Chapter 2: Membership, Development & Participation Data

The data that is required by any information system is dictated by the activity that is being automated. For each piece of information (data element or field of data) that is proposed to be managed by the system, we should be able to point to a process that would not be effectively managed in its absence. The following discussion of the data of membership, participation and development is, therefore, also a discussion of the critical success factors of the membership, development and participation function.

Membership and Client List Management

From the perspective of an information system, memberships are entities distinct from the individuals, families and organizations that "own" a membership. The name under which a membership is established may be a collective name, as in family memberships or corporate memberships. Some repositories may also recognize special categories for couples or multi-generational units. If the institution ever needs to contact these individals separately, or to mail them different materials, if it can imagine them having different addresses and names, or could receive separate gifts in their separate names, each individual should have their own record. Since these possibilities exist for all adults it is not adequate to have records for a couple with all the data about both individuals in one record. It may be acceptable to have data about family members in one or both individual records. However, if each individual has their own record, the "membership" may need to have a record that points to each of its owners or beneficiaries.

Running a membership information system involves the entry, storage and retrieval of data about the owners of memberships. It is the essentially a list management function focused on the maintenance of a list. The critical requirement is that the system must be able to store the data on any individual or organization that might be of service to the institution. In addition, a complete statement of functional requirements will address how well the system supports the entry of the data, its online retrieval and display, and its predefined reports and ad hoc reporting capabilities.

What too many systems designers forget is that the membership list is a subset of a complete list of clients. Clients of all kinds, including members, donors, contacts within corporate member organizations, prospective clients, and program participants, must be represented in a single database. This is because many clients have many relationships with the repository and the opportunities for recording inaccurate or incomplete data are vastly multiplied as the number of separate places in which it must be recorded grows. Each client, therefore, ought to have only one record and to be identified by the various ways in which he or she is involved with the repository. If the museum participates in a reciprocal membership program, and wishes to track attendance by reciprocal members, it will additionally be necessary to issue such affiliates unique identification numbers.

The unique identification number will provide a useful handle to the record for any system linkages that must be made, but clients will still be known to the staff and each other by their names. The management of client names may sound unproblematic, but it is not necessarily easy to do. How many names per member, for example, should the system record? The same person who is often known as Jim Smith is more formally known as James McMann Smith or Dr. James M. Smith and may be addressed by the Director by his nickname "Jazz". The organization needs to determine the number of different names for a single member it will allow and how it will link and display them. In addition to the name by which the person is usually addressed, must the system record former names? Mrs. James M. Smith was once known as Mary Cally Jones and Mrs. Harold Jones, and previous to that as Mary Cally. To properly credit gifts and retain accurate historical records, the system must record the names of those who made the gifts at the time they were made. To reflect the history of client relations to the repository accurately, the system needs to bring together all interactions between an individual and the institution regardless of the names used by that person at some point in the past or names used by a person for different purposes. The system may need to associate dates with names and retain a full history of previous names. Some systems may permit a number of names for an individual, perhaps even with date ranges associated with them. Can the repository establish in advance the number of forms of name that will be permitted per record? Should data about membership and donations under previous names be merged with the new name record or simply linked?

Even individuals with one name need to be addressed in a variety of ways depending upon the occasion and who is writing to them. Membership systems must support a variety of salutations for each member. How many salutations are required per record must be determined by the organization. Whether the system permits each salutation to be linked to a user, and/or to an occasion or purpose, needs to be determined. The organization needs to decide whether titles of members should be stored separately, or only as part of a salutation.

Individuals and corporations also have numerous addresses. Different addresses are appropriate for different purposes and at different times of year. The museum should determine how many addresses will be necessary and how they can be linked to the appropriate record at the proper time and for the appropriate purposes. Those evaluating systems should remember that family members may not have the same addresses and different offices of a corporation are likely to have different addresses.

Membership systems should be able to store some biographical information about members. Information about the family of members has already been mentioned. It can be stored as a cross reference to other records or by recording the names of all family members, their addresses, and participation history in one family record. For physical reasons, systems that elect to store data in one record will typically keep less information and provide for less variability between family members.

In addition to family and business relationships, a membership system may need to retain miscellaneous biographical data on members, such as their hobbies. Some organizations feel it is important to keep birth, wedding anniversary, and even death dates for members. Financial data, including substantial information about real and personal estates may be required by some repositories. The "interests" of clients, their affiliations with other organizations and the history of major giving to these organizations is transactional data that can be repeated an unlimited number of times. It is desirable to be able to keep the dates, amounts and purposes of giving and the nature and source of evidence of interests.

The defining feature of a membership system is data concerning member benefits and affiliations with the museum. Most organizations have a number of levels of membership based on different annual fees or gift levels; the system must accommodate as many such levels as might ever be established. If membership levels are based on gifts or donations, the membership maintenance function should automatically calculate membership level based on giving levels (for a defined year of membership, whether this is a calendar or fiscal period). In defining categories of memberships, the organization must determine if the system can support hierarchically structured membership levels such that the benefits of each lower level are automatically received by those at higher levels. Keeping a full history of membership affiliation will enable the institution to track trends in membership upgrades and losses. The history must include the date a member first joined, each renewal, and the date on which the current membership will expire (remembering that the system must process anniversary dates if membership is calculated on this basis). A full history of member associations with the organization would include, in addition, data about each role the member has played with the organization, the dates, and the experience. This association history is exceptionally valuable to the organization, but it can best be retained as a series of transaction records (as with volunteer job assignments) rather than providing for recording it within a membership list. A membership database should have data about current membership status that permits recording of prospective members and ex-members as well as current members.

