Chapter III

The Algos Center:
Information Systems in a Small Non-Profit Organization

Susan J. Chinn, University of Southern Maine, USA

Charlotte A. Pryor, University of Southern Maine, USA

John J. Voyer, University of Southern Maine, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Two systems faculty from a university was contracted to perform an analysis of information systems at the Algos Center, a small non-profit charitable organization which provides support for children and their families facing losses. The Center specifically requested help in integrating its fundraising and accounting software packages or exploring alternative software solutions. It also needed to generate reports required by the board of directors and United Way. Finally, the Center requested help in designing a family database to capture and track statistics about the families receiving services. As the team analyzed the Center, they discovered many underlying issues that would form part of their recommendations to the staff. This case

makes two contributions. First, it reveals many problems facing small non-profit organizations, which primarily expend their resources on mission-critical activities, and allows readers to supply possible courses of action. Second, it provides an opportunity to evaluate how a consulting experience was handled and to make recommendations to ensure successful project implementation.

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

The Algos Center is a non-profit organization based on the east coast. (Because we are using a pseudonym to describe the organization, the Web site address cannot be revealed). It was founded in the 1990s by an individual who helped a young relative deal with her aunt's death; he saw a need for a Center that would help and support grieving children. The Center's mission is just that: to aid grieving children, teens, and their families through outreach, education, and peer support. The model for this organization is the Dougy Center, which was the first center in the United States to provide peer-based bereavement support groups for grieving children (Chappell, 2001; http://www.dougy.org/about.html).

In support of the mission, the Center sponsors many program activities, but bereavement peer support is the primary service provided (Rubin & Witztum, 2000; Stroebe, Strobebe, & Hansson, 2002). Approximately 170 children, teens, and adults attend these support groups every week. Trained volunteers conduct the groups. The volunteers seek to provide a safe environment for participants to express their feelings; they do not attempt to be counselors or therapists. A professional consultant or staff member also attends these meetings. All participants are welcome, even if they cannot afford the suggested monthly pledge donation. Groups are divided into age categories: 3 to 5, 6 to 8, 7 to 12, teens, and young adults (up to age 30). Adult family members participate in support groups as well.

A related program, the Life Care Program (LCP), offers support groups for children and teens dealing with family members facing terminal or life-threatening illnesses. This program was started in the mid-1990s in collaboration with several hospices, hospitals, and nursing and cancer associations. While the bereavement peer support program is ongoing, LCP is offered in six-week sessions.

Two other major programs are offered. The Diversity Peer Support Program provides peer support in association with Kennedy Elementary School, which has a very diverse student body. Many of the students come from war-torn backgrounds and have lost family members. The second program, Community Extensions, is aimed at helping schoolchildren who are faced with a loss, and at assisting adult organizations and businesses dealing with grief issues. Other Center services include presentations to organizations by trained volunteers, and

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