

COMPUTER OVERHAUL

The traditional perception of charities wheezing along in the information technology slow lane is as dated as the unwanted hand-me-downs it used to subsist on. **Gary Flood** reports on how the sector has learned to embrace IT

Which of the following sentences is true? IT in the non-profit sector is poorly understood, indifferently implemented, and treated with fear and suspicion. The voluntary sector lags far behind its commercial and public siblings in the effective deployment of IT and electronic communications. IT staff in charities tend to be losers, paid less well than counterparts in other sectors, and unable to do much beyond patch up third-hand kit.

If you answered 'true' to any of these questions, you're working from outdated information – and your attitude isn't so much wrong as actively unhelpful, according to IT leaders in both the charity world and the supplier sector.

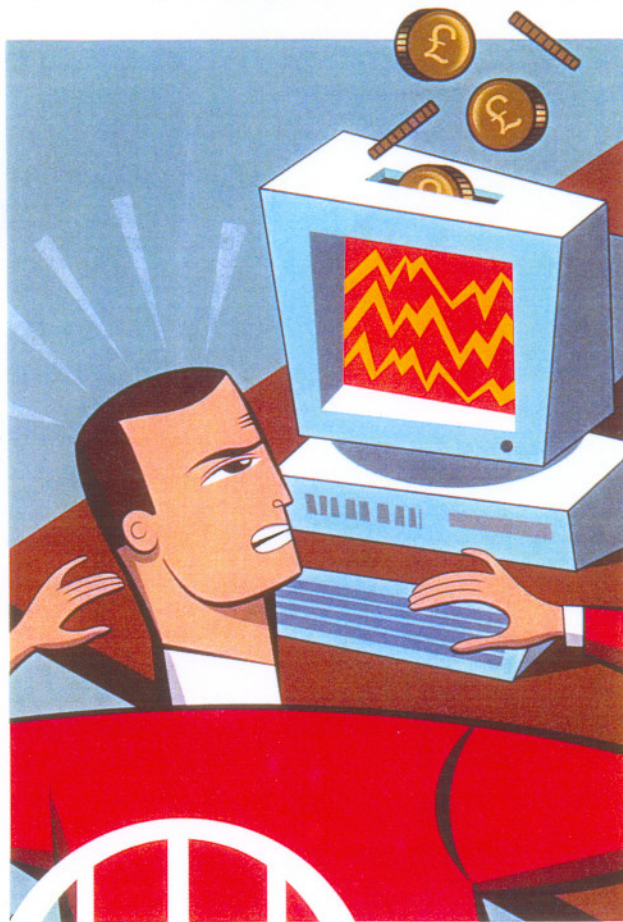
The reality is that in 2004, while there is much still to do, especially among small to medium-sized charities, the use of IT's power and flexibility has never been put to better use in the charity world.

That's not to say there isn't some historical – and, yes, contemporary – foundation to the negative perceptions. Just two years ago, for instance, a study funded by the Barings Group found that of the 30 UK charities it surveyed, most didn't think they had the technical expertise or financial means to implement an IT strategy.

And that's still generally the case, says industry veteran and entrepreneur John Tate, IT adviser to the Charity Finance Directors' Group, which represents the views of the UK's 1,000 leading charities, including Help the Aged and the RSPB.

"In general, the charity sector is struggling in a number of areas to do with IT," he says. "Most of these come down to a lack of what we call 'the art of the possible' – of having sound expectations of what technology really is or isn't capable of delivering. We see too many charities thinking of just buying some whizz-bang technology to solve problems that are often internal and cultural.

"We also tend to be risk and change-averse, which isn't bad, but is certainly a factor, and we tend to like consensus decision-making, which really can slow down adoption. We need to be spending



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longer putting more strategic, long-term thinking into the whole area."

In a similar vein, Mark Wakefield, corporate community relations manager for IBM UK, who leads the liaison between the IT giant and the sector, notes: "It's a very mixed picture as to the successful adoption of IT within the sector. There are a number of challenges. One big factor seems to be the attitude of senior management, for example. Those who didn't grow up with computers and technology don't have a natural feel for what it can do, and so tend to underestimate its relevance."

Yet to suggest in general terms that IT isn't being used well within the sector is plain wrong, insist charities and the

companies supplying them. "I think it's definitely the case that charities, especially the larger ones, 'get it' now," says Peter Crutchfield, information systems director at Marie Curie Cancer Care, who services 1,000 IT users throughout his organisation with a staff of 15. "Every pound we spend has to get more than one pound back, and I think we're doing well in the sector in achieving that."

This viewpoint shared by David Smith, UK and Ireland SMB marketing manager for another IT giant, Hewlett-Packard. "Of course some get it right and some still get it wrong," he says. "But the majority of IT charity people I meet and work with have done a really good job on research, they're very strict on return on investment and proof of concept, and often they're more pragmatic and results-oriented than equivalents in similarly sized organisations in the commercial sector."

Technology uptake

Trevor Cole, business development director for Protek Computer Systems, which markets the Pro-7 fundraising and membership system, agrees. "Over the past 10 years, I've seen huge improvement in the general use of technology, and in the past five years in particular, the level of professionalism and general quality of IT people we meet in customers is remarkable," he says.

"The technical director at one of our charity customers is one of the very sharpest individuals I've ever dealt with," adds Joseph Wykes, European managing director of software firm Percussion.

So what's going on here? It seems that at long last a grudging attitude towards IT – namely that it's not worth investing in, and is best borrowed or donated – has come to an end.

That approach has had unfortunate consequences, says IBM's Wakefield. "We have now stopped donating old kit as it's a never-ending cycle for us and actually unhelpful to the charities, as they're just putting a sticking plaster on the problem."

