

Oxfam International's New Content-Management System Model Extends to Other Nongovernment Organizations

Executive Summary

CUSTOMER NAME

Oxfam International

INDUSTRY

Nongovernment Organization (NGO)

BUSINESS CHALLENGES

- Improve speed and quality of response to humanitarian crises
- Create a more structured approach to information across Oxfam affiliates
- Develop a model for a generic content- and information-management tool for NGOs

SOLUTIONS

- A scalable, open-source, content-management solution
- A single repository for information, including content for multilanguage Websites
- A modular and documented approach to reusable software
- Online collaboration spaces for teams

BUSINESS RESULTS

- Better communications through the creation of a “pull” rather than a “push” information culture
- Substantial efficiencies in information management
- Better, faster decision-making through access to information globally

Information and resources are critical following any humanitarian crisis. Oxfam International's 12 affiliates around the world know this all too well having spent decades bringing aid to disaster-affected communities. The Asian Tsunami disaster of 2004 that affected six countries saw Oxfam International use its Web-based foundation to enable collaboration and information exchange between teams. This approach to a content-management system has since been extended with additional functionality to further improve communication and collaboration. The Cisco® Internet Business Solutions Group (IBSG) has worked closely with Oxfam International to realize a shared vision of how to bring a Web-based foundation within the reach of the smallest NGO.

BUSINESS CHALLENGES

In the closing months of 2005, Oxfam International's Humanitarian Response Dashboard—a password-access extranet used by staff around the world—was becoming a victim of its own success. Developed 18 months earlier by Oxfam International at its Oxford, England, headquarters, with the help of Cisco IBSG, as a means of improving access to information following a humanitarian disaster, the extranet had become the way information flowed across the confederation of 12 Oxfam affiliates.

The value of a Web-based foundation for collaboration across the confederation had proved itself during the Asian Tsunami disaster. Overseeing Oxfam's response was



Prepared by Cisco Systems, Inc.
Internet Business Solutions Group

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**Jeremy Hobbs, executive director
Oxfam International**

Fernando Almansa, humanitarian coordination manager, who received news of the disaster in the early hours of December 26, 2004.

Within hours, he was posting information to the dashboard from his home in the Spanish countryside, providing contingency plans and keeping people up-to-date with situation reports from the field. By reducing the burden of having to use e-mail to keep the rest of the organization and stakeholders informed, people working in the field could focus more of their time on coordinating and delivering aid.

By the end of January 2005, the dashboard had more than 1,000 registered users, contained more than 2,700 documents, and was visited by more than 80 Oxfam staff each day.

In the months that followed, the widespread adoption of the dashboard by Oxfam personnel meant that the dashboard had gone far beyond its original scope to become the central source for information, ranging from contingency plans and situation reports, to project notes and digital assets such as photographs. This had led to the dashboard slowing down and difficulties in finding information. By the start of 2006, the dashboard had over 15,000 items and over 50 spaces for team collaboration.

Jeremy Hobbs, executive director, Oxfam International, explains: “For all of Oxfam’s work in over 100 countries, knowledge is key, whether you are working on HIV or land reform, it is all about knowledge and particularly being able to share that knowledge and learning globally.”

To manage information better, Oxfam again turned to Cisco. But this time the solution would not just benefit Oxfam, but also potentially thousands of other NGOs and their partners around the world.

SOLUTIONS

Oxfam International is a microcosm of the NGO world. Located around the globe, Oxfam International comprises 12 autonomous and legally different organizations, working together in more than 100 countries and with over 3,000 local partner organizations. While the Oxfam affiliates share common goals, and want, and need, to work more closely together, cross-affiliate collaboration on a global basis requires structures and systems to make sure there is a ready exchange of information.

As with many commercial businesses, information within Oxfam tended to lay in silos across the extended organization. A common approach to information management was needed, and IBSG and Oxfam started a series of discussions and workshops that led to the idea of creating a content-management system (CMS) based on the concept of a Web foundation, building out from the existing dashboard experience. A proposal for part of the funding by the [Cisco Systems Foundation](#) was approved to enable Oxfam International and [Oxfam Great Britain](#) to build a

scalable, open source CMS for managing Web content and business on a global scale, both for their own organizations and as a model for other NGOs.

An early decision was to use [Zope/Plone](#), an open source application service for building content-management systems, intranets, portals, and custom applications. The Zope/Plone community consists of hundreds of companies and thousands of developers, and some Oxfam affiliates had already successfully employed it. Using Zope/Plone for the new CMS would build on this expertise and allow for the creation of a model that could be shared by other NGOs with similar needs, but without the budget required to implement and support a commercial off-the-shelf solution.

“WE HAVE CREATED A CONTENT REPOSITORY, WHICH IS THE SOURCE OF ACCURATE INFORMATION AND A PLATFORM FOR COLLABORATION ACROSS ALL THAT WE DO.”

**Julia Flynn, brand and communications manager
Oxfam International**

In the summer of 2005, information architects from Oxfam International and Oxfam Great Britain collaborated with another expert (associated with the [Cisco corporate social responsibility](#) program) who had worked on the original dashboard. Technical development expertise from Oxfam in Australia, Spain, and America helped to define the necessary information standards and business processes. The broader Zope/Plone community also supported the project, creating a true international team with developers from Lima, Peru to Bangkok, Thailand. By Christmas, the new system was starting to come online.