Corporate membership data can be quite complex. Organizations will need to examine the structure of this information to assure that it adequately reflects what they need to know about the names, titles, addresses and phones of officers of the corporation, contact persons, and recipients of benefits. They will need to determine what, if any, history of offices, titles and occupants they need to retain. Like individuals, corporations have interest profiles and "biographical" information, but the organization needs to decide whether to also retain such information about individuals receiving their membership privileges through a corporate account. Corporate members have contact hierarchies for a variety of different purposes; each museum will need to assess its requirements to record this data.

These basic data requirements make it evident that the membership record, as one category of client record distinguished by having a "membership" relationship recorded among its affiliations, has a complex structure including, potentially, links to transaction records for name, salutation, address, biographical event, participation event, and contact event. Without such structures, the options for recording variability will be quite limited.

On the other hand, if such structures have been implemented, an effective means of linking these sub-records will be essential so that full records on members even from large membership databases can be easily viewed and edited.

Participation

Both members and non-members participate in the public activities of the museum. They may take part in special events or simply attend exhibitions by general admission. They are the constituency of the institution and as such they are its most important asset. Documenting participation provides membership and development offices with a tool to refine their methods and a justification for their expenditures. Every organization will need to keep some information about participation.

Each repository must first decide whether to record an anonymous visitor count at the entrance, a count at various doors, events or services (for instance, parking or lunch room), a count with categories of visitors, and/or names of attendees and their membership status. In addition to a body count, they need to determine the use of a variety of non-obtrusive measures that could be captured at the door, such as the sex, age, or race of visitors. Whatever detail they capture, they will need to determine whether the data should be dated or fully time stamped. If the repository has an interest in occasional ad hoc visitor surveys, for short term, in depth, analyses of visitors (for example, at the main entrance or at shops, cafeterias or exhibits), it should consider whether any system it is evaluating has the ability to record visitor survey data on ad hoc developed data collection screens. It should also examine the functions of the system to determine whether such data collection instruments could be set up, unmanned, for direct user interaction.

Membership thrives when members can be made aware of membership services and opportunities that are directly of interest to them. Targeting members depends on capturing and keeping growing amounts of useful information about each member so that it can be matched to what is known about the features of services. It is important for membership and development staff to recognize that subject content alone is not the only predictor of when services will be of interest to members. Members may come to events at given times of year, or times of week, or times of day. They may come to services earmarked for particular age groups (and these will shift in predictable ways over time) and they may come at specific price levels. To begin to build a profile of clients and programs it will be necessary to retain a substantial amount of information about which kinds of services attract which clients.

To link participants with events, and to promote events with those potential participants who will be most interested, requires a system that maintains a calendar of all events taking place in the repository with descriptions and interest profiles of the activities so that these can be linked with interest profiles of members or prospects.

Not all participants attend functions on their own; many come as part of a tour or group. Tour registration and group booking data can be extremely complex, since the organizer/sponsor, the people in charge on the day of the tour, and the billing agents may all be different individuals (or multiple individuals in each role) with their own addresses and phone numbers etc. Some group data is authority data for every visit (billing, address, phone etc.) while other data varies with the visit (number in group, person in charge, etc.). Groups have arrival times, meeting places, and cafeteria or lunchroom requirements that need to be recorded. Known handicaps, age and grade levels, and eligibility for special grants or discount programs may need to be recorded in advance. Data may need to be recorded to support transportation or movement of the group between multiple event sites, the mailing of preview materials, and group or tour operator confirmation requirements. If not all tours are self-guided, the organization should be sure that docents or guides for tours can be recorded in the system.

Ticketed programs require information to be recorded about the facility in which the event is scheduled, including the seating available if seats are reserved and any restrictions on the space. Information about the event itself includes the beginning time, duration, interest level, and prices of tickets. Organizations that want to provide for non-additive pricing of multiple events, or for discounts based on events rather than or in addition to discounts based on member or group descriptions, will need to record such information in the event profile. If tickets are to be issued on subscription, or by advanced sales, the system will need to provide for recording of name and address data for non-members and for linking participation to member records. It may also be necessary to record that tickets will be held at the box office for pickup. Potential purchasers of membership and development systems should compare the number of ticket prices, packages or combinations permitted by the systems, the number of purchaser categories, and the number of discount levels.

In addition to visiting the repository, clients are also active as volunteers on behalf of the organization. A major aspect of participation management involves the management of volunteers, including members of committees, solicitors, and docents. Assignment of volunteers requires a system that records schedules of availability, and indicators of skills and interests. It must be possible to assign individuals to teams, with some volunteers serving as leaders. This will be especially important in the assignment of solicitors. The system must retain a service history for each person so as to generate management reports on volunteer hours.