The problem is that 'free' old or non-standard kit can end up costing you more because you have to spend longer running

ThirdSector

IT systems

around maintaining it and patching it up. "We always try to do things on the cheap, so we don't realise the real total cost of ownership," warns George Cook, chief executive of Charity Logistics, which supplies infrastructure and support, including IT, to non-profits. "The time staff end up diverting to crashed systems is basically a huge wasted opportunity."

Interestingly, a way forward here may be to continue accepting the traditional donations from the IT industry – but of people, rather than old equipment. "Provision of a few hours of expertise on a *pro bono* basis by a skilled IT practitioner could provide real support for smaller charities' IT managers," believes Cook.

IBM and HP are just some of the companies starting to do this, while other resources exist through initiatives such as www.ictconsortium.org.uk, a new website launched by the ICT Consortium (Information Communication Technology), a group of voluntary sector organisations which have come together to plan and deliver a co-ordinated framework of ICT guidance, good practice, advice and support for voluntary and community organisations.

IBM has put together a dedicated programme of support for the sector which it calls 'On Demand Community' – the reference is to its general strategy of making IT resources available to customers whenever they need it. The company has set itself a goal of recruiting 25,000 present or

CASE STUDY: SCOPE

Scope is claiming tangible benefits from increased investment in information technology

The charity employs 4,000 staff at more than 100 locations. It is this geographical split that prompted its recent move to wire up its offices and communications network with a new ADSL (broadband) link, according to Adrian Boylan, assistant director of the charity's finance and management service.

"We wanted to provide better connectivity to both our regional offices and our many home-based workers," he says.

The majority of sites will be on the new high-speed network before the end of the year, with the entire organisation connected up before the end of next year.

The new system will give staff access to a range of data and services, says Boylan, including a central HR and charity-wide

**I'm disabled.
Not someone
to look straight
through.**



Time to get equal.

Scope: using IT to better deliver services

email system, as well as providing ways for staff to log in to core purchasing and invoicing systems.

"We see this as being a way to deliver better overall quality of service," says Boylan. "We have high standards to achieve from both clients and government and see using online resources as a way to achieve this."

The project caps an ongoing commitment to better use of IT, he adds, and links with a two-year upgrade in desktop technology so that more internal users can get access to the new services.

"Part of that is driven by the fact that users themselves are now more used to technology like this, and have actually come to expect it."

Boylan says that in his experience charities' use of IT tends to be more successful overall than the commercial sector.

"We tend to be less aggressive, which means we're more circumspect in our investment decisions," he says.

retired IBM staff to help as volunteers across the globe, for a minimum of eight hours a month for at least five months, across a range of voluntary organisations. There is also an option for eligible schools and charities to get discounts on technology purchases. "The skills, knowledge and resources IBM staff possess can make a real difference to the communities we live and work in," says Wakefield.



"We have stopped donating old kit as it's a never-ending cycle for us and does not help charities – it just puts a sticking plaster on their problems."

Mark Wakefield, corporate community relations manager, IBM UK

This sort of initiative can only be welcome when you consider the financial limitations of charities.

But sometimes the pressure to invest wisely brings with it an unlikely advantage when it comes to implementing IT strategies. "Because we simply can't afford to make mistakes with our money, we tend not to embark on projects until there is a proven business case," says Ajay Burlingham-Boehr, head of information systems at the RSPB, and past chair of the Charity Commission's IT Directors' Forum.

Vigorous evaluation

"This leads to vigorous evaluation of vendor claims, painstaking tenders and intense case-study analysis, but better results in project delivery. We have had no IT project failures in the past three years in our organisation, for instance."

If things are brighter than sceptics might expect in charities' use of IT, there's still no cause for complacency. "The biggest charities are generally doing very well with IT, but it's a much more mixed picture in the medium-sized and smaller charities," warns Charity Logistics' Cook. And, as Tate points out, given that the vast majority of the UK's 200,000 registered charities generate income of less than £100,000 a year, many can't afford to keep up their IT systems up to date.

Putting it all together, it seems that it's a good time to be a charity IT user. It may also be a great time to be a charity IT buyer. "This is a fantastic time to invest, as price-performance has never been better," claims HP's Smith. "A year ago we were predicting that colour laser printers might come down to less than £1,000 – now you can buy a good one for £350. If you use IT to help minimise your ongoing costs, it can really help you achieve your aims." ■

CASE STUDY: THE NSPCC

Many charities have limited their investment in computers to running back-office accounts, and fundraising and membership handling systems. But others have made big moves into using the internet, which has even led some to invest in special software to make the information and documents available to the public or staff – so-called content management systems.

The NSPCC recently implemented a package called Rhythmix from Percussion Software in order to restructure its intranet, improve the management of its content and make it easier to manage and promote information-sharing across the organisation, according to Gary Smith, its project support office manager.

Why does an organisation such as the NSPCC need such a system? It needs to manage a number of programmes, including its 180 community-based projects throughout the UK and Northern Ireland, a 24-hour child-protection helpline, its public education campaigns, parliamentary campaigns, child-protection training and advice, research, information resources and fundraising through individual and corporate sponsors.

Much of this work is supported online through a number of documents, support materials and other resources that are used



NSPCC: using web as a communications tool

by both the public and staff, so the internet is a crucial tool.

Ensuring that information is up to date, approved and accurate is critical, says Smith: "We wanted to get in place a centrally managed corporate style and pull content from across the organisation into a managed environment. We wanted to place content management back in the hands of the authors, and enable them to carry out updates easily and re-use existing content without technical assistance."

Smith says that at the NSPCC the emphasis today is not on IT projects but 'business' projects. "We work with colleagues to make them understand they're our joint projects, not requests they just bung over the fence."