

Non-profit teams up with firm on for-profit effort

Comet Informatics LLC is rolling out product to Boys & Girls Clubs

By NATE DOUGHERTY

Dirk Hightower was tired of seeing data go to waste.

The executive director of Children's Institute, Hightower often had seen detailed research on student performance go unseen within school districts or be interpreted incorrectly.

Mindful of the need for accurate data in academic and after-school programs, the Children's Institute teamed with information technology developer SophiTEC Inc. to create Comet, a software system that allows for simple reporting and interpreting of data.

The program was rolled out quietly over the past two years to school districts nationwide, and since December it has been used by affiliates of the Boys & Girls Clubs of America.

The Children's Institute first saw the need for a more effective information system nearly a decade ago, Hightower said. Working with personnel within school districts, the institute found that information gathered often failed to reach its desired destination.

The breakdown in communication and delivery of information was upsetting, Hightower said, and called for a solution.

"The Children's Institute as an entity was starting to get frustrated with collecting information and getting it back to people on a realistic timeframe," he said. "I once had a principal come to me and ask why we hadn't sent some important information over. This was January, and we had sent it back on Nov. 1, but it was sitting on someone's desk at the district."

Having come from the days of information stored on floppy disks, which could be hard to keep track of, Hightower knew there had to be a better solution. So working with SophiTEC and its president, Serge Lossa, the Children's Institute came up with a Web-based system to collect information.

The partnership between the non-profit Children's Institute and for-profit SophiTEC was a bit of a challenge at first, Hightower said. Attorneys for the Children's Institute told him the non-profit could not have a partnership with the company, so together they formed Comet Informatics LLC in 2011.

Hightower and Lossa serve as co-CEOs of the company, which aims to enhance student outcomes through better data collection and interpretation.

The system they developed was sensitive to its audience, delivering information in a way most effective to them, Hightower said.

"We got together with Serge Lossa and planned how to conquer the world in terms of information and how to provide it back to them," Hightower said. "We wanted to make sure they got the information they wanted, versus how an administrator or IT person or researcher wanted it back."

Comet allows teachers to evaluate and report quickly and accurately, enabling them to spend more time on targeted teaching, company officials said. The program also improves communication between administrators and classrooms.

The program allows users to plug num-

bers into a before-and-after format to create a greater depth of analysis, Hightower noted. Keeping track of areas such as attendance or demographic information is easier because people reading the data can see and understand a bigger picture, he said.

Comet has modules—which Hightower noted are the same as apps on a mobile device—that can be changed or added based on customer needs.

"Now we have apps for putting on new tools, sending out new reports and many other areas," he said.

The emphasis on customer satisfaction extends to the operation of the system itself, Hightower noted.

"That's one of the comments we hear repeatedly coming back in, how easy this is to use," he said.

The program is helpful for after-school programs that are required to record attendance and performance data, company officials said. Administrators previously would glean this basic information, report it to funders, but then store the data.

But since December, leaders of the Boys & Girls Club of America have used Comet to make data more useful, producing more targeted insights and faster reporting of mandatory data, company officials said. As a result, children enrolled in these programs are receiving better support with early intervention and individualized attention.

The program has caught on quickly. In three months, it has been adopted by 50 Boys & Girls Club chapters in several states. More are set to join soon, company officials said.

The program is also used by the Rochester City School District.

So far, Comet has gotten good reviews from its users.

"From the first phone call, we knew Comet could be a valuable partner," said Pandit Wright, president and CEO of the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Washington (D.C.). "Comet associates continue to extend themselves, not just to our systems development team but directly to club staff—our ultimate users and clients. Working together, we are confident that Comet will help us unlock the doors of success for our kids and teens."

The company tries to strike a balance between being responsive to customers and being able to determine on its own what features will be needed in the future.

"You cannot really expect to have your customers telling you about all the innovations; you have to understand what will be useful for them and innovate in those areas," Lossa said. "We have to be creative but know that not all of the additions will work. Some are great but others go directly to the garbage, and our process is to get good feedback from our customers and do continuous improvement."

Hightower said he sees room for Comet to grow, branching out into early childhood programs and charter schools.

"There are a lot of areas that aren't big enough to be connected to big programs but could really use this," he said.

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CORRECTIONS AND AMPLIFICATIONS

A March 29 article incorrectly identified Blue Cross Blue Shield of Western New York as part of Excellus BlueCross BlueShield.



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