

ChurchEasy White Paper

The Case against Churches using Volunteers for IT Work

Churches have limited funds and seek to practice good stewardship of the funds they do have, so the concept of someone donating time and services at no charge to the church is quite enticing to the church. However, if the use of volunteers leads to higher costs in the long run, the church is wasting its precious dollars.

In churches around the country, a common practice is the use of volunteers, usually church members, to do much of the work of the church. In many cases, this is not a problem and can result in significant cost savings for the church. However, in certain types of work, including Information Technology, ChurchEasy maintains that the use of volunteers for the church's IT needs can ultimately cost the church more money than if it had hired professionals to begin with.

Let's look at the potential problems that can occur when dealing with volunteers in IT work in the church. The issues we will cover are:

- Possible lack of ability or even outright incompetence
- Lack of liability insurance if/when things go wrong
- Lack of accountability
- The possibility, perhaps even likelihood, that the volunteer will lose interest in the project(s)
- The potential of the volunteer quitting the church and leaving the church in a lurch

Let's look at each of these issues in more depth.

Possible lack of ability / incompetence

Just because volunteers desire to donate their services to the church does not mean that they are competent at the job. Too often churches get so excited that someone (anyone!) is willing to take on a needed task that they jump at the offer without considering whether the person truly has the necessary skills and knowledge to do the job properly.

It has been the experience of this writer, after over 15 years of working with churches, that too often volunteers in the church have minimal qualifications to handle the IT needs that churches have. Volunteers tend to be amateur "techno-geeks" who tend to think they know more than they do. Whether it be networking, backups, computer repair, website development, printing problems, phone systems, spam/virus filtering, or firewalls, unless the volunteer has had professional experience, it is likely that (s)he would not have the skills and knowledge necessary to do the job properly, potentially leading to costly problems: network crashes/loss of data, spam- or virus-infected computers, lack of phone or e-mail connectivity, a defaced or crashed website, broken computers and printers, and the like. Typically, it is cheaper to pay a professional up front to set everything up properly than it is to pay a professional to mop up afterward.

Lack of liability insurance

What happens if something goes disastrously wrong with what the volunteers have done? What happens if personal information is stolen due to the volunteer's actions? Are they insured? Not likely. The responsibility will then lie with the church, which will be financially held liable. The results can be catastrophic.

A professional company will be fully insured (something that should be confirmed by the church before engaging any company). If something does go wrong, the professionals will have the insurance to cover any liability, thus protecting the financial well-being of the church.

Lack of accountability

A professional company hired to do the work is accountable to the church for the quality of the work. If the company wishes to get paid, as well as get future jobs, they will do quality work in a timely manner.

Volunteers have no such accountability. They are donating their time, and while they may do the best job they can, ultimately the church cannot hold them accountable for what they do or do not do.

Loss of interest

This writer has seen this scenario happen continually in the years of church service: volunteers are gung ho to begin with, but often lose interest in a project. Churches throughout the country are littered with unfinished projects that volunteers have abandoned.

Churches then have to bring in professionals to finish the projects. Since the professionals have to spend time deciphering what has and hasn't been done, again it often will cost more than if the professionals had done the job from the beginning.

Professionals have a vested interest in finishing a job and doing it well. They want to be called back in the future for more work. They want positive references to give to other potential clients. They will not lose interest and leave jobs incomplete.

Volunteers leaving the church

Church conflict is inevitable. Too often a church has volunteers doing work who get caught up in some clash in the church and leave the church as a result. This writer has seen churches in a technical lurch because the volunteers are the only ones who know the passwords, web hosts, infrastructure details, telephone setup, etc. Once a volunteer has left under unfavorable circumstances, many times this information leaves with the volunteer who might not be willing to divulge it.

Again, professionals then have to be called in to mop up. The costs would be greater to get everything running again than it would have been if the professionals had been called in to begin with.

Case study

Let us examine a particular church situation where the use of volunteers has caused myriad problems. The church and its location will not be named.

This church has an affiliated childcare center that has its own computers but is also connected to the main church network. The childcare center board of directors is made up largely of church members. A new childcare board member determined that her spouse could serve as a volunteer taking care of the childcare center's computers while an IT company takes care of the church. The volunteer is a long-time computer student completing a higher level education with limited time and no professional insurance.

The childcare center uses specialized software to run the day-to-day operations including accounts receivable and payroll tracking. It is very important that the data from this software be backed up daily to avoid losing valuable information. The backup was set up by the IT company so that the data would be backed up nightly to the church's file server. The file server (with data stored on it for the entire church's operations) is then backed up off-site nightly to a data center for safe storage and disaster recovery scenarios (e.g. a burning building, etc.).

The childcare board decided to use the volunteer to replace the childcare center system. Upon the purchase of new computer equipment for the center, the board determined that the volunteer could install the software. He was further instructed to lock down the computer from administrative access to reduce spyware and virus risks. However, the childcare director was not provided with administrative access to the system and the volunteer was to orchestrate design and instruction on the software.

The volunteer evidently made changes in the configuration files to incorporate his own backup strategy which required a childcare director to backup to a thumb drive on a weekly basis, thereby causing the childcare data not to be backed up for weeks.

It was noticed by the IT company that while the file server backups were running properly, the data for the childcare center were not being backed up to the file server and subsequently not to the data center. When pressed on why the backups were not occurring, the volunteer claimed that "tampering" at the server level had occurred rather than anything that he might have done.

The volunteer does not understand what he did, nor does he understand the initial setup of the backup configuration. He also fails to understand the value of automated backups, instead relying on a worker at the center to do daily/weekly backups by hand. The reliance on humans to backup data is fraught with danger; humans forget, make errors, might be absent and otherwise might fail to accomplish the backup.

The volunteer also doesn't understand his vulnerability. If crucial data are lost, he does not have liability insurance to cover him if necessary in the case of disaster. In this case, all child care data were at risk for several weeks. A simple drive failure would have resulted in all child care data being lost.

The church is in a difficult spot now. They recognized that they needed a professional IT company to manage their technology needs; but due to a relationship of a childcare center board member, the church has this volunteer handling the technology for the center, even though the center is connected to the church network. On the one hand, they have the professionals who are being paid to do a job, but on the



other hand they have this volunteer who is hampering the company from being able to do its complete job.

Summary

While on the surface it would seem that the use of volunteers to handle IT needs in churches might be a huge money saver, in reality it can leave a church hanging with myriad problems:

- lack of phone or e-mail service (communications down)
- lack of backups/no data recovery in the case of disaster
- computers that are so infested with spam and viruses that the staff is unable to do its work
- an incomplete or out of date website

...all requiring the hiring of professionals to come in and restore order to the chaos, at a greater cost in the long run.

“A false economy refers to an action which saves money at the beginning but which, over a longer period of time, results in more money being wasted than being saved.”
(Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/False_economy)

ChurchEasy maintains that, in general, the use of volunteers for IT work in churches is a false economy. The best stewardship of the money that churches receive likely would be hiring professionals to do the job right to begin with instead of paying more down the road.

ChurchEasy is a service of Net Easy, Inc., a technology company in Richmond, VA that uses software and network engineering processes to solve problems. We save our clients money while improving their efficiency and reducing costs. Net Easy knows and understands churches, and wants to see churches spend their money wisely. If we can be of service to you, please feel free to contact us:

Net Easy, Inc.
877-740-EASY (3279)
sales@neteasyninc.com
NetEasyInc.com
ChurchEasy.com