

Case Study:

Slivers of Time

Key themes

- Making a great idea a reality
- Encouraging others to understand the potential of your idea
- Adapting an idea to serve a whole new, unexpected group of users
- Staying focussed on your goals and knowing when the time is right to act



Introduction

This case study looks at how a great idea became a sustainable reality through hard work; development of the right technology; funding and eventually being able to seize the moment.

What is Slivers of Time

Slivers of Time is a social enterprise which has created online technology to connect employers who need short-term staff with workers who need to work at times of their choosing. The team at Slivers of Time provides both the technology and the expertise to enable organisations to set up this system and can adapt it to meet their particular needs. Essentially, the system allows people to register themselves as available to work at certain times. Employers can then use it to match up their staffing requirements with people who can work when they need them.

Perhaps a local authority needs someone to deliver leaflets one Tuesday afternoon. They could match this need with a registered worker on the Slivers of Time system who is able to work between 3pm and 5pm on Tuesdays. Job done, so to speak.

The original idea for Slivers of Time was aimed at tackling worklessness. The technology was devised to offer people the chance to get back into work through ultra-flexible means, and this still forms a core part of the way the system is put to use. It can provide an excellent tool to help those people who want to work but find it difficult to hold down a regular job because of other commitments in their lives.

According to Naveed Parvez, the organisation's head of operations, the team at Slivers of Time are "marketplace experts" specialising in marketplaces that deal with time.

But Slivers of Time has really come into its own following the introduction of the Personalisation Agenda, which is aimed at allowing people to manage how their care is delivered. People wanting to book a care worker can use a "Person-to-Person" system to book the carer they want, when they want to.

Take the example of a woman who wants to find a carer to take her swimming on a Monday morning. She can go online and see who is available at that time. The list of carers will show names and hourly charges, everyone showing will have been vetted thoroughly and will have registered their availability to work. She will be able to narrow the search down to people she knows and trusts and can book a carer directly online there and then. The carer will then receive a text confirming the booking.

It seems such a simple and unarguably good idea but the road to success has been an arduous one.

Date

Interviews with Naveed Parvez and Richard Manby carried out in April 2009.

'The Slivers of Time system has really come into its own following the introduction of the personalisation agenda, which is aimed at allowing people to choose how their care is delivered'

Teething problems

Slivers of Time is now flat out implementing and informing people about the system, but the project was not immediately successful. The innovation first came into existence in the 1990s when various think tanks were looking at tackling worklessness. In 1994, the journalist Wingham Rowan, who produced and presented ITV's cyber.café show, went to the think tank Demos with an idea for "public benefit computer trading" which would allow people to buy and sell small chunks of working time online. This would give people the means to get back into employment in a small way, offering to work when they were able to, to fit around their other commitments.

Over time, the idea of an ultra-flexible system of working was developed, with the hope that it would bring people back into the workplace in stages. However, while the concept made perfect sense, the technology was not yet available to make the system work in an economically viable way. Developments in technology have made it possible to build the right applications, and with the advent of the personalisation agenda, the organisation's time has come.

The waiting game

Slivers of Time exemplifies that sometimes the only way to get a project off the ground is through the correct balance of patience and perseverance. It took 12 years for the idea to grow into a fully working project.

Initially, a company was formed, but after a false start in 2000 it was wound up. A legal dispute over the intellectual property ensued. In 2002 Rowan won the case and retained intellectual property, and over the following year work on the technology necessary to underpin the idea was stepped up significantly. In 2004, a company called Guaranteed Markets Ltd was formed with the support of Paul Barry-Walsh, founder of the Frederick Foundation and European Philanthropist of the Year in 2009. Paul Barry-Walsh is now chairman of Slivers of Time.

The big break

Slivers of Time was finally awarded funding worth £0.5 million in 2005 by what was then the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's e-innovation fund to launch Slivers of Time Working. This enabled the software behind the scheme to be built to an industrial scale.

A pilot project was started at Earn as You Learn in Newham College, London. The project allows students to take on bits of paid work for short periods of time to fit around their studies, while giving employers access to an ultra-flexible workforce.

This was followed up with similar projects, such as that of East Thames housing association, which initially registered 30 of its tenants onto the system and started booking them for short periods of time to carry out customer service and administrative work. The marketplace was revolutionary, and proved such a positive experience that the association began using the system in many more of its departments.

The team were fast becoming marketplace experts. Through the evaluation process surrounding the projects, they found that, for the marketplace to get going, employers needed at least 75% of their hours to be filled. At the same time, workers selling their time needed to be given work for at least 25% of their available hours. This evaluation of the way marketplaces can be successful has been vital in getting schemes off the ground and convincing other organisations of its worth.

‘The team had two jobs to do, the first was to go out and sell the system, and the second, perhaps bigger, job was to challenge the status quo within the bodies’

Spreading the word

With fledgling schemes under their belt, the Slivers of Time team set about selling their idea to local authorities and soon found they had two jobs on their hands. The first was to go out and sell the system, and the second, tougher, job was to challenge the status quo within the bodies. Many authorities were unable to imagine how they could benefit from the system, and just finding the right person to approach was challenging, with every authority having its own model for procurement.

Local authorities who already had contracts for temporary staff in place with other agencies or Master Vendors were nervous of rocking the boat by bringing in another system. And since it is often managed by recruitment agencies, there has been concern about bringing in new names that could upset existing contractors.

