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Collaboration in Information Technology: YMCAs of the Rocky Mountain Region

Suzanne Marchi
Regis University

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Collaboration in Information Technology:

YMCAs of the Rocky Mountain Region

Suzanne Marchi

Regis University

Abstract

The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) has experienced tight financial times. Opportunities to minimize cost and maximize benefits of technology for the YMCAs of the Rocky Mountain region were identified. Action research was used to determine the feasibility, benefits, and the paybacks of collaboration through sharing computer software, hardware, and connectivity solutions among the YMCAs of this region. Historical data, as well as survey and interview data on collaboration and technology was gathered and used to diagnose the problem. The diagnosis uncovered a lack of technology expertise, money, time, commitment, and priority on IT needs. Three interventions were recommended including (a) hire a short-term leader to champion the IT cause, (b) increasing volunteer support, and (c) outsourcing all IT functions.

Collaboration in Information Technology:

YMCAs of the Rocky Mountain Region

The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) is the largest nonprofit organization in America ("A Brief History," 2004). In Denver, the YMCA serves a large population, but over the past ten years it has experienced increasing financial difficulties. Under budget constraints over the past ten years, Rocky Mountain YMCA staff had limited opportunities to expand their technology knowledge and skills. In order to manage the budget and meet the current demands for information from Information Technology (IT) systems, the YMCAs in the Rocky Mountain region (Colorado, Nebraska, and southern Wyoming) indicated interest in pooling resources to develop and collaboratively utilize new IT systems.

Background of the YMCA

The YMCA was founded in London on June 6, 1844 ("A Brief History," 2004). Social conditions during the rise of the industrial revolution found many young men far from home working in cities and living in poor and sometimes dangerous conditions. To respond to this need, George Williams and a group of fellow drapers (dealers in cloth or clothing and dry goods) "organized the first YMCA to substitute Bible study and prayer for life on the streets" ("A Brief History"). By 2005, YMCAs were located around the globe, in 120 countries and served more than 45 million people ("A Brief History"). The YMCA came to the United States in 1851, the first site being established in Boston. About 2,500 YMCAs exist in the United States in 2005 and it is the largest not-for-profit community service organization in America. The YMCA is open to everyone, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, socio-economic status and/or lifestyle choices. It served 18,900,000 men, women, and children in about 10,000 communities in 2004. The YMCA has served the Denver area since 1875. At the start of this project, the YMCA of Metropolitan

Denver had 10 facilities and served over 100,000 people. The Mission of all YMCAs has always been and remains to "put Christian values into practice through programs that build healthy spirit, mind and body for all" (Romano, 2004).

The YMCA in Denver provides services in the form of swim lessons, health and wellness programs, youth sports, childcare and day camps (Romano, 2004). Some special programs include substance-abuse prevention programs and programs for children in 138 schools and nine school districts. The YMCA offers a summer day camp and childcare throughout the metro area, including a Spanish-speaking day camp program that cooperates with the Mexican Consulate. There were 10,000 boys and girls involved in the YMCA Junior Nuggets basketball program in 2005 (Romano). As an embodiment of these programs, the Denver YMCA made the promise, "We build strong kids, strong families, strong communities" and posted its values as "Caring, honesty, respect and responsibility are the basis for all that we do."

The Competitive Environment

This researcher was a good fit for this project because of her experience in technology and leadership, as well as having been employed by the YMCA for 10 years. The Director of Management Information Systems (MIS) for the YMCA of Metropolitan Denver expressed a pressing need for help with defining and implementing technical solutions. In the 15 years since leaving YMCA employment, this researcher had gained expertise in the computer industry through managing the day-to-day technical operations for a 17-site global technology company. Experience gained in managing IT in a distributed environment is relevant to this project because of the distributed nature of the Rocky Mountain region YMCAs. Experience gained in identifying the business needs, implementing technical solutions to meet those needs, and then

working with collaborative groups to bring the projects to fruition was also relevant to this project.

At the time of this project and historically, membership dues are the largest revenue producer for the YMCA of Metropolitan Denver (T. McNeil, personal communication, November 2004). Membership family units include family membership as one unit regardless of how many people are in the family. There had been no increase membership units or revenue over the past 10 years. Of the 10,800 members active at the time of this project, 1,000 were "silver sneakers," participants from a Kaiser Permanente sponsored program who received membership type privileges and pay on a per use basis, so the actual membership numbers were about 9,800 (S. Schrage, personal communication, December 20, 2004). The Denver YMCA faced considerable competition from health clubs and city Parks and Recreation departments. According to Citysearch (2004), there were a total of 401 recreation facilities in Denver and 271 health clubs and gyms at the time this project was conducted. In the for-profit sector, one study by the International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association ("IHRSA/American Sports," 2002) showed health club membership growth had increased 76.1 percent over the previous 12 years nationwide. These numbers included the YMCAs.

The world's largest privately owned and operated fitness center chain, 24 Hour Fitness, is a good example of the increased competition in the region. The first 24 Hour Fitness club in the Colorado, Nebraska, Wyoming area was in 1997. Between 1997 and 2004, 24 Hour Fitness had grown to 17 clubs in these states (S. Wright, personal communication, December 13, 2004). For-profit fitness companies like 24 Hour Fitness, continued to market aggressively, and had managed to gain market share (24 Hour Fitness, 2004). Fitness facilities and programs such as instructor-led fitness classes, drop-in weight rooms, pools, and racquetball courts were in direct

competition with YMCAs. Tax-funded Parks and Recreation centers had become another major competitor of the YMCAs (T. McNeil, personal communication, November 2004).

Childcare programs at the YMCAs include preschools, after school programs, summer day camps, and camps that operated during school breaks. Childcare revenue was the second leading revenue source in the Colorado YMCAs at the time of this project. The Director of MIS at the YMCA of Metropolitan Denver reported a decrease in childcare attendance or revenue in the past 10 years (T. McNeil, personal communication, November 2004). The YMCAs in Denver served 3,000 children annually and this accounted for $3.7 million in revenue. This was about one half the size of the childcare programs 10 years ago (S. Schrage, personal communication, December 20, 2004). Competition is strong in the childcare industry in Colorado. During the study period, the National Child Care Information Center (NCCIC) listed 4120 licensed family childcare homes, 2873 childcare centers in Colorado ("2004 Child Care", 2004). While these statistics deal with the competitive environment in the state of Colorado and the Denver metro area, all indications were that competition was equally relevant in Nebraska and Wyoming.

Problem

History of the Problem. The YMCA was facing many challenges and, due to budget constraints, may not have been able to provide the same services in the future that it had in the past. Because of this revenue challenge, the executive management was looking to manage the business more efficiently while improving the quality of information available. Improved information would help the executives make the best business decisions possible. In order to accomplish this, a committee of representatives from Colorado YMCAs was formed in early 2004, to look at the need for and cost of technology systems. The representatives concluded that

a collaborative solution might be beneficial to all the YMCAs in the Rocky Mountain region. Preliminary plans to implement a solution were made, but it had not been implemented at the start of this project. The reasons for this lack of action were unclear to the YMCA staff of Metro Denver (T. McNeil, personal communication, November 2004).

The existing software used by the Denver YMCA was becoming outdated and would soon not be supported by the vendor. This was causing uncertainty amongst the YMCA management about the continued reliability of the systems. If the YMCA systems were to fail, the software and hardware vendors, who had been under contract in the past to solve the problems, would be unavailable for support. The YMCA did not have the staff or expertise to solve the technical problems without the vendor's support. The researcher had experience in situations where a vendor of a critical system no longer supports a product, and shared the opinion that the risk of failure is too great for this company to bear. The reliability of the product was at risk, and the potential failure and time to recover outweigh the cost and effort required to upgrade the systems.

Another factor in this case was that the software did not give the YMCA executive management the basic information needed to make critical business decisions (T. McNeil, personal communication, November 2004). Through new advancements in computer software technology, information could be gleaned from the data stored to aid executives in making key business decisions. This more sophisticated software could organize information in new ways to make it more valuable and would allow it to be quickly accessible which was not possible in the past. Therefore, executives at the YMCA could expect information to be immediately available. Aalst & Hee (2002) show the trend for corporate executives to need to sort through more and more information, and that it is reasonable to expect today's software to be able to sort

information on demand and make it available immediately. The YMCA of the USA realized this and created a five-year IT initiative ending in 2003 (T. McNeil, Personal Communication, November 2004) code named "George." The purpose of "George" was to offer IT software, hardware, and services to all USA YMCAs. Many YMCAs, including those in the Rocky Mountain region, wanted to capitalize on this offering, and so did not pursue progress with their own solutions. Consequently, local hardware and software continued to get further out-of-date. The "George" initiative was aborted in early 2003, and as with many failed programs, information about why it failed is not readily available. In 2003, the Rocky Mountain region YMCAs realized they needed to find their own solutions.

