THE

B3

INITIATIVE

Building a Digital Community Infrastructure that harnesses the power of the Internet to bring prosperity to the communities of Ontario and beyond.

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Introduction

The purpose of this document is to outline an initiative to harness the power of the Internet in order to dramatically improve the quality of life in Ontario and beyond.

We call this the B3 Initiative.

It involves the widespread adoption of a web-based technology that is already being used in communities across the province and on the other side of the border.

It involves nurturing the ecosystem that is already in place in order to expand adoption of the technology quickly.

It involves bringing together stakeholders who wish to improve the quality of life in their communities to take ownership of the technology and foster its widespread adoption.

We believe the end results will include
- improved productivity for individual community constituents
- improved collaboration amongst community constituents

In turn, we believe this will result in improved prosperity for the communities of Ontario and beyond.

We also believe it will result in a new, decentralized, technology-based industry in Ontario that serves the global market. This means that any number of communities can share in the benefits that derive from helping to build and maintain this new digital community infrastructure.

Who Are You?

You have received this document because you belong to one of the stakeholder groups that wish to improve the quality of life in your community.

These stakeholder groups include anyone concerned with economic and social development, namely the following:
- locally owned businesses
- local business organizations, including business improvement areas (BIAs) and Chambers of Commerce
- local organizations, such as arts groups, sports clubs, not-for-profits, and environmental groups
- umbrella organizations
- local, provincial and federal government agencies and politicians

We hope that you will explore the merits of this initiative with your colleagues.

Ultimately, we hope that you will lend your support to the realization of this initiative and the benefits it will provide.

Who Are We?

The B3 Initiative is sponsored by NaberNet Inc. Our company developed the Bridgelin Platform based on our initial success in developing and maintaining community websites.

We then further developed the platform to serve the needs of key community constituents, most notably BIAs and Chambers of Commerce.

This has resulted in a first-hand understanding of the opportunities and challenges facing these organizations and the communities they serve.

Our direct experience has been supplemented by related research, providing us with the unique perspective that has enabled us to propose this initiative.

It is our hope that we can all work together to bring about the benefits outlined in the B3 Initiative.

The Challenge

In a 2012 overview of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), the Business Development Bank of Canada noted that businesses with fewer than 100 employees represent 98.1% of business in Canada and account for 54.3% of Canada's GDP. With Ontario contributing the largest share of this sector at 35%, it is clear that the health of these SMEs is critical to the health of the Ontario economy. In the communities across our province, including the neighbourhoods of our larger urban centres, the fate of local businesses determines the fate of the local economy.

Globalization is taking its toll on these entities. It is becoming increasingly difficult for the smaller players to compete effectively against the larger players that increasingly dominate the market.

The reasons are simple. Whether an enterprise is large or small, it must perform the same basic functions – most notably communication and administration. The bigger you are, the more resources you can apply to these tasks in absolute terms while actually allocating a smaller portion of your overall operational resources in relative terms. The one day a week a sole proprietor might spend on administrative tasks, for example, cannot compare with the capabilities of a department responsible for the same tasks in a large multinational – the latter can do much more while absorbing a much smaller portion of their overall resources.

While it might be argued that the prevalence of technology should help level the playing field, it is in fact increasing the disparity. A large enterprise can allocate the resources necessary to build and maintain a comprehensive, integrated technology that addresses all of their digital requirements – often referred to as an Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system. It enables them to reduce operating costs even further, in both absolute and relative terms, thereby improving efficiency and profitability. More resources are therefore available to expand their market dominance. The big guys just keep getting bigger.
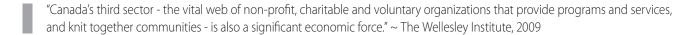
On the other hand, smaller players have two options: they can build their own system or they can cobble something together using a variety of software tools.

Building a new system from the ground up is a time- and cost-intensive undertaking, and so it is rarely a viable option. It is virtually impossible for smaller enterprises to obtain a solution as comprehensive and as integrated as those of their larger counterparts.

The second option does provide some relief. The problem is that to mimic the capabilities of an ERP solution, a number of disparate tools must be used, none of which work together. Efforts to improve productivity in this way might actually detract from it, since employees need to find, learn and maintain a plethora of software solutions. The amount of resources that must now also be dedicated to social media activity is a clear example of this phenomenon.

The organizations that serve these local businesses, most notably local BIAs and Chambers of Commerce, are subsequently affected as well. They find it increasingly difficult to gain the participation of their membership, who are hard pressed to make ends meet. They are also stymied by not being able to provide the level of membership value that would ensure active engagement.

Of course a local economy consists of more than just businesses and business organizations. A plethora of local organizations make up the fabric of a community, often referred to as the Third Sector, and they face the same challenges. They must compete with larger organizations for sponsorship dollars while they see local contributors reducing their participation. They also face the same economies-of-scale differential in their communication and administrative undertakings. This means they must spend proportionally more resources on these secondary activities and therefore fewer resources on those activities for which the organization was originally founded. This is the case whether or not the organization is entirely volunteer-based or has staff.

> "Canada's third sector - the vital web of non-profit, charitable and voluntary organizations that provide programs and services, and knit together communities - is also a significant economic force." ~ The Wellesley Institute, 2009

Given the importance of local businesses and the challenges they face in their communities it is important that a solution be found to counter these challenges in order to strengthen local economies.

> We define the combination of local Third Sector constituents – local businesses, local business organizations and local government agencies – as the local economy.

