



JTC Resource Bulletin

User Groups

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Abstract

Implementing and adopting useful technologies cannot be accomplished in a single “training” session or event. It is a process that can, however, be accelerated with the help of an effective technology user group. When people band together to share what they know, the result is a community with more knowledge, better technology utilization, and higher overall satisfaction with technology. This paper explains the value of building a court technology user community, and provides suggestions for creating and managing a user group in the court environment.

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JTC Mission:

To improve the administration of justice through technology

JTC Members:

COSCA

David Slayton (Co-Chair)
 David K. Byers
 Laurie Dudgeon
 Gerald A. Marroney
 Robin Sweet

NACM

Kevin Bowling (Co-Chair)
 Paul DeLosh
 Yolanda Lewis
 Kelly C. Steele
 Jeffrey Tsunekawa

Other

The Honorable O. John Kuenhold
 The Honorable Michael Trickey
 Casey Kennedy
 Jorge Basto

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Introduction

Courts today rely on a wide variety of technologies, ranging from multi-monitor computer on the bench, automated jury questionnaires, and kiosks, to attorneys with tablet PCs. Technologies change and more technologies are being introduced at a staggering rate. Helping your court organization implement and adopt useful technologies cannot be accomplished in a single “training” session or event. It is a process that can, however, be accelerated with the help of an effective technology user group.

Technical knowledge can be shared in a variety of ways, from casual conversations between friends sharing their favorite new app, to more structured settings, including formal training and organized user groups. When people band together to share what they know, the result is a community with more knowledge, better technology utilization, and higher overall satisfaction with technology. Engaged user communities can actually influence the development of technology.

User groups that focus on software and/or hardware have existed since the 1970s. Although not a new concept, there are very successful groups, as well as groups that have failed quickly. An understanding of the dynamics of knowledge sharing across a community can help your group succeed.

This paper explains several types of user groups and their pros and cons in the court technology environment, and provides some basics for creating and managing a user group.

Defining User Groups

A user group is simply a group of people who come together periodically to learn and share their experiences using a particular technology. Those “gatherings” may be in person or “virtual”, where members share information through webinars, Google “hangouts”, message boards, Facebook groups, etc. User groups have been around since the early days of mainframe computers. Several groups have been active for more than 50 years, an indication of their value and relevance.

As the technology available to courts increases in scope and complexity, user groups can greatly assist courts with adopting and effectively using these technologies. Because the user group is a community that combines technical knowledge with social connection, group members are able to share experiences, ideas, and lessons learned, increasing the entire group’s comfort and competence with a particular technology.

This increase in comfort level results in increased use of the technology, sometimes in ways the developers had not envisioned, but which better address business needs. As users share their “real world” knowledge with their vendors, they can often influence the technology provider to modify or expand their technology offering. A robust court

technology user group can become a powerful tool to help courts successfully adopt and implement new technologies by supporting users, sharing “best practices” and ideas, and ultimately influencing the development of the technology itself.

Types of user groups

The types of user groups are as varied as the products and interests they serve. The group may focus on a specific hardware (mainframe, iPad, etc.) or software. In addition to the subject of the group, user groups can be created to address the interests of a particular subset of users (separate user groups for judges, clerks, and law enforcement, for example). A single user group might be formed to serve all who use a particular application, regardless of role.

This paper examines two additional categories: formal vs. informal groups and vendor-owned vs. user-owned groups.

Formal vs. informal

The formality of the user group depends on the needs of the group. Some user groups have a formal group charter, consistent meeting schedule, and dues. This may be the case particularly if the group was created to meet the terms of a contract between a court and a vendor. Other groups find an informal atmosphere with no charter and irregular meetings is sufficient. Most groups fall somewhere in between these two extremes. Some may have a simple mission statement that directs their activities; many have a formal charter. Meetings may occur on a fairly regular basis, but there may be no set date or time for these meetings. Dues may or may not be required to join.

Formal user groups

Formal user groups, although not the most common, can be very successful when managed effectively.

One formal user group in the justice community was officially chartered in 1976 by the Oklahoma State Legislature. Although this group does not serve a court community specifically, its success provides an example to learn about how a formal group functions effectively. The Oklahoma District Attorneys Council serves all the District Attorneys in the state. In addition to providing centralized payroll and insurance, the Council created a committee that supports the

statewide case management solution provided by New Dawn Technologies¹. This statewide implementation is unique in that the entire state shares code tables and documents but each district has a unique on-premise implementation model. Because the entire state uses the same codes, any changes required by a specific district must be vetted by the committee. This committee acts as a user group for the rest of the state, with a mission statement that directs their actions. They meet on a monthly basis to help them direct the affairs of each case management solution and define enhancements that they request from their vendor. This format continues to work well for them.

