

Written by Boorhaanol
Thursday, 07 January 2010 08:28



It's time to look at the masjid not only as a community resource, but as a business entity that is sensitive to profit and loss. Does your masjid or Muslim community center still use paper receipts? Are you doing too much by hand and not enough with the keyboard? Are you renting storage space just to keep boxes of old documents? It sounds like your masjid could benefit from an important money-saving concept in today's technological world. That concept is called automation. Instead of working harder with fewer results, you can work smarter with more success. Information and communications technology can save money for a masjid and increase community effectiveness and reach.

According to a study by Farris Research, companies that use e-mail in the workplace save an average of \$9,000 annually per employee. A study by the Gartner Group suggests that electronic receipts and invoicing can cut costs significantly. Each paper invoice that a company generates costs a business an average of \$5.00. In contrast, generating an electronic invoice only costs an average of \$1.65 per invoice. Data storage is another area for large cost savings. A single terabyte of data can hold the equivalent of 1 billion business documents which, in paper form, would demand 150 miles of shelf-space to store. Then you can probably imagine how a database could streamline a masjid or Islamic center.

Most likely you won't need something as large as a terabyte of data. But you will need to employ a consultant or ask for a qualified volunteer from the community in order to formalize an assessment based on your masjid's work environment, and then create an action plan that identifies growth opportunities and implements operational efficiency. Within a short time, you will probably be asking yourself why you didn't implement technology earlier.

Evaluate Your Waste Before you run out to buy the latest technology, it will be important to make an evaluation of your masjid's current processes and procedures. This is called a needs assessment. These are the questions you need to ask yourself during this phase: What processes and procedures consume too much time, money, and man-power? Where are the redundancies? On which processes are we spending most of our money? You will also want to take a look at your masjid's financial records. Look for areas of expenditure that are tied to a specific process. For example, do your logbooks suggest that you spend too much money on the ordering process? Is it paper-based and manual?

Some procedures have no direct financial cost in the logbook, but are time wasters. For example, if you rely on announcements after Jumu`ah Prayer in order to recruit community volunteers for projects, your workflow might help inspire more far-reaching ways to maximize

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the number of volunteers you have available to you as well as more effective ways of communicating with them. This realization would most likely result in the decision to develop a proactive community volunteer database system that stores phone numbers, e-mail addresses, and area of expertise for all potential volunteers.

Outline the workflow process in a program like MS Visio, or MS PowerPoint, or any other flowcharting tool of your choice. You can find freeware flowcharting software programs at sites like Software Matrix (<http://www.software-matrix.com>). If you don't want to spend the time creating flowcharts for your business processes, you can simply make a list of all procedures in a word processing software program like MS Word. If you do not have the funds to buy Microsoft Office, then download a comparable suite of products available from Open Office (<http://www.openoffice.org/>). Open Office is open-source software that you can download, install, and use for free.

Your needs assessment may take one to three weeks, and will be used by your consultant to make recommendations for process improvements and for implementation of the right technology in the right places. At the end of your needs assessment, your consultant should have documented possible solutions and performed a cost-benefit analysis in order to determine if the projected savings will warrant the implementation of new technology.

Move to a Paperless Paradigm

Change is not easy. Sometimes, people hold on to bad habits with a tight fist. An organization that relies on paper rather than computers is holding on to one of those bad habits, and this behavior always chooses comfort over logic. Start slowly and take small steps when switching to a paperless paradigm. If you are truly starting at the bottom of the technology ladder, then you can begin by making some of the following easy changes to get used to technology by swimming in the shallow end first, before you try to tread in deep water:

Make sure you have good security software running on your system that will automatically download updates frequently. Online Banking: Avoid writing checks, paying for stamps, and mailing paper envelopes. Make bill payments for your masjid or Islamic center by signing up for online banking through your bank's website. Make sure you have good security software running on your system that will automatically download updates frequently. Examples of security software that you should have running on your system are virus protection software such as McAfee (www.mcafee.com) or AVG Anti-Virus from Grisoft (<http://www.grisoft.com/doc/1>), anti-spyware utilities like Spybot (<http://www.safer-networking.org/en/index.html>) or MS AntiSpyware (<http://www.microsoft.com/athome/security/spyware/software/default.msp>). And make sure that you are using a secure browser. Mozilla's Firefox (<http://www.mozilla.org>) has higher security ratings than MS Internet Explorer.

Internet Presence. Launch a small website so that Muslims in your community can access important information like prayer times, halaqaahs, picnics, and other activities hosted by your masjid or Islamic center. A new online service that helps communities build an online masjid is <http://www.masjids.org>.

