintenance and production of e-mails about campaigns.

Involving the membership on a broader level was seen as an important goal. Enhancing the e-newsletter via links to the website and membership forms would be useful. General Web 2.0 functionality (e.g. podcasts, online training, online polls, links to letter writing or petitions) might also assist. The inclusion of a calendar of events on the website was suggested.

Building on the current communication channels was seen as a very important element in reaching out to the membership – "taking it to the next level". Perhaps work on a communications strategy or plan would be useful.

The lack of flexibility in the development of new content for the website is constraining. Perhaps a self-mangaged content management system would be an easy way of quickly uploading new content.

Records management was seen as a vital goal. The development of simple guidelines for how and when to create a record, what metadata to add to it, and when records should be kept or destroyed were key needs. Doing IT Better will provide some in kind consultancy to assist with this process.

**High Priority,  Medium Term Issues**

- Policy Development: A policy committee for a better electronic strategy.  Take into account the nature of the sector, and the filtering of communications by management in many organizations (i.e. line staff don't sometimes get to see things). Time is a problem for workers.
- Records Management, Electronic & Paper

**Medium Priority, Short-term Issues**

- Ongoing Information and Knowledge Management—An evaluation will be conducted by Doing IT Better  in 12 months (i.e. Aug/Sept 2008)
- Funding and other information— more effective use of the internet for funding resources

**Medium Priority, Medium-term Issues**

- Community participation, conference
- Audit and technology plan
- Long-term records management of electronic and paper records.  The record keeping system needs longevity.  New workers should be able to access the recording keeping system.

**Medium Priority, Low-term Issues**

- Advertising online workshops, seminars and forums, possibly training online?
- Digital learning materials: using IT to attract new users and income, to increase exposure to the community
- Possibly Podcast.
- Reliable tech support
- Staff and stakeholder videocasting —not just issues of hardware, but sufficient bandwidth for it to be effective.

**III Future Planning & Evaluation**

It's probably necessarily to unpack all the short-term priorities and interests again, to be realistic, and reallocate them with  the following factors taken into account (but others could be

added), and add in more detail and priorities for hard data and evidence as necessary

Whatever the specific strategic planning process used by VAADA, it might be useful to try to document and benchmark some of the technology related priorities. A grid like that below might be a useful starting point for

developing a very detailed assessment of what can be done.

The decisions taken could then be used to develop an evaluation framework.

| Strategy → ↓ | Which particular electronic tool/s? (if needed) /for whom? | Resources (human/$, material) | Implementation/ Sustainability | Timeliness | Monitoring and Evaluation questions |
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| e.g. Better use of Microsoft Office | | | | | |
| e.g.Enhance e-bulletin | | | | | |
| e.g. Records Management | | | | | |