Informal user groups

In the court community, informal user groups seem to be the most prevalent. These groups often have a mission statement that defines their purpose but not a regular meeting schedule or agenda. Groups may include users from different court jurisdictions united by a single technology focus -- such as case management product, imaging, statewide statutory requirements such as e-filing, or other technology focus that brings them together.

The Ohio Courtview User Group started in the early 2000's as a way for users in the state of Ohio to discuss their case management needs and case management software application. The group has branched out to include discussions on many of the periphery technologies surrounding case management, which may or may not be provided by their current case management vendor. With long distances between courts and limited budgets for travel (even within the state), this group finds that irregular meetings, sometimes paired with state conferences that most group members will already be attending, best fits their needs. They do not have a formal charter but do have a main facilitator/chair (a volunteer position), who requests agenda items, schedules the meeting, publishes the agenda and facilitates the meeting. The facilitator simply manages the "business" of the meeting and participates as any other member, with no additional power.

Similarly, California's Tyler User Group was started in 2013 by five counties in California who all selected the same case management vendor. Although this group has not been in existence long, they have held several meetings and are already finding value in their discussions. They also have a mission statement to help guide their efforts and rely on members of the group to define the agenda of

¹ New Dawn Technologies, Sustain Technologies, and ISD Corporation merged to become Journal Technologies, a wholly owned subsidiary of the Daily Journal Corporation, in December of 2014.

every meeting. Although they do not have a set meeting schedule, they try to meet quarterly.

Vendor-owned vs. user-owned

By definition, user groups are run by the users of a particular software application or technology interest. However, some vendors have started user groups that serve the needs of their customers with varying degrees of success.

Understanding the purposes behind each group will help you determine which type of group best fits your needs.

User-owned user groups

User-owned user groups are run completely by the members of the group. There is usually little to no involvement from a third-party provider of technology such as a vendor. Even limited interaction with a vendor is usually by invitation of the group. The Ohio Courtview User group described in the previous section is a user-owned group. They allow their vendors to attend part of their meetings (usually only about an hour at the end of the day) to hear any thoughts or concerns the users may have about their products, but the vendor does not in any way drive this discussion. The Ohio user group also allows vendors to provide demonstrations of changes to the products the group is using. However, these demonstrations do not occur at every meeting and only occur by invitation of the group.

There are several benefits to users that are available only in user-owned groups. These benefits include:

Learning: There is no better way to learn than from your peers who have been “in the trenches” before you. When learning a new technology, working with a mentor who has been through the same issues and can provide a roadmap of lessons learned is invaluable.

Networking: Networking allows you to interact with others who are fulfilling similar roles and who understand the challenges you face working with a specific technology in your court. They may have similar concerns, and can readily share in your successes. Networking can actually help users resolve their own usability questions by providing a forum for informal “product support”..

Sharing experiences: Much like learning and networking, sharing experiences helps increase user knowledge and use of the technology in ways that ways you may never have considered. Because technology is

generally used individually, connections established through the user group can also remove some of the sense of isolation that is a barrier to successfully adopting a technology.

Open, honest communication. It is easier to have an honest conversation about the pros and cons of a solution to a specific problem or the technology solution as a whole, without the vendor in the room. However, be careful that conversations don't become gripe sessions. Open, honest communication is healthy and necessary to identify shared concerns and to share lessons learned. Complaining, on the other hand, is unproductive and may ultimately increase issues rather than help resolve them.

Vendor-owned user groups

One of the main purposes of vendor-owned user groups is to receive feedback. These user groups function more like a focus group than a user group as defined in this article. User groups run by a vendor can be successful if rules are in place to facilitate communication between the vendor and the group. Many vendors create user groups to improve post-implementation communication with a customer, and to support and train users in technology enhancements and upgrades.

Joshua Paul of Socious, the leading provider of user group management software, lists three tips to vendors for starting and leading an effective user group.² These tips can also help courts "manage" their vendor-user relationship. User-owned user groups can also benefit from understanding these principles as they apply to the relationship between users and the court's internal IT organization.

Rule #1) Give Customers a Voice And Empower Passionate Customers

It is important to remember that user groups are created for users. That is why you see so many independent user groups (independent=not company run) in existence. These user groups are often created by users of a product that are looking for support with complex issues and to share product feedback with the product's company using the strength of one united voice.

