



Social Services

*Doing more with limited resources:
Empowering social services organizations
to improve service delivery by making
better software and technology decisions.*

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Introduction

Social Services organizations are constantly challenged to provide greater assistance to their constituents with limited personnel and financial resources. Increased pressures from funding sources to account for the effectiveness of each dollar spent on service versus administrative costs requires your accounting, grant administration and project, program and case management staff to have more effective, integrated and reliable financial and operational software.

Good software must result in real and measurable improvements in efficiency and productivity.

Historically, not-for-profit organizations have been under-served by vendors of financial and operational solutions. Too often, organizations have had to compromise between very specific functional requirements and implementing technology with a lasting future value. Selecting and implementing the right software solutions should allow people to become more efficient, eliminate redundant data entry, connect employees together, deliver timely information on funding sources and expenditures, reduce paper-based processes and scale to meet future needs.

This whitepaper addresses the key issues facing social services organizations and provides practical guidelines to assist financial, operational and information technology leaders in solving issues and meeting sophisticated requirements, while establishing a solid technology foundation to resolve future challenges.

Definitions

Social services organizations provide preventative and remedial services to individuals or families experiencing difficulty in meeting their basic needs. The major categories for social assistance are:

- Child and youth services
- Services for the elderly and persons with disabilities
- Other individual and family services
- Community food services
- Community housing services
- Emergency and other relief services
- Vocational rehabilitation services
- Child day care services
- Residential care for elderly, mental health and substance abuse

Overall, the services are designed to; enable physical survival, sustain and support gainful employment, provide support and interaction in times of personal crisis, provide assistance related to health and substance abuse challenges, and to provide access to ancillary services for remedial education, transportation and referrals.

Quite often, social services are closely linked to governmental programs with organizations obtaining substantial funding from government grants to complement other individual, corporate, religion-based and foundation sources. While organizations delivering social services include governments as well as not-for-profit (NFP) or non-governmental (NGO) organizations, we will focus on the role of NFPs/NGOs versus government agencies or departments and refer to these organizations as NFPs, recognizing that in many parts of the world, NGO is the more accurate acronym.

Industry trends

In recent years, events such as natural disaster and terrorism, and regulations such as Sarbanes-Oxley have prompted discussions on the impact of their impact on the NFP industry. At the same time, the United Nations has established its Millennium Development Goals¹ to be completed by 2015. While more developed countries have only small segments of their population “in danger,” many post-conflict and developing nations are still struggling to provide very basic services such as food, sanitation, natal-care, primary education and water to enable physical survival for large segments of their people.

Money is always going to be a vital ingredient to allow social services organizations to deliver services. However money alone does not lead to efficiency and productivity. Employees and volunteers in social services organizations need better information, better communications and the ability to focus more of their time on accomplishing their mission versus administration of their infrastructure. In the early 1900’s, organizations became more efficient by leveraging technology such as radio communication and transportation. In the early 2000’s, organizations must learn to better leverage recent technology advances in computer hardware/software, cellular communications and the internet among others to make better use of money.

While 9/11 and Sarbanes-Oxley have further magnified the scrutiny of NFPs, the audit issues are not too significant because of the fact that NFPs have always been heavily regulated and audited. On the other hand, the increased scrutiny and the impact on audit firms makes it more important that NFPs have more reliable data, better confidence in the integrity of their financial and operational applications, and in the end to reduce their dependency on “work-around” systems such as spreadsheets, redundant data entry and manual interfaces between applications.

The larger impact of 9/11 and other global issues such as HIV/AIDS and natural disasters is to emphasize that there is a huge inter-dependency between the “haves” and the “have-nots” in this world. Advanced industrial economies such as the USA, European Union countries and Japan, are major financial contributors to poorer nations. Social deficiencies in these countries create real threats to the economies of the “haves,” whether through the threat of terrorism, political isolation or ideological separation. The global economy can also be adversely affected by the pure desperation of large numbers of people and their ability to upset dependencies on fossil-fuel resources and outsourced manufacturing labor.

