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Why Your Association Should Not Develop Its Own Software

Written by Wes Trochlil

On occasion, clients will ask me, "Why don't we just build our own database program, rather than trying to find one that fits our needs?" Invariably, my answer is, "You don't want to do that, and here are three reasons why."

Once you decide to develop your own database, you are no longer just in the association management business; you are now in the software development business. Regardless of how good your developer is, and whether or not your developer is in-house or external, software development means it is your responsibility to:

- Scope the project: You will have to outline all of the functionality that the database provides. Remember, you're starting with a blank sheet, so you need to be able to identify every single element of functionality, starting with what data is captured all the way through to whether or not the system can do broadcast email and manage financial functions.
- Testing the software: Sure, the developer will test the software before they deliver it to you. But how much and how effectively? Your staff will be responsible for checking all the work provided. This means testing every single element identified in the scope described above.
- Documenting the software: Unless you pay your developer to document the software, there will be no "standard" documentation. So now it is up to you and your staff to do it. And if you don't document the system, and the staff person responsible for the system leaves, guess what's going to happen to the database?
- Creating training: Again, there will be no "standard" training available, so you'll have to create that yourself. And deliver it.

You lose the tremendous benefits of a community of users. By definition, custom software means your organization is the only organization using the software. This means that you lose all of the benefits that a community of users of off-the-shelf software provide. Some of those benefits include:

- A users group that can help your organization find better ways to do things within the software.
- Additional features being developed and added to later releases, frequently at no additional cost. These additional features are usually suggested (and possibly paid for) by other users of the software.
- Broader testing of the software. When a single software package has many different users, it is being tested every day it is used. The broader the user base, the better the testing.

You are re-creating the wheel. Software companies have been developing database software for the association community for over 30 years. And by my count, there are more than 50 companies that claim to provide some type of membership management software. Each of these companies has created some type of data management system that takes into account many of the aspects of association management that you face every day. Is it really likely that your data management needs are so unique that no one has addressed them?

Of course, there are associations that have been successful developing their own in-house database software. But these are the exception. Frequently, when a potential client comes to me for help to find a new data management system, it is because they have a home-grown database that is no longer sufficient to their needs. Don't let this happen to you.

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About the Author

For more than 20 years, Wes Trochlil has worked in and with dozens of associations and membership organizations providing a range of consulting services, from general consulting on data management issues to full-scale, association-wide selection and implementation of association management systems. Follow Wes on Twitter @westrochlil. His website is www.effectivedatabase.com.

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