The Opportunity

While the current state of technology appears to be increasing the disparity between large and small players, it can also be made to balance the equation.

Assuming there is (or soon will be) affordable, high-speed Internet access within virtually all Ontario communities, the opportunity exists to reduce the disparity being experienced by the constituents of local economies by embracing the Cloud.

Cloud computing, or web-based applications, represents a major shift in the technology arena, dramatically changing how software is delivered and used.

The old model required purchasing and installing applications on a stand-alone computer. This meant the user required a relatively high degree of technological sophistication in order to acquire the correct application, install it correctly, ensure proper back-up procedures, and acquire and install the inevitable upgrades.

In addition, opportunities for extensive collaboration were limited to those organizations that had the wherewithal to establish a local area network. As this would be internal to that business or organization, collaboration outside that network would be limited to email.

However, in the case of cloud computing, all that is required is Internet access. The user needs nothing more than to turn on their computer and launch their browser. The application is immediately available, always in its most current iteration, eliminating any concern with installations or upgrades. This of course reduces the degree of technological sophistication required of the user.

This also makes the application ubiquitous: it can be accessed by anyone from anywhere, including the mobile environment.

It also means more users within a business or organization or community can access the application and so the opportunities for collaboration are increased exponentially.

There is also no limit to the size or sophistication of the application that can be provided in this way as it is not restricted by the capabilities of a stand-alone computer. All the work is done on the cloud on the hardware configuration best suited to the task.

From the provider's point of view it means they need only concern themselves with running one instance of the application and can therefore dedicate more resources to development, security and support.

It is therefore now possible to provide a more robust solution to a less technologically sophisticated market – and all at an affordable price.

The Solution

The objective then is to implement a solution that takes advantage of the opportunities inherent in the cloud to address the challenges faced by local economies and their constituents, most notably local businesses.

The solution proposed in this document, the B3 Initiative, involves building a digital community infrastructure and its concomitant ecosystem using a shared-source model.

This solution has the following components:
- building and maintaining a robust, fully integrated web-based platform (the application)
- fostering widespread adoption of the platform through member-based organizations, in particular provincial umbrella organizations (the affiliate network)
- establishing a community of value-added providers such as web designers and other content creators to adopt the platform for their clients' requirements (the designer network)
- establishing a community of independent developers to build the application under the direction of a central body that also maintains the application and its supporting hardware (the developer network)
- ensuring all the stakeholders (developers, designers, affiliates and end-users) have a direct say in how the application is developed and maintained (the governance model)

NOTE: It is important to note that all components of the proposed solution have been established and are proven. This means implementation of the B3 Initiative is simply a matter of expanding an existing framework.

Following is a more detailed description of each of the components.

The Application

As stated, the core of this initiative is the application, the digital community infrastructure, which provides direct value to the local economy by providing direct value to its constituents.

> We believe "a cloud within the cloud" is the best way to succinctly describe a digital community infrastructure. It suggests a portion of the Internet that provides the functionality available on the larger Internet but in a seamless, fully integrated fashion. This structure makes it possible for users to access a virtually endless menu of modules while facilitating sharing and collaboration.

We see this value as having three main components:
- Content Management
- Data Management
- Collaboration

Content Management refers to those online components normally associated with the visible or communications portion of a website, including news and events, specials, sponsorships and advertising, directories, product catalogues, e-commerce and the like. We have extended that definition to include email broadcasting and social media integration.

Data Management refers to those online components normally associated with the invisible or administrative portion of a website, including contact information, membership and customer invoicing, applications and registrations, demographics and other statistics, as well as any other data requirements that may be identified.

Collaboration refers to the ability of end-users to not only contribute content and data to the website but to interact with each other in meaningful ways such as exchanging contact information, organizing meetings, sharing files, conducting online meetings, exchanging referrals, organizing events, undertaking projects, raising funds and building consensus.

The overarching logic is that by pooling resources it is possible to create a much more robust application than any one constituent would be capable of building on their own. The modular nature of the application, on the other hand, ensures the end-user need only acquire those functionalities that their requirements and budget dictate, comfortable in the knowledge that additional capabilities can be acquired at any time.

If the end-user has a very specific requirement, it is also possible to have a custom module developed that would be fully integrated with the rest of the application and at considerably less cost than if they were to develop an entire solution from scratch. If there are others who would be interested in that module this end-user might also recoup the cost of development.

The One Login

A key point of distinction with the application proposed here is that everything can be done through one login. Not only does the end-user benefit from increased productivity but that productivity is increased because they need remember only one password, climb only one learning curve, make only one support call.

It also means duplication of effort is all but eliminated and the re-purposing and sharing of content and data are simplified.

And as the same login enables meaningful collaboration with other members of the end-user's business, their industry, their organization and their community, the benefits are further amplified.

Pooling Resources

It is an obvious premise but one that bears highlighting. Let us say one community constituent decides to build a solution for $10,000. In the end this constituent has a solution with just the functionality they could afford with that budget.

On the other hand, if five community constituents pooled $5,000 each, they would each have access to the functionality that $25,000 could afford. In other words, they would have each spent less but ended up with considerably more.
If you take that argument across the entire community – and the entire province – you can begin to imagine the possibilities.

An Application Without Limits

We propose that the application be as far-reaching and as integrated as can be imagined. An example of this would be to build an email module, along the lines of Gmail and the like, that would be fully integrated with the other modules. Shared calendars, chat, remote meeting functionality, file-sharing, video-conferencing would all be incorporated into this one-login solution. In effect we are duplicating the various capabilities available on the Internet in one seamless environment. A cloud within the cloud. The only limitation - imagination.

