LET US BEGIN

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This narrative is the story of how three individuals with widely diverse backgrounds came together to identify and establish a solution for social work resource problems by utilizing Internet hierarchial search procedure principles. In addition, this solution has the capacity to be duplicated and manipulated to fit the constructs and parameters of any given region and/or county-regardless of distance.

"All this will not be finished in the first one hundred days. Nor will it be finished in the first thousand days, nor in the life of this administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin."
- John F. Kennedy, 1961

Ruby's Experience

As a Los Angeles County foster child, I was a recipient of various services from social services providers. I remember being shifted out of one agency into another, often without knowing why. I wanted to locate resources for my needs but I did not know where to go or whom to ask. I remember my mother, who was born and raised in Mexico, telling me that she had to attend English parenting classes due to the lack of Spanish-speaking referral information. Soon after I emancipated from this government agency, I began to question this system of care—the system that shrouded child-safety policies. As a result, I began searching for answers to the questions that I had regarding my foster care experience. This effort then directed my desire to work and study in the field of social work. Consequently, I enrolled at a university to study social work. At the same time, I began expanding my social work experiences by seeking employment and doing volunteer work for a string of non-profit organizations or government social service agencies, some of which were: (1) A resource coordinator for incarcerated women; (2) A resource coordinator for the homeless population in Long Beach; (3) A domestic violence shelter; and (4) A children's social worker for a county agency.

In my first placement as a resource coordinator for incarcerated women, there were no sets of referrals and/or social services laid out in a formal manner. Instead, I traveled throughout the local community and the rest of Los Angeles County in attempts to gather information and resources in order to assist incarcerated women paroled into their former community. My traveling for resources became a repeated, time-consuming process because human service provisions would change—without warning—and so did the regulations that governed how these services were accessed. In addition, I experienced levels of frustration when calling resources and being placed on hold, getting an answering machine, or receiving a dead end. Repeatedly, I would contact social service agencies, document the contacted referrals, paste together a referral list, and run to the copy machine to make copies for the clients I served. I remember seeing the faces of some of these women when I would hand them a pasted-up referral list as they would leave through the front door—and some women had nowhere to go.

In my second placement as a resource coordinator for the homeless population, the process of referral distribution was random. For example, I would pull out a stack of referrals from desk drawers to consolidate referral listings for potential clients. I observed folders within folders that contained many

referrals—all of which came in different shades of color, size, and shapes—with each referral having different calendar dates and instructions. I began wondering how one produces and maintains an organized and comprehensive list.

In my following social service placements, the referral distribution was better than the previous placements—but not by much. For example, during placement with a domestic violence shelter, a female client needed referrals. The evening staff handed her a very short list of referrals and told her to come back the next day when the administrative staff would be available to assist in generating a more comprehensive referral list. At that time, I wondered what would happen if she was greeted by her angry husband for leaving his house, and if she would return the next day to obtain the needed referrals.

In another social service placement with

a large child-protective agency (as a child, I was on their case load), I was given a book of referrals, but I saw social workers creating various referral folders to compensate for the lack of referrals maintained in this book. This time, I thought that there may be something better here at this facility." I left my desk to locate my union steward and asked, "Is there something better than this book and file folders?" Soon after, the union steward instructed the workers to participate in a work action—an official strike. We did, and our clients went without services.

What I have gathered throughout my social service experiences are that referrals

are not being adequately shared with those needing services. I began questioning this rationale. Are these agencies holding these referrals and/or resources because cloaking resources under secrecy enables an agency to continuously provide available referrals for their specific clients? Is it their means to an end? Or is it that limited finances and/or strict budgets do not allow these social service agencies to propagate themselves and/or their referrals to other service providers? Is engaging in the design, printing, and mailing of social services flyers to the community and its organizations a financial burden? Do these agencies have access to a sizable funding base to commit to a long-term "marketing" effort for Los Angeles County and to the clients they serve?

I then began reflecting on my childhood and on my employment in social services. I remembered my own complaints—being placed in an environment that placed limits on receiving information and/or referrals. Additionally, while continuing my work with human services, I finally realized that in my line of work, the lack of referrals was a common issue for me and everybody else that worked alongside me. I began to gain an understanding that small non-profits faced similar referral difficulties. This stumped me. I wondered how I could take this concern and locate a universal solution.