Problem Statement. The YMCA of Metropolitan Denver was experiencing tight financial times and needed to improve efficiency and quality of its decision support, membership, and human resource information technology systems. The current systems were outdated, becoming unsupported by vendors, and were not meeting the needs of the business decision makers. Six other YMCAs in the Rocky Mountain region had the same need and were interested in working with the Denver YMCAs toward a mutually beneficial solution. This action research project examined the information needs of the different YMCA staffs and the potential for them to work together to save money on the purchasing, delivery, staff training, and maintenance of IT systems, as well as establishing a procedure for ongoing IT collaboration.

Literature Review

The general benefits of collaboration among organizations include cost savings and increased efficiency through a better use of scarce resources. Linden (2002) states that collaboration allows organizations to achieve together what cannot be achieved individually, and often results in a higher quality solution than could have been achieved alone. The potential for

individual or corporate learning and a better ability to achieve important outcomes are also benefits of collaboration (Linden).

The benefits of collaboration for non-profit organizations are seen when non-profits band together in order to help them all succeed (Surman, 2004). Although cost and profitability are important to all business, non-profit organizations are often operate on a very limited budget and the staff is keenly aware of the cost of doing business. Benefits of working together include strategic sharing of administrative and overhead costs, and reducing duplication of efforts. Austin (2000) outlined three benefits of collaboration for nonprofit corporations: cost savings by eliminating duplicate costs and excess capacity, economizing scarce resources, minimizing capital expense by group discounts, and cost saving through gained efficiency.

Collaboration requires careful management and planning to be successful. Linden's (2002) framework for successful collaboration starts with the basics. These basics include a shared goal that parties could not achieve on their own, that parties are ready to pursue a collaborative solution and are willing to contribute, that the most suitable people are involved, that there is an open and credible process for communication, and that the initiative have a champion. The Linden (2002) framework for collaborative success includes four critical points needed for success. First, an open trusting relationship between the principals must be created. Secondly, it must be understood that the consequences of success or failure are significant. Thirdly, the participants must be committed to the effort and must have influence over the other parties involved. Finally, the leadership of the committee must follow collaborative principles. Linden's collaborative principles include the leadership emphasizing the basics as stated earlier, modeling open and supportive behaviors, and building broader support though other stakeholders.

Austin & Hesselbein (2002) believe it is beneficial to ask some questions when working toward successful collaboration. For example, they recommend asking questions about how might this alliance benefit the business strategy or what assets and liabilities might be exchanged in this alliance. Collaborators should know how this alliance would be incorporated into their operating plan and what risks might this alliance involve. Successful collaboration also requires clarifying the team's mission and vision as well as the members' roles (Podolsky, 2003).

Collaboration can be applied successfully to help implement IT change. Ricciardi (1993) sees the demands for accurate, consistent and timely information that stretch the limits of what conventional systems can supply. Today's most successful companies see the long-term benefits of redesigning their entire financial management process. Ricciardi believes organizations are often reluctant to abandon obsolete systems because of the costs of retraining staff and further investment in hardware or software. Collaboration is one solution to help organizations overcome this reluctance.

Fay (2003) found, in the San Francisco Bay area, that nonprofit organizations did not have adequate hardware or software to perform their job tasks. She suggested that nonprofit organizations were unaware of the impact or benefits of technology and were not aware of the resources available to help them access it. She concluded that the lack of awareness of which technologies are available, and of what it could do for an organization, was a likely cause of the lower utilization of newer technology among non-profits, compared to other types of organizations. Although this research was done in California and it did not look specifically at YMCAs or the Rocky Mountain region, it was reasonable to assume that the same issues were relevant here. The lack of technology awareness was common among the YMCAs employees (T. McNeil, personal communication, November 2004). Fay did not speculate on the cause of this

lack of awareness of technology, but did discuss how collaboration on IT issues in some of the organizations studied was successful. Collaboration was a great benefit to them because it allowed management to attack IT issues together when it was too overwhelming to try individually.

YMCAs of similar size to the Metropolitan Denver YMCAs, with similar IT challenges, had chosen collaborative IT solutions. YMCAs in Kansas City, Missouri and Richmond, Virginia, ("YMCAs Take HR," 2004) and all over the United Kingdom (Knights, 2004) were using hosted IT models. A hosted model is a system wherein all the hardware and server software is located at a single and often remote site and is managed by an external company. Knights suggests hosted services are beneficial for organizations that do not wish to manage the hardware and software or hire new staff to maintain their systems. Hosted solutions are collaborative in nature in that they share the expertise, hardware and software of the provider. Jeffress (2002) reviews the function of outsource providers, also known as ASPs, that allow companies to avoid the responsibility of purchasing, installing and managing IT applications.

Security was of greater concern in all organizations because of the damaging effects of viruses (Trend Micro, 2004). In a survey by the Computer Security Institute, 85 percent of the 538 companies and organizations detected computer security breaches (Trend Micro). In a study in 2002, there were more than 10,000 viruses identified, and 500 new ones were being created every month (Trend Micro). Of 70,000 corporate networks surveyed in January 2001, hackers made 6000 attempts to gain access each month (Trend Micro). Attacks on computer systems were continuing to get more sophisticated (Legard, 2002). With an ASP, system security is managed by security experts and with state-of-the-art tools. The centrally managed ASP technology was one potential solution to investigate in relation to this proposed project. At the

other end of the continuum of potential solutions, separate and locally managed IT solutions for each site are an option for further investigation.

Method

The method section includes the basic foundations of action research and review of the model chosen for this project. The agreement between the YMCA and this researcher is discussed, as well as defining the scope, resources, and timeline for the project. Data gathering methods include a review of historical data, a proposed survey and proposed interviews. The collaborative group reviewed and revised these data collection strategies in this project.

Action Research Definition

Action research involves collaboration between the researcher and the organization. It addresses the practical concerns of the people in the organization while considering the goals of social science. One benefit of action research is that, due to the collaborative nature of the activities involved, it can lead to organizational learning strategies that will be useful to the organization after the researcher withdraws from the project (Gill & Johnson, 2002). Coghlan and Brannick (2001) refer to Lewin's work as the foundation of action research and define action research as using a cyclical process and scientific approach to solve a problem while generating new knowledge. French and Bell (1999) describe action research as the following:

> Action Research is the process of systematically collecting research data about an on-going system relative to some objective, goal, or need of that system; feeding these data back into the system; taking actions by altering selected variables within the system based both on the data and on hypotheses; and evaluating the results of actions by collecting more data (p. 130).

Entry and Contracting

The entry stage involved creating commitment from the organization to address the problems. It also included the creation of a collaborative team, including the researcher and organizational members, to work on the problem through the action research process. The Director of MIS from the YMCA of Metropolitan Denver was the champion of this process and had identified the challenges as well as suggested participants for the collaborative team. The initial collaborative team included the YMCA of Metro Denver Director of MIS, the CFO of Metro Denver, and the Membership Director/Office Manager of the Boulder YMCA. Other team members included the IT resource person from the Longmont YMCA and a representative who was responsible for programs such as the YMCA youth sports programs. A YMCA of the USA national resource person was also included. This person was a resource to local and regional YMCA groups and could bring a much broader base of knowledge and perspective to the project. He was based out of Colorado Springs, which is over 100 miles from the Boulder and Longmont representatives. Time and money limitations made face-to-face meetings difficult so conference calls were used for the collaborative team meetings.

Contracting involved gaining project approval from Regis Master of Science in Management (MSM) staff and YMCA executives. It included a mutual agreement on project goals. The goals for this project were to gain information about the most financially attractive options for IT systems and to determine if and how collaboration between the Rocky Mountain region YMCAs would be beneficial.

Contracting included defining the scope, resources, and timeline for the project. All of the YMCAs of the Rocky Mountain region were within the scope of this project. It included investigation into collaboration among the YMCAs and into the delivery and support of the IT

solutions. Although related, for the sake of manageability, the software selection was out-of-scope for this project. The collaborative team agreed to attend meetings to refine data collection instruments and distribution protocol, review data results, create an action plan based on the results, and finally to review the project.

The collaborative team was comprised of the already established IT committee lead by the Director of MIS plus additional representatives from other Rocky Mountain YMCAs. This team was composed of 14 people. There were two executives, two independent YMCA representatives, three Denver metropolitan staff, and two program representatives, one membership director/office manager, and one National YMCA of the USA representative. The team grew to include three additional executives from independent YMCAs in Wyoming and Nebraska.

