Innovations in Internet-based Sporting Association Management

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Abstract

This paper introduces the concept of Internet-based sports management products and services, developed by an Irish based company. These products and services are designed to improve the management, workflow and communication processes for sporting associations. The design intent for such systems is thus to facilitate the sporting association’s goals, while also providing powerful communication channels for the grassroots supporters, participants, players, enthusiasts and officials. The innovation that the company - Servasport - provides in its products and services to sporting associations is based upon close on-going, working relationships with many differing sports. The paper outlines the rationale for the design of such systems, within the requirements of modern sporting associations.

Introduction

This paper outlines the innovations in development at Servasport, a software company that focuses on producing products and services for the management and operations of sporting associations. Sporting associations cover a broad range of disparate types of groupings, including sports governing bodies; national and regional sporting bodies; government; academic bodies, including university and college sporting clubs; sport in business; and finally private clubs and associations. Each of these organisations has many similar organisational and management issues. The common problems facing these sporting associations relate to communication, administration, information management, time management and finance. In order to address these common problems and other issues specific to certain organisations, Servasport has developed an Internet-based workflow management system which addresses these issues whilst integrating the organisation’s rules, procedures and also creating transparency.

Servasport’s system (See Figure 1 below for indicative screen shot) provides the following high-level features:

- Content delivery and management system, especially designed for ease-of-use.
- Messaging management systems, enabling real time communication, to make use of today’s popular, acceptable channels of communication (SMS/IM), to create and maintain loyalty and to strengthen relationships.
- Document management, facilitating the easy accessing, distribution, dissemination and sharing of important, relevant and useful documentation within the various levels of associations.
Members’ management, reducing and automating the number of tasks associated with collecting, marketing and managing members’ information, significantly reducing paperwork while improving efficiency.

Workflow management, enabling the automation of processes within the organisation to improve efficiency, productivity and overall effectiveness.

Commerce development, creating designed to support new and lucrative revenue generating opportunities.

Training, e-Learning and Support, through the use of online coaching programs.

Core Issues Facing Sporting Associations

The dawn of this millennium witnessed the decline of the industrial age and its replacement with the information age. The increasing use of the computer and of the Internet has contributed to the accelerated transformation of most industries over the last decade and to Information & Communications Technology (ICT) becoming a key driving force in the economy.

The harnessing and deployment of the best ICT applications and tools has enabled many organisations across a range of industries to remain viable, to achieve success and to maintain their competitive edge within this new information age. This paper outlines the product innovations in development at Servasport, as this software company designs and builds an integrated, Internet-based system which enables sporting associations - the key organisations within the sports industry - to flourish and prosper while successfully meeting the challenges of the 21st century.

Servasport’s approach to designing and building a system which addresses the identified organisation and management needs facing today’s sporting associations was also informed by the fact that, unlike other industries, the sports industry has always relied...
heavily on volunteers to make a vital input at all levels. Although sport had been success-
fully served by such volunteers in the past, sporting associations are now facing
up to the fact that there is a need for organisational management reform and that asso-
ciations must begin to manage themselves professionally if they are to survive [1]. It
is estimated that in the UK alone, there are over 5 million volunteers who freely offer
their time to a sports organisation. Sue Campbell, interim chair of UK Sport, pointed
to the dilemma of having and needing such dedicated volunteers…."who have given a
lifetime’s service to sport” whilst simultaneously facing up to the reality that today’s
volunteers…."aren’t best positioned to make the dynamic, rapid-response decisions
we now need” [2].