Digital Donations. No matter how your website gets built or who builds it, make sure you have

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an online donation system set up. This is much easier than it sounds. PayPal, a reputable leader in e-commerce, makes things easy. Once you establish a PayPal account, you can provide a link via your website so that people can send donations to your masjid. Some masjids have already done this, like the Atlanta Masjid of Al Islam (<http://www.masjids.org/atlantamasjid/newsponsor.asp>)

Wired Offices for Starters. It will benefit every full-time masjid employee to have his or her own computer on the premises that is Internet enabled. All masjid employees should have e-mail accounts. Free e-mail providers can be found in abundance on the Internet (Google, MSN, Yahoo and Mail.com). E-mail is often the best way to communicate because it allows people to save information and refer back to previous discussions, a benefit that can make the work process more efficient. Please remember that the Internet is not a secure place, so do not use free Internet e-mail to send masjid reports, personal identifying information like social security numbers, or financial data.

Move to Deep Water

Advanced and more secure implementations of the paperless office paradigm can be realized with a host of other technologies, depending on your need. When you are ready to swim in technology's deep water, consider some of the following enhancements to your masjid IT:

- Multifunction Products (MFPs). These products save space because they have the functionality of several products in one. For example, one machine has the capability to fax, scan, copy, and print. For this reason, MFPs are also more energy efficient. MFPs are less expensive and save on equipment costs associated with buying and operating separate products that do the same thing.
- Local Area Networking. For long-term cost savings and employee productivity, a LAN (Local Area Network) makes sense to install, although the initial cost is prohibitive. By implementing a LAN in your masjid or Islamic center, you can share files and equipment. On a LAN, your operating environment is more secure because permissions can be structured and passwords can be set up in order to minimize risks. You can host an enterprise quality database system, such as Oracle or MS SQL Server, to store accounting, purchasing, and administrative data. E-mail communication can be set up in a secure environment, as well.
- Enterprise Content Management (ECM) Systems. ECM systems allow you to standardize your data, documents, web content, and information across all functions of your organization and often represent a theoretical structure that relies on middleware programs to unify your information and respective platforms. An ECM system implementation can help strengthen your long-term strategy with a host of software products available. Document Management Systems are one such type of product by which documents are scanned as images or text in a searchable system that makes the records retrieval process easier, and reduces the time and cost it takes to manage paper records.

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- **Non-Profit Financial Management Software (FMS).** Many products are available on the market to help non-profits, including religious organizations, manage all aspects of their business. Most non-profit FMS have features for managing fundraising campaigns, developing and distributing budgets and spending reports, adhering to government requirements, setting up spending rules, and identifying the highest donors.

Keep Informed of the Latest Technology

Attend technology conferences and subscribe to small-business technology magazines. Don't depend on your consultant or volunteer to be aware of the latest technology. Make sure that all masjid leaders have exposure and perform some research into the issue of technology for the application of the masjid. Leaders are in a better position than any other participants to direct the overall vision of the community. Attend technology conferences, subscribe to small-business technology magazines, and investigate how other faith-based communities are implementing technology. Contact companies in whose software products you are interested and request demo versions or a free presentation by a sales representative. Technology changes quickly, but if you find its heartbeat and stay with it, the community will only increase in its strength and effectiveness to impart Islamic values to future generations.

Encourage Your Community

All members of the Muslim community must be open to change in order maximize the full potential of modern innovations such as the Internet, and database and software technologies. In addition to using face-to-face and telephone communication, all members of the congregation, both young and old, should be encouraged to open an e-mail account. That way, when they aren't at the masjid or a community function, they can remain close to issues and discussion within the congregation that takes place online via the masjid website, e-groups, and discussion forums. If people are wary of participating in the digital realm, hold classes and develop outreach programs that encourage the use of technology and educate them on why it is an important strategy for success, political effectiveness, and unity. Empower the community by encouraging participation in the development of long-term strategies surrounding the use of information technology.

Create Internships for Technology Support

Depending on how many Muslims in your community have the skills and experience to support masjid technology, you may want to create internship opportunities so that you have more personnel resources to lean upon when times get complicated. Set aside the budget to train a few dependable, dedicated, and active young Muslims who elect to be on-call for special technology projects initiated by the masjid. Announce your plans to the community, and have each applicant go through a "hiring" process, proving that they would be a good candidate in which the masjid could invest its time and money. Empowering Muslims within the community creates a sense of ownership and empowerment, and will build the morale of the entire Muslim congregation if the applicants are chosen in a fair and equitable manner.

The technology you will bring to your community must be investigated. Make gradual and small improvements based on careful cost-benefit analysis. Once the right technology is implemented in the right places, take note of the improvements, large and small, that you notice as a result of

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the change. Undoubtedly, you will conclude that it was the right thing to do for your Muslim congregation in this digital age.