



Guide Dogs for the Blind: Side-by-side with digital and data

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Guide Dogs for the Blind has existed for almost 90 years, helping people with sight loss to live the life they choose. The charity recently went through a wide-reaching digital transformation, building its data and digital capabilities to support to those living with visual impairment better so they can live an active and independent life.

The data transformation project is part of an organisation-wide refresh to change the way it delivers its services. CIO Gerard McGovern and Caroline Carruthers, CEO of Carruthers and Jackson and lead data consultant on the project, spoke to DataIQ about the goals and opportunities for the programme.

DataIQ (DIQ): First of all, please tell us about the vision you are pursuing with the current transformation?

Gerard McGovern (GMG): With the advent of the digital age, Guide Dogs has the potential to help more people living with sight loss in the UK than ever before in our 86-year history. This also means our strategy is changing. We're looking to improve our digital offering and ultimately to be able to offer a better standard of care and support, as well as reaching more people than ever before.

DIQ: How is this vision being translated into a business strategy, specifically in terms of digital services and the enabling technology they require?

GMG: The use of digital services is a cornerstone of our "By my side" strategy, which aims to increase the number of people we support from 200,000 to 500,000 by 2023. From a business strategy point of view, this transformation will enable us to reach out and build a consistent and long-lasting relationship with donors.

We are doing this by reviewing the data we have about them and understanding how we can best serve them with content and information about the work we are doing. We know as much about someone as they're willing to tell us, and this transformation will help us to make sure we're using this information to best engage with them.

DIQ: And how is that being supported by the data strategy?

GMG: We have nearly a quarter of a billion records from communications we've sent people. The quality of the data is there to build a solid digital offering, but there's no use just growing that data for data's sake – we need to make the best use of it. Ultimately, we want to centralise that data and once we have all of that information in one place, it's much easier to deliver digital services and to get insights from that data.

Data also helps on the canine side of things, which I term DRM or dog relationship management. We're one of the largest breeders of guide dogs in the world, which means we also have a lot of good data on breeding, genomics and dog behaviour on our system. Developing a way of properly servicing and utilising this data will ensure we run a much more efficient organisation and ultimately improve our offering to those living with sight loss.

DIQ: What resources did you already have in place within Guide Dogs for the Blind to support the transformation? What additional resources have you needed to bring in?

GMG: I'm not afraid to say that we have one of the best data teams in the third sector, and they'd worked on a number of great projects across the organisation for individual departments. There was already a wealth of expertise and experience which, for these kinds of projects, is absolutely crucial.

What we lacked though, I think, was an understanding of how to translate those siloed projects into a strategy that spanned the entire organisation, and that's where bringing in some outside expertise like Carruthers and Jackson really helped.

Caroline Carruthers (CC): I think Gerard's right, the building blocks for a good data strategy were definitely there. But what the organisation needed was for its data team to get out of a project mindset focusing on just marketing or just donor relations, and understand that data offers an holistic business strategy.

DIQ: What does the roadmap look like in terms of milestones and end point - have you built in quick wins before you reach the target state?

GMG: This current stage of the project is set to be completed by next year, and our current "By my side" strategy is set to be completed in 2023. That being said, our data needs will always be changing and we will always need to innovate - the data journey and digital transformation won't ever end, and nor should it!

DIQ: How have the circumstances of 2020 impacted on your plan? And do you anticipate staying on track (or getting back on track) in 2021?

GMG: Covid-19 has really highlighted the importance of data. We've had to pivot to provide the same level of support and care, but in a digital way. Having the right data and digital services has enabled us to do this.

I actually think that it's a lesson and a way of operating that will carry through even post-pandemic. The remote capabilities of the organisation have improved massively because of the pandemic, and

that will ultimately enable us to give more choice to those that we help in the future in terms of how we provide support and care for them.

DIQ: Culture change is always one of the hardest parts of any transformation - how are you tackling this?

CC: One of the most important parts of a data transformation is securing buy-in from all corners of the organisation. It has to be a journey that everyone in the organisation comes on, otherwise it's almost certainly doomed to fail. One of the best ways to ensure a culture change around data is to educate and improve people's understanding of data.

That's exactly what we've been doing as a consultancy firm with Guide Dogs - through workshops and other interactive sessions, we've sat down with all levels of the organisation to improve data literacy and understanding from top to bottom.

GMG: Certainly as CIO, securing buy-in and culture change around data has been one of the most critical parts of leading this data transformation journey. What we set out very early on to do was to make sure this wasn't seen as a tech project, but as a project for the whole organisation. There is no such thing as a technology project, only organisational ones, as everything we do is about working towards the goal of helping people with sight loss live the life they choose.

DIQ: Is part of the objective to develop data literacy and data culture within Guide Dogs for the Blind? If so, what does that journey look like?

CC: Absolutely. A big objective of the data discovery and executive data visioning workshop that Carruthers and Jackson did with Guide Dogs focused on improving data literacy and culture for all of the reasons mentioned above.

In terms of what that journey looked like, we worked to inspire conversations across both the senior team and further down the organisation to explore the future of data at the company, and generate a new excitement around the possibilities of data. We also worked with the senior team to develop their understanding of data and enable them to define a data vision, which in turn will encourage better data literacy

DIQ: Will your role and responsibilities as CIO change or develop as part of the transformation?

GMG: To some extent, yes. The work we've been doing over the past few months has laid the groundwork for a much bigger culture change, so my role as won't be as focused on trying to sell the data changes to the rest of the organisation. In other ways, though, the role of the CIO is always to a large extent trying to stay ahead of the curve and constantly innovating. So I'll be using these new data capabilities to continue innovating and continue building our digital capabilities.

DIQ: Will the charity's service users, supporters and fundraisers notice a difference, too?

GMG: They certainly will. As mentioned previously, we have huge amounts of data on both those we help and those that help us. We can use the data we have on donors to inform the kind of content and information we send them to ensure we're able to build that meaningful and long-lasting relationship with them.

If we look at the data we have on the people that we help, we want to make sure that we're giving help in the best possible, person-centred way. At its most basic, this means that we don't have to ask the people we support for their story and details more than once in order to help them, and that we can much better tailor our help based on individual needs.

DIQ: Finally, how will you know if you have succeeded?

GMG: As I alluded to earlier, there's no final end point where we can sit down and say "right, we've done what we needed to do, we've succeeded, that's it." Digital transformation and this data journey that we're on is an ongoing process.

Metrics-wise, we'll know we've succeeded if we're able to improve satisfaction amongst the people we help or reach the target of 500,000 people being supported by the charity by 2023. But long term, the idea of success is constantly evolving. We'll just be in a better place to adapt to new challenges thanks to the new data capabilities that we have as an organisation.