ict hub

ICT Hub Case Study
Access for Life (AFL)

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Project Summary

Susie Halksworth is the Resources Director at Advice for Life (AFL) (formerly the Cambridge Independent Advice Centre). AFL is a not-for-profit organisation based in Cambridge, focused on advice and ICT projects. This case study is about how a personal blog written by a staff person at a VSC organisation can be a useful professional development activity and ultimately support the organisation's aims. Her blog, Susie's Blog - Winning hearts and minds over to FOSS (Free and Open Source Software) illustrates how ICT professionals in the VCS field may use blogging to reach out to their colleagues for advice and support as well as document their personal learning.

Project Delivery (What Happened)?

Like many people who work with ICT in the VCS, Susie Halksworth can be described as an 'accidental techie'; someone who does not have extensive formal training in technology, but who finds themselves responsible for their organisation's ICT or ICT project. As Susie notes, "I'm not just accidental, I'm not really a techie at all." She received mentoring by the organisation's computer consultant who gave her materials to read, encouraged her and assisted with more complicated technical troubleshooting.

As the point person for implementing her organisation's FOSS project, she is responsible for working out the details of what is required to get people in her organisation to use the software. She observed that the most challenging aspect has been persuading people to try the software and not give up at the first sign of trouble. She notes, "The organisational issues I encountered were not anything I anticipated or expected." She emphasised that the main issues with FOSS weren't technical at all, but were around organisational adoption and acceptance.

At around the same time, she attended an ICT Hub Conference Workshop about Web 2.0 and was introduced to the concepts of personal and organisational blogging. She decided soon after to experiment with personal blogging because she enjoyed writing and thought her organisation's experiences with FOSS were worth sharing with others who work with technology in the VCS. She explains further; "...there were a few incidents that were just so funny you couldn't make it up. At one stage it was like a French farce. So I thought it would be a good professional development exercise to keep a blog as a diary that showed the real issues of trying to get your organisation to move over to FOSS." According to Susie, she may have been one of the first VCS staff members in the East of England region to start a personal blog about their work.

Outcomes and Impact for the Organisation

Susie describes her blog as a quasi-organisational blog, although it is more like a personal blog written for professional reasons. Further, Susie admits that it is difficult to measure the organisational outcomes directly, however, she points to a number of benefits that this type of blogging offers her organisation.

- Logging the organisation's process and issues in adopting FOSS software was not only useful for her as the project point person, but has been useful to her blog readers, many of whom may be facing similar issues within their organisation.
- The blog provided her and her organisation with a low risk opportunity to experiment with Web 2.0 tools and networking strategies.
- She was surprised that her blog attracted an audience and one that leaves comments on her posts. She has met many of her readers and as a result feels connected to a wider ICT community. This sense of connection has made her interest in FOSS grow deeper.

- Her colleagues within the organisation give her positive feedback about the blog and Susie believes the blog has opened the doors for organisational conversation about the FOSS project.
- The blog provided her with a source of inspiration as well as an outlet when she faced frustrating barriers as the project implementer.
- The discipline of regularly writing about the topic helped her think and reflect more deeply about it and as a result helped her make incremental improvements to the FOSS project itself.
- The blog provided a way to add visibility for the idea of women working in FOSS.
- The blog helped to raise her organisation's visibility with colleagues in the UK (and beyond) who are VCS techies.

The blog also had an impact in on her personally and professionally, "I enjoy writing it so it always cheers me up. In fact I have had some days I have only got through by thinking - at least this will make a good blog entry..."

Lessons Learnt

- Just get started. Don't over plan it. You'll learn a lot by just doing it.
- It's better to ask for forgiveness than permission to blog from your organisation.
- This is a great approach if you can identify someone in your organisation who is comfortable with learning publicly, writing, and is very motivated to blog. If you have to "force" someone, it won't work.
- It requires some time to maintain a blog as Susie notes, she writes her blog on her own time, after work hours.
- Obviously, you don't want to air your organisation's dirty laundry on the blog. So, think carefully about what you say about people and what incidents in your organisation are appropriate for sharing.

Any other comments

As Susie notes, "You start off being really careful and politic about what you say, but you can't keep it up (or I couldn't). It's like Derrida's concept of écriture: the blog ends up writing itself. I genuinely love my job and think AFL is a great organisation. I feel I'm safe to do an organisational blog, because the truth from me is never going to be that critical. Obviously, we have arguments and annoyances but they're funny more than anything. But I would think that if you weren't mad keen on your org and also someone who liked blogging it would be incredibly difficult to keep the tone appropriate. I think what I'm saying is, my blog is absolutely true: this is how it is working for AFL, and this is how I am. Of course that does mean if I ever start being unhappy in my job I'll have to stop writing it!"

More Information

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