

ThoughtWorks®

Setting Up For Success At The NSPCC

The NSPCC and ChildLine needed to consolidate and improve their essential volunteer databases as part of the 'safeguarding' process. ThoughtWorks consultants facilitated an intense project inception, enabling the NSPCC to quickly and confidently decide to build rather than buy. The analysis, completed in just one week, enabled the project to kick off immediately, accelerating the charity to the early release of software and its value.

The Client

The NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) was established in 1884 and is one of the UK's foremost charities. With over 170 community based projects running at present, the NSPCC dedicates its 2500 employees and 17000 volunteers to protecting children, including running ChildLine (a free helpline for children in distress, with trained counselors answering calls). The charity also works with the UK government, councils and private organisations to achieve its vision of a society where all children are loved, valued and able to fulfill their potential. Since its formation, the NSPCC has helped over 10 million children.

The Situation

NSPCC and ChildLine are now one organisation and needed to consolidate their crucial volunteer databases – the backbone of their 'safeguarding' process which ensures the proper checks are in place for every volunteer across the charity.

Critical to the charity's aims, the database was previously a combination of SQL2000 and excel spreadsheets, and there was limited budget available to review, consolidate and rebuild or replace it. All previous development projects had been run in a waterfall fashion. The charity contacted ThoughtWorks to understand the value Agile methods could add to this and to future projects.

The Challenge

As with all charities, the NSPCC faces a major challenge in tightly controlling costs. ThoughtWorks organised a fixed-time, fixed-price project inception, which would provide the expert consultancy they needed to ensure they were taking the right decision for their organisation and its aims in the long term, without the danger of escalating the project costs. In fact, the intensive inception / analysis phase reduced the overall project time, freeing resources for other projects and reducing impact on the bottomline.

With two legacy systems and multiple user groups, the other primary challenge was in analysis – agreeing on the right requirements, their priorities, the processes, risks and potential paths. It was essential to draw out the challenges of the users – the volunteer administrators and management team – and the technical considerations and balance those with the ever-important questions of system reliability and flexibility, and cost.



The Benefits

- Focused, collaborative analysis enabled a well-informed, quick decision to build rather than buy.
- Closer project control – working in iterations enables the team to prevent overrun (and therefore overspend) by delivering highest value requirements first.
- User engagement – users provide regular, constructive feedback improving the relevance and quality of the software.
- Relationship between IT and the organisation improved through close collaboration and regular, meaningful deliverables.

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Working Towards A Solution

Introducing a radically different way of working for the charity, ThoughtWorks consultants brought all the involved parties together for a week of workshops – ensuring agreement rather than misunderstanding by using visual models and non-technical terms.

The actual users of the system (the volunteer administration team), as well as the sponsors, took part identifying and prioritising the requirements so that the development team could make sure they delivered the important functionality first. The team was not only visualising a major system affecting their everyday jobs, they were learning a whole new way of working. Andy Robinson, development team manager, recalls: “it was an incredibly intensive and rewarding week. We finished it with a set of data that would have normally taken months to agree, and totally revitalised as a team.”

Outcomes from the inception phase:

- Transform the way an IT department or group functions; productivity increases in the order of 40% are not unusual
- Delineation of potential risks
- Identification of key users and their core processes
- Understanding of technical challenge and options
- Estimation of time to complete the project
- Improved communications between development team and users
- Identification of a further, larger project to be reviewed later.

Before engaging ThoughtWorks, the analysis phase was expected to take several months, and result in a set of relatively ‘soft’ requirements which would evolve. Agile techniques helped the development team embrace this evolution of requirements, but, most importantly, reduced the time elapsed prior to beginning development – the overall impact is estimated to reduce the total project time by 30%-40%.

The hard work continues – the inception phase informed the charity’s decisions and gave the project a great kick off.

The Agile practices the team learnt are now being carried out in development, where the benefits of short iterations, failing fast and communicating frequently with the business will keep extending.

With the ongoing engagement between the development team and the users, the project is already benefiting from constructive feedback which otherwise would have been uncovered at UAT, adding time and expense to the project.

Robinson explains: “iterative development is the practice we are the feeling most significant benefit from – being able to showcase and re-prioritise weekly or fortnightly means the charity gets what it needs much faster and the overall satisfaction and engagement levels in the organisation are much higher.”

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Client, NSPCC

The Future

This project will be complete within a few short months. The NSPCC is confident that, even if they come across hurdles, the new processes and communications channels in place will help them understand the challenge early and make sure the project still delivers. Even if it is not completed exactly as mapped out, they have the flexibility to redefine as needed. Robinson concludes: “whatever we come up against, we are delivering the highest value first, and know the software does what our users need, so the team and the organisation has confidence that we will come to the best possible solution in the time we have”.

www.nspcc.org.uk

ChildLine is a service provided by the NSPCC.

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