Action Research Model

As the researcher was not an employee of the YMCA, the entry, contracting, and withdrawal steps needed to be clearly defined. Many research models are similar, but for these reasons, the Gill (Gill & Johnson, 2002) model was the most suitable action research model for this project. The Gill model (Gill & Johnson, 2002) outlines six stages for action research. These stages include entry, contracting, diagnosis, action, evaluation, and withdrawal (Table 1). This model stresses an iterative approach where the diagnosis, action, and evaluation stages are repeated as many times as appropriate when applied to a specific problem or situation. This approach was applicable to the YMCA, as this allowed the collaborative group to be agile in dealing with new information from the research and from the results of the actions taken. It was also appropriate because it allowed the project to change as needed because of the quickly changing IT industry and also in an ever changing non-profit business climate.

Table 1

Gill's Action Research Model (1986)

Stage	Activity
Stage 1	Entry
Stage 2	Contracting
Stage 3	Diagnosis
Stage 4	Action
Stage 5	Evaluation
Stage 6	Withdrawal

Note: From *Research Methods for Managers* (p. 76), by J. Gill and P. Johnson, 2002, London; Sage Publications

Data Gathering Methods

Three methods of data collection were used in order to attain method triangulation. Method triangulation is the use of a multifaceted approach in research in order to identify gaps or biases, as well as to stimulate further thought and analysis (Patton, 2002). Patton stresses that each research method has limitations and strengths, and by using triangulation, the researcher will look at both quantitative and qualitative data. The value of triangulation is through checking one data-gathering method with another, the result being that the data are more complete (Mason, 2002). The three methods chosen for this project included collecting historical data, a survey of YMCA executives, and interviews with a subset of those surveyed.

Secondary data. McNamara (1999) declares that historical data is useful in gaining a perspective of the situation and organization. He also believes that secondary data capitalizes on work previously done, and it did not interrupt the client's routine. The historical data for this

project included two surveys done by the Director of MIS at the YMCA of Metropolitan Denver in 2003. One survey quantified the number of users and devices. These data include information from Denver, Boulder, Longmont, and Pueblo YMCAs. These data were relevant to this project because cost of the IT solutions depends on the number of users and devices. Typically IT hardware, software, and service prices decrease when the volume of the purchase increases.

The second source of secondary data was a comparison of prices for Blackbaud (the favored accounting software identified by the MIS Director to purchase in 2005) when used and supported internally compared to the ASP options. These data were validated and combined with quotes on other software including accounting, desktop (Microsoft Office), and email software.

No written historical data was available on any of the IT committee collaborative efforts prior to the start of this project. Minutes were not kept, nor emails retained, since the meetings were informal. This information was gathered through interviews with the Director of MIS.

Surveys. A survey is a "method of collecting information directory from people about their ideas, feelings, health, plans, beliefs, and social, education, and financial background" (Fink & Kosecoff, 1998). A survey is especially suited for the job of assisting a researcher in gathering information from a large number of people in different locations. Surveys are more practical to use than interviews when the respondents are geographically dispersed. The respondents in this project were scattered throughout the Rocky Mountain region, and for this reason, email surveys were used. The surveys were designed to insure that the questions were not biased and that the intent of each question was understood in the same way by all those surveyed. There were no questions on the surveys that could not be acted upon. The respondents were targeted individuals, rather than randomly selected from the entire population of YMCA employees. With approval from the collaborative group, 14 Branch Executives, Membership Directors, and Office

Managers were invited to respond to the survey. These people were the decision makers of the organization, and also were the users who needed the information that could be gained from new computer systems. As cost was one of the key issues in this project, the opinions of those accountable for the budget were vital to clarifying the issues being investigated through the survey.

The intent of the survey was to gather current opinions from the staff of the YMCA on their IT needs and their feelings about collaboration as well as their willingness to commit to ongoing support of a collaborative solution. Email was used because it could be delivered immediately, and responded to immediately with no delay for mailing or postage concerns. However, using email, because of the overload of spam in a users inbox, can get overlooked or inadvertently deleted.

A cover letter accompanied each survey, in order to introduce the purpose of the survey. The cover letter informed those surveyed that their responses would be pooled together. The cover letter also let the respondents know that the collaborative team would review the results and that each participant would be sent the tabulated results. This set clear expectations. Those surveyed were asked to return the survey within one week. The researcher collected the surveys and tallied the information.

Two surveys were completed. An effort was made to test for and assure content validity. Content validity determines if the survey is measuring what was intended to be measured. A class of graduate students, a faculty advisor, and the YMCA MIS Director pre-tested the first survey to help create questions that were direct and clear. This in effect is a test for content validity. Thereafter the first survey was distributed to seven members of the collaborative team. The resulting data from of the collaborative team's survey were important because these

respondents were part of the YMCA organization and had been central to the historical IT discussions and decisions. The committee members completed the survey and were also used as a pre-test group for the second survey. They were asked to comment on how to improve the survey. Their comments were discussed and the appropriate changes were made. The main survey change was adding a question that asked the respondent to indicate their opinion about the most important driver of the software choice being cost or function. The response set for this single item was changed from "Strongly Agree" through "Strongly Disagree," to a five-point continuum with cost on one side and function on the other. The point of this modification was to help determine if the respondent was willing to give up software functionality to save money. This change reflected the choices facing anyone purchasing IT software, hardware, and services because it costs more as functionality or features are added. The second survey was distributed via email to the selected14 Executives, Membership Directors, and Office Managers. The second survey more clearly stated what we were intending to measure, but this researcher can not claim it had true content validity without more diligence spent on the development and testing.

The main limitation of using a survey is that a survey is a one-way communication. Often further investigation is required to obtain qualitative information, and so it makes sense to pair the survey with follow-up interviews.

The survey results were tallied and distributed to the survey respondents and then the collaborative team met to interpret the information. A conference call was used because of committee member's time limitations and their distributed locations. The researcher summarized the results of each survey following Cummings & Worley's (1997) properties for effective feedback, including making the feedback "relevant, understandable, descriptive, verifiable,

timely, limited, significant, comparative, and unfinalized" so the committee could be spurred to action.

Interviews. An interview is a good research tool when a deeper understanding of the issues and problems is needed than may be exposed in a survey (Fink & Kosecoff, 1998). An interview can also help to identify potential solutions. With the information gathered from the survey, the collaborative group created a list of seven executives to question further. These included two executives from the Denver Metropolitan YMCA, and five from other independent Rocky Mountain region YMCAs. Executives only were chosen, because of their decision-making responsibilities, as well as their big picture knowledge of the IT systems in place and the needs at their YMCA. Interviews were written based on the results of the surveys to gain a deeper insight into the issues.

Fink & Kosecoff (1998) suggest that face-to-face communication gives the interviewer more information than a phone interview, but because of interviewee time limitations, geographic location and travel cost, phone interviews were chosen as the best option. The researcher conducted one-on-one phone interviews. At the beginning of the interview, the interviewees were told that their responses would be compiled with those of other respondents and their answers would not be attributed to them directly, unless they specifically requested to be identified. To set clear expectations, the interviewer communicated that the compiled results would be reviewed by the collaborative team and also mailed to each interviewee.

The organization and presentation of the feedback by this researcher was a key step in the diagnosis phase. This critical step helps form the client's ownership of the data (Cummings & Worley, 1997). The data was organized into main categories and presented first to the MIS director, and then to the collaborative team.

Results

Secondary data. The historical data gathered showed how the YMCA staff had quantified

the number of users and devices from Denver, Boulder, Longmont, and Pueblo YMCAs. This

indicated the numbers from which to obtain baseline software pricing. There were 187 users of

IT services at the YMCA of Metropolitan Denver. Further questioning with the MIS Director

indicated that the number of users in 2005 would drop to 175. The number of users was relevant

because the software cost in this case was based on the number of users and not the number of

hardware devices. The number of users could also be used as a baseline for comparison and

pricing with all software vendors, and was also valuable information in determining estimate

costs for other IT services including ASPs and hardware. The secondary data gathered also

provided the budgeted numbers of users expected to use Blackbaud which was the favored

accounting software identified by the MIS Director to purchase in 2005. The data also provided

the expected number of users requiring desktop operating software. The annual budgeted number

of people to use BlackBaud was 35 in Denver, expanding to 72 when including Longmont,

Pueblo, and Boulder. This information gave a baseline for pricing of the software when

supported internally compared to the ASP options. A price comparison was done for 5 different

types of operating software. Although the specific software choice was out of the scope of this

project, the potential benefit of collaboratively purchasing the software or using it on a

collaborative ASP platform was relevant.

