Chapter 18

Getting on the "E" List:
Email List Use in a Community of Service Provider Organizations for People Experiencing Homelessness

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case examines how a community of organizations providing service to people experiencing homelessness made use of an electronic mail list. Current economic conditions have encouraged organizations in various sectors—including nonprofits—that might normally compete for scarce resources to collaborate with one another to increase their chances of survival. One set of tools likely to be of value in such relationships includes various online discussion technologies. An examination of this community's email list use over a three-year period suggests a somewhat complex picture regarding technology use. More specifically, some issues both constrain and enable use. Additionally, seemingly basic and minimal uses of the list provided not only the greatest functionality for the users, but also led to several unanticipated consequences for those involved.

INTRODUCTION

Homelessness continues to be a complex social problem in countries such as the U.S. It impacts individuals of all ages, races, and geographic regions. The Department of Housing and Urban Development's most recent Homeless Assessment Report (2009) puts the number of persons experiencing homelessness at some point over a year-long period at approximately 1.6 million, with nearly 700,000 on a single night. Other groups estimate as many as 3.5 million people per year experience homelessness (National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, 2008). Evidence seems to suggest the current economic situation in this country is

increasing the number of persons considered homeless. HUD's most recent annual report notes a clear rise in families coming directly from housed living arrangements now seeking shelters; furthermore, a recent report from the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (2009) suggests foreclosures are leading to more people findings themselves homeless. Simultaneously, the number of organizations proving services to this population and the available resources to address the concern is shrinking.

Despite the significance of this social issue, scholars in general have paid relatively little attention to the organizations that must interact with one another to serve those individuals who are homeless (see North, Pollio, Perron, Eyrich, & Spitznagel for a notable exception). Miller, Scott, Stage, and Birkholt's (1995) examination of service provision and Tompkins (2009) recent book on communicating to end homelessness represent some of the only work in the field of organizational communication to touch on this issue. In terms of communication-based solutions, communication technology has been linked directly to individuals who are homeless. Schmitz, Rogers, Phillips, and Paschal (1995) described a free computer-based network system available for use by persons who were homeless—and several sizable programs have emerged in the last two decades to provide free phones and computers with Internet access to users experiencing homelessness (see Dvorak, 2009; Ramey, 2008). The project reported in this current case (called CTOSH, for Collaborative Technologies for Organizations Serving the Homeless) attempts to provide that technological solution to the organizations tasked with providing various services to individuals who find themselves homeless.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

This case examines an interorganizational network of nonprofits and government agencies provid-ing service to individuals currently considered homeless in a large metropolitan area in the southwest United States. This network includes approximately 25 organizations directly or indi-rectly providing support and services to a fluid population of over 4,000 persons experiencing homelessness—including families, unaccom-panied youth, and single men and women. The community studied here is like many others with a network of agencies creating a patchwork of service provision—sometimes working in strong collaborative relationships and sometimes work-ing only with minimal awareness of one another. Despite what was sometimes a shared mission to end homelessness, the provider organizations lacked a number of tools (e.g., website, chat tools, discussion forums, collaboration tools, etc.) to help them better interact with one another.

In 2001 the first and second authors received initial grant funding to start what would later come to be called CTOSH (Collaborative Technologies for Organizations Serving the Homeless; pro-nounced "See-Tosh"). Much of the next year was spent securing additional funds, gaining necessary approvals, and conducting baseline research on the current state of collaborative engagement, interorganizational communication, and com-munication technology use within this network of service providers. Approximately 25 agencies initially signed up to participate in CTOSH. In early 2003, most organizations were given new comput-ers (which oftentimes replaced much slower and older computers), provided with connectivity to high-speed Internet (for those organizations who lacked it), trained for and initially introduced to several new communication technologies (e.g., instant messaging, NetMeeting, email list, web-site, and a hosted electronic meeting system), and offered ongoing technical support for these tools.

The CTOSH email list was established in April 2003, but did not reach its current configuration until July of that year. CTOSH provided the email list as a means for individuals within the community of service provider organizations or

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