

Abstract – Chapter 5

Why NGOs have so much trouble with IT?

Have you ever felt daunted by technology, confused by the jargon or overwhelmed by the sheer number of different IT options - or struggled to understand how it might be used in your organisation? Don't worry, you're not alone. In fact you are probably with the majority in the NGO sector. This chapter aims to help those who are not technologists, who are a little intimidated or even plain disinterested but are know they need to engage with technology.

This chapter is a practical guide to understanding IT change projects for NGOs. It is relevant for IT projects aimed at enabling NGO operations, as well as strengthening field programs – often referred to as ICTD (Information and Communications Technology for Development). The analysis and suggestions apply to NGOs and International NGOs, at all levels. We briefly describe the key phases and activities of a typical project life-cycle, with a range of practical tips – respecting of course that this is a simplified view and that in practice, there are many alternatives and variations.

We argue that in an ever-changing digital world - IT is an essential enabler for NGOs – and can have a transformative effect on the impact they can have. However, NGOs have historically underinvested in technology. There are a variety of reasons for this - some are to do with the understandable field oriented culture of most agencies, others are linked to the significant pressures to minimize overhead spending. When NGOs do have the courage to pursue new strategic IT projects – it can be a real challenge and success is elusive, particularly for large international NGO families. These issues lead us to explore the million dollar question: “Why do NGOs have so much trouble with IT?”.

When we dissect some of the typical challenges - we find that some of the issues are explained by the level 1 topics discussed in chapter 1 – such as inadequate articulation of value and benefits, poor governance, and failure to deploy the appropriate skills. The good news is that many of the common problems can be fairly easily addressed and avoided.

In the future we would like to see more NGOs take a strategic approach to technology – using it to achieve a significant step change in how they work, and in the impact they are able to make in the fight against poverty and injustice. NGOs can and need to be technology enabled organisations to deliver the impact they aspire in a digital world. We see five important considerations to achieve this: 1) The need to reposition IT as a program opportunity; 2) The need to re-imagine an technology enabled NGO; 3) The importance of a good IT strategy with a clear roadmap; 4) The need to elevate the profile of IT in the leadership structure and culture; 5) The need for extreme discipline to ensure simplicity and consistency.