National governments provide a lot of money to support these causes. However governments are handicapped by political realities and constraints, so NFPs and NGOs provide a critical conduit to help resolve global needs for social services. NFPs and NGOs are better able to make smart business decisions in how to spend money more efficiently to enable their delivery of projects, programs and management of cases. Using technology more effectively is a sure way to “do more with less,” to empower people in the field and to implement better accountability. Empowering people leads to efficiency and productivity, and accountability leads to an improved ability to compete for scarce funding.

¹ The UN Millennium Development Goals (completion by 2015) are:

- a. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- b. Achieve universal primary education
- c. Promote gender equality and empower women
- d. Reduce child mortality
- e. Improve maternal health
- f. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- g. Ensure environmental sustainability
- h. Develop a global partnership for development

Organization characteristics

It would be an over-simplification to state that social services organizations are completely homogenous in nature. Any single organization can be different based on:

MISSION

- Which social assistance category previously listed is their focus?
- Are they remedial and/or preventative?
- Do they assist individuals or families?
- Are they faith-based or secular?

FUNDING SOURCES

- Are they self-funded through donations or fee-for-service?
- Are their grants from governments, individuals and/or foundations?
- Do they have specialized billing needs such as medical?

DELIVERY METHOD AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- Are their services delivered by employees, volunteers, subcontractors?
- Are expenses managed as projects, programs or cases?
- How many different constituents such as grantors, auditors, board members and managers need financial reports?
- Does the organization have multiple locations? Are these autonomous or owned affiliates? Are they in one or more countries?

ORGANIZATION ROLE

- Are they a funding source?
- Are they responsible for managing funds?
- Are they providing services?

A social services organization has unique needs and requirements based on which combination of characteristics applies to them. These needs and requirements directly impact the extent to which benefits can be derived from making better software and technology decisions.

In general, the more complex the requirements, the greater are the opportunities for cost savings and efficiencies by investing in good software. Conversely, implementing poor software and technology will inevitably lead to gross inefficiencies, reduced employee morale and effectiveness, and a potential for living in a state of dangerous acceptance that their status quo is "good enough."

The organization role is of special interest since any organization can play one or more of these roles, and the roles they play dramatically impact their software requirements, as well as their fiduciary reporting responsibilities. In general the money flows as follows:

Funding Source > Manager > Provider

While the reporting responsibility flows in reverse:

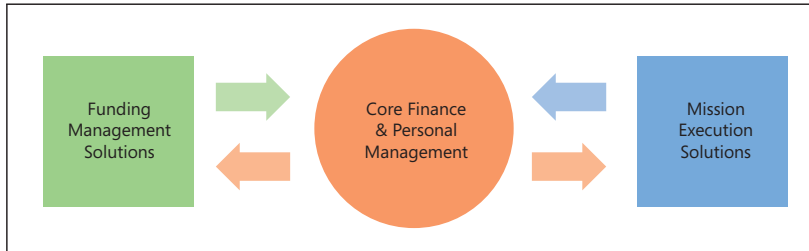
Provider > Manager > Funding Source

When an organization plays multiple roles these flows can be both external and internal. For example, an NFP providing support to persons with disabilities can have external funding sources through grantors and can act as a funding source for subcontractors. Hence this organization is both a funding source and a manager of funds. To further complicate matters, the organization can provide services through its own staff and programs, while also enabling multiple external providers. Consequently, they play all three roles in both internal and external modalities.

These roles then directly impact the types of software applications required, and further intensify the needs for sound software and technology decisions to ensure accountability, provide flexibility, and reduce their administrative burdens.

Software application types

Depending on an organization's roles, there are three major types of software application required to run their end-to-end business activities: **Funding Management, Core, and Mission Execution.**



Funding Management solutions can generically be viewed as revenue applications such as grant management, fund raising, reimbursement billing, fee-for-service billing, and sales of products such as training materials, books and videos.

Core financial solutions are the financial, logistics and human resources applications such as General Ledger, Accounts Payable, Cash Management, Inventory, Payroll, Fixed Assets, Receivables and Purchasing.

Mission Execution solutions are driven by the Provider role and the Delivery Method. These applications can include Case Management, Project/Program Accounting, Job Costing, as well as document management and relationship management.