The Ecosystem

The B3 Initiative is about more than just a technology. It recognizes that every technology requires a supporting ecosystem to ensure it will grow and can be sustained.

The ecosystem proposed in the B3 Initiative consists of not just the local business end-users, but also the affiliate organizations that encouraged them to adopt the platform, the designers and other content creators who set them up on the platform, the developers who are building the platform, and the central body that maintains the integrity of the platform.

We believe there is considerable benefit that will accrue to those organizations that adopt the Platform for their entire network as it would facilitate content and data-sharing and collaboration across their entire network, not only making each constituent of the network more productive but making the whole greater than the sum of its parts. The sharing of data and best practices would be greatly simplified.

It would then also be possible for members of the various local organizations with common interests, such as industry groups, to collaborate more effectively.

The Affiliate Network

We believe that widespread adoption is required for this solution to realize its full potential and that this can best be achieved by encouraging the formation of a network of affiliate end-users. We further believe the most appropriate candidates to act as affiliates are the organizations that serve the local business community, most notably BIAs and Chambers of Commerce.

The logical first step would be for these organizations to adopt the platform for their own purposes. The next step would be to provide their members with access to the platform, along with training, in order to update their online presence on

the organization's website. Starting with their directory profile, the members could also be given the ability to expand their presence to include specials, events, news items and the like. In this way the organization could familiarize their membership with the platform. The final step would be to encourage their members to adopt the platform for their own requirements, so that directory profiles would become websites.

The potential exists for the affiliates to receive an incentive rebate that could be used to defray their operating costs or be passed on to their members as a discount.

In so doing, these organizations would benefit in a number of ways. First, they would benefit directly from the productivity improvements inherent in the application. Secondly, they would be in a position to offer their members an introduction to the platform that would in turn provide them with productivity gains and collaborative opportunities. Helping their members cross the digital threshold onto the platform would represent the kind of membership value that would spur increased engagement. A third benefit is the potential new revenue stream.

The ideal scenario would be for the provincial umbrella organization to adopt the application for their direct requirements as well as for the networks they serve. We are suggesting the Toronto Association of BIAs (TABIA), the Ontario BIA Association (OBIAA) and the Ontario Chamber of Commerce (OCC).

A key advantage of the platform is the ability to share content, in particular listings, events, news items and specials. As businesses and individuals often belong to more than one organization, it is possible to maintain a presence on more than one website while maintaining only one directory profile. It means a business could update their profile once or issue a coupon and have it appear on a number of websites. It means an organization could post their event once and have it immediately appear on a number of websites – and be included in the email broadcasts of each site.

The Designer Network

There is more to a website than the underlying functionality provided by the platform. Design and content are essential ingredients for a complete online solution. It is our contention that these service are best provided by local designers and content creators. This ensures that a key aspect of building and maintaining a web presence remains within the community the website is serving.

The designers benefit from being able to provide their clients with a robust, fully supported solution while the end-user and affiliate has the benefit of working with a local provider – which also benefits the community.

An incentive rebate can be provided to the designer to foster adoption of the platform, providing them with an ongoing revenue stream.

The Developer Network

Software is never finished, especially in the case of this platform. The intent is to continually add new functionality and improve on existing capabilities.

It is our contention that we accomplish this ongoing requirement by adopting a hybrid model – employing the services of a wide-ranging network of independent programmers as in the open-source model – but under strict centralized control as in the proprietary model.

The centralized control is important, as this is a single instance of a web-based application, which is part of its inherent power. This kind of control requires that the application be administered by a central body with clear procedures for maintaining the performance, integrity and security of the platform at optimum levels. This central body would also ensure that developers adhere to the standards necessary to maintain those optimums.

The benefit to the developer is the opportunity to derive revenue from building new functionality onto an existing platform. They might simply bid on an existing requirement or undertake a project on their own with an eye to realizing a greater return. They would benefit from not having to concern themselves with marketing or supporting the capability and so could focus on their programming strengths.

There is also the opportunity to have development undertaken by the faculty and students of appropriate post-secondary institutions across the province. The challenges involved in undertaking the development of an application of this magnitude would benefit from the advanced knowledge available in these institutions. The institutions could also benefit from revenue-sharing opportunities, if appropriate.

The Governance Model

The B3 Initiative is about more than just a technology and an ecosystem. It recognizes that there must be a business model that will ensure the sustainability of the ecosystem, and therefore the technology.

The model proposed here is a shared-source model that lies between open-source and proprietary. It means simply that the stakeholders in the ecosystem have meaningful control over the application, its development and maintenance, and the policies and procedures that govern its use and development.

This can also be extended to include sharing in the financial benefits of this undertaking.

We contend that the integral nature of a digital community infrastructure as proposed in this initiative is such that the participants in the ecosystem – the developers, designers, affiliates and end-users – should have a say in how it is managed.

We would go so far as to say that it would make sense, at some future point, for the stakeholders to collectively own and govern the application outright.

We believe this approach to governance will provide a number of benefits. We believe it will promote adoption of the platform, particularly by organizational networks knowing they have a direct say in ensuring their interests are being addressed.

The governance model also allows for expansion outside of the province to the rest of Canada, the rest of the continent, and beyond.

