

NPOKI – Evolution of a Dream

On May 9, 2005, an all-day meeting of four nonprofit organizations took place at the Helen Edey Conference Room of EngenderHealth, New York City. While collaborative meetings are nothing unusual for nonprofit organizations, this one was indeed unique, even historic. The people sitting at the table were not program staff there to discuss some new trend in reproductive health, but rather operations staff and upper management of organizations based in Seattle, New York, and London. The topic of conversation: how to share their proprietary tools, best practices, and lessons learned without stumbling over issues of ownership or loss of intellectual property. They were discussing “giving away the store”. They were looking for ways to avoid “reinventing the wheel”. They were hoping for “a miracle”.

The organizations included PATH, IPPF, PPFA/I and EngenderHealth (EH). The problem was one they had all grappled with. Over the years, each had spent hundreds of thousands of dollars creating management tools and protocols. These tools/protocols ran the gamut from standard operating procedures to complex database applications to manage grants, aggregate workplans and budgets, and manage projects. When they honestly looked at their individual efforts, it was clear that many were similar, if not outright duplicative. They could have easily shared this development process in the same way that their program staff have shared their field work. Their funders had suggested this for years, and even internally, their own staff have thought that it would be a good way to save monies that could be better spent on program work. But an innate fear that sharing operations best practices with their sister organizations would somehow compromise the competitive advantage when bidding on RFA/RFPs prevented a true collaboration. Until now...

This collaboration, given the very generic name of NPOKI (NonProfit Organizations Knowledge Initiative) evolved from a conversation between Daniel Messer and Rodolfo Melia of IPPF and Bill Lester of EH. Both organizations had developed information management systems, and following a suggestion from Wendy Sheldon of PPFA-I, the two groups got together to take a look at what all that time and money had created. “You show me yours and I’ll show you mine!” When the demo concluded, the realization was both profound and frightening: the two applications were similar in approach, methodology, development protocol, and scope of work. The problems faced by both organizations as they developed the applications were similar. The future development needs were similar. In short, both organizations in parallel had spent millions of dollars developing what was basically the same application!

After recovering from the shock of the wasted opportunity, IPPF and EH began exploring how they might work together on future projects. The suggestion was made that there might be other organizations that should be part of this discussion. PPFA-I and PATH agreed to participate in a meeting. ASPIRATION, a foundation that focuses on developing tools/protocols for nonprofit organizations agreed to facilitate the meeting. The agenda was expanded to include any issues related to agency collaboration. The twelve attendees had titles ranging from software developer to program associate to director of technology to vice president of operations to chief executive officer.

The group agreed to start some pilot projects. These included sharing taxonomies, best practices for document management, as well as the development of a generic information management system. A listserv was started, and some working groups were formed to tackle issues of governance and mission. From this meeting, NPOKI was born.