Many social and economic factors are now impacting on the ability of the sports or-
ganisations to maintain the involvement of existing volunteers and to attract new vol-
unteers. The key issues pertaining to volunteers, which need to be addressed by a
sports management solution include:

- The frustration of volunteers frequently working 9-5 within business-like,
  competitive environments in having to devote valuable time and energy to
  undertaking repetitive and unproductive tasks without ICT support.
- Regulations and funding shortfalls leading to officials having increased workloads
  in order to raise funds, acquire training or adhere to government guidelines.
- Increased time demands associated with increased paperwork and legislation.
- Increase in competing leisure-time options and increased pressures of time.
- Most people travelling out of the area and spending less time interacting within
  the local community.
- An expectation of having some technological support if volunteering to devote
  some quality free time to voluntary work.
- Exposure to very well-funded, well-marketed sport such as American football
  raises expectations and creates the benchmark by which other organisations are to
  be judged.
- Diminished pool of volunteer’s limits fresh thinking and restricts the range of
  activities that contribute to the real spirit of community.

These changes are also affecting sporting associations at the grassroots level, with
participation and retention levels dropping. The general public is less tolerant of
watching sport which is portrayed in an amateur manner, and has grown accustomed
to cutting-edge communication techniques bringing professional performances to
within viewing distance of a comfortable armchair.

**Key Design Issues**

An Internet based system is central to Servasport’s solution in addressing the needs of
sporting associations, for the following reasons. There are no hardware requirements.
Servasport’s research had indicated that not all officials have access to an office or to
ICT resources. Most though, can access the Internet with relative ease. There are no
installation costs. Sporting associations will have no additional investment costs asso-
ciated with purchasing software applications which can become obsolete quickly. An
integrated, compatible, centralised ICT system is required. All levels of the Sporting
association are connected together and interlinked through this innovative system
allowing all vital information pertaining to the association to be controlled and stored
centrally and to be made available in an easily assessed form to authorised stake-
holders anywhere, anytime, thus facilitating the informed, real-time decision-making to which Sue Campbell refers.

The Sporting association needs to be in control of a secure, central database, within which all relevant information is housed and to which all new information can be added on an on-going basis.

The Sporting association needs to operate much like a sophisticated franchise indicating its requirements and its expectations. The key benefits to clubs, for example, include:

- Standardisation
- Streamlining
- Reduction of workloads

A tight degree of control can be exercised by the sporting association through the top down approach afforded by this system. Importantly though, each club retains its autonomy and its ability to take decisions at specific levels regarding specific issues.

Standardisation of communication is required to provide vital revenue-generating opportunities through direct access to the specific information required being facilitated, resulting in the removal of the need to work through an intermediary such as the sporting press.

**Competitive Environment**

In the global sports management software marketplace there are two other major players whose systems must likewise be considered innovative, namely Firstwave [3] and the Computer Software Group (CSG) [4]. Although the applications in which they specialise vary somewhat, both companies have been to the fore in providing cutting-edge solutions to meet specific management needs of sporting associations.

They both approach the provision of management solutions from the perspective of focusing on cutting costs and of maximising revenue both of which are high on the agenda of sporting associations. They have both been creative finding ways in which sporting associations can reap an increasing range of financial benefits from imaginatively managing key areas of potential revenue such as their membership, their fan base, their customer relationships and their ticketing.

Servasport is in many ways providing solutions to addresses these same issues but from a different perspective. It focuses on providing the entire hierarchy within a sporting association with a powerful integrated platform which will appeal to officials, managers, volunteers and its fan base.

The key challenges of safeguarding the future of sport and of putting in place appropriate structures for its effective management are being given priority by Servasport. Importantly but secondary of the systems objectives, are cutting costs and generating revenue which are built onto the platform, both of which will also be achieved over time through the strong integrated applications which will be regularly used.

**Case Study**
In order to evaluate the benefits of Servasport’s solution in addressing the needs of sporting associations, the company examined a case study in detail in Ireland in 2004. The case study is drawn from a club within the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) and a brief background to the Association is provided in the paragraphs below, based upon the contents of the Association’s web site [5].

The GAA was founded on November 1, 1884 by a group (…) who had the foresight to realise the importance of establishing a national organisation to revive and nurture traditional, indigenous pastimes including the games of Hurling and Gaelic Football and to take part in Athletic events. Regional and club units are now well established in America, Australia, New Zealand, Britain, Canada, mainland Europe and in many other parts of the world where the large Irish diaspora are located.

