Office 365 helps NetHope's virtual operations bring technology to developing nations

by M. Sharon Baker | Sep 23, 2013

When you help people in developing countries develop their job skills, find clean water, or put a roof over their heads, the last thing you want to do is waste time trying to find electricity or an Internet connection that works long enough to send an email.

You also don't want one of your far-flung colleagues to be the ad hoc IT person, administering a worldwide network from a server in their home. Yet for a couple of years, that's just what NetHope, a Washington, D.C. nonprofit did.

The nonprofit was founded when seven Chief Information Officers (CIO) of the world's largest humanitarian organizations decided that they couldn't individually solve every developing world technology problem and needed to work together. They then convinced the world's leading technology companies that rather than making individual contributions, they could have a bigger impact if the businesses worked together and side-by-side with NetHope.

Today, NetHope's team supports the technology outreach efforts of 39 humanitarian organizations, including Save the Children, Oxfam, CARE, the Red Cross, Plan, World Vision, Habitat for Humanity, Mercy Corps and The Nature Conservancy, among others, that work in 180 countries.

NetHope runs 20 to 25 programs annually, which range from setting up wireless networking to help communications in the world's largest refugee camp in Kenya to bringing remote access and Internet back to Haiti after its earthquake to teaching Rwandans how to become IT proficient to support the new infrastructure they build. (Watch videos of NetHope's work.)

When they aren't in the field, 35 team members operate out of their homes in Seattle, Los Angeles, Washington D.C., Geneva, Nairobi, and all points in between.

"Because we're a virtual organization, much of our collaboration happens through teleconferences and email. Very rarely do we get together face-to-face," says Frank Schott, NetHope interim President and Executive Director. Although steeped in technology-building efforts worldwide, the nonprofit doesn't have its own IT department, and for years operated on home computers and the public internet.

In NetHope's early days, team members used their own email systems, kept files on their local hard drives, and had to synchronize documents via their own disparate email systems where "integration between systems wasn't particularly elegant," says Schott.

Additionally, they had no central data repository or an administrative staff that could upload institutional knowledge when departing employees took the time to send it, which was rare.

NetHope jumped at the chance to be among the first to use the cloud-based Microsoft Office 365. Schott is excited that other nonprofits will now have access to Office 365 thanks to Microsoft's donation announcement earlier this month.

"NetHope's use of Office 365 touches just about every program in some way," says Schott, a former Microsoft employee and Microsoft Alumni Foundation Integral Fellow. "It's SharePoint for our electronic payments work in Indonesia where we collaborate around proposals, project plans, budgets and donor reports. It's Lync for cost effective voice communications during the Haiti emergency. And Outlook for asynchronous communications with project teams working on the NetHope Academy Intern Program in Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, Ghana and Haiti."

Schott no longer worries about lost knowledge or data or the time wasted when a new employee had to reconstruct and replicate successful interventions.

"With Office365, we have everything in one place, and I don't have to think anymore about the data or programs they were working on because we already have them."

Another important benefit of Office 365 "is that it flat out works and helps us accomplish a whole set of business objectives securely and reliably," Schott says. "We don't think our mission is to be experts in administering servers. Every minute we have to spend trying to get our IT to work is a minute we don't get to spend on our field programs.

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