Finally, the level of participation of an individual may only involve having purchased items from the museum shop. Many institutions will track such sales to predict inventory and staffing needs; with very little additional effort they could identify the visitor and track their interests if items for sale were "interest" coded. Such interest coded records could be used for targeting programs or subsequent sales.

Development

Acquiring a pool of potential donors, contacting them effectively, and nurturing their support requires careful recordkeeping about development efforts in addition to data about the prospects being contacted. Prospects need to be associated with the lists from which they were drawn. Names and addresses need to be matched for duplication so that potential donors are not angered by multiple solicitations. The history of previous contacts, whether or not these resulted in giving, including the contents of any discussions, need to be recorded. Attention needs to be paid to the way in which information gleaned from contacts is recorded so that it can be used in subsequent solicitations. Telephone surveys of members can acquire information about what each member feels is most valuable about the membership, and an automated system can record this on an individual by individual basis, but without careful thought to how the information will be used, the analytical reports produced from this data may not prove very useful.

Museum membership, special events and shops may be promoted through media campaigns and mailings. In order to manage these effectively, promotions must be tracked by the media used, the content of the promotion, and its cost. Typically, codes are introduced into addresses, promotions include coupons, or special discounts are mentioned in ads so that media influence can be measured. Users should remember that such information must also be reflected in ticket and merchandise pricing options.

The driver in development is the campaign. Campaign management requires documentation of some information about the campaign itself. The name and purpose of a fund raising drive, its duration, the accounts to be credited, the goal of the drive and sub-goals of defined campaign increments, and the reporting schedule all describe the campaign itself. Development campaigns typically use many volunteer solicitors. It is necessary to record the teams and their goals, each of the workers and the names they are assigned, and to track individual and team success on an on-going basis.

Individual solicitors need to be able to record donations received from target donors. The organization needs to determine whether it requires a capability to record cash gifts, pledges, in-kind gifts and/or collection related objects. For cash gifts, including cash received as checks, credit cards, or negotiable stock, the recipient must record at least the amount, check number and bank, credit card number, type and expiration date, transaction date, signer, purpose, restriction, and fund and may need to record other information such as the cash batch or receipt number for accounting purposes. For stock, the value at the time of gift and the value at the time of sale are separate data that will be needed for accounting purposes. When the cash gift is for a membership, dues or fees, the expected benefits must be itemized and if any special offers were involved, these must be recorded. In some settings it may be necessary to record gifts as being received through or credited to "gift societies" or membership sub-groups, or to divide credit between spouses, or unrelated member records. Staff will want to record memorial text, captions, and limitations imposed over gifts, including the desire of the donor to remain anonymous.

For pledges, including regular deductions such as payroll deductions, the organization records not only the information normally associated with a gift, but also the dates of planned future payments and amounts associated with them. Organizations should consider how many such payments may be recorded in the system, how far in advance, and whether payment amounts can all be variable based on the expressed desires of the donor. When payments are periodic and regular, it may be desireable to have them record automatically. The number of pledges that an individual may have open at one time, and the variability of memorials and crediting arrangements for specific payments, should also be examined.

Of course, the organization contacts clients at times other than fund raising campaigns, and for a variety of reasons. It should be possible to record the time and reason for every client contact, the name of the person who made the contact and the result, and whether the contact is made by mail or phone. The organization should consider how much access it will need to the free text description of the contact and evaluate the retrieval capabilities of the system carefully. Contact history should be kept, and it should be possible to record tickler dates in contacts to alert staff to a follow up or to schedule a future contact.

Some museums have planned giving programs. Those which do need to record a substantial amount of tax related information about clients and their gifts in order to assist in the administration of the remainder value of charitable remainder annuity trusts and unitrusts for multiple lives, and to plan deferred gift annuities. This information need not be retained; indeed many clients would be most troubled by the idea that it was. It is acquired initially only to carry out the analysis of costs of giving under a variety of scenarios.

If the organization considers grants within the purview of its development activity, it will need to record information about grant proposals in order to track when proposals and reports on grants are due. The information required may only be a tickler date and an associated text field. Museums usually need to document many specific aspects of grants that would not otherwise be recorded about gifts and will rarely want to attempt to meet all these requirements in the automated development system.

In the process of raising funds, it is not unusual to receive non-financial gifts, whether these are gifts in-kind, for which an appraised value can be entered along with a description of the goods or services provided, or collection items. Collection items will be more fully documented in accessioning and registration systems, but the organization needs to decide whether the fact of a donation should be recorded within the development system. If so, donors would be credited with the gift and it would reflect in their contribution history. The benefits of seeing this information as part of the contribution record could be considerable.

The fact that some potential donors have items suitable for the collections which may far exceed the value they would be willing or able to donate in financial assets points to the value of an estate profile of prospects and donors as part of the membership and development system. Such an estate profile would detail known financial assets and property of interest to the archives or museum. Its structure might be a list or free text. Some specific data such as giving interests and potential, could be recorded for prospects as well as for estates of existing clients and donors.