Surveys. The first and second survey results were reviewed and other IT actions were

reported and discussed. Of the 14 committee members, 9 participated in the discussion about

both surveys. On the collaboration questions (Figure 1), the respondents overwhelmingly showed

commitment to a quarterly meeting and support for the IT committee with one hundred percent

agreeing or strongly agreeing to attend a quarterly meeting and participate in the committee activities. Eighty-six percent understood the benefit of the IT committee at the time of the survey. However, the IT charter was not clear to the IT committee surveyed. Only 29 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the IT charter was clear and 71% were neutral on this issue.

Figure 1.
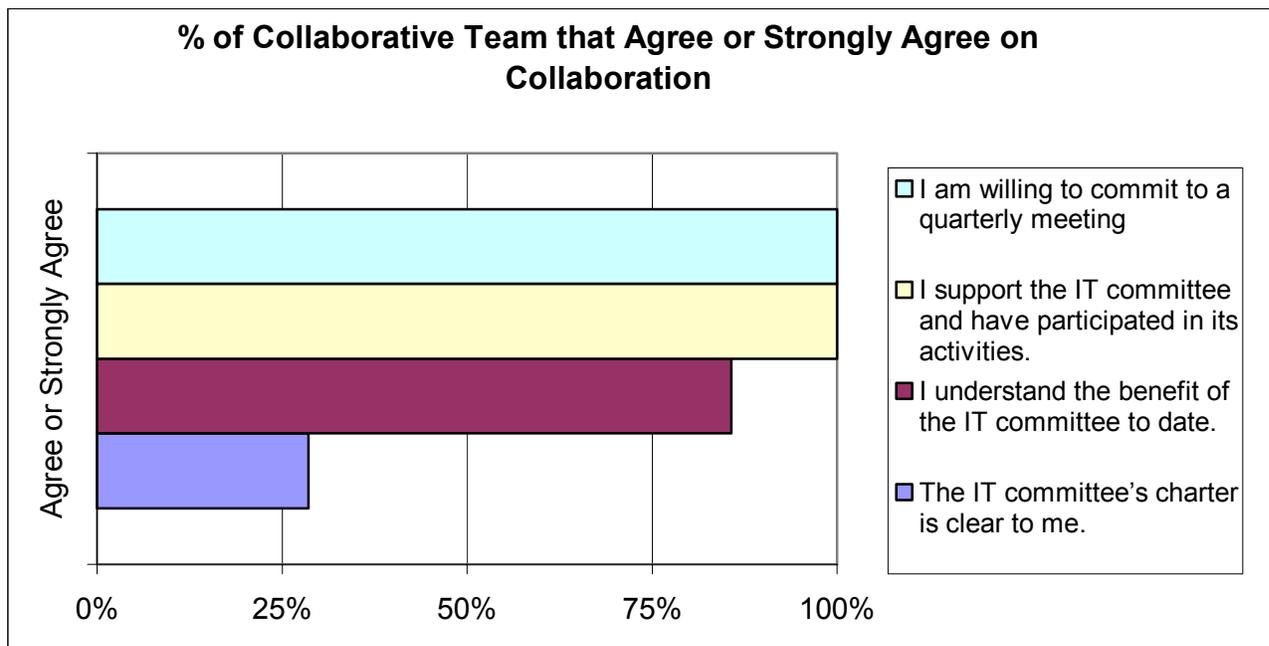
The collaborative team was also asked about technology issues on the first survey (Figure 2). When asked about technology issues, 100 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they needed to know the complete costs of IT solutions including system and costs per user before making any commitment to using them. Only 29 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they were most concerned about desktop computer hardware, whereas 100 percent were most concerned with membership, accounting, and HR software. They unanimously agreed that the current IT was neither adequate for today or for the next five years. Fourteen percent of the collaborative team

respondents wanted to manage the IT in-house, 29 percent were neutral, and 56 percent did not want to manage IT with their own staff at their YMCA.

Figure 2.
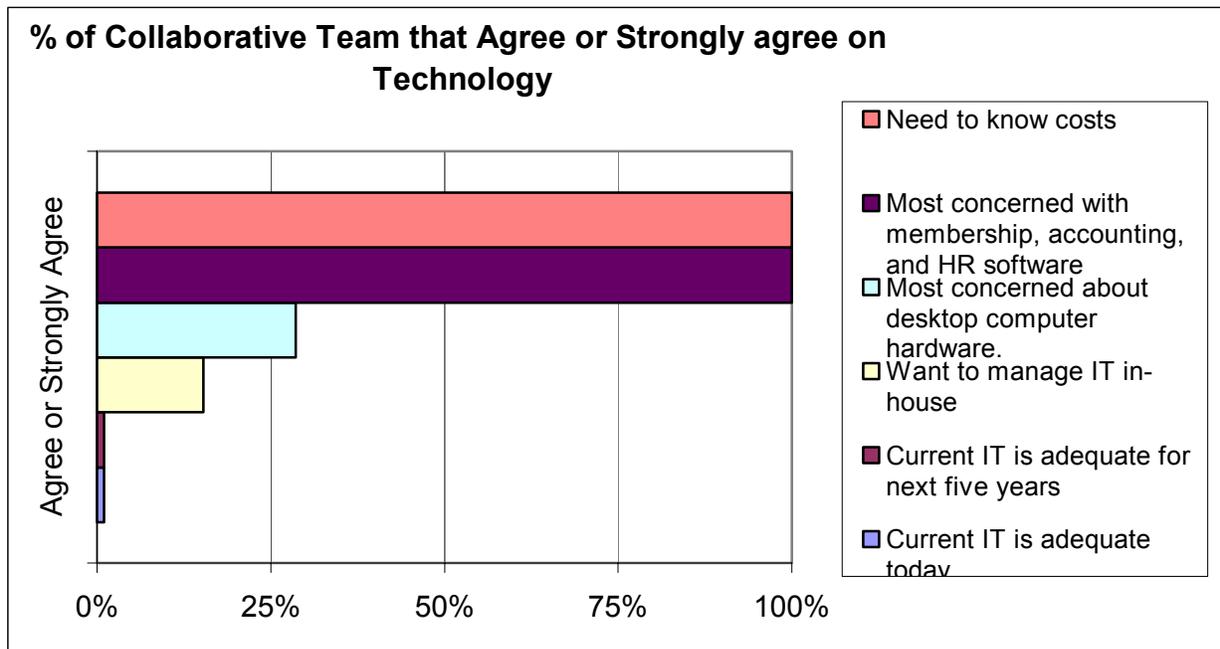
Business representatives including executive directors, membership directors, and office managers were the respondents in the second survey (Figure 3). Data gathered by the second survey came from 7 surveys returned out of the 14 sent, for a response rate of 50 percent. The same collaborative questions were asked of this group as of the first survey of collaborative team members and the answers were more scattered among the choices. Eighty-six percent were willing to commit to a quarterly meeting. Twenty-nine percent had participated in some way in the IT committee at the time of the survey. This survey did not specify the type of participation by the respondents. Forty-three percent of the executive directors, membership directors, and office managers felt they understood the benefit of the IT committee to date, while 14 percent felt the IT committee's charter was clear.

Figure 3.