This yearning then fueled my desire to look for alternative solutions—one of the many solutions was using computers based on Internet principles. I began visualizing this solution—an idea of building an open-forum community that imparts free referrals to anyone in need. It would not matter if a person were employed for a non-profit or government agency or worked as an independent contractor. Everyone would have free access, as opposed to a "closed" padlocked Intranet service. I began drawing charts and diagrams and researching; reading anything remotely related to the charts and diagrams that I

generated.

In addition, I began the exchange of information with colleagues from the government social services and continued this dialogue with classmates while pursuing a MSW. I then reflected on how many people I approached and the responses I received in my attempt to create a referral open-source Internet community. But I could not get a focus on how to motivate people into believing that this conflict deserved a new approach, via computer.
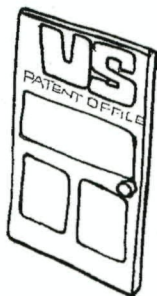
While flipping through a computer magazine, I read an article about an individual gaining credibility and capturing an audience that enabled his vision to become a reality by filing his idea with the United States Patent Office. I researched the patent process and contacted patent attorneys. I made appointments and spoke with experts in the computer field. Later, during a conference with a law firm, I was informed that a patent would be feasible, but it required dedicated work and funding. A year later, the patent process was now on its way and intellectual property rights were documented and filed. Now, with documents in hand, I had a clear vision with potential, filed in the United States Patent Office. I asked for volunteers, and this time around, I received about twenty-two "volunteers" ranging from businesspersons to computer engineers. From this pool, we all took part in outlining objectives and mediating tasks. During this developmental process, I observed that over 50% of this pool had money as a primary focus, while the client remained secondary.

I felt trapped. This idea needed talented people to establish it. However, I realized that it would be difficult to maintain the genuineness of this idea—establishing and linking social service agencies in an open-forum community by utilizing Internet principles—without the constraints of operating business hours and/or accessibility costs. I began asking individuals from this project what they honestly thought about establishing a no-fee-for-referral access Internet framework—meaning that no one would be charged an admission or service fee for the download of human service referrals. For example, during a business meeting, a finance manager discussed how the main thrust of this Internet process is to generate as much revenue as possible. He began writing numerical figures and plans in his notebook. I informed him that his motivation appeared to be different from that of this Internet project—to provide free, accessible referrals. He agreed. Soon afterward, he discontinued communications. At the same time, I observed other "volunteers" beginning to step down. In time, everybody stepped down, except for three individuals. These three are Ray (a rocket scientist—literally), Joseph (an educational therapist), and myself (a children's social worker), along with other "quiet volunteers" participating in this forum when they are able to do so.

Joseph's Experience

Being from a family of 12 children, I learned to maximize resources when there was little left. Whether it was tangible things, such as clothing, food, money, space, or transportation, or non-tangible resources like time and energy, there was always a need to make things stretch. As the middle child, sixth born and third oldest male, it was up to me to create alternatives and to mediate for needs. This type of experience prepared me for what I discovered to be my passion: Social Work.

I began my formal education wanting to serve and help those in need. I began my quest as a teacher, which is a step toward my overall goal—to be an agent of change for those in need. During this experience, I observed how dignity and compassion when providing referrals and services are two very important components. Further, as a "change-agent" I learned that I may make a difference to one individual at a time—by acknowledging the

client's right to self-determination.

However, in order for me to assist the individual, I need to have the tools ready to assist. As a worker in a helping field, I was often frustrated when I gathered agency-sponsored referrals that were not in the best interest of the client. Consequently, clients, at times, would not use the referrals or resources that I would provide. At times, the resources were listed but not available. This reinforced my desire to search for a method to develop a qualitative resource that was fluid and could be updated quickly to ensure maximum efficiency. But during this explorative process, I wondered how a fluid qualitative resource could be accomplished, especially when agencies are scattered throughout the county. How would they be able to connect?