The challenge is to choose an ideal set of solutions, with the ideal being a **single-vendor, homogenous technology, and fully integrated solution**. Buyers should be wary of solutions provided by a single vendor, which are in fact collections of products built by different companies, and should be extremely diligent in assuring themselves that these applications are integrated versus just interfaced to one another.

Homogenous technology should be apparent through common design standards, a common user interface, common development methodologies and most importantly a single development team. Fully integrated solutions should automatically post data from sub-systems to main systems and should not require data transfers using ASCII files or require users to run import or export routines.

A **fully-integrated** solution should post data automatically between applications, and provide data confidence by being able to drill down from summary numbers to supporting transaction detail.

Why are these factors important? Efficiency, productivity AND total cost of ownership.

When applications are integrated, employee efficiency and productivity is enhanced by eliminating tedious data transfer tasks. Information becomes more reliable thus boosting productivity. Ongoing system costs decrease:

- by eliminating or reducing training expenses
- through reduced audit risk and expense
- by reducing unplanned replacement of non-integrated subsystems
- because of increased employee confidence and empowerment

Most critically, the social services organization's ability to spend money efficiently on mission activities and explain how the money has been spent to internal and external constituents allows the organization to become more competitive for revenue sources while containing administrative expenses.

In summary, the ideal solution should provide fully integrated, homogeneous funding, mission-enabling and core applications to assure the user of data integrity, elimination of redundant data entry or processing, and reduced long-term support, training and maintenance costs.

Major systems issues facing social services organizations

1. STAFF EFFICIENCY AND PRODUCTIVITY

Because of the lack of integrated systems available in the market, employees of social services organizations have become accustomed to being creative in developing “work-arounds” and putting up with inefficient and disconnected systems. As a result, users of systems often get entrenched in ineffective and obsolete usability paradigms, become resistant to change, and cynical of newer software offerings. These staff, often highly driven by their commitment to their organization’s mission, **deserve** better.

Modern software applications should deliver on the promise of Windows document-centric usability, true relational database design, easy access to information, elimination of ad-hoc systems and integration with office productivity applications (i.e. spreadsheet, email, calendaring and word processing). Routine tasks such as budget control and approvals should be automated and integrated with email and calendaring to eliminate a very tedious and time-consuming manual, paper-based process used by many organizations.

Efficiency and productivity for a constrained administrative workforce can only be achieved by demanding that their software do more work for the users instead of having valuable employees struggle to work for the software and to overcome limitations in the software.

2. INTEGRATION OF DATA AND SYSTEMS

With the lack of integrated systems on the market, compounded by the pattern of software product acquisitions by major software companies over the past decade, there are in fact very few truly integrated solutions available. Project teams have to choose to license and integrate several “best-of-breed” solutions to handle their diversified needs, or sometimes license several products from a single-vendor on the promise that they are in fact integrated solutions.

Buyer beware! Just because a company sells several solutions does not eliminate the need to ascertain whether these products were in fact developed and are maintained by different companies and different product development teams. If the accounting system looks different from the case management system which looks different from the grant management system, then these are, most likely NOT integrated systems. Different user interfaces, lookup conventions, screen layouts invariably mean different programming languages, different data architecture and potentially major pains in data integrity.

Unless a vendor can offer a single-source, homogeneous technology solution, one must factor in the ongoing cost of reconciling application data, labor costs to interface data, and also the risk of having to go through another purchase process when a product fails to meet expectations.

Users should never have to run data extracts, import/export routines if at all possible. Their time is precious and any mistakes will adversely impact audit expenses, as well as undermine management confidence in data and the reports provided to key constituents.

3. PROGRAM, PROJECT AND CASE MANAGEMENT

Managing budgets and tracking expenditures in social services organizations is complex. Services may be delivered by employees, volunteers and subcontractors, while budget-to-actual tracking is vital in all cases. The delivery of services is typically categorized as projects, programs or cases, and sometimes combinations of the above.