We also believe it will limit the emergence of competing infrastructures. We do not believe any large corporate interests that have the wherewithal to implement a project of this magnitude would offer a shared-source solution, as it runs counter to their preferred proprietary model.

We also believe it would be difficult for another platform to emerge with the same governance model, as it requires the collaboration of varying interests, which is not easily duplicated.

Note that the Platform lends itself well to this requirement. Due to the integral nature of the Platform, all users would be regularly accessing the login. Here it would be possible to survey users and build consensus.

Who Owns What

We should be clear that the content and data posted to the Platform remain the property of the contributor and are only shared at their discretion.

We do however propose that the application could and should be collectively owned and governed at some future point.

The Role of Government

The role of the various levels of government in this initiative would be to assist in its realization and participate in its use as members of the community. We do not believe it should be a government initiative. Of course the ecosystem would be bound by the laws of each jurisdiction, in addition to its own policies and procedures.

Building Consensus

The challenge of other solutions designed to encourage involvement and consensus is that they are single-purpose. Therefore, they tend not to be a priority for the users. The advantage of B3 is that the platform is so robust and integral to ongoing operations that it must be accessed on a regular basis. Also, the end-users are already known and validated, as they have been brought to the platform by known affiliates.

We envision a lightbox appearing when the user accesses the platform that would request input on an issue as warranted. Once the user has responded they can go on with their activities and will not be presented with another lightbox until it is time to address another issue or vote.

Because of the real-time nature of this environment, more fluid governance scenarios could be envisioned and undertaken – the only limit being imagination. As an example, this could herald the beginning of electronic voting or midterm changes to elected positions based on the degree of support wielded by a representative at any given point in time.

The Benefits

The benefits of digital community infrastructure extend to each person, business, organization and community that joins the ecosystem – both individually and collectively.

The Platform, as a fully integrated digital solution, provides every constituent with significant time and cost savings. There is no limit to the productivity tools that can be added to the Platform. Some productivity tools benefit all constituents; others address the specific requirements of individual constituents or groups of constituents.

As noted, rather than having to employ multiple applications to gain the kinds of robust capabilities available to their larger counterparts, community constituents would have just one login to a system that fully met their digital needs. This means only one password to remember, only one learning curve to climb, and only one support phone call to make.

Once logged into the platform, constituents could access a variety of tools to enable them to be more effective and efficient. As a fully integrated solution connected with all aspects of their workflow, the platform eliminates duplication of effort. For example, new content could be shared on their website, through social media and by email broadcasting all at once. The platform would also enable re-purposing, so that the same content would be available for other relevant constituents to share.

Then there are the collaborative benefits. Individual end-users are able not only to connect but also to interact in meaningful ways, in ways that the end-users themselves identify. Among those being developed are
- sharing of contact information
- creation of contact networks
- organizing meetings
- exchanging referrals
- organizing events
- fundraising
- exchanging goods and services

In addition to the general benefits outlined above, realization of the B3 Initiative would see every constituent of the ecosystem benefiting in a number of specific ways, as described below.

Benefits for Local Organizations

Not only do local organizations directly benefit from improved productivity, they are also able to marshal their membership to enhance the content of their website, thereby making it more relevant. In the same way, they are helping their members cross the digital threshold and take advantage of a technology that will greatly improve their own productivity – a real instance of providing membership value and all the benefits that accrue.

Benefits for Umbrella Organizations

Most local organizations belong to umbrella organizations at the provincial and federal levels, which can offer to their members the same benefits the local organizations offer to their own membership. The B3 Initiative provides a real opportunity to better integrate the umbrella organization's network, making it much easier to share content and data and to collaborate. An announcement appears on all the websites of the network instantaneously and is subsequently included in all their respective newsletters with little effort.

Similarly, data from the network can be amassed instantaneously, giving the umbrella organization greater leverage when putting forward their case to the market or the government.

Having this common framework allows the umbrella organization to more easily build the technological capabilities of its network and the human resource capacity to take full advantage of that technology.

Benefits for Local Businesses

Membership in their local organization provides a local business with the tools they need to become more productive. They are shown how to take full advantage of the technology at a pace most appropriate to their skills and budget.

They are provided access to a platform designed to address their general requirements as a business as well as modules designed to address the specific needs of their industry or specialty, such as point-of-sale and e-commerce capabilities for retailers and specific work-flow management tools for other types of businesses.

They also gain an opportunity to collaborate not only within their own local organization but across the entire network, resulting in opportunities for economies of scale, such as group buying and group promotion.

Of course, they can be found easily on desktops, laptops and smartphones in ways they could not easily or affordably achieve on their own.

Benefits for Developers

Developers are often interested in developing applications that will generate ongoing revenue. However, success in this type of venture requires more than just programming acumen. Marketing the new product and providing support require very different skills from those used in development and can require considerable resources. By building onto the platform developers can benefit from the ongoing revenue in the shared-source model while knowing the marketing and support considerations are being addressed, making their new functionality that much more attractive.

Benefits for Designers

Designers are interested in addressing the look and feel as well as the content of their clients' websites. They would prefer not to have to deal with the functionality aspects or the support of that functionality.

The Platform, and the associated support, provide exactly that, as well as an ongoing revenue stream that further encourages adoption.

Benefits for Communities

Each of the constituents of a community benefits from the Platform, as noted above. However, in addition, the Platform would greatly increase opportunities for collaboration between its constituents.