% of Business Representatives that Agree or Strongly agree on Collaboration

Legend:
- ☐ I am willing to commit to a quarterly meeting
- ☐ I support the IT committee and have participated in its activities.
- ■ I understand the benefit of the IT committee to date.
- ☐ The IT committee's charter is clear to me.
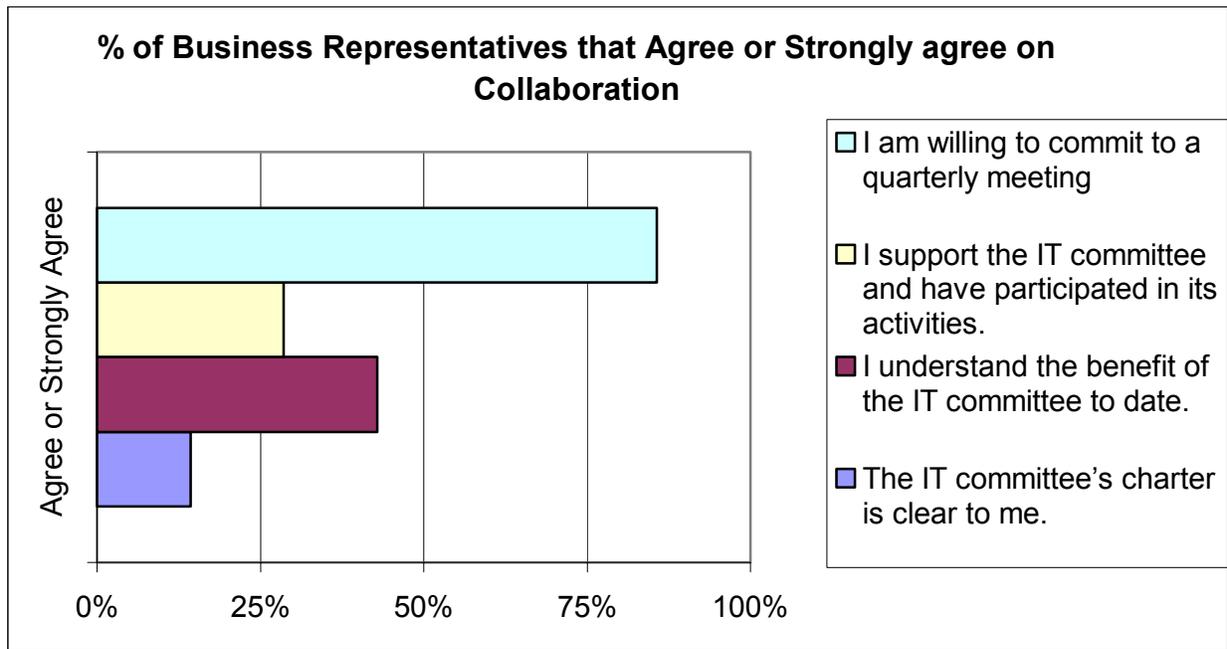
Executive directors, membership directors, and office managers also responded to technology questions on the second survey (Figure 4). One hundred percent felt they needed to know the cost of the systems per location and per user. Certainly in this cost conscious environment there would be emphasis on the need to clearly understand the potential costs and cost options. The executive directors, membership directors and office managers agreed by 100 percent that they were most concerned with membership, accounting, and human resource software. Seventy-one percent agreed or strongly agreed that they were most concerned about desktop hardware. Not one of the respondents wanted to manage IT in-house, meaning they did not want to hire YMCA staff or assign IT duties to current staff. Respondents wanted to hire other companies whose core focus and expertise was on IT issues, rather than develop and manage IT competency in-house. None of the executive directors, membership directors, and office managers felt IT at their YMCA was adequate for the next five years. Fourteen percent of the respondents felt their current IT was adequate.
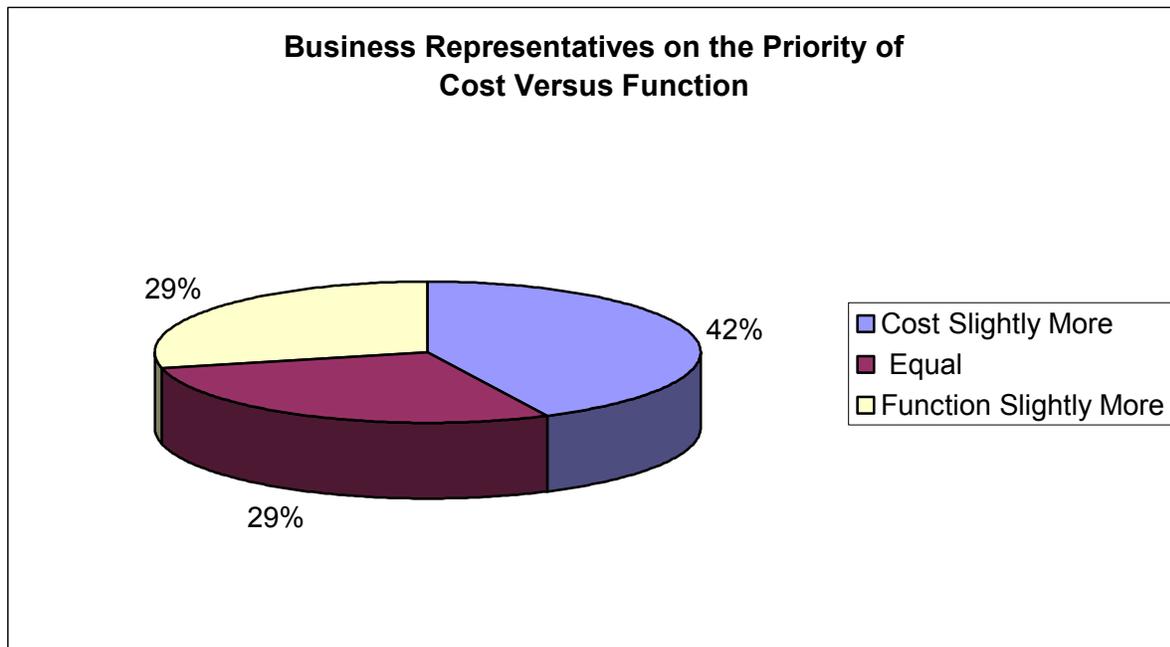
Figure 4.

% of Business Representatives that Agree or Strongly Agree on Technology

Legend:
- Need to know costs
- Most concerned with membership, accounting, and HR software
- Most concerned about desktop computer hardware.
- Manage IT in-house
- Current IT is adequate for next five years
- Current IT is adequate today

Y-axis: Agree or Strongly Agree

X-axis: 0%, 20%, 40%, 60%, 80%, 100%
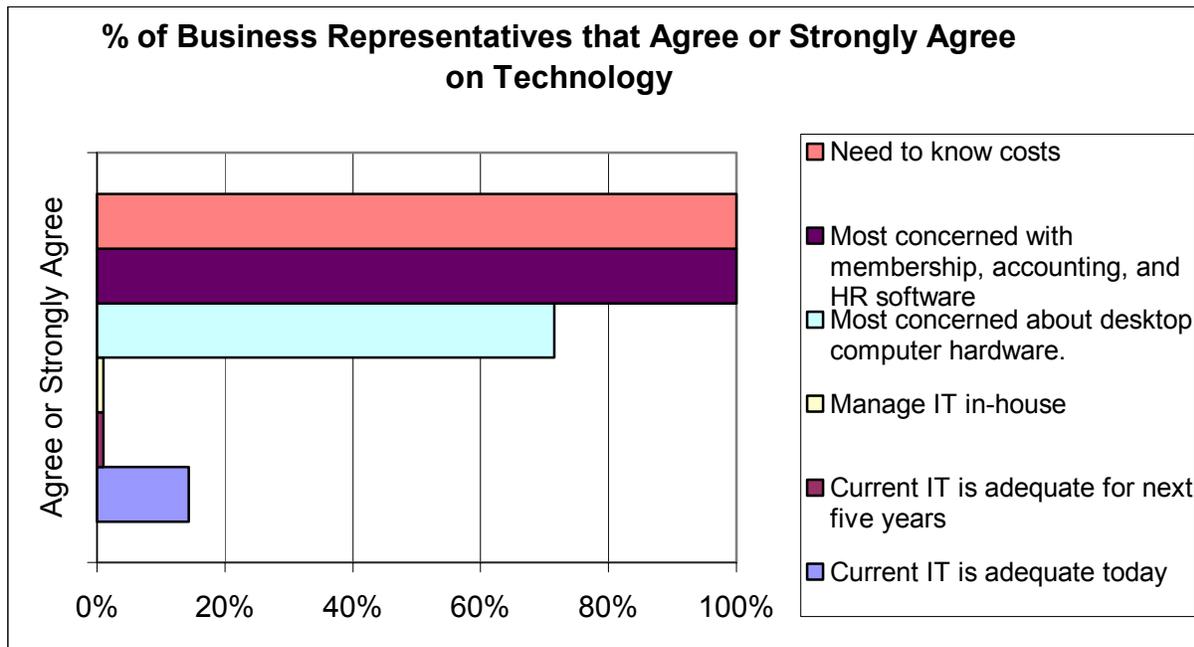
In the first survey of the collaborative team, 43 percent agreed or strongly agreed that cost was the most important issue in the selection of technology. A second question was asked about the importance of functionality and 86 percent rated it as the most important issue in the selection of technology. The collaborative team had representation from a YMCA IT resource person, YMCA youth sports program management, and a YMCA of the USA resource. The collaborative team also had representation that overlapped the second survey group including one membership director/office manager and two executive directors. In the second survey of executive directors, membership directors and office managers, the respondents were asked a single question where they had to choose between the importance of cost or functionality in the selection of new technology. In this survey where executive directors, membership directors and office managers were forced to choose cost or functionality rather than answer two questions independently as in the first survey, 42 percent of the respondents indicated that cost was slightly

more important. Twenty-nine percent rated them equal, and twenty-nine percent felt function

was slightly more important (Figure 5).

