Tech Team Initiative

ICIT

Iowa State Association of Counties
2013 Excellence in Action Awards

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1. Abstract

In the fall of 2011, ISAC and CoStar were approached by Emmet County seeking advice on the replacement of aging servers. CoStar decided to approach ICIT to see if they would be interested in sending a team of County IT professionals to Emmet County to do a technology assessment. With the funding being provided by CoStar, the ICIT Board approved the project. A team was formed with representatives from Worth, Hardin, Sioux, Marshall, and Dickinson Counties. The team visited with Emmet County prior to the on-site visit to define the scope of the project. The team arrived on December 7 and met with department heads and Board members to kick-off the project. The Tech Team visited with every department individually, gathered network information, reviewed financial records, and evaluated the physical structure of the network. After working well into the night, the team met again the next morning to finish entering their findings. A summary presentation was then given to the department heads and Board members. Three weeks after the visit the final report was presented to Emmet County. The final report contained detailed findings and resolutions in addition to a 2 phase plan addressing the Counties need to replace aging servers and infrastructure. The County was also informed that they could continue to contact the team for further support, which has been provided by ICIT.

The evaluation of Emmet County was a huge success, so ICIT made the decision to take this "beta" program and offer it to the rest of the Counties in Iowa.

2. The problem/need for the program

Technology in local government changes and evolves at an ever increasing rate. Counties that do not have the resources to focus on technology solutions struggle with making decisions or rely on

vendors to provide those technology solutions for them. This can leave the County vulnerable to budget, security, performance, and a host of other technology issues with very few options. This also leaves the County with no technology vision or direction. This ends up costing the County in wasted time, wasted funds, and wasted effort. And with budgets continuing to shrink and the demand for technology increasing, it is critical that Counties spend their technology dollars wisely.

3. Description of Program

The Tech Team Initiative evolved from the Emmet County Tech evaluation in late 2011. The current program has a few different iterations. The procedure is for a County to contact the ICIT Technology Advocate with an issue that the County is having. The Tech Advocate then calls upon the other ICIT members to develop a plan to address the issue. The main request has been for County wide technology evaluations. This involves the Tech Advocate getting the request from the County. The Tech Advocate then sends the County a survey to better understand what issues the County is experiencing. This survey also assists both the County and ICIT in defining the scope of the evaluation project. Once the County has returned the survey, the Tech Advocate asks the ICIT board for approval. Once approval has been given, the Tech Advocate selects a project lead and then the project team. This selection process is based on the resources and skills required by the scope of the project. The team then has a conference call with the stakeholders of the County to address additional questions, request needed financial files and network access, and schedule the team visit.

The team then visits the County; typically it has been one overnight stay, visiting with County officials and evaluating the infrastructure and finances. The second day, the team presents their initial findings to County officials in a "first impressions" presentation. Shortly after the visit the delivery of the final report is scheduled. This final report is a mix of technical and non-technical findings ranked by level of criticality. Every finding is detailed along with a specific resolution. At the end of the report there are typically 3 or 4 major recommendations for addressing the wider scope of issues found. The County is then encouraged to reach out to the team after the evaluation for any additional information or assistance. This has ranged from giving advice on quotes and projects to assisting in the hiring process of an IT/GIS position.

An additional initiative that the Tech Teams have taken is to provide GIS training days. These training sessions were sponsored in conjunction with Iowa State University. ISU provided a GIS lab where ICIT could host 18 County employees for basic parcel GIS training. This training was targeted at County employees who are not able to regularly attend ISAC events. All expenses were paid by ICIT except for mileage and lodging. Demand for this type of training was high as both events filled up within three hours of opening registration. The feedback from the exit surveys has been overwhelmingly positive.

4. Use of Technology

The Tech Teams have used a wide variety of technology to cover a very diverse range of environments. We have utilized the EVMS program from the State to evaluate network vulnerabilities. This has been a great partnership with the State of Iowa, and one we will continue to grow and nurture. Each team member brings a certain skill set and "toolbox" to the evaluations. A small sample of tools used would be open and closed source network scanners, password crackers, Android tablets for scanning wireless networks, Spiceworks, Survey Monkey, and many more.

The teams have been utilizing a SharePoint portal developed by James Nehring from Hardin County as our main communication and knowledge repository. This has been a mission critical tool for allowing the teams to easily share findings, expenses, deadlines, photos, and financial data.

The GIS training days have utilized the GIS labs at ISU. These are a great resource for hosting training on ESRI products in a non-vendor atmosphere. We hope to find more of these labs in the future so we can broaden our outreach.

5. Cost of Program

The cost of these programs so far has been quite low. For a full technical evaluation the County covers the actual travel, lodging, and meal expenses for each team member. The total cost fluctuates depending on team size and travel distance, but the average total for an evaluation is $1,500. The GIS training days have been covered by ISU and ICIT. The cost to ISU has been their providing us the labs and the cost to ICIT has been for parking and meals which have been averaging around $500 per session.

6. Results/Success of Program

We have had overwhelmingly positive feedback from the Counties and individuals we have reached with these programs. In three Counties we have assisted with creating and filling a new IT Director position. In other Counties we have provided guidance on how they should structure their IT efforts for the next couple of years and these plans are progressing. All of the Counties we have visited now have a better understanding of where they are spending money on IT. And due to these evaluations they are making more informed decisions on IT expenditures and projects.

One unexpected benefit has been to the team members themselves. The opportunity to work alongside other County technology professionals on a project allows them to learn new skills that the team members can take back to their own Counties. Not only are we seeing benefits to the target County but to the Counties that the team members are coming from as well.

The GIS training days have been showered with praise for providing this type of training to County employees that need it but usually do not get the opportunities to receive it in a hands-on environment.

This program has also started getting national attention and could easily be replicated throughout the nation.

7. Worthiness of an Award

The Tech Team Initiative is the embodiment of the "good neighbor" policy for County government. We have ICIT members, some of whom take vacation time, to volunteer to help their fellow Counties across the State of Iowa. There is a definite need for non-biased assistance and direction for many Counties in Iowa. We want to assist Iowa Counties in understanding and embracing technology so that they can better serve their constituents. Cybersecurity for Counties is one of the top priorities for Homeland Security and NaCo. We believe ICIT, through programs like the Tech Team Initiative, can provide Counties with the tools to better protect themselves from cybercrime.

ICIT will continue to evaluate our efforts as well and improve our offerings to other County Affiliates that are looking for technology assistance. We will continue to provide training and presentations at both ISAC functions and Affiliate workshops. We are always looking to expand our outreach to other County entities to help them come to a better understanding of how technology can benefit their organization.