



Chapter XVIII

Academic-Community Partnerships for Advanced Information Processing in Low Technology-Support Settings

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What knowledge is required to enable individuals in community agencies to harness advanced information and communication technologies (ICTs) to promote their communities' development? Around the world organizations of all types use ICTs to significantly enhance and transform the quality and efficiency of work. Knowledge workers in community agencies, like knowledge workers in general, want to employ the full power of ICTs, both to provide services electronically and to improve their own access to information. There is an increased need to be able to "gather and interpret data efficiently and effectively into functional information for professional acting social work settings" (Grebel & Steyaert, 1995, p. 163).

There are a variety of roles in community agencies, including administrators, program developers, counselors, and teachers. All individuals filling these roles would be categorized as knowledge workers because their tasks require non-routine and complex work, they must apply their knowledge capital to these tasks, their work requires significant cognitive information processing, and their written and verbal outputs have information content (Davis et al., 1993). Their needs for more information include content information to help community agency employees provide service to clients more effectively, information on community and other resources that can provide additional help for clients, as well as information that helps employees assess their service programs and the management of their agencies. These needs stem from both the desire to provide better service to

clients and increased pressure from funding sources, public and private, for more accountability.

What is unique about the community agency setting is that resources available to purchase and develop ICTs are more limited than in the typical for-profit organization. Not only are community agency administrators reluctant to divert funds from direct service activities to purchase ICT hardware, software, networks and expertise, but often there is limited knowledge about how to be intelligent consumers of the products and services offered in the marketplace. This chapter argues that academic-community partnerships can enable community agencies to take full advantage of the power of advanced ICTs. Community agencies are viewed as low technology-support settings that, given adequate assistance from a neutral agent, can successfully develop and use quite sophisticated information and communication systems to enhance their work.

The idea for these partnerships stems from the author's ongoing participation in two community agencies. This chapter will include short descriptions of the specific ICT problems faced by these agencies, the source of these problems, and how the academic-community partnership acted to solve the problems. One case study involves technology planning and the development of a database resource for enhanced program assessment at a public and privately funded Crisis Center. The second case study concerns the development of a program assessment system that includes a within-agency database and network combined with interagency data exchange; this system is for a charter school for children who live in a privately funded shelter for homeless families. Background information and a summary of specific activities with each agency are provided in Tables 1 and 2 at the end of this chapter. Based on specific examples from these case studies, the chapter will detail the challenges and problems in informatics inherent in such situations, as well as how an academic-community partnership offers a workable solution.

Background: What is Meant by *Low Technology-Support Settings*?

Non-for-profit organizations that provide community services increasingly use information technology to capture data about their services and to support service delivery. Typically these systems are based on microcomputers and local area networks, and the systems include both standard personal productivity software and specialized software products for social service providers. For example, Crisis Center staff use a suite of word processing, graphics, and spreadsheet programs, as well as a commercial product called IRis, from Benchmark Enterprises, for client tracking and referral information support. In the past volunteers from the MIS department of a local company developed a database for one of the neighborhood centers, but that system has been abandoned because it could not be maintained by the staff and the local company no longer works with the Crisis Center. In addition Crisis Center staff use their microcomputer workstations as terminals to larger state and federal systems in order to input mandated information about services they

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