And when it came to tackling worklessness specifically, Slivers found that there were simply no minimum targets in place for getting people back into work. Under official targets, getting a person into work meant finding them a full-time, regular job. Since the scheme did not immediately appear to help them meet any of their objectives, Local Authorities

had little incentive to buy into the idea. In fact, the system has shown that starting with just two hours a week can help a person to develop the experience, skills and vital self-confidence they need to get back into the workplace full time.

Where local authorities were positive, they often thought too broadly about the system, and envisaged it taking on a huge, wide-reaching role within their organisations. In fact, it is key to remain focussed and target specific areas that the Slivers of Time system can help with. “It’s very important to have some sort of roadmap in place, as most organisations don’t have the processes set up to deliver or fully take advantage of this sort of marketplace,” explains Parvez.

The way forward

The team is now concentrating on implementation. It foresees more local authorities jumping on board further down the line, as the system gains greater recognition and a “me too” mentality kicks in. Slivers of Time has now been launched in more than half a dozen areas across the UK, with more expected to follow.

Turning points and surprises: The Personalisation Agenda

The project started out as an innovation to tackle worklessness, and using the same technology as a tool to allow people to book support workers in a person-to-person way, rather than through an impersonal agency is a completely new twist. It is the perfect example of how to adapt an excellent idea to fit an entirely new need.

This new way of using the system came about in autumn 2008, when the Innovation Exchange’s Next Practice programme commissioned and funded Slivers of Time to carry out an outreach programme to see how local authorities might take advantage of a Person-to-Person Support marketplace as part of their Personalisation of Care Agenda.

Slivers of Time approached 150 councils about the need for such a marketplace, which would allow people to book care workers directly online using the underlying technology already in use for Slivers of Time Working.

Of those, eight London boroughs came forward and said they were ready to make explore the possibility of starting a Person-to-Person marketplace. There are also projects moving forward in Hertfordshire and Lancashire.

Sustainable Funding Project Case Study: Slivers of Time

Funding and sustainability

- Slivers of Time was awarded funding worth £0.5m in 2005 by what was then the government's e-innovation fund, which kick-started the development of the software
- The main investor behind the organisation is the Frederick Foundation
- Innovation Exchange's Next Practice programme commissioned and funded an outreach project to promote Person-to-Person Support within local authorities
- Slivers of Time has a sustainable funding model. Local authorities pay the organisation to set up the system, while those at the earlier stages pay for consultations to set up a road map to see if it would work for them

Main challenges

- Technology has been both a catalyst and a barrier for Slivers of Time. Person-to-Person marketplaces are incredibly sophisticated and developing suitable technological applications proved difficult for many years.
- Local authorities can be set in their ways, and a revolutionary idea such as this can challenge them to the core. It has been difficult to even identify the right person to consider the project, and once found it has been difficult, in some cases, to convince him or her that it could be worth altering the status quo to implement it.

- Identifying those groups who are serious about using the system and separating them from those who are interested but not yet ready has been tough.
- Getting across the way in which the scheme can help to tackle worklessness has been made very difficult. There are no minimum targets for getting people back into work. In the eyes of local authorities, being employed means having a regular job, so helping a person to work for two hours a week does not help authorities meet objectives.

What drives this idea towards success

- The team behind Slivers of Time, led by the initial innovator Wingham Rowan, are extremely driven and tenacious. This has pushed the idea, which was arguably born before its time, through to realisation.
- The problem of worklessness, and more recently the personalisation agenda, both presented gaps in society which needed to be filled. Slivers provides a perfect solution.
- Once marketplaces have been created, the Slivers of Time model is self-perpetuating, with users driving the need for it to exist.

- Perhaps the key driver to the development of this innovation has been timing. The concept was already there, but the necessary technology came later, as and a clear-cut need for it came later as the personalisation agenda created a perfect environment for the system to work.

Learning points

- Sometimes a brilliant idea can take off in an entirely new route, as Slivers of Time has found with its move into personalised care.
- Perseverance is essential – it can take a very long time for some ideas to come to fruition. Slivers of Time took 12 years from the concept stages to delivery.
- Identifying the right partnerships and relationships is vital to get things moving in the right direction.
- Thinking in a broad way about where your funding could come from is key to moving towards sustainability.

'Slivers of Time foresees more local authorities jumping on board further down the line, as the system gains greater recognition and a "me too" mentality kicks in.'

Sustainable Funding Project Case Study: Slivers of Time

Just the beginning ...

Slivers of Time's success so far has been a result of tenacity, a clear vision of what the team wanted to achieve and an ability to adapt and act when the time was right for the innovation to take flight. As the organisation's experience shows, ideas that are worth pursuing may not have an immediate impact and may not follow the path the innovator originally had in mind. It is the combination of a good idea and a persistent, flexible team that can make innovations like this one really happen.

Contact

Slivers-of-Time Working
Unit 3, Essex House
375 High Street
Stratford
London
E15 4QZ

Tel: 020 8586 5677

Email:
naveed.parvez@
sliversoftime.com
richard.manby@
sliversoftime.com



LOTTERY FUNDED

The Sustainable Funding Project is an NCVO initiative working in partnership with the Big Lottery Fund and Charity Bank.

NCVO's Sustainable Funding Project is the sector's premier provider of tools and resources encouraging and enabling voluntary and community organisations to develop and implement a sustainable income strategy.

Visit our website at

www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/sfp or call us on **020 7520 2519** for further information and to subscribe to our free monthly e-newsletter.