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Best of BI: Volunteers of America Chesapeake uses BI to boost donations

Hit hard by a slow economy, this charitable group uses BI to raise money and predict fluctuations in resources.

By Sue Hildreth

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Computerworld - If there's a homeless shelter, drug abuse recovery program, senior center or housing services agency for the disabled in your community, there's a good chance that it's supported by the Volunteers of America, which has 36 affiliated chapters around the country. Like all VOA chapters, VOA Chesapeake relies on contributions and volunteers from a variety of corporations, charitable groups and individuals to support its programs.

In 2010, however, the Lanham, Md.-based organization was suffering from the downturn in the economy and needed better analytics tools to understand how it could use its resources more efficiently. VOA Chesapeake also wanted to improve the quality of the data it uses in its appeals to donors.

"We needed a robust set of data that we can share with [donors] to convince them of results," says Franklyn Baker, the group's chief operating officer.

VOA Chesapeake also needed to be able to more accurately predict fluctuations in donations, volunteers and other resources. Predictive analytics would allow it to factor in assumptions about trends such as dips in the economy or upswings in volunteerism.

Lacking in-house BI expertise, VOA Chesapeake brought in The Cambridge Don, a Chicago-based company that develops adaptive expert systems and offers a SaaS-based BI and predictive analytics product called Talent Chaser, which can be adapted for different business uses.

VOA Chesapeake began using Talent Chaser to examine its performance evaluation and new-hire screening processes. After successfully increasing employee productivity while cutting the number of people on its payroll by 100, the organization started customizing Talent Chaser to enable it to handle additional business analytics.

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Today, VOA Chesapeake can run reports and forecasts on just about any aspect of its operations and charitable services, from how volunteerism correlates with financial donations to what factors are most helpful in getting people to complete a

substance abuse recovery program or leave a homeless shelter with a job and a new place to live.

The data also helps VOA Chesapeake departments gain insight into their operations and program success factors.

For example, Kyoto Queen, the group's vice president for mental health rehabilitation programs, says, "I regularly check the program operational and outcome measures, and [use the data to] develop intervention strategies."a

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Hildreth is a veteran IT writer based in Waltham, Mass. She covers enterprise technologies, from BI and CRM to social media and IT management.

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