

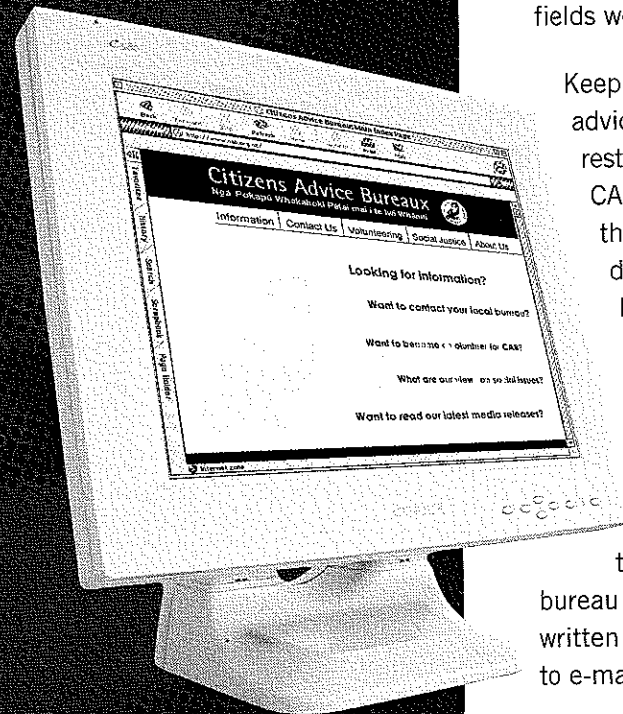
NZ Citizens Advice Bureaux

A long-established information and advice agency with branches in communities around New Zealand, CAB keeps its neighbourhood focus while using IT to keep information up-to-date and circulated regularly to their offices, and their website to inform the general public.

The first Citizens' Advice Bureau in New Zealand was set up in Ponsonby in 1970. Through the energy of local authority and community workers, advice centres spread rapidly throughout Auckland and then New Zealand, especially in urban and suburban areas, and a national association was formed by the mid-1970s. In 2001 there are 88 member bureaux with 2700 trained volunteers providing an enormous range of advice. National administration is provided by the head office in Wellington and the service fields well over half a million inquiries a year.

Keeping bureaux supplied with accurate and current advice in a time of social change and politically-driven restructuring has always been a challenge for the CABs. In the last four years, each bureau has replaced the previous manual card system with an electronic database containing local and national information. Local information is updated by a local bureau or group of bureaux. The national information is updated and emailed monthly to all bureaux.

None of this has been easy, given the unique nature of each bureau in its response to local needs and also the vast difference between them in resources and staffing. Getting every bureau into hardware capable of running the specially-written database software, and then getting them all on to e-mail, took two or three years.



Website www.cab.org.nz

Freephone 0800 FOR CAB (0800 367 222)

Contact Glenda McCallum or Ross Bell

Phone 04 382 8759

Facsimile 04 382 8647

Email cab.natnl@xtra.co.nz

The range of volunteers' ages and skills has also meant varying rates of IT take-up. Training in IT use so that it becomes a tool to help answer inquiries is challenging. In the year 2000, an IT officer was appointed at national level, alongside the existing information officer position. One part of the job is to support regional staff as they support bureaux in their area.

The CAB website went live in the latter part of 1999, and required significant resourcing. A grant from a major City Council, Telecom sponsorship and free hosting through Xtra enabled CAB to contract a website company, who also contributed considerable time at no cost to the Association, to design and build it.

Despite the CAB experience with information management, they acknowledge that they had no clear idea of what they wanted the website to do. Because of this, they ended up with a site more focused on web presence and public relations than on information for clients.

Since then, the website has been redeveloped. It is now more focussed on the site visitor who is looking for information, for example, about tenants' rights or what can be done about noisy neighbours. And it continues to inform the general public on the wide range of social issues the Association takes up based on client enquiries which are collated and analysed nationally. However, the creation of an "intranet" (a web-based information resource limited to authorised users with gateways, passwords and other security devices) may enable the national database to be placed online and updated continuously rather than distributed by email at defined intervals.

To operate through an intranet, all bureaux will need a separate phoneline with permanent internet connection – an expensive outlay, but one which is being established through the CAB's involvement with PowerSwitch, a service for consumers comparing power prices. It also requires good quality landlines, not always available to rural communities.

Useful tips

"Make sure people with technical know-how are used for the technical side of IT. Don't just graft the technical task on to another job (such as information officer) unless that person already has the training and the skills. Otherwise they will spend far too much time doing technical things ineffectively which others can do well and quickly."

"For a community-based service like CAB's, set up a committee combining people who know the organisation with people who know IT. Let the committee thrash out the issues and come up with policy and direction(s) before the project gets under way."



Key success factors:

- Recognise the disparities in skills and experience in both people and organisations, and accept that some workers take longer than others to accept new ideas and techniques.
- Don't let the fact that corporates and some government ministries have huge budgets to spend on website development put you off. With the right focus and a smart designer, great websites can be built on very small budgets.
- Build initial and on-going IT skills and software use into the training programme at regional level.

"We want to talk to the experts too soon, before we had sorted out what we ourselves wanted from the site. This meant lots of meetings, heavy time commitment by three of our staff, was frustrating and ate up the funds very quickly."