Setting up budgets for each of these categories is an important element to allow managers to make decisions on how much service has been delivered, and also how much budget remains for additional service. In addition, tracking of quantities and amounts may

also be required when additional items are delivered such as training courses, equipment and vouchers from other vendors. Cost amounts may be driven by invoices to vendors, as well as time spent, necessitating additional interfaces to time capture, job costing or payroll applications.

The discrete management of expenses spent to deliver services also often requires complex allocations to assign indirect costs and apportion other administrative costs in proportion to the time and/or effort used.

Finally, since many people may be involved in delivering services, web-based access to data and for entering critical data can be a valuable aid to improving the quality and timeliness of program/project/case data.

4. REVENUE MANAGEMENT & TRACKING

Revenue is always a reality in any business concern. The ability of a social services organization to sustain a revenue stream is critically dependent on the ability to spend money effectively, then be able to link all categorized expenditures to one or many revenue sources. For example, a grant may fund multiple programs, and a program may be funded by multiple grants or a combination of grants and internal or general funds.

In addition some grant funding requires a “fee-for-service” reimbursement model, where payments are received only after services have been tendered, and sometimes when payments have been made to vendors delivering those services.

Once again, having fully-integrated financial, mission and funding applications allows for seamless and real-time connection between revenue and expense data, as well as enabling proactive budget management and control.

In summary, of the key systems issues facing social services organizations, all share a common thread—all are alleviated by the quality and integration of the software application types needed.

Where can software solutions help?

Functionality, adaptability and total life-cycle cost of ownership should be the cornerstones of any good software selection.

1. FUNCTIONALITY

Social services organizations must be assured that their funding, core financial and mission-execution requirements are all met by the software selected. If choosing best-of-breed solutions or multiple products from a single-vendor, then the quality of integration between applications is also a key point of functionality.

Some of the more critical points of functionality which should be “out-of-the-box” items are:

- Fund Balancing—software should allow for funds to be balanced automatically with or without the generation of due-to and due-from transactions. For example, if a vendor invoice has multiple line items assigning costs across multiple funds, the accounts payable control account should balance to the line items based on the distribution of the expenses—without generating due-to and due-from balancing transactions. If payable transactions are distributed in this manner, then the user should have the option to clear payments through a single bank account, while having the supporting general ledger entries follow the distribution of the expenses and payables entries.
- Detail categorization of revenue and expenses—every transaction entered anywhere in the system should allow for classification by revenue source (e.g. fund and grant) and detailed expenditure categories such as program, project, location and department. Without this classification, it’s impossible to effectively track whose money has been used for what purposes.
- Automation of billing processes—since many expenditures may be reimbursed by funding sources after they have been spent (sometimes after a vendor has been paid), the payables and receivables systems must be connected to enable automatic generation of reimbursement invoices based on expenditures recorded in the system.
- Flexible, cross-fiscal period budgeting and reporting of financial and categorized data—the organization needs to be able to report on its own fiscal periods, as well as the life cycles and fiscal years defined by funding sources and grantors. Grants in particular

almost always have grant life periods which do not coincide with the organization's fiscal year, can be several years in length. Grantors need reporting based on the grant life term, and budgets have to cross fiscal years.