Through another working experience at a runaway shelter, I observed how telecommunications—as a resource—is a benefit. I wanted to inform a child's parent that their son was safe, and that a contact would be made the following day to schedule a conference with the intake director and their son. The child's parents, being from another country, did not understand English, which made communication difficult for this English-speaking agency. Using an overseas operator via a telephonic communications network, I was able to have the call reversed and then dial the child's home. Without violating confidentiality, I was able to let them know that their son was no longer living in a dangerous condition and that we would be contacting them to set up an appointment for a reunification conference.

After school I obtained employment with Orange County Children and Family Services as a Bilingual Senior Social Worker working with group-home children. This opened my eyes to the need for resources and how frustrating it is to want to help and not have the resources to do so. I would find myself in a situation time and time again when the client would need to attend a parenting class, attend family or individual counseling, or just find out about housing. Using the current method, a paper trail, I found myself buried in searching directories, trying to find resources for my group-home kids. This reduced the amount of quality time that I was able to provide. Again, I wondered how this problem could be addressed.

Now employed at Orange County Department of Education in Alternative Chapter, Contract Education Support Services (ACCESS), I continue to work for at-risk children. There, I am able to help the students and their families to acquire services to meet their needs. One such situation occurred that I had never experienced before. Working as a school social worker, I was told that a student had committed suicide. Wanting to provide services for his family, I spent over two hours looking through the many pages of the current resource directory and contacting several social service providers, only to find that several of the listings were no longer current or no longer available. I called provider after provider to ensure that they would be able to meet the needs of the student's family. At this point, I reflected how frustrated my recipients must feel. After deliberating I came to the conclusion that referral availability needed to be addressed—but how?

Soon after this experience, I was approached by a social work colleague. She presented a referral availability program by way of diagrams and hierarchical charts—via Internet. These diagrams and charts led me to understand how the Internet process would enable me to do two things: 1) Provide referral and resources for my clients at a moment's notice; 2) Assist and encourage my clients to learn how to access free referrals or resources for their own needs—client's right to self-determination.

Now I was given the opportunity to apply my tools of management to help create a resource locator for the helping profession. Working in the traditional social work fashion,

I believe in a grass roots approach to provide for those in the trenches. One of the most challenging things for me was trying to find resources in a timely manner. This can now be accomplished through modern technology at www.resourcescout.com.

Ray's experience

I became involved with ResourceScout (before it had a name) by accident. I had packed up my laptop computer and driven to a coffeehouse in Long Beach in order to get some writing done. As I walked into the coffeehouse I saw a Ruby, an ex-roommate of mine. Since it had been about five years, we both did a couple of double takes before we recognized each other. We chatted about the things that were going on in our lives before Ruby explained her attempts to locate social service resources via computer. Ruby knew that I was a techno-geek and used computers everyday, so she felt comfortable bouncing ideas off me. She was also happy to be able to talk computerese as she had come up against a number of technophobic coworkers. We parted that night with Ruby saying that her group met every Thursday night at 7:30, and that if I wanted to get involved I could just show up and help.

The following Thursday I met a number of the key players. I was impressed with the enthusiasm of the team as well as the absolute desire of the team to improve the process of finding and providing social service resources. Up to this point I had assumed that resources were neatly catalogued by the employing agency or, at least, by like-minded professional social workers. After thinking about it and recalling the difficulty that we had finding food and shelter for runaway youth as part of a volunteer effort that I performed in the mid 1980's, I realized that the search for and provision of social services had not advanced in that 15-year time period. It was time to get involved and see if I could contribute.

At that time in my life, I was struggling with career choices and the need for a greater calling than merely building satellites for a living. There was a desire on my part to make a difference in the world, to help others beyond contributing money to worthwhile causes. Though the ResourceScout effort wasn't going to change the world as the semiconductor or the personal computer had, it was still a means to make a positive contribution.

Throughout my life I have always found trouble whenever I became bored. I recognized that boredom and drudgery were evil. I could also see that professional social workers always having to look for resources was a time-consuming and wearisome task. Putting myself in their shoes, I could see where I would soon become frustrated with trying to locate, verify, and provide resources for clients. If resources were properly catalogued, then it would be relatively simple to let a computer do the searching. This would free up a significant amount of a professional social worker's time for other tasks as well as remove a large source of frustration.

