

# Working with Charities: What Works and What Doesn't

## A Research Paper for the Documentation Management Module

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### **Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to:

- record the lessons learned about undertaking documentation projects for charities as part of a formal course in technical and scientific communication, and
- outline the implications of these lessons for course developers and teachers.

### **Background**

The ACT Society for the Physically Handicapped Inc (SPH) approached me for assistance to update its policy and procedures manual. My initial consultations revealed that they were not prepared to pay commercial rates for this assistance. As an alternative, I offered to ask my student colleagues if they would help out. By assisting, students would be able to apply their learning and produce written material to satisfy assignment requirements.

During the next six months several students worked with me and the SPH on this project. Our work was slow and ranged far beyond the scope of technical communication. In the end, the SPH accepted that it had to pay for assistance if it was to obtain the necessary documentation.

### **Lessons learned**

From this experience nine lessons can be learned. Each is summarised below.

#### **Limited student interest**

Few students are interested in participating in such voluntary projects. The lack of interest applies even to students who are not working as technical writers and thus have to prepare material especially for assignments. Of those who participate initially, most will fall by the way relatively quickly.

#### **Lack of student knowledge**

Much of the knowledge students needed to assist the SPH was not taught till later in the year, for example, information design, managing documentation projects. Thus only experienced technical writers would have been able to make a significant contribution from day one.

#### **Low client technology base**

The technology used by the SPH was basic, for example, obsolescent PCs and no internet connection. Only parts of the SPH had access to the technology, for example, there were no computers in the workplace of the support workers, and all users were not highly skilled. Low-tech solutions are thus called for.

### **Client ignorance—documentation and technology**

The SPH was ignorant of good documentation control, development and management requirements. Further, they had virtually no understanding of possible documentation technologies, for example, Adobe Acrobat, intranets, electronic document management systems. We were thus seen as the ‘font of all knowledge’. This brings with it tremendous responsibility and significant risks.

### **Client ignorance—information**

Relevant information was spread throughout the SPH and no-one knew what was available or where it was. When finally identified (if it ever was) it consisted of in-house and external material from a range of copyright owners. In addition, one of the staff was undertaking formal training and her coursework and assignments were to be used as the basis for new policies and procedures. High-level information collection and analysis skills are thus required as well as a good understanding of copyright issues.

### **Client ignorance—business skills**

Like many small business owners, the SPH management has limited business skills. We were often consulted on non-writing matters, for example, corporate strategies, and spent much time talking about peripheral issues. This area is a trap and must be resisted at all costs, unless the topic of conversation is within the expertise of the student.

### **No timeliness**

What was achieved in six months should have taken no more than one. In the main, this was due to the lack of financial commitment by the SPH to the project. For the students, that it was a voluntary project also contributed to the lack of urgency. Creating an externally imposed time-frame would resolve this problem.

### **Client reluctance to pay**

Because it relies extensively on voluntary assistance and fund raising, the SPH was reluctant to pay for anything, including printing large numbers of manuals for its staff. Production of documents, and supply of any additional resources which require payment by the charity, for example, new software, could thus be problematic.

### **Great appreciation by the client**

Against these difficulties was the consistent and strong sense of appreciation of our efforts by everyone in the SPH. No doubt this reflects the voluntary nature of the organisation but it was still satisfying.

## **Implications**

From this project we can identify five significant implications for course developers and teachers. These are discussed below.

### **Integration of work in the curriculum**

Working with a charity cannot be tacked onto the edges of a formal course in technical and scientific communication—it must be integrated into the curriculum. Only in this way will:

- sufficient students be available to make the exercise viable

- students have the skills and knowledge they need at the time they need them
- students have a sense of urgency about completing tasks and producing deliverables, and
- student activities be solely writing-related and not expand into general business administration and development.

Strategies to achieve this integration are beyond the scope of this paper, but I do not suggest that they are easily developed or implemented.

### **Delivery of appropriate-tech solutions**

CIT will need to work with the charities to identify the appropriate level of technology to be supported at the charities. Alternatively, this could be one of the initial tasks for the students. However, in both cases, CIT staff and students will need a greater understanding of technology issues than is currently taught. And to teach this necessary information seems to be counter to current thinking about teaching technical and scientific communication.

### **Statement of requirements and expectations**

Everyone involved in these projects will need to explicitly state their requirements and expectations. What each party can and cannot do must be spelt out clearly and unambiguously. Similarly, the role, objectives and benefits of working with charities must be clearly defined within the scope of the course. Such a statement should be relatively straightforward to develop.

### **Resolution of legal, moral and ethical issues**

Working with charities this closely raises significant legal, moral and ethical issues, for example, legal liability for advice provided by students, selection of charities to work with, use of students as ‘free labour’ albeit for charities. These will all need to be identified and resolved before such arrangements are formalised or widespread. This is unlikely to be a simple exercise.

### **Development of formal agreements with charities**

To safeguard everyone’s interests, a formal agreement should be negotiated between CIT and each charity worked with. Topics to be covered in the agreement include:

- statements of work to be done by students
- resources to be provided by each of the charity, students and CIT
- timeframes for all activities
- deliverables
- management arrangements and responsibilities for the project
- legal obligations of the charity, students and CIT
- copyright in deliverables and associated student work, for example, assignments
- standards of behaviour for the charity, students and CIT
- mechanisms for varying the scope of the project, and
- review arrangements for the agreement.

Until all the other implications are unravelled and suitable responses developed, creation of a formal agreement is not warranted.

## **Conclusion**

Preparing documents for charities as coursework can be satisfying for students and productive for charities. But there are significant issues which must first be resolved before this can become an integral part of any curriculum. Until then, students should be encouraged to seek opportunities to work with charities as part of their studies, but they should also be told of the issues they will have to confront in undertaking such work.