- Automated allocations of indirect costs to expenditure categories—in order to better manage administrative-to-service ratios, a critical requirement for justifying responsible spending of funds, complex allocations are often needed to automatically re-distribute indirect costs, as well as to evaluate the effectiveness of projects and programs.
- Support for regulatory standards such as FASB (USA)—since NFPs are usually heavily regulated and audited, software must have business rules and reporting capabilities which meet the requirements of statutory and regulatory standards. An example of this is SFAS 117 in the United States which requires balancing of amounts by Fund and Net Asset Class, as well as guidelines for columnar reporting by Net Asset Class.
- Budgetary planning and control—the ability to easily establish budgets by multiple, detailed expenditure categories and then be able to control expenditures pro-actively leads to immense efficiency for accounting staff, grant investigators and program managers alike. Older systems can be characterized as having great rear-view mirrors, meaning that one can always look back and identify budget exceptions. Unfortunately, this reactive process results in wasted time and significant audit problems when it becomes apparent that funds have not been spent in the manner designated by the source. Modern systems should enable electronic alerts as transactions are entered and posted so that budget exceptions can be identified and handled before-the-fact.
- Managing commitments and encumbrances—calculating the availability of budgets is impossible without deducting expenses which are still pending in the system. Requisitions, outstanding purchase orders and budgeted positions for personnel all consume budget, and the system should show real-time budget availability net of all un-posted, unapproved and un-invoiced expenses so that budget managers can make sound decision when approving new expenditure requests.
- Availability of web portals to enable non-accounting staff and constituents—since much of the critical data originates from people outside the accounting department, the system must allow for the entry of information like time sheets and requisitions using web portals, fully accessible by people who are not connected directly to the organizations servers.
- Ability to allocate labor costs to expenditure categories—a majority of any organization's expenses are personnel related. Quite often it's advisable to use an integrated payroll application so that payroll expenses can be directly classified by expenditure category as time is entered. Some grantors may also require tracking of effort and the allocation of fringes based on pre-defined rules.
- Management of grant applications, awards and budgets—since grants are major sources for funding, it's not enough to simply track expenses by grant numbers. Effective grant management should also enable tracking of applications pending, awards made, and assignment of grant funds across budget categories which are often more summarized than the chart of accounts.
- Automated methods for grant revenue recognition and indirect costs—grant awards often specify the rules for assessing cost markups and revenue recognition and payment reimbursement. Effective budget management for grants requires that all costs are tracked, both direct and indirect.
- Ability to track detail for projects, programs or case—social services organizations are mission-based. Mission execution sub-ledger systems must be available to track detail for projects, programs and cases. Projects may need further classification by phases and tasks, while cases may be created for individuals or families requiring assistance. Effective case management also requires the ability to create care plans with detailed tasks to deliver care, both by internal resources and outside vendors. If vendors are involved, then the system must integrate with the payables module, as well as the general ledger.
- Paperless access to information—users of legacy systems often ask for a list of reports provided because they are accustomed to having to print to paper to get information. While paper reports are still important, modern systems should provide on-line access to information and reduce dependency on paper reports. Users needs for reports can be reduced by having better inquiry tools using dashboard and drill-down/drill-around technologies resulting in lower costs overall.

2. ADAPTABILITY

While an ideal solution should provide key functionality out-of-the-box, all organizations will have some unique issues. In addition, it is not uncommon for organizations to have custom developed in-house applications to handle special needs, or to anticipate that some of their needs are either not predictable or may change over time. Today's software must be adaptable by permitting further tailoring of the solution or providing the ability to **rapidly** and **cost-effectively** re-engineer or develop specialized applications. Without this adaptability, it's just a matter of time before an organization will be engaged in another software selection study and find itself wasting their investment in a prior purchase, not to mention all the time invested in implementing and learning a now redundant solution.

This is another grave danger of implementing best-of-breed or disparate applications, because it's highly unlikely that the applications will share common development tools or standards. A lack of adaptability can also result in the adoption of ineffective business processes or unanticipated support and maintenance costs after the initial implementation.

3. LIFE-CYCLE COST OF OWNERSHIP

Buyers tend to over-focus on the initial cost of software and implementation, neglecting the total life-cycle costs of alternatives. Cost factors often overlooked include:

- Redundancy—a lack of adaptability will invariably lead to a new set of needs which can only be handled by creating new “work-arounds” and in time the new system will become equally inefficient as the one replaced.
- Opportunity—often, less expensive systems are selected because the opportunity costs for internal labor are not accounted for. All NFPs have scarce administrative resources and are challenged to prove the effectiveness of their spending on their mission. Burdening employees with systems, which make work instead of enabling work will always cost money which can be spent elsewhere.
- Ongoing support and training—best-of-breed and disparate systems will have hidden ongoing costs such as training of new personnel, forensic work required to justify numbers between main and subsidiary ledgers, and unnecessary audit fees and labor.
- Workarounds—fully integrated systems should not require minimal manual review and intervention. Workarounds result in undocumented and unsupported “Islands of information” which not only result in additional cost to develop these systems, but also a risk of losing key functionality when employees leave.