Figure 5.

Business Representatives on the Priority of Cost Versus Function

42%

29%

29%

- Cost Slightly More
- Equal
- Function Slightly More

The comments on the first survey of the collaborative team included one person

clarifying that they did not know the committee had a charter, and another that they did not want

their own IT personnel. One comment was a request to modify the survey for the business

representatives to assign a value to the cost versus functionality questions. There was only one

comment returned from the business representatives on survey two and it stated that the current

system was cumbersome and a new IT direction was needed for the YMCA to keep up with

technology in order to attain future goals. This was interpreted as a call for an increase in

attention and resources for IT systems.

Interviews. Of the seven executives selected as interview respondents, six participated for

a response rate of 86 percent. The executive who did not participate reported not having time to

respond, but wanted to keep informed of the progress on the project. The six respondents were two Denver Metropolitan executives, one Wyoming executive, and three Colorado independent YMCA executives. The three Colorado independent YMCA executives represented two smaller local community YMCAs, and one multiple branch YMCA.

Interview results were summarized using content analysis. Content analysis is defined by Cummings & Worley (1997) as "an attempt to summarize comments into meaningful categories." This summarization was appropriate for the YMCA interviews because it reduced the answers and comments into themes and trends that could then be used to determine a diagnosis. The major categories of interview responses discussed were nonprofit issues, IT issues, and collaboration issues.

The interviews showed the key issues that impact the YMCA as a nonprofit were limited resources, tighter budgets, and the fact that they tend to put their resources into people or programs more than technology. The smaller YMCAs felt they had fewer resources than the larger YMCAs or the Denver Metropolitan YMCA. The smaller YMCA executives gave examples of how Denver did not always have the same limitations that they did because Denver had, or appeared to have, more resources.

One IT issue identified by interview respondents was that the current systems limited the way the YMCA was managed. Most executives interviewed understood that technology in their branch needed to be replaced or upgraded, but most did not know the best way to go about it.

The same theme seen in the survey arose in the interviews where executives felt functionality and cost were both important issues in selecting IT systems. There was support for focusing on functionality because lessons were learned with one organization that had purchased software that ended up not meeting their needs. This resulted in money wasted. Most felt it was

important to make a needs-based, value-based decision. It was very clear that the full cost:benefit of the software they currently used had not been understood, and that more time should be spent on this with new systems so the same mistake was not repeated. One executive felt if he found software with the right functionality, then he could find the money. One executive felt he was not willing to spend a lot of money on software. He preferred a cheaper solution that could give him the basic functions.

According to interview respondents, collaboration occurred both among YMCAs and between the YMCA and other organizations. Collaboration was seen in training programs, marketing, and networking among people. The Colorado YMCAs had banded together on some statewide issues including child obesity and hiring a legislative lobbyist. The executives had learned lessons from collaborating with other YMCAs and community based organizations and volunteers. There needed to be a shared vision, and clear expectations of what was going to be done by each party, and clear goals. Several executives felt that Denver was a powerful, and sometimes overbearing, partner in the Rocky Mountain region. Denver needs were not always the same as other smaller YMCAs. A common theme throughout the interviews revolved around control issues. Most respondents were concerned with meeting the needs of their community and association first, and that those needs did not necessarily match with other YMCAs. Their commitment was to their YMCA, and if collaboration benefited their YMCA then they were supportive of working together.

The potential of collaborating on IT issues was seen very positively with the most emphasized benefit being cost savings. The second most mentioned priority was the ability to share training, and to back each other up when problems would arise. One person suggested starting a user group. Sharing best practices would also be an expected benefit of collaborating.

The benefits to the customers, who at the YMCA are the members, would include easier registration, and the ability to use the memberships at other YMCAs in the region. Executives felt there could be future benefits, like being notified of child predators, the ability to do online registration, being able to do donor research, or use membership participation profiles to target groups to sell additional programs.

Specific interview questions were asked to determine the priority of the IT responsibilities among the executive leadership. The commitment the executive director respondents and committee members indicated a willingness to meet on a monthly or quarterly basis to work on the IT issues. The caveat from several respondents was that they felt the IT committee needed some more direction, and they did not want to waste their time.

In the final part of the interview, interviewees were shown estimated costs for IT ASP and software solutions and then were asked to express their interest in using those IT solutions. All of the respondents were interested in using these solutions, if not immediately, at some later date. They appreciated having some hard numbers to review, and saw the potential cost savings that could be found by collaborating. The collection of each YMCA's current IT situation and their short term plans, for the first time, gave the collaborative team a good understanding of the region's status in this area.

<div align="center">Discussion</div>

The summarized survey results were reviewed at collaborative committee meetings. The members were very busy with their other YMCA responsibilities and it was difficult to get them all together, even on a conference call. One meeting took several attempts to get 50 percent participation. This lack of time and focus for the IT committee was a good example of the challenge faced at the YMCAs. One conclusion agreed upon by the collaborative team was that

the lower response rate for the survey of the business representatives could have been because of the same issues that they faced, including lack of focus on IT solutions with other priorities taking precedence. It could also have been lower because email was used, and some participants may not have been regular email users or comfortable with responding in this way.

The survey results indicate that the purpose of the IT Committee was not clearly defined to the YMCA staff or to the committee itself. This could be why only twenty-nine percent of the collaborative team surveyed strongly agreed that they would participate in a quarterly meeting and 71 percent agreed. These were the members of the committee who had already been meeting on an as needed basis. Twenty-nine percent of the respondents to the second survey of executive directors, membership directors, and office managers strongly agreed to participate in a quarterly meeting with 57 percent agreeing, and 14 percent neutral. This could also have been because of the lack of understanding of the purpose and goals that would be included in a charter for this committee. The 86 percent of the executive directors, membership directors, and office managers agreeing to participate showed support for a collaborative effort on the topic of technology, with one hundred percent commitment from the staff who had already been involved with the committee.

The responses to the survey showed that in-house IT staff was not desired by most respondents, perhaps indicating that a hosted option should be pursued in which a vendor would manage the systems. One respondent to the survey identified a desire for in-house IT. This comment was attributed to the one YMCA in the region there was more technology in-house and already employed and IT staff. This was the exception, as all other YMCAs did not have in-house staff or technology supported by in-house staff.

Based on the conversations with the MIS Director, this researcher expected to see the cost versus functionality responses showing the greatest concern for cost, but this was not the case. The costs versus functionality questions in the first survey were asked differently than in the second survey. This was because the real intent of the question was to determine whether the respondent was willing to give up functionality to save money, so the second survey was refined to help gather this information. However, some of the respondents to the second survey may have interpreted the questions to mean choosing a cheap solution without the right functionality and they determined this was not appropriate. When the questions were asked separately, respondents were not forced to make that choice. In the first survey where the priority questions were asked separately, with 43 percent of the collaborative team rating cost as the most important, and 86 percent rated functionality as the most important. However, functionality and cost were not compared, and it could not be determined whether the respondents, if forced to choose, would give up functionality for a lower cost. The second survey was changed to force this choice. In the second survey, 43 percent of the respondents indicated that cost was slightly more important, 29 percent rated them equal, and 29 percent felt function was slightly more important (Figure 5). The interview results clarified that both functionality and cost was important. They also showed the differing opinions, with one person wanting the best functions and willing to pay more, and another willing to give up functionality to get the lowest cost solutions.

The way the YMCA staff is organized into departments, teams, or functional groups, as observed by this researcher throughout the years, affected the functionality of the group and the success of specific goals. IT functionality at the YMCA is affected by the group design. Cummings and Worley (1997) say group design includes core activity, structural, measurement,

and human resource systems, as well as organizational culture. Core activity refers to the group's task. At the YMCA, the staff task in reference to technology is to define and manage IT systems and software so that it balances the most value to the organization at the minimum cost. The structural system specifies the coordination required to achieve this goal. This researcher observed that staff dedicated to IT at most YMCAs was very minimal, and the emphasis of hiring IT savvy staff as a secondary skill was not a priority. Because of budgetary restraints, staff time allocated to this project was minimal because of other priorities. This could be the cause of the slow progress of the committee, which was difficult to gather for meetings, and difficult to get time to focus on IT issues since all but one of them had other fulltime jobs at the YMCA. It could also be part of the root cause for any IT systems upgrades and enhancements to be delayed.

