

Pro Bono Versus Paid-For IT Support

by Ian Ryder, Managing Director, appiChar Australia, January 2010

In February of 2009 I arrived back in Sydney from the UK after a 10 year break, with the mission of trying to understand the not-for-profit sector in Australia. I had spent the previous decade working for various charities and then setting up appiChar to provide IT services to more than 150 organisations across the UK. Having got to a point where we had developed a polished set of systems and services and a deep understanding of the sector in general, the aim was to see if organisations in Australia could benefit from what we do.

One of the biggest differences I found when I came over was the extensive use of pro bono support for IT. It does exist in the UK and helps many organisations that would otherwise not have access to any help when they need it, but in general most organisations, even the smaller ones, will use some form of paid-for IT service.

Talking to people, as I've worked my way around, I've tried to build up a picture of why this is the case and what sort of impact a company like ours may have on that situation. Should we even try if organisations are getting great support without having to pay for it?

Why are so many organisations using pro bono?

The simple answer as to why many organisations use pro bono support could be that it doesn't cost anything. That's true in one sense but we'll come back to that point in a bit...I may beg to differ! Cost is certainly one issue but I don't think it's the only factor; most likely it's only one of three key considerations that send organisations down the route of pro bono support. These are:

- Not knowing where to go to find trusted help – there aren't many companies doing what we do who have to rely totally on keeping a good name in the sector to be successful. Too many organisations I've spoken to have been ripped off by IT suppliers in the past so don't want to risk going that way again.
- Even when they've paid in the past they've had a slow or unreliable service from their IT support provider so why pay and wait a week for help when you can get that for free?
- Cash – it's on the list for sure but possibly not as important as many might think.

Does pro bono really save money?

If you are using a pro bono IT support provider and they look after you in a timely manner, they do a good job and you're able to tell them when they don't, then for sure, that's got to be better than paying for the same thing! You are extremely lucky and your supplier deserves a pat on the back.

If on the other hand you're at the back of the queue behind all the paying customers when you have a problem and don't feel like you can complain because it's free, it might be worth looking at the wider picture and trying to see if you really are saving money.

A good number of the organisations I have spoken to that use pro bono have come to accept as normal the idea that it's OK to wait a week to get someone to look at something because nobody is paying for the service. The fact that the problem might be affecting two or three people for a week and might be stopping them from working at full tilt isn't seen as a cost. In some cases that might be correct if the end-users can get on with something else or do something another way. But often problems can have a direct impact on productivity which will have a cost that

someone is paying somewhere. Like any business, not-for-profit organisations need to be making sure they're working as efficiently as they can so every dollar that comes in is used as wisely as it can be.

Just as a rough example, let's take a PC that's playing up and taking up 15 minutes a day hanging, rebooting, hanging, rebooting and so on – not an uncommon issue and no doubt much less time than many people experience. In a week that's 1¼ hours spent rebooting a troublesome machine; **over the course of a single year it's nearly 8 whole working days down the drain!** Assuming a salary of \$40,000, that's just cost the organisation over \$1,400, not to mention all the frustration and morale-sapping along the way.

Multiply that by 10 and you're looking at a serious cost to the organisation.

You can add to that the opportunity cost – if you haven't got systems and support you can rely on how can you look at bringing in new systems that can help move the organisation forward? There are so many good systems out there to help streamline processes or to help reach new audiences but most of them will require that you have a solid platform to run them from.

So what can you do if you need to change?

Obviously I have a vested interest in highlighting the potential problems with relying on pro bono support, so feel free to have a large pinch of salt on hand just in case! But working out what you need to do and how to do it is pretty straight-forward – if you're using a service now that's free but means you don't get the service your organisation needs then look elsewhere. You need to find someone that:

- Understands what you do and how IT can help you do it
- Can work with you the way you want them to
- Has a good reputation and good references
- Is priced reasonably
- Won't lock you into painful contracts

We aren't the only company that ticks those boxes so have a good look around and use your contact network to find out who has good support. You should talk to two or three companies and see how they approach things – it's amazing how different people can approach something in completely different ways and still achieve the same end-result.

And just to give you an idea of how the maths might work, to provide top-of-the-range IT support and management services to a user for a year should cost a lot less than half the amount detailed in the example above, so the maths can be pretty compelling.

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