At the beginning of my involvement with ResourceScout, most of my time was devoted to developing the business plan. We wrote, edited, and re-wrote the business plan many times. Along the way, we brainstormed regarding the technology that we needed to perform our intended mission, the opportunities for funding to develop the product, and the specific layout and format of the provision of resources. We knew that we could significantly improve the process; we just needed a chance.

In order to demonstrate the eventual product to potential investors, I put together a working model of the social service resource database and search capability in an Excel spreadsheet and macro. It was clunky, but it gave us the idea of what we needed and what we should avoid. But we also decided that we had to make the demonstration product look, feel, and act like the eventual product.
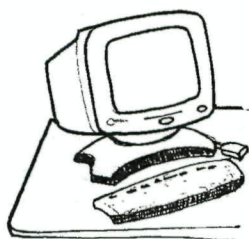
Hence, it was time to go on the Internet.

On my birthday in early August of 2001, one week before we were to sit down with web programmers, I considered myself an HTML, Javascript, and Perl virgin. I had never written a single statement in any of these languages up to that point. But all computer languages are similar. So within a week we had an Internet-based demonstration that performed geographical and categorical searches of a trial Los Angeles County database. The entire ResourceScout team was shocked that things had come together so quickly. We were lucky because the meeting with the Web programmers showed us how willing people are to take your money and a piece of your company if they think that you need them. And it showed us that they wanted in on the action strictly for the money—completely the opposite of why we were developing the ResourceScout product.

Conflicts

During the development and showing of early versions of our product, we encountered resistance to the idea of online resources. A number of people insisted that a paper-based set of resources was needed. An online set was not equivalent nor was it acceptable. We were surprised at the passion of those who could not get used to the idea of an online set of resources. Everyone needs a comfort zone and for these people, having a paper-based resource list was it. We decided to maintain our long-term vision and continued to develop a set of online resources and associated search capability. Those who needed a paper-based resource list would have to print them from the Internet as they found them.

We also experienced resistance from a number of groups for (initially) unknown reasons. There was a lack of interest, there was open aggression against our product, and there were other reasons proposed that would stall our progress. We took the resistance seriously and had long discussions concerning our outlook, our product, our methods, and our timetable. We felt that we were on the right track: the combination of online resources and a user-friendly search process was the way to go for providing resources. We proceeded with our product and tried to listen to rational arguments while disregarding arguments that had no foundation. Later, we learned that some of these groups had been trying to develop their own set of online resources and resented that they were not going to be first.

A number of people wanted to get on board on this project just to make money off this idea. As is obvious from our narratives, we saw our mission as helping people locate and find resources. We weren't involved in the project in order to generate money as a primary focus or to simply sell the idea to business professionals who would have a different outlook than we had. Along the road we encountered social workers who opposed our idea because they thought that we were in it for the money. We encountered early participants who wanted to generate a sellable business plan and go public with stock offerings, and we also encountered computer hardware and software people who wanted a piece of the action in order to milk it for income. We also reviewed non-profit versus for-profit status. After many intense debates, we chose for-profit status as we felt that this would encourage this project's growth by allowing its founding members to preserve the creative force and to continue in directing the energy for this project to succeed. In each case we had to step back and return to our roots – helping professionals and non-professionals locate resources. The choices that we made reflect this principle.

Barriers

As a team we recognized that we would encounter barriers as we moved forward toward bringing our project to life. The first barrier that we encountered was technology.

We needed to be able to create a project that was not only user friendly but functional in providing the information that was being sought. We borrowed code from other applications that had been proven and time tested. We altered the functionality of the code to perform categorical and geographic searches of the database of social service providers. This allowed us to create a fluid database that can be updated instantly as entries change.