Why is technology relevant?

Why do planes, trains and automobiles have wheels? Why do we take for granted an ability to talk to people almost anywhere in the world using the telephone? The wheel, the telephone, the transistor, the silicon chip, the personal computer, the internet, the relational database are all technologies which dramatically impacted the products we often take for granted in every day life.

Rapid advancement in technology provides both a boon and a challenge as social services organizations try to evaluate products and anticipate future implications. However, it's fairly easy to follow the lead of large software companies who have impacted technology in the past twenty years and look at how they plan to deliver in the next 20 years.

All software products are based on technologies provided by market leaders, and some products use technology better than others. Technology is relevant when evaluating software if it enhances the following:

- Communication—social services organizations have many constituents, both in the office and the field providing assistance. Sound two-way communication of data, events, budgets, actual quantities/amounts, documents and emails can only be achieved through better leverage of technology.
- Efficiency—integration of transactions with workflow, email and calendaring is achieved through technology standards for interoperability provided by leaders like Microsoft®. Software vendors can choose to incorporate these features in their business application,

elect to ignore capabilities, or do a mediocre job of cross-application integration. The technology to enable efficiency is available; the key question is whether vendors are embracing the richness available.

- **Accountability**—compliance with emerging regulatory standards spurred by Sarbanes-Oxley and existing needs to satisfy board members and auditors require accountability from NFP executives. This accountability is assured when executives have confidence in the integrity of their data. However, data comes from software applications developed by humans who are susceptible to their free will, meaning that some software products are written better than others. The quality of an applications data model, relational design and complete integration between modules and applications is not a given. Evaluation teams need to test and challenge the design of data and the integration processes to support their need for accountability.
- **Transparency**—in a similar vein, social services organizations have a need to improve transparency to their funding sources. As an example, it's far easier to renew grants by establishing sound evidence of success with previous grants. All funding sources need to know that their money is being spent well. Transparency is easier when the end-to-end business applications employed by an organization share similar data models, relational databases, reporting tools, and again have true integration. Expenditure categories must be linked tightly with funding categories in a pro-active, transactional manner to enable confidence in reporting and effectiveness of spend.

Just as an organization would not willingly buy a ten year old personal computer, they should be less comfortable with software applications which are older. Vendors must demonstrate a clear vision of how they are addressing emerging advancements in desktop, server, collaboration and communication technologies, and standards within their product lines.

Summary

The needs of social services organizations are complex and diverse because there are many types of organizations with multiple characteristics and roles resulting in requirements for different types of software applications and technologies.

However, complexity and diversity are challenges that software vendors are capable of overcoming by leveraging technology to provide fully-integrated, homogenous applications which meet current needs as well as establishing a solid foundation for the future. Financial and operational software needs to be evaluated in an overall context which includes other critical desktop, server, collaboration and communication platforms and solutions, so that an organization's overall efficiency and productivity can be maximized.

Social services organizations should demand more from their vendors, and should also look at the overall cost of ownership for all their systems versus focusing purely on the initial cost of acquisition.

Ultimately social services organizations and their success in fulfilling their missions dramatically impacts the world we live in and the ability of people to move beyond survival. Making smart software and technology decisions is an easy way to improve the efficiency and productivity of the great people who choose to work in these organizations and eventually improve the lives of disadvantaged people everywhere.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jay Malik has been in the software industry for more than 25 years and has worked with Price Waterhouse as a developer and implementer of financial software for minicomputers and personal computers, followed by several successful software companies and VAR organizations. His roles have included software development, consulting, marketing, sales and senior executive positions. Malik has always been involved with companies who have pioneered technological advances beginning with mini-computers and moving on to software applications powered by advances in the local area network and client/server revolutions. Based on these experiences, he has developed an expertise in advocating the use of rapid application development, the use of relational databases and a conviction that software publishers must take on the challenge of delivering advanced functionality, assuring the highest levels of product quality and delivering true customer satisfaction to their targeted markets. Over the past decade, Malik has focused primarily on the not-for-profit industry and has championed the cause of people working in this industry and their needs for better software functionality and reliable, modern technology to serve their missions.

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