Measurement of job performance at the YMCA is done by human resource appraisal by the employee's manager and reward systems like merit increases are based on this appraisal. One reason the priority for IT issues had been so low is that only one person in the entire Rocky Mountain region was evaluated on their performance in regard to IT issues. The one person, the Director of MIS, was not evaluated on the Rocky Mountain region progress, but only on the Denver Metropolitan YMCA. Finally, organizational culture was considered, and observations were based on the researchers experience with the YMCA organization. Even in the Metropolitan association, the YMCA is a bottom-up organization. Initiative, ingenuity, and priorities are set and rewarded at the local level. This makes it difficult to take on state and regional responsibilities like collaborative IT improvements.

Cummings & Worley (1997) define the design components that influence the team effectiveness as goal clarity, task structure, composition, group functioning, and performance norms. They believe the main metric for determining groups' effectiveness is by measuring their

performance in controlling costs and improving quality. A team's effectiveness can also be measured in the groups' perceived quality of work life including work satisfaction, team cohesion, and organizational commitment. Based on discussions with the MIS Director and the researcher's experience with the YMCA, it was determined that the YMCA collaborative team's goal clarity and task structure had been very minimal. Before this project, the composition of the group had changed several times, and it had been a casual, unstructured group. The cost control or quality measurement had not been addressed. The commitment to working on and with the committee had not been reviewed.

The YMCAs commitment to technology can also be looked at from an individual staff level. Individual level diagnosis involves reviewing the specific job or position and combined in an overall measure of job enrichment. This includes the effect of organizational design, groups' design, and the personal characteristics of the jobholders (Cummings & Worley, 1997). The personal characteristics affecting the outputs in a job include age, education, experience and skills. The components of an individual job include skill variety, task identity, task significance, and autonomy. Based on the researcher's experience with the YMCA, it had been observed that the YMCA positions require a great deal of diversity in the range of activities and skills to perform their work. The IT portion of each individual YMCA staff member job including executives, membership directors, office managers, and program workers, is just a small part of their jobs, and requires voluntary involvement. Although the intentions of the staff in working to improve technology are good, the identity to this task and the task significance in relation to the other tasks performed is low. This was seen in interview responses including "Our resources are into people more than technology" and "The mentality when we think about IT - the choice is often IT solutions or helping kids in school – we help kids in school." Most YMCA jobs,

including the jobs for all respondents to the surveys and interviews, were highly autonomous. All YMCA employees have a great deal of latitude to choose their schedule, work goals, and outcomes. It was this researcher's observation that feedback and results were often indirect and ambiguous about the IT involvement, since it was a voluntary and often self-directed set of tasks.

The functioning of the collaborative team was addressed. One respondent wondered why the committee took so long to choose the BlackBaud accounting software. One reason was because no single person is dedicated to leading this effort, and because of that, other priorities caused delays. Another reason there was delay, was because of funding issues. Also, to come to collaborative solutions, it requires everyone to participate and to wade through the issues. Some people just wanted answers without being willing to do the work, and that hindered the process. The national YMCA representative gave some perspective to the committee. He was familiar with similar projects all over the US, and gave testimony that the Rocky Mountain region YMCAs were on the leading edge and working through the issues quite well compared with some of the other associations.

Conclusions. The diagnoses phase of the project uncovered three issues and these would need to be considered in the action phase. The first issue was the lack of technical expertise or experience in procuring, managing, and supporting IT systems among the staff at the YMCAs. Most corporations have a full staff for these support roles, but the YMCA of Metropolitan Denver had only one dedicated resource. The second issue was the lack of time, commitment, and priority put on the IT needs of the YMCA. These issues existed in an environment where the YMCA of Metropolitan Denver was downsizing and where two of the YMCA facilities had been recently sold. Money was so tight that a poor decision on a major IT system could put the Association at risk of additional closures. The lack of expertise, time, commitment, and priority

on IT needs, coupled with a tight financial environment were the significant considerations for the interventions recommended.

Interventions

The action phase is where interventions are planned and executed based on the findings in the diagnosis phase. After careful review and summarization of all data, this researcher worked primarily with the MIS director both in email and in face-to-face meetings to collaboratively develop the proposals.

Before these proposals could be considered, an immediate action was executed to help the YMCA understand the ASP offers available so decisions could be made in a timely manner about an expiring contract in Denver. A second parallel effort was happening during this project where accounting software was being evaluated and implemented in a pilot program at the Boulder YMCA. After these immediate issues were addressed, the more global issues were considered. The first problem discovered was the lack of technical expertise or experience in procuring, managing, and supporting IT systems. The second problem was the lack of time, commitment, and priority put on the IT needs of the YMCA. These problems all existed in an environment where cost and return on investment (ROI) was critical.

An immediate action was based on the outcome of the collaborative team meeting to review survey results. It was apparent that the most urgent need was for more information on the technical ASP options available. This information needed to be gathered and communicated. The MIS Director welcomed help comparing the different options for a hosted solution, and in understanding what was included and not included in the bids. The researcher created a hosted comparison data collection chart, and created a list of questions to send to the vendor, to help clarify the different options so they could be compared. The Director of MIS held meetings and

conference calls with four vendors over a period of three weeks. Because one of the goals for this project is to have the researcher withdraw and have the organization continue without assistance, two interviews were conducted with the MIS Director and the researcher together so that the vendor/company negotiations could be modeled. The MIS Director did the third interview alone. A final phone interview with a company from out of town was done to reinforce the vendor negotiation process. This gave the YMCA the information it needed to accurately compare the offerings of the ASP and hosting solutions. This comparison enabled the YMCA of Metropolitan Denver to sign a multi year contract for ASP services where the final cost provided significant savings over the current systems. It also included provisions for future collaboration such that additional YMCAs could join at a later date for a discounted rate.

Although specific software selection was out-of-scope of this project, the project was impacted because the people resources needed to select and pilot the software implementation were the same people who were on the IT collaborative team. A successful implementation of the proposed accounting software would give the committee a big step forward in credibility and in possibly bringing the other YMCAs together to share in that success. Near the end of this project, a vendor training session was complete, and the Boulder YMCA had installed the BlackBaud accounting software and was migrating and entering their data and testing. The Denver YMCA would follow in one month, and the Longmont YMCA may follow thereafter. This collaborative effort of the Boulder, Denver, and Longmont YMCA's was a good example of the benefits that could be realized. The cost savings for the shared price of the software and training by Boulder and Denver was significant, and communicated to the other YMCAs that they could also buy into this solution when they were ready. The BlackBaud vendor-led software training was shared by Denver and Boulder, reducing the price, and increasing the benefit

through shared solutions. For instance, the way Boulder decided to write their accounting codes helped Denver create theirs since they were very similar. The collaboration continued to benefit both YMCAs through the sharing of best practices with each other and through the shared discount and support form the vendor.

Three interventions were collaboratively developed with the MIS Director and proposed to the YMCA collaborative team as the outcome of this project. These interventions, if implemented, would mitigate the issues discovered during the diagnosis phase. The first intervention would be to hire a leader to champion the IT cause for 6 months to one year. This person's goals would be to formalize the functioning of the collaborative team, prepare software product review information and cost/benefit analysis for HR and membership applications, finalize the information and cost/benefit analysis of the ASP solution, and to help manage a smooth transition of these duties back the current YMCA staff. The success of this would depend on finding creative solutions to fund this position. Some suggestions included finding a company to lend or donate an employee, to get a corporate donation to cover the staff salary, or to pool money from all Rocky Mountain YMCA organizations to share the cost.

The second proposal was to work with volunteers with IT and IT vendor negotiation expertise. Because the YMCA is a volunteer based organization, this could be effective if done well. This would begin with training for the YMCA staff on how to effectively identify and use volunteers in this capacity. A lean IT committee of volunteers would be developed to execute some of the vender negotiations and selection criteria and provide expert advice. A small representative group of YMCA staff would act as liaisons with the rest of the YMCA to collect and share information to make sure needs were being met by the proposed IT solutions.

The third intervention would be to outsource all of IT to a company with the capability of serving the entire Rocky Mountain region YMCAs. The target company would need to meet specific criteria and provide their services at a modest price. The target company would need to provide full support of critical systems on a 7x24 basis, and user support during business hours. They would host and maintain all servers and network connections. They would provide all hardware and software used at the YMCAs. They would work closely with the YMCA liaisons to assure needs are being met. One company that was currently providing remote support and hosting for the YMCA of Metropolitan Denver was capable of doing this, and there were other companies around the region who focus on this type of service. Each YMCA could buy in to all or part of this service, with the cost savings passed on to all.