The second barrier we confronted was the task of gathering information and creating a reliable database. With new organizations being created and older agencies no longer available, we wanted to gather as much information as we could to provide resources. Through current information directories, telephone contacts, and surveys, we were able to start building a database to meet the daily needs of social workers and those in the helping professions. For example, we received a large listing of 24-hour crisis hotline referral telephone numbers. We called each referral at 2:00 am on Friday and Saturday morning to verify that they were available at this time period—as stated in the listing. Some referrals were attached to an answering machine, while some were closed altogether but had a recorded messages regarding their hours of operation, so we called these agencies on Monday morning to verify service provisions hours of operation. Once verified, we were able to list the agencies accordingly. In addition, we are maintaining a schedule to verify referrals—in group clusters—while providing accessible e-mail. Any person may key in a referral error or complaint at any time—24/7—and the referral's corrections are posted as soon as possible. At times it has been difficult for agencies to release listings out of concern for serving their population, and only after we demonstrate the benefits of using a computerized search tool have they relented and chosen to participate. Now their workers can locate resources for their clients faster and the time required to search out local providers in the individual's area has been reduced.

An unanticipated barrier became apparent when it became time to offer the service to public agencies for use. This became a challenge due to concerns of administrators about the ability to control and coordinate resource management. Although there is a way to locate nearby service providers in areas where resources are sparse, the concern is that once a service has been expended, the service would no longer be available to any additional recipients. Only after demonstrating the efficiency of the program were we able to provide a better understanding of the allocations of resources and the inability to spread resources evenly. This also drew attention to the areas that required additional services and the over-saturation of services in areas that were not being used efficiently.

Another unanticipated barrier that required addressing was the ability for this program to sustain itself and ensure its longevity. We dealt with this issue by creating a corporation entity to seek out sustainable funding for the project. Currently the founders, with the goal of creating a tool that could be used by the helping professions and by those in need of provision-related services, have sustained the project. The members have been able to dedicate their own time to create, develop, and produce the tool known as ResourceScout. This project has been a labor of love that brought together individuals from several industries, each member having a single mission: to help others to help themselves and to assist those in the helping profession.

Lastly, an unanticipated barrier was the resistance to change by practicing service providers. Any change creates anxiety and apprehension in people used to doing things a certain way. Changing over to a new process requires an effort to bypass the standard

process and apply the new one. The advantage of embracing technology and improving efficiency, after an introductory period of familiarization, advances the user to higher levels of effectiveness.

Ethics

Professional social workers and those in the helping professions have the ethical responsibility to do everything in their power to assist their clients in meeting their needs. In addition to maximizing the care and resource options available for clients, these professionals must find ways to maximize the number of clients that they serve.

We have taken the "maximize clients helped" responsibility and developed a resource to facilitate this obligation. Our mission is to be a catalyst to assist clients in their interdependence with their communities. Furthermore, we feel that in the interest of maximizing social service provision for our clients, it is appropriate that verified resources be disseminated as widely as possible, thus the utilization of the Internet to make resources available to all interested parties.

But it is also the professional social workers' ethical responsibility to do no harm to a client in need. Along those lines we felt that it was our ethical responsibility to contact each resource and attempt to confirm that the information we listed was as accurate as possible. The use of the Internet and a central database facilitates the accuracy of resources by allowing us to rapidly update and change referral information when needed.

We started the development of ResourceScout in Los Angeles County because we were familiar with the territory and the resources. But it also has proven to be a great training ground in the development of the product because it is one of the largest counties in the country. The lessons that we learn and the mistakes that we make in Los Angeles County will guide us as we go statewide and countrywide. For example, we

learned that basing the search on Global Position Satellites (GPS) coordinates will be better in the long run due to the possibility of having facilities on city/zip code boundaries. In addition, this computer process does have the capacity to be duplicated and manipulated to fit within the constructs and parameters of a given region while also possessing the ability to expand and incorporate regions nationwide, thus allowing artificial state boundaries to blur as we attempt to help our clients.

Conclusion

It is understood that social service provision, referrals, and resources derive from a framework composed of bureaucratic government agencies, corporations, and non-profit agencies. In addition, this framework is fragmented through various county and local jurisdictions. Consequently, it does not allow for clients or those in the helping professions to maximize referral and resource distribution and accessibility. We, as well as the "silent partners," do understand that to create an open referral/resource Internet center is a monumental task. But, "Let us begin."