² Paul, Joshua. "3 Rules for Effective User Group Management." Socious Online Community Blog. Socious, 9 Sept. 2011. Web. 12 Nov. 2014.

Avoid treating your user group like another marketing channel by which your company talks at your customers. Make it clear that you understand the user group-company relationship is very much a two-way street where customers drive the agenda.

Identify those strong customer leaders who will give you consistent, open, and honest feedback. Empowering those individuals within the user group community will not only help grow the user group, but also create advocates for your company in the ranks of your products' users.

Rule #2) Make Community Building Easy and Valuable

User groups find strength in numbers. The more people who join the group, the more helpful the peer-to-peer support becomes and the more powerful the user group's voice is in future product development. However, your customers are very busy. They are not looking for another way to make friends online. They are looking for support and a partner to help them in their jobs and make their organizations more successful.

In addition to continuously striving to ensure your online user group community provides value to users, make joining the online community, registering for events, and becoming part of the online conversation easy for new members, tire kickers, and veteran members alike.

Rule #3) Listen and Show Action

Let your users know that you are listening and that the work they are doing supporting each other, validating product concepts, providing feedback, and evangelizing your solutions is important to you and your company. The fastest way to kill an active community of users is not to act on their feedback. **Tip:** Look for quick wins where you can tangibly incorporate their work. **Better Tip:** Integrate the user group into your product management processes.

Best practices for user groups

There are basic practices that can help ensure every user group is successful. These best practices include having a clear purpose, knowing the audience, limiting negative input, and delivering value.

Have a clear purpose.

Do you have a specific purpose? Do you want to provide opportunities for networking and sharing experiences, or do you want to get a vendor involved,

working to create modifications and enhancements to the solutions? Knowing why your group exists will help you determine if you want users or the vendor to manage the meetings and the group.

Know your audience.

Do your members require a formal charter to outline governance of the group, or do you simply need a mission statement to direct your efforts? Do you need a regular meeting schedule to maximize attendance or do irregular meetings or meetings that piggyback on local conferences better meet your members' needs and circumstances? Understanding your members and their needs will help you define how formal or informal your group should be.

Limit negative input.

Although venting frustration may seem like a healthy way to deal with a particularly aggravating problem, repeatedly complaining in a user group does not benefit the group, and does nothing to improve the technology. Limit “whining” to an after-hours' cocktail discussion. Ensure particularly vocal participants don't derail a meeting, but make sure their concerns are noted and addressed.

Deliver.

Maintain a purpose for the user group and continually strive to increase the value of the user group to your users and to the court organizations they represent. Whether this value is through sharing experiences, providing a support group, documenting best practices, facilitating discussion, arranging vendor demonstrations, or bringing in industry experts as guest speakers, provide value. If you do, your members will stay engaged, which will further strengthen your user group.

Creating a group charter

It may be helpful for your user group to define its purpose in the form of a charter. There are many examples of quality charters online:

- [Web NFC API Community Group](#)
- [Social Web Working Group](#)
- [Honeywell User Group](#)
- [LANCE User Working Group](#)³

³ NASA's Land, Atmosphere Near real-time Capability for EOS

- [Sample Group Charter](#) (blank template)

Group charters do not have to be lengthy and filled with legalese. The best charters use clear, concise language and are only as long as necessary to detail the purpose of the group. The charters listed above range in length from just over 100 words to more than 2500 words. Larger groups will likely require greater definition (and more detailed charters).

Charters may include any of the following components:

- Mission/Purpose
- Authority
- Definition of who can participate
- Goals/deliverables
- Structure and frequency of meetings
- Organizational structure
- Leadership
- Funding (if any)
- Communication mechanisms

No matter what checklist, template, or sample you use for your group charter, remember to detail the WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY, and HOW. Keep the language clear and concise. Make sure the charter clearly articulates the purpose of your group and what participants in the group should expect.

Summary

The purposes of user groups are as varied as the types and number of user groups in existence. If you are thinking of forming a user group, qualify a purpose and reason for meeting, decide who should be involved and what level of formality would work best for those purposes. Pinpoint a technology or objective for the group. Be specific enough for the group to have a clear purpose and to spark interest. Consider how much time you and others can commit to invest in the user group, and scope your objectives and activities accordingly. Most importantly, get buy-in from potential members by ensuring that everyone in the user group benefits in some way.