

Volunteer Reading Help

eBusiness benefits a not-for-profit organisation

Background – Volunteer Reading Help

Volunteer Reading Help (VRH) is a UK Charity which helps and encourages children to read using a network of volunteers. They have been operating for 30 years and in that time have helped 80,000 children improve their reading.

Coordinating the efforts of their volunteers is crucial to the success of their operation. This depends upon communication with volunteers across the country. Fund Raising also requires good communication both with prospective and existing donors.



The organisation has a head office in London with volunteers grouped by branch within regions. Each branch and region has an office with manager.

The challenge

Initial meetings with the VRH directors identified 3 key objectives which were prioritised as follows:-

1. Web site Content Management – produce a site which the VRH could maintain themselves to assist their communications.
2. Document Library – Implement a secure solution to allow documents to be shared across the organisation. This would help standardise on documents and improve sharing of information. The system needed to ensure people only had access to the documents for which they had permission.
3. Email Newsletters – Regular bulletins by email would reduce the workload of the Head office and improve communication throughout the organisation

Being a charity VRH had a fixed budget available within 1 year. At the same time their IT strategy was in transition. The challenge was to build a scalable, robust solution capable of meeting their long-term as well as their short-term objectives.

Our approach to the project

A project team was agreed which included 2 representatives from the VRH head office, a new media designer from GPS Visual Communications. From Parabola the team consisted of a project manager, a Developer and an analyst/trainer. Project meetings took place initially to detail the requirements and consider the wider implications of the long-term objectives and IT strategy.

A staged delivery was agreed as the best project shape. This would allow each stage to be delivered and implemented before the next stage began. The main advantage of this approach was seen as managing the impact on VRH as each stage required significant organisational change.

A formal analysis and design process for each stage was followed to ensure the details were documented, confirmed and well communicated across the project team. For the web site stage a prototype design was produced and reviewed.

The build and testing for each stage was completed off-site at Parabola by a single developer with support from the Project Manager and Analyst/Trainer. The system testing was led by the Analyst/Trainer and involved several other members of the Parabola team.

At the implementation stage VRH were given hands-on training of the solution and telephone support. The analyst/trainer was able to develop a high quality customised training plan and user guide and as a result of her involvement in the project since inception through to testing has an in depth understanding of the requirement and the application.

Each stage was delivered inside 3 months and successfully implemented on our web hosting facility at Telehouse.

The resulting system – how the objectives were met

The **web site** has a powerful content management back-end based upon a number of template page designs. This allows VRH complete flexibility in maintaining the web site. In addition to being able to amend the existing content they also have the ability to:

- Add new menu items and new sub menus
- Add new pages
- Use new documents and images from the document library.
- Format the content using an MS-Word like interface

The **document library** operates entirely on the Internet whilst remaining secure. Volunteers, Branch managers, donors etc can search the online library and access any file they have been given permissions to by the administrator. This meets the needs for making documents available and sharable across the organisation. In addition, documents can be made publicly available i.e. when accessing the document no password is required. This means that documents held in the library can be used in the content managed web site.



The **email newsletter** facility allows central, regional and branch newsletters to be produced on a regular basis as HTML emails. Template designs are provided to ensure a degree of standardisation across the organisation. Subscribers are grouped by Region and branch. Each subscriber can specify online which newsletters they are interested in and unsubscribe if they wish.

Technology – Microsoft ASP.NET and SQL Server

The solution was built using ASP.NET and included use of Parabola's library of re-usable software components. This enabled the solution to be cost-effective but customised to VRH's specific needs. For instance the web site and email newsletter applications required a use of the region and branch structure.

The ASP.NET software design has a separate data access layer to enable any database backend. In this case SQL Server 2000 was adopted as the most secure and scalable solution with purpose built data providers from Microsoft ADO.NET.

A high level of security for the document management system has been achieved using an ISAPI filter in combination with .NET. This enables the document library to be available to volunteers etc. over the Internet whilst it remains secure so that internal documents are not open to the public.

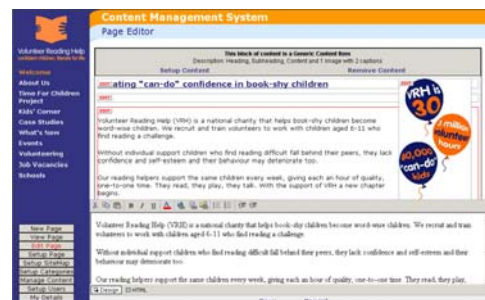
The email newsletters facility uses a combination of CDO and ASP.NET to allow branch, regional and head office staff to send newsletters to their subscribers. Newsletters are created based on pre-defined HTML templates with CSS style sheets applied. They can be amended using an MS Word-like interface and there is a facility to embed special tags which personalise each newsletter with a subscriber's details as it is sent. Subscribers have a separate secure facility to manage their contact details and their subscription preferences.

The site is hosted on a dual Xeon processor server, at our Telehouse hosting facility. The hosting includes access to DeepMetrix LiveStats which is currently the best log analyser available on the market.

Conclusions - The benefits

Using a staged delivery we were able to help VRH implement a number of eBusiness basics without disrupting their organisation. Parabola was able to provide this by taking time to understand their organisation and build relationships with the key people.

The benefits of each stage are gradually benefiting the VRH organisation. The first stage, the web site produced the following comment from Sue Field, Head of Communications at VRH



“We are delighted with the new website. We asked Parabola to provide us with a website solution that gave us maximum flexibility for minimum cost; we really seem to have got it. We can update information easily and will be able to give each VRH branch their own webpage which they can change locally. The site will include a secure internal section too which means that we can share internal information easily with our branches – it’ll basically be an on-line library.”

After delivery of stage 2 the document library Sue Field commented

“the Document Library is very easy to use ... it all looks wonderfully clear.”

References/Links

VRH web site – <http://www.vrh.org.uk>

Demos – <http://demos.parabolasoft.co.uk>. For a login to a demo please email [Richard Gray](mailto:Richard.Gray).

DeepMetrix LiveStats – <http://www.deepmetrix.com>

Further information

For further details and a quote based upon your particular requirements please contact Richard Gray + 44 (0) 20 8399 5920, rg@parabolasoft.co.uk