Ease, integration, automation, scale and reach: Harnessing the power of the cloud for the benefit of New Zealand's disadvantaged children

VARIETY – THE CHILDREN'S CHARITY

All-in-one Microsoft cloud solution, encompassing Office 365, Dynamics NAV, CRM and custom web portals, helps Variety make a difference to more Kiwi kids

THE SITUATION

Established in New Zealand 26 years ago, Variety – the Children's Charity is a champion for Kiwi kids, helping sick, disabled and disadvantaged children to reach their full potential. Each year Variety helps more than 13,000 children to have brighter futures through its national programmes, with assistance targeted to each child's individual needs and circumstances, allowing New Zealanders to get involved in helping one Kiwi kid at a time.

Variety's Kiwi Kid Sponsorship programme, established in 2012, currently helps 2700 children, providing essentials that a local child would otherwise go without – whether that's basic clothing, shoes, school stationery, warm bedding, medicine or an extra-curricular activity.

Working alongside schools, community agencies and healthcare professionals who refer children around the country who are in the greatest need of help, Variety's Kiwi Kid sponsorships match sponsors with an individual child so they can connect and create positive change in their lives.

While this effort in itself is significant for the individual child, it's just "a drop in the bucket" in terms of both need and willingness to support from within New Zealand communities, Variety's CEO, Lorraine Taylor says.

THE OPPORTUNITY – A CHALLENGE OF SCALE

In the past 30 years, national child poverty rates have doubled (from 15% in 1984 to 29% today) and in New Zealand today there are 305,000 – or nearly one in three – children living without the basics.

With a current waiting list of more than 600 children and aspirations to scale its services to support 10,000 Kiwi kids through the Kiwi Kid Sponsorship programme, Variety needed to look to its foundational technology systems in order to find a feasible, financially sensible way to make this aspiration a reality.

In its 26 years of operation Variety established and ran a lean, cost-conscious organisation focused on creating action and positive change at an individual level within New Zealand's communities. In the background, however, Variety's technology systems created an unsurpassable barrier to growth.

"Ultimately, we wanted to greatly extend our reach and to be more responsive to the children, their families, sponsors and referrers. And we knew that we needed automated, integrated systems to be able to do this."

LORRAINE TAYLOR
VARIETY CEO

"Before looking to move to an all-in-one Microsoft cloud solution, our systems were not intergrated," CEO Lorraine Taylor says. "Processes were laborious and paper-based; there was a lot of staff handling and duplication, and – the biggest problem of all – we had no ability to scale to meet demand," she explains.

Lorraine illustrates the incumbent systems' limitations by way of example.

"We trialled the Kiwi Kid Sponsorship initiative in late 2012 and it launched in 2013. The media coverage was huge, as was the support from the community, with 400 people interested in sponsoring. But we didn't have automated systems or the ability to take credit card details online – so we had to call everyone one by one and match them with children, which meant we struggled to scale to meet the demand," she says.

"Since that time the initiative has grown to support 2700 children, but it's only a drop in the bucket in terms of both need and the level of support that's there in the community."

Variety recognised that to truly embrace the need that exists in New Zealand to help underprivileged children, and to be able to scale to meet this significant challenge, it would need to completely rethink its technology platform – and to do this in a way that provided the greatest possible value for money, establishing a future-proof, robust, integrated solution with the capacity to scale to meet need as required.

The sale of a Variety premises in late 2015 provided the means for Variety to stand back, take stock and think about what they needed to do, from a business and technology investment perspective, to achieve its ambitious plans for the future.

THE TECHNOLOGY

Variety needed a new technology solution that would incorporate, automate and bring together all areas of the organisation, simplifying and streamlining every customer touchpoint, from the website, through to CRM through to the finance system. And, most importantly, it needed a solution that would scale, allowing Variety to grow its number of sponsored kids by a factor of four without having to add additional overhead in order to achieve this increased reach.

"In today's online world, people expect to be able to do everything online, and we want to meet that expectation. From a sponsor perspective we want to allow sponsors to easily engage, do what they need to do online and get automated responses and updates. And from the perspective of the children and their families we want the same ease of use – so they can do everything from signing up online to seeing how much money they have remaining," Lorraine says.

James Page, Intergen's General Manager Dynamics Solutions says, "Essentially, Variety needed to connect with more Kiwi kids without increasing the number of people or overheads in their business. For Intergen it's really exciting to be a part of enabling this with a truly integrated, cloud-based Microsoft solution."

"What's particularly exciting is how the solution brings together Office 365, Dynamics NAV and CRM portal technologies, all connecting to provide seamless and efficient experiences for applicants and sponsors alike.

"In the New Zealand marketplace we're seeing strong adoption of Microsoft as a platform for all of business, and that native interoperability of systems is within reach for small to mid-sized New Zealand organisations, allowing them to achieve true productivity gains and digital transformation through technology. Variety is truly leading the charge on this front and now has a strong platform in place for its great work in the future."

THE ROAD AHEAD

"We're really excited to be starting this new chapter with our new technology solution in place," Lorraine says. "For us it's about using this technology to engage better and know that we have the ability to scale significantly so that we're able to help more Kiwi kids. It's about making it easier for everyone involved and helping to connect people. And it's about streamlining and automating systems so our people are freed up to spend more time, in person, with the people we're here to help."