It has been argued that communities with a preponderance of engaged citizens offer a greater quality of life. This can be amplified when the groups and organizations within the community work together at every opportunity and the platform is designed to encourage and facilitate collaboration of all kinds.

One obvious benefits of the Platform is the ability to coordinate events. Consolidating all community events onto one platform allows community event organizers to identify timing conflicts as well as opportunities for complementary events.

It is easy to see that in a scenario where local businesses and community groups are working together, coordinating events and effectively sharing information, the community will be richer and more vibrant. Facilitating this type of interaction further amplifies the social and economic benefits of community collaboration.

Benefits for Ontario

It is often said that a rising tide lifts all boats: as each constituent of the ecosystem benefits, so too will the province as a whole.

We believe the kind of technology we have outlined in this document is an inevitability – it might not take exactly this form but it will come. The opportunity exists for Ontario to lead the way, to take advantage of the head start provided by the B3 Initiative to show the rest of Canada and the rest of the world how it can be done, and then provide the underlying technology and best practices to those markets.

It means jobs, sunrise jobs, jobs that can be established right across the province. It also means existing providers of a whole range of goods and services can be made more productive and therefore more competitive.

The Plan – Join the Discussion

Building the digital community infrastructure proposed in this document is not a far-fetched idea. It can be done and is being done. The challenge is to increase the scale.

The plan is simple. First, there must be discussion on the merits of this initiative. It is our intention to conduct a series of one-on-one meetings with community stakeholders to start the discussion.

We subsequently propose to have meetings involving a variety of stakeholders to further discuss the merits of the proposal and determine the next steps.

What we would like to see is some key organizations within the province, including appropriate government agencies, lending their support to this initiative. It should involve a form of support that will enable the initiative to be taken to the next level – to continue development of the application and the ecosystem – and to begin discussions on a governance model. However, the precise nature of that support would be determined by the stakeholders.

We are also proposing the establishment of some full community networks so that we are better able to understand the challenges and opportunities that are involved. There are a number of embryonic networks in place and we plan to expand those to their full potential. We believe this discussion document will help to facilitate that aim.

The truth is that any of this will happen only if we agree to work together, or at least get together to discuss the possibilities.

We are in this together, so join us in the discussion.

Appendix I: The Vision and Vignettes

We have created a number of vignettes in order to outline how digital community infrastructure and the Bridgelin Platform will affect different segments of the community.

The capabilities suggested here are not all currently available, although the foundation has already been established. The vignettes are designed to highlight the realization of our vision, which is to help foster a vibrant community of communities integrated by a commonly owned, self-governing technology.

There are 10 vignettes:
- organization
- local business
- retailer
- designer
- community
- developer
- support
- investor
- economic development
- co-operative

Bear in mind that many more vignettes are possible, including some that might occur to you. If they do, please share them with us.

When you are reading the vignettes, it is important to remember that everything would happen through one login. That means only one username and password to remember, only one learning curve to climb (with the help of our guides), only one place to enter data and look for information, and only one email to send or phone call to make if you need some help.

Just one login to a system you own and control.

Local Organization

Gordon is the Executive Director of his local Chamber. His job is to make the Chamber better so that existing members stay and new members join. The better the Chamber does, the better it is for its members, the executive director, and the community. Everybody wins.

Gordon likes the fact that because all the Chamber membership information is online, it is always accessible.

The membership info is tied to the directory info, so that any change to one changes the other. They are always in sync. Each member has access to their own directory listing so they can carry some of the workload of keeping the directory accurate.

Gordon recognizes the value of their directory; it is a central component of the Chamber's success. A good directory not only ensures members can find each other but outside customers can find them as well, bringing traffic to the site and customers to the members.

Listings in the directory can be found through a menu, the directory search, or the site search. They can also be found directly through major search engines as well as on the Chamber's mobile app, which runs off the directory.

Managing the directory is straightforward. There are three layers - Section, Category and Listing - and they can be moved around easily, one at a time or all at once.

Gordon likes the fact that members can go in and update their own information, including contact details, descriptions, keywords, member-to-member discounts, events, and expert articles. That information is seamlessly added to the website proper and included in the weekly email newsletter with just a few clicks. One of his members, Joan the plumber, decides to do some online advertising on the site. Gordon hooks her up with a local designer to create the ad, and then the information is put up online with minimal effort on Gordon's part.

Gordon also likes the fact that he can produce an accurate and up-to-date print directory of members whenever he feels the need, as for the upcoming local home show.

The site includes information on the benefits of membership, such as discounts, networking and advocacy. If interest turns into action, the new member can sign up and pay online, and their information goes directly into the membership management area. Membership renewals are done automatically, just like a phone bill. No muss, no fuss.

Other revenue-generating activities, like events, are also handled with little effort for optimum effect, all done online. Event information is integrated with the membership info, so Gordon knows who went to which event.

Gordon likes the fact that he can receive content seamlessly from the provincial and federal Chambers as well as other local Chambers and other local sites, which he can again incorporate into the Chamber website and newsletter. The content flows both ways, making it easier for him to get the word out to the community and beyond. Of course, that's because they are all on the same platform.

When it comes time for elections, nominations or surveys, he likes that the Platform handles all the logistics.

Gordon wins two ways. He can do more things more effectively and with less effort so he can spend more resources on other membership builders. With some of his valuable time freed up, he and his staff can spend more quality face time with members, prospects and the community at large.

The result is that the members are happier and more prosperous, the Chamber is healthy and self-sustaining, the executive director improves his lot in life, and the community prospers.