The GAA has over 2,500 clubs in Ireland alone. The playing of Gaelic Games is based on the GAA Club, and each of the 32 Counties in Ireland have their own Club competitions, culminating in County Winners in championship and league. Club units outside of Ireland have their own league and championship competitions with the format dictated by the number of players and clubs available, while the county is a geographical region in Ireland, and each of the thirty-two counties in Ireland organises its own GAA affairs through a County Board. Counties have a number of Divisional or Juvenile Boards to organise competitions at district and youth levels.

The Provincial Councils are the organisations responsible for the arrangement of GAA matters within their Province. They organise the Provincial Championships for clubs and counties in both hurling and football, and look after organisational and disciplinary matters in their jurisdiction. Inter-Provincial teams in hurling and football are selected from the best players from the counties in every Province and compete for the annual Railway Cup Hurling and Football competitions. Finally, the National Organisation (GAA) is run by Central Council with the Management Committee controlling day-to-day affairs. They run the All-Ireland series of the club and county championships, and look after the major Cups and competitions.

Within one particular GAA Club at University College Dublin (UCD), the officials have been using Servasport applications to improve processes within their club. A senior official at UCD stated that “despite the club management system being introduced midway through the season the system has already had a major effect on improving how the club is run. I feel we have only begun to discover the benefits & possibilities of this system and feel that it will continue to improve radically all aspects of running the club, being involved with the club, or getting people involved in our club. I can imagine the use of the member management system and the document system being particularly useful to our club with the turnover of new officials, captains and managers each season, as information can now be accessed via a centralised system. I look forward to using the system in 04/05 as we will be able to market it to our members and players from the start of the season to help maximise the potential from the web and WAP sites.”

Officials within the club undertook a survey from a representative range of members and players within the club. The officials within the club had already had first hand experience of the benefits of the administrative applications as demonstrated by the
testimonial by the football captain above, but wanted to verify the impact that the communication channels (web, wap, text & email) had on their members. The key points they received from the survey are outlined below:

- 100% of members knew the club’s web address
- 90% said that it increased communication within the club
- 100% said that it kept them informed of club activities, in particular fixtures
- 80% of members use the service to access information on club & general GAA news
- 80% felt that it contributed to the club being seen as visionary & vibrant
- 100% agreed that the Servasport Club system helps attract and retain new members.

The key benefits for the club level entity were immediate take-up, impact and results, with no delays experienced with installation. There were no issues associated with downloading, and the user-friendly interface contributed to an increase in many users levels of confidence. The portal demonstrated a great variety of content from many perspectives, as well as enabling real-time communication, quality decision-making capability and engendering of inclusiveness especially in the strengthening of interpersonal relationships and increased general club affinity and positive regard for the club.

Conclusions

Within sport, many organisations have avoided addressing major demographic ‘time-bombs’ and other major strategic external issues. In a bid to accelerate the streamlining and modernisation of sports management, some governments are now taking the initiative and are linking funding to improvement. Sporting organisations seeking financial support will now have to respond, will have to change, and will be required to use ICT solutions to improve its management. To be welcomed, such solutions need to be at least very user friendly, have immediate results, be cost-effective and be significantly superior to what they are replacing – and at best, be innovative.

Each sporting association must experience some form of pain barrier as it comes to terms with the use of technology to assist in engendering good sporting relationships and management of association processes. These are some of the most difficult and intangible concepts to manage and communicate.

The innovation that Servasport provides in its products and services to sporting associations is based upon close on-going, working relationships with many differing sports. Part of the innovation indeed is not just the technology, but in understanding how the technology may best be introduced to the sporting associations, and in understanding how to help them to manage the potential pain of change as they seek to build for the future and ensure the survival of their sport.

References

[1] Foster, A., Moving On: A Review of the Need for Change in Athletics in the UK,
[2] Sue Campbell, interim chair of UK Sport, May 2004