“We have created a content repository, which is the source of accurate information and a platform for collaboration across all that we do,” says Julia Flynn, Oxfam International’s brand and communications manager, who led the project. “The concept is a single repository with multiple Websites, including the dashboard and Oxfam International’s public Website and Oxfam Great Britain’s global intranet, all drawing content from the same repository to separately skinned sites.”

The single repository also supports the multilingual capabilities of Oxfam International’s Website. A plug-in module to Zope/Plone, called [LinguaPlone](#), allows the running of a truly multilingual Website, enabling users to switch between English, French, and Spanish content. An automigration tool for the existing dashboard enables the migration of over 15,000 items and their individual security permissions to the new system with its improved information architecture and expanded searchable metadata fields.

A coherent, end-to-end approach to information structures and policies also makes identity management possible within the dashboard for single sign-ins, and for pages to be built in a rush according to the needs and permission of the user. Global directory functionality is being built in, drawing information from the various human resources personnel databases within each affiliate. The use of metadata (to define and label information types) and a new search engine are also allowing for the right information to be retrieved quickly.

BUSINESS RESULTS

“The first 48 hours of any disaster are very critical,” says Almansa. “The dashboard is extremely important, because it affects the quality of management, and this has a direct effect on the people we are trying to support—in disaster-affected communities. It is informing our decision-making and enabling us to respond better.”

In May 2006, the Yogyakarta earthquake rocked central Java. Immediate access to contingency plans and contact details for humanitarian workers on the ground was soon complemented by situation reports that were used to better coordinate efforts. Just one week later, Oxfam and its local partners had provided emergency aid to 100,000 people in remote areas. Around 90,000 liters of water, 12,500 tarpaulins, and 20,000 other nonfood items, such as jerry cans, soap, and sarongs, had been provided. An organizational chart of the international and local response teams helped clarify roles and responsibilities, while photographs—a key resource for communicating externally—were also uploaded to the dashboard.

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**Fernando Almansa, humanitarian coordination manager
Oxfam International**

The creation of a single platform across all affiliates is leading to a review of business flows and daily information processes to take advantage of the new platform. A workshop in February 2006 brought key communications staff from the Oxfam affiliates’ leading humanitarian responses together to review processes and ways of working. The groups agreed on roles and responsibilities to improve planning, in general, and also make possible faster communication for media relations and for reporting back to donors and supporters on Websites and through other channels. The identification and utilization of best practices globally is becoming the norm and the dashboard is integral to those reviews. For instance, the dashboard now houses humanitarian contingency plans for over 60 countries.

The ability to support multiple Websites with a single CMS is having a major impact on the approach to how information can be posted and resources can be used. The dashboard and public Website teams at Oxfam International have been brought together to create a larger skill base, sharing the same platform technology with a view to removing duplication of content and the resources supporting it. Active discussions are taking place with other Oxfam affiliates about the CMS, and for the smaller Oxfams, the ability to share a wealth of content and take on additional functionality well beyond existing resources is currently being explored.

Just as important, the project is meeting its objective as a model and resource for other NGOs. The team’s work has extended the knowledge and resources of the entire Zope/Plone community, which can be made available to NGOs.

Oxfam is now regarded as a leading example of open-source, content-management expertise, and Oxfam Great Britain hosted a very successful one-day conference at its Oxford offices. Called *Ploneability 06*, the conference was attended by decision makers from over 50 organizations, including a range of NGOs, such as Greenpeace UK and Amnesty International, who learned about the open-source platform and the thorough documentation developed to help any organization wishing to learn from the experience.

“Cisco IBSG challenged our thinking and helped us to analyze and recognize the extent to which our support systems lagged behind our need to share information, to be mutually accountable, and to have more efficient transactions across the confederation,” says Hobbs.

NEXT STEPS

Looking forward, Hobbs says he would like to make other support systems easy to use, perhaps with tools that extract data directly from affiliates’ databases.

Meanwhile, Almansa is thinking about a rules-based engine that could help teams around the world quickly access funds, with appropriate checks and balances, for smaller projects. Currently, the majority of joint Oxfam International funds are focused on larger emergencies and such a tool would help redress the balance.

The CMS platform is provided to Oxfam International by Oxfam Great Britain under the terms of a service-level agreement. This type of arrangement is particularly significant to Cisco. Taken to its logical conclusion, the solution has succeeded in proving that such a platform can bring significant process, business, and costs benefits to an NGO. Were enough NGOs interested in taking advantage of an open-source platform, there would be an opportunity for a service provider to offer it as a pay-to-use managed service solution.

While NGOs would enjoy economies of scale and greater efficiencies through Web-based processes, the greatest benefit would come in being able to focus resources on their core business without the diversion of managing and developing an IT platform.

MORE INFORMATION

The Cisco Internet Business Solutions Group (IBSG) is a global consulting team that helps customers transform their organizations by strategically applying business process innovation and advanced technologies. A unique combination of industry experience and business and technical knowledge enables IBSG consultants to serve as trusted advisers to many of the world's top organizations.

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