Local Business

Joan runs Acme Plumbing. She joins her local Chamber, where a listing is created for her in the online directory. These same data will eventually be used by her Chamber to renew her membership.

The Chamber gives her access to her listing and invites her to a training session where she learns how to add a description, page title and keywords so she will be easier to find in the Chamber directory, as well as by the major search engines. She also learns how to post her own member-to-member discounts.

Joan, who knows how to get around on the Internet, got started on her own but went to the training session so she could learn more. John, whom she met at the training session, didn't have a clue about the Web and appreciated the Chamber holding his hand as they jumped into the shallow end.

She also learns how to update her own personal profile and she learns that everyone else in the Chamber has a profile too. She attends a Chamber networking event, and afterwards, she is able to locate everyone she met and "nudge" them online. A few of them agree to become part of her networking group, without her having to enter any business card info.

She now has a list of everyone she has connected with, with a little note about each one, as well as their contact info, including links to their Facebook, Twitter and Linked-In accounts. She can even like and follow them right from her Chamber profile.

Eventually she starts getting referrals through her Chamber connections and her business starts to grow.

She has had a simple website for a while but realizes she needs more, so she decides to upgrade her Chamber listing to a full-fledged Bridgelin website. She has a Chamber member design the site – the same one who did her ad. Another member helps her to populate the site with content.

Then she takes the next step and gets the Data Management module that lists all her customers and prospects, including those she met through the Chamber, and her business continues to grow.

Next, she gets the newsletter module and starts sending out email broadcasts with specials and expert articles, and her business continues to grow.

Then she picks up the sales module, which enables her to track her business-building efforts, prepare and send out quotes electronically, and issue invoices and receive payment. All the while, her business continues to grow.

In fact, it grows to the point where she is having trouble keeping track of the work and of whether or not she is making any money. She decides to get the workflow module, which assigns electronic work tickets to her group of plumbers and they mark down their time against that ticket. She can also track parts and associated costs online, and at any point she can see where she stands and what needs to be done next. She can access the information right on her Smartphone, along with her own to-do list – while her business continues to grow.

She now gets to the point where she wants to add a new dimension to her business, to become a specialist in environmentally friendly plumbing. She accesses the business planning module, which helps her formulate her plan. She posts that plan onto the local exchange, and some local environmentally concerned investors decide to back her business.

While Joan has been learning and growing on the platform, so has her business. Now she can hire more people, so the community grows and benefits too.

Retailer

Eva runs a women's-wear fashion boutique in the downtown core, which is covered by the local BIA, a municipally sanctioned business association where the merchants and property owners work together to make the area more conducive to shopping.

The BIA uses the Bridgelin Platform and Eva has a listing on the site's directory, which she uses to promote her business. She has also upgraded her listing to a full Bridgelin site, using it for content management and email broadcasting.

She takes advantage of the Platform's e-commerce module, which offers a number of advantages. Of course, it has all the shopping cart features, but she is running a boutique, not just an online business, so she appreciates the associated point-of-sale (POS) module that handles all of her in-store transactions.

Then there is the catalogue module, which ties in directly to a number of her vendors who are also on the Platform. This means that all the information she needs for both the e-commerce and the POS modules is automatically provided, and she doesn't have to enter anything other than her pricing.

The associated inventory module is another advantage of the Platform. She can use it to order directly from her vendors and when the products are received, they are entered straight into the system using the bar coded price tags supplied by the vendor. The tags already have her prices showing, which she defined when ordering the product.

As her products are sold, whether online or offline, the inventory is updated.

Her vendors love being on the Platform as it makes order entry very simple because clients are doing it for themselves. They also appreciate that by providing all the catalogue information, they are making it easier for their retail customers to sell their products so they can sell more, which means reorders. The less time their customers spend doing administrative tasks, the more time and effort they can spend on marketing and sales.

She and other merchants really like the mobile app module the BIA added to the site. It means the information she posted on her BIA listing, like contact info, About Us, hours of operation and specials, appears not only on her site but on the mobile app as well. It also appears on other sites and other mobile apps where she is listed, which of course use the Bridgelin Platform.

For Eva, the result of using the Platform is a thriving business and a more prosperous community.

Designer

Marsha is a Graphic Designer, who also helps her clients with all their marketing requirements. She has found that helping people with their Chamber online advertisement is a good way for her and her clients to get to know one another and maybe start a mutually profitable relationship. She makes money by helping her clients make money.

She likes using the Platform because it makes it easy for her to design and build a website, which can grow as her clients' needs grow. When she is done, she knows both she and her client will get the support they need, no matter what the technical issue. The fact that her main support person, an independent Bridgelin support agent, is local just makes it that much better.

She also likes being part of a network that uses the same platform as she does, because she knows that she can always find someone to help her with a project, whether it's website search engine optimization or helping her client get on top of invoicing or other administrative tasks.

She likes the fact that dealing with her clients and her suppliers is seamless, as if she was General Motors or something. It's like having an ERP and a just-in-time system like the big guys. Work orders, invoices and payments all move seamlessly while her credit union account grows.

Oh, and the rebate money she receives on a regular basis, even after the website is set up, is a nice bonus. The more clients she has on the platform, the bigger the rebates and the more her credit union account grows. The better Marsha does, the more the community prospers.

Community

Nelson started a community website on the Bridgelin Platform. He always was a community person and this seemed a good way to earn a living doing what he loves.

He worked with a Bridgelin Partner who specializes in community websites, who got him all set up. They helped him put up his website, build his directory, and get his marketing and sales program under way.

Among his first visits were the local Chamber of Commerce and the local BIA, which were both on the Bridgelin Platform. They welcomed the visit because they already knew Nelson and liked what he was planning to do. They saw that it would give them another channel of exposure and added value for their members.

His next visit was to Town Hall where again he was well received. While the government itself was not on the platform, many of their agencies were, including the community centre and tourism sites. They also saw this as a welcome development that would provide added exposure.

He then started reaching out to all of the local organizations, asking them to post content on the new site. They would receive additional exposure and all he asked in return was for them to tell their members about his site and distribute the postcards he had printed.

Through these efforts, his site began to build content and traffic, and his newsletter list started to grow. He also brought on a Bridgelin SEO partner who helped him build his search engine visibility.

The next calls were to the merchants in the community, who could receive added exposure by sponsoring the site, so now he had advertisers and some revenue. He kept the cost low for the first few and gradually increased the sponsorship rate as the traffic grew.

Some of his sponsors were Chamber members and BIA members, some were both, and many were neither. The members appreciated the added value they received for their Bridgelin listing, while the others appreciated the opportunity to get online exposure for the first time.

Some of the key sponsors were the local real estate brokers and agents, who recognized how important a role community plays in both residential and commercial buying decisions. They were not only sponsors; they also used the Platform themselves to post Property Listings and promote their respective businesses.

A few of the non-member sponsors, who were updating their own listings and posting their own content, decided a Bridgelin website would work for them and so did an upgrade. They started small, with a just a few pages, but then gradually added more functionality as they went along. A local designer helped them get things going. Nelson now receives an ongoing affiliate rebate for these new Bridgelin clients, which supplements his sponsorship revenue.

He also started providing services to some of the smaller local organizations that did not yet have the resources to do these things for themselves. He started handling registrations for some events, for which he took a small fee. The organization was happy that they could have that task done for them and therefore concentrate on putting on the event.

Nelson has also connected with people like him in neighbouring communities. They have worked out a package rate for companies that want to sponsor more than one site. They also share content as appropriate as well as best practices.

He is proud of what he has accomplished and the benefits that have accrued to his community. He is now considering establishing the site as a co-operative so that he can expand and involve the community even more.

Developer

Hassan is a programmer. He has always liked the open-source model because it increases his programming capability considerably.

He likes the Bridgelin shared-source model even better.

He has been certified as a Bridgelin developer, meaning he has met their exacting standards. Any module built for the Platform must integrate with it completely. These are not plug-ins that are connected to the main application and work independently with a separate database, like a box of crayons. Instead, the module is fully integrated with secure but limited access to the common database, more like a turbocharger. The new module is tested by Bridgelin on staging servers to ensure it meets their standards before it is installed on the main servers and made available to the Bridgelin community.

When the module goes live, he knows that it can be sold through the Bridgelin sales mechanism and be supported by the Bridgelin Network of support agents.

In other words, as a programmer all he needs to worry about is programming, because sales and support are the responsibility of the mother ship.

There are a number of programming assignments he might undertake; for example, Bridgelin might ask him to bid on a new module they have decided to build as part of their ongoing development plan.

He might also be contracted to build an application for a new client. He starts with the Bridgelin Platform, because most of the functionality he needs is already in place, so he can focus on addressing the specific requirements of his client. Bridgelin charges him for testing of the application, updating the user guide and training the support network, and this charge is passed along to his client.

The amount of that charge, if there is any charge, depends on the nature of the module and the degree of exclusivity the client wants to exercise.

If the client wants to keep the new functionality all to themselves, the full charge applies. However, if the client is prepared to share that functionality and it is determined there is a market for it then a different deal is struck, which could include the client receiving a commission for each sale of the module.

Another possibility is for Hassan to donate his services to Bridgelin to build some new functionality or improve an existing module, which enhances the overall capability of the platform in a dramatic way. In this case, he becomes recognized as an investor and receives all the associated benefits.

He also likes the fact that not only is he, along with numerous other programmers and programming firms, helping to build a highly effective and trouble-free, fully supported application and receiving financial rewards for doing so, but he is also contributing to the well-being of his community and communities like it.

Support

Support is a key aspect of any technology offering. A person needs to know there is someone out there who can help them through an issue should one arise.

Lynda found out that she could become a support agent for the Bridgelin Platform. A stay-at-home mom, she liked the idea of being around for her kids while earning some extra income.

She paid a small fee to be trained and certified on the Platform. She also received some training on other related technologies for no extra charge. This was all done through the Bridgelin Support Centre (BSC). In some communities, that training was sponsored through local funding initiatives.

Her role is to be the first point of contact whenever anyone on the Platform has an issue. She liked the idea of working with locals so she was added to the roster of local support agents. As each new client, partner or developer came onto the Platform, the BSC would assign them to her as appropriate.

Her first responsibility would be to help them set up their website. She would also provide training and coordinate the efforts of different specialists, like designers, content providers, data preparation, SEO experts and the like.

Her next role was training and helping users to learn the system. These steps would be repeated any time a new module was added to a client's configuration.

After the site was up and running, she would become involved in supporting the site. Whenever an issue was encountered, the individual would generate a support ticket. Sometimes it was a phone call or an email to the BSC, in which case they created the ticket. In either case, the ticket would then be assigned to Karen for follow-through.

Her first responsibility was triage, in order to ascertain the severity and urgency of the issue so she would know how to react – of course, an emergency would be handled by the BSC right away. She would then undertake a diagnosis, including re-creating the issue. If she was able, she would then resolve the issue and advise the user and the BSC through the ticketing system.

If it was beyond her scope, she would bump it back to the BSC with an indication of what she had discovered and what she thought the issue might be. The BSC would then determine the best specialist in the Network to address the issue, keeping Lynda in the loop, who in turn kept the client informed.

The issues did not always involve the platform. The client may have been having an issue with their email and did not know who to turn to. They know they can always count on the Bridgelin Network to come to the rescue.

Of course, they also realize that this level of service comes with a price. They recognize that there is value to uptime and so did not protest having to pay a premium for premium service – but it was all factored into their setup and monthly charges.

With the ticketing system, BSC is able to monitor overall activity as well as individual activity and determine whether an account is overusing the system. In this case, they might recommend an increase in the premium or perhaps some additional training.

Lynda is happy with the flexibility the setup affords her, enabling her to earn extra income while being there for her kids. The clients like the personalized service and improved productivity, while the community benefits from the money that gets circulated through the local economy.

Investor

Peter has been lucky, and he will tell you that it seems the harder he works the luckier he gets. This hard work has resulted in a pool of capital that he wants to put to work.

He has always been a community person and has recently discovered that the Bridgelin Platform gives him access to community initiatives that are looking for investors. Each opportunity includes a simple but detailed business plan that conforms to a standard, making it easy for him to compare them.

He settles on one from a local plumber named Joan who wants to build her business around environmental sustainability, another hot button for Peter. She is looking to raise $50,000 dollars and already has commitments from investors for $30,000. He decides to put in $10,000 and calls his investor friend Sanjay who agrees to top it off.

The whole process is administered through the Bridgelin Platform with oversight provided by the local credit union.

Peter and the others take an equity stake in the opportunity. It could have been done as a loan but they feel that while the risk is a little greater, the long-range payback will be greater too.

Joan now has the resources she needs to move forward to get the equipment and expertise she needs. She reports regularly and her investors provide guidance when needed, all through the Platform.

Her business expands; she hires more people and starts paying dividends. Peter is happy, Joan is happy, and the community prospers.

Economic Development

Karen is a key figure in the community's economic development department. Her mandate is simple: improve economic conditions in her community.

She works closely with the other players in this arena, including the local Chamber of Commerce and BIA as well as key local businesses and real estate brokers. All have access to the Platform in one way or another.

It is important for her to be able to gauge the success of her various undertakings. One of these measures is the state of the real estate market, both commercial and residential. The Platform is able to provide her with cumulative benchmark data that tell her where they stand with values, lease rates, occupancy and the like. She is also able to gauge employment levels, both full- and part-time. Individual businesses, property owners and others who understand the value it provides to the community and therefore to themselves have entered this information.

She works with the other players to develop initiatives that are then communicated throughout the community in short order through the network capabilities of the Platform. She is also able to monitor the impact of those initiatives, which she shares with her colleagues.

As a result, the community prospers through the collective efforts channelled through the Platform.

Co-operative

All the people using the Platform come in through the same entrance, the same login.

When they get in, they are on the Bridgelin Admin Home Page (BAHP), where they find news about what is going on with the Platform or with the Co-operative - even local community news.

The BAHP is customized for and by each contributor.

There is some advertising, but it is targeted using artificial intelligence, because the system knows who has logged in and what their interests are. Of course, the advertiser does not know which contributor is receiving their message. They do know that an ad impression can turn directly into a sale with minimal effort.

The contributor doesn't mind the ad, because ads are just the sort of things they are looking for.

Occasionally there will be a light-box when they login requesting they address co-operative business, like a quick survey or a vote, often offering a small reward in return. Some votes require they review some relevant information.

It is through the BAHP that the Board of Directors are elected and that is also where some decisions are put to a referendum. Easy as pie.

They can even rescind their support if they feel circumstances have changed, like their support for a Director who no longer shares their views on the co-operatives' business.

The things they vote on are politically neutral: boards of directors, pricing policies, development priorities, etc.

The same mechanism can be used by individual organizations and communities for their own consensus-building and voting requirements.

The members of the co-operative like the fact that they not only own the application they are using on a regular basis but they have a direct say in how it is developed and managed – all with little effort.

This new level of involvement has a wider impact as they find themselves becoming more engaged in other areas, like their community. When they prosper, the community prospers.

Appendix II: Bridgelin Platform Capabilities

The following is a brief description of the current capabilities of the Bridgelin Platform. Please note that all modules are integrated to eliminate duplication of effort. There are also numerous automated processes to minimize workload.

Content Management: The foundation of any website is content. You want lots of it and you want to keep it fresh and inviting. The Bridgelin Content Management module makes posting, organizing and maintaining your own content as easy as can be. In addition to the standard pages, you can build an event calendar, a news section as well as photo and video galleries. It is integrated with the Newsletter and Directory modules for added benefit with Content Sharing for an extra bonus.

Directory Management: The Bridgelin Directory is one that people will use – and isn't that the whole idea in the first place. Easy to find what you need - and with lots to see when you find it – all the usual information plus maps, online coupons and much, much more. And a permissioning system that lets you share the workload of keeping it accurate and up-to-date.

Advertising Management: Draw attention to your sponsors – or your own promotions – and track the results. There's a whole menu of placