

“Tech enabled change”

Darren Hurst, Head of IT at CLIC Sargent

CLIC Sargent is the UK’s largest charity for children and young people with cancer, and the services it offers range from grants and free accommodation close to hospitals, to care teams to help people claim benefits and lobbying the government to ensure families get the support they need.

Some years ago, the charity realised that these services were only reaching two in every three young people that could benefit from them, and so in 2015 it launched a drive to reach the “missing third”. From then on, all of its technology decisions were made with one of three aims in mind:

- To reach more families online
- To have a greater impact on young lives, and
- To build better relationships with its supporters.

The charity also decided to take account of changing behaviours among younger donors, who were reportedly becoming much keener to donate via their mobiles.

Darren Hurst, the charity’s Head of IT, recalls how a breakthrough came in 2017 when the supermarket chain Morrison’s selected CLIC Sargent as its charity partner for three years. “This suddenly enabled us to progress a lot of our ideas,” he said.

The charity was able to bring in a temporary head of digital change who helped to identify the areas where technology could add the most value, and to drive those projects through to completion.

It also redeveloped its website to make it mobile-optimised and more customer-focused, including offering ApplePay and Google Play as donation channels. And it replaced its outdated grants system which could only issue grants by cheque.

But this transformation wasn’t easy, Hurst confessed.

“We had all these ideas and we finally had some money behind us, so we started getting loads of projects sent to the technology team, which was pretty overwhelming at first. We didn’t know what the priorities were and we didn’t even know if the projects had gone through the correct approval process. So we knew we had to improve our governance.”

This led to the creation of the charity “corporate sun”, a diagram showing all the key strategic objectives for the next two years. “This sounds simple but it’s something we didn’t have before and it’s really enabled us to identify the priorities, see where there are resource gaps and also to push back where expectations are unrealistic.

“We also created a digital board which acts as a gatekeeper for any digital or technology projects that come through. And then, because there were so many projects that it would have taken ages to deliver them all using a standard project approach, we started to train key staff on agile and scrum processes and made a rule that any technology projects had to go through a scrum process.”

The first project that was delivered using a scrum was the website redesign.

“We got really good feedback from the development team that they really enjoyed the scrum process – it helped them bond as a team, they had a shared goal and they got to work on things they never thought they would.

“Some of the team members found it challenging to balance their business-as-usual work alongside their scrum projects – some underestimated the time commitment of the scrum project and some

managers were more helpful than others to give their team members the time to work on it.” But since the success of the website relaunch, CLIC Sargent has also used a scrum process to redesign its intranet and its social care and grants database.

In other projects, to improve relationships with supporters, the charity installed new marketing data analysis systems and legacy management systems, and trialled contactless payments at events. It also implemented a visitor management system at head office to free up front-desk staff to work on more business-critical issues, and improved its video-conferencing capabilities to reduce travel costs. It scrapped its bespoke online carers’ support service in favour of Facebook groups and created a YouTube channel for young people, along with a tutorial to help them make their own user-generated content higher quality.

The results of the work have been broadly very positive, according to Hurst.

“Website donations have improved by 25 per cent, engagements have increased and bounce rates have decreased massively.” This was despite the fact that the team’s first attempt at the new donation journey was a failure, which delayed going live by a month.

“Staff have said they are able to find information much more quickly on the new intranet and feel more connected to each other.

“With the live chat, we’re able to answer customer queries much faster and, more importantly, at the first attempt, and it’s given us a much greater opportunity to engage with our service services.” Although, he admitted there were challenges with this service: “We only have limited resources so we could only offer the service during business hours, and customers obviously expected an instant response which we couldn’t always give. Also, we found that the live-chat operators needed a specific skillset with a breadth of knowledge across the organisation which was really hard to find.

The scrum process enabled teams to break large projects down into smaller steps and has improved inter-team relationships and accountability.

“And we’ve improved the management of our grants process and made it much easier to search, analyse and report on this data.”

One project that didn’t get off the ground was an idea to put robots into schools to act as eyes and ears for young people who are too poorly to attend school themselves. “It sounded like a brilliant idea but when we started to get into the meat of the project, we found it was quite a high cost with a low reach, and there was no way of providing ongoing sustainable funding.” However, since then, CLIC Sargent has secured a partner who is willing to fund five pilot robots with a view to more if they are successful, so that project is back on the agenda.

Hurst concluded that probably the biggest learning from the last two years was assuming too much digital confidence among staff. “We made a lot of changes quickly and so a lot of the time we were guilty of not taking users on the journey with us,” he confessed. “This led to a lot of apprehension and fear around the new products, particularly for our non-office-based staff. We’re now trying to address that retrospectively with a blend of face-to-face and e-learning.”

He summed up with six top tips for any charity embarking on a similar process:

1. Ensure users are at the heart of your decision-making
2. Take time to reflect and use insights to gain a better understanding of stakeholder behaviour
3. If you have to make compromises, work out what is the minimum you can achieve
4. Ensure that any new technology supports your core objectives

5. Don't underestimate the time it takes to change organisational culture
6. Never stop looking for alternative ways to deliver services.