The collaborative team discussed and created a list of how success of any implemented solutions would be measured. This included looking for cost benefit, and sharing of support and training. The success would be seen by the ability to serve the community better, and by spending less time, people, and money resources on IT support while getting a greater return for the efforts. The success could also be measured by the ability to get information such as class rosters and schedules created more efficiently as compared against the baseline of how long it took to create them in the past. Creating reports was cumbersome at the time of this project, and could require the MIS director to run the reports. Reports were often not done at all because of the time and effort required to get the information needed. Ultimately the end effect of successful IT collaboration and system implementation would be the customer benefit. The customer would have a better experience through quick registration at each facility, or gain convenience with the ability to register over the Internet.

It is important to try to quantify the success of these programs as the IT work continues past the end of this project. To measure this success, the IT committee will look at the membership retention rate. A membership retention program was in place at the time of this project, but was not fully utilized because of the current IT limitations. This included a program to mail a birthday card, or membership anniversary card after 30 days and one year to members including promotions and offers. The improved class participation rate within the membership will be measured, including the amount programs being cross-sold. One cross-selling example could be that the average family membership participates in 3 classes or sports per year. The goal would be to get them to sign up for additional programs by marketing to target groups. A family with preteens who participate in basketball may also sign up for a summer sports camp they learn about through a targeted direct mail campaign.

Collaboration advantages could be measured by keeping a record of the vendor training and support shared amongst YMCAs. The number of support occurrences given from one YMCA staff to another could measure the success of collaboration. This could be measured by surveys to the membership directors and office managers before and after each IT collaboration effort. This would measure the number of times ideas were shared and how often those tips and techniques gleaned from another YMCA staff member were useful.

Project Evaluation

The evaluation stage began with the researcher's review of the personal project journal and reflection on the team and the personal learning and growth taken place throughout the project. The major learning took place in three areas.

First, the goals and timeline of the researcher were not the goals and timeline of the YMCAs, so the project took three times the estimated duration first established. The project had

to run the course, and fit into the schedules of the collaborative team. To get better participation, the meetings were rescheduled, and one was aborted because of lack of participation. This, too, was a symptom of the incredible time pressure on YMCA staffs that had been cut to a very lean number of individuals to do the full job of running the YMCA facilities and programs.

The second area of learning involved a personal struggle. This researcher had worked for the YMCA during a more lucrative and growing period. It was difficult to see the challenges for the current staff and their severe financial limitations. It was frustrating to see the lack of volunteer and community support of the IT operations. That does not mean the YMCA does not have volunteer support, because the community is a great supporter of the YMCA, and there is a great deal of highly successful volunteer involvement. Volunteer support was lacking in the IT area. When volunteers were used at one YMCA to help select a software product, the product ended up not working as expected, and was considered a failure. One explanation was that the volunteers lacked the understanding of the true needs of the staff, and the staff did not have the intimate knowledge of the IT systems to be able to effectively communicate what was needed. These two differing perspectives are what many IT professionals struggle with on a regular basis, and accurate needs analysis is a very specialized and complex business. This researcher's pro-volunteer perspective was because she has seen many successful volunteers, at the YMCA and at other organizations, which had proven to help accomplish great things. The expansion of resources that good volunteer support could bring to the YMCA could solve many of the problems. It does take time to manage these volunteers, and the same issue of limited staff time has stopped the staff from initiating this effort.

Another area of personal learning on this project was that patience must be employed. To get the best results possible, you have to wade through the process. This was true when setting

meetings, because they were often delayed in order to get more participation. Also, managing schedules required delay so that one effort could be completed before another began. As a director of an IT team, this researcher was used to having more control over schedules and priorities, and so this was a learning experience. It also caused this researcher to try and minimize the time taken by the collaborative meetings. This was a great disservice, because in order encourage good will, cooperation, and team identity, a group needs to spend time together struggling to define and interpret the important issues and to cooperatively emerge with the answers.

The final and most life changing personal learning resulted from a great lesson in leadership. The whole action research process should not centered on the leader or driven by the leader, but rather the leader should be keeper of the process and become the servant. The results of this project could have been even greater if more time was spend on encouraging and developing the cooperation of the peripheral participants in the group, rather than driving for quick result with the natural leaders. In the collaborative meetings, many times this leader gave the interpretations and answers and then asked for feedback. This leadership style is sometimes necessary in the IT world to gather support of a team to rally behind a new project. However, in this case the whole project would have benefited from soliciting answers from the collaborative team and listening to others ideas and answers.

The collaborative team reviewed the project success by looking at the participation of the YMCAs through reviewing the response rate to the survey, the number of people engaged in the ongoing meetings, and the communication and involvement with the IT issues among the different YMCAs. 100 percent of the IT collaborative team participated in the first survey, and 50 percent of the Executives, Membership Directors, and Office Managers participated in the

second survey. The main conclusion among the collaborative team about this low participation in the second survey was lack of time available and priority focused on IT issues. Five out of six of the executives slated for interview participated. This higher percentage was because this researcher was tenacious in tracking down the individuals and encouraging them to participate. In order to get one interviewee to participate, it took three emails, two phone calls, two rescheduled appointments, and one missed appointment before he was finally interviewed. This also points to the lack of time available and priority focused on IT issues.

The participation in the collaborative team meetings grew as the project progressed. This is because some Rocky Mountain YMCAs had been inadvertently excluded previously were identified and asked to participate. The current state of the IT systems and short-term goals of each YMCA was identified and shared for the first time. The excitement about the potential improvement that IT solutions could bring to each YMCA was growing, as seen in the interviews and at the meetings. Better ways communicate and collaborate on IT issues among the YMCAs was discussed at the collaborative team meetings. Commitment was made to be more inclusive by sending emails to communicate when progress was made at each YMCA, and inviting others to participate in software evaluation site visits. IT issues would be included on the agendas at the standard meetings including the Wyoming State Alliance in May and September, the Colorado State Alliance that is three times per year, and the September key leaders conference at Snow Mountain Ranch that includes Colorado, Scottsbluff, Nebraska, and Cheyenne, Wyoming.

The project evaluation by the collaborative team was done by reviewing the goal of the project, which was to explore options for collaboration around IT needs. They were asked if they consider this effort to be successful. The progress was thought to be successful. Progress was seen by clarification of what each Y was doing for software, hardware, and support. Useful

information was gathered about what the respondents wanted, what they felt was important, and their problems and issues. Communication between the YMCA staff increased and a plan was made for continuing communication on IT issues. More collaboration was occurring and trust was developing between the larger and smaller YMCA associations in the IT arena and other areas, too. The committee began creating an understanding that the collaboration attempt was not a Denver dynasty, but an attempt to help all YMCAs become most successful. The project assisted in the selection of the best ASP vendor for the YMCA of Metropolitan Denver. The BlackBaud software rollout was done during the project period in Boulder and Denver with preferred pricing, saving an additional 25 percent on the software and 40 percent on training and support services because of the collaboration.

Finally, the collaborative team evaluated if the YMCAs were poised to continue implementing solutions after the researcher was gone. The collaborative team was positioned to continue implementing solutions because the group planned to be on the agendas at all the state and regional meetings. This would help carry forth the momentum as well as increase awareness and communication among the YMCAs. Travel plans were set for representatives from the Rocky Mountain Region to visit North American YMCAs for a review of membership software including Klass, Unity, and Daxco software at the Calgary, Indianapolis, and South Hampdon Road (VA) YMCAs.

The withdrawal stage is the end of the contracting for the researcher. It is also the setup and review of the ongoing plan for the continuation of the learned or changed behavior at the YMCA after the researcher is gone. This was achieved at a final meeting with the Director of MIS. It was agreed that the objectives of the problem statement were met, and to further the benefit after the researcher's withdrawal from the organization, the researcher encouraged the

institutionalization of some of the learning. This included periodic IT updates and evaluations on a maximum three-year cycle. It included encouraging continued IT collaboration meetings including an annual review and update of the IT Committee's mission, goals and objectives.

The YMCA had faced many challenges over its 160-year history. It was facing tight financial times and needed to utilize IT systems most efficiently and cost effectively. An action research project concerning the collaboration of the Rocky Mountain YMCAs regarding their IT system solutions was executed. The Gill model (Gill & Johnson, 2002) was followed using action research principles, and three data collection methods including: reviewing and collecting secondary data, survey results, and interviews. A collaborative effort among the 14 YMCAs in the Rocky Mountain region allowed them to work together toward appropriate solutions. Results were studied and interpreted and subsequently three different solutions were presented for consideration by executive management and the Board of Directors. The YMCA can continue to be a strong organization in the Rocky Mountain region communities, and this action research project will help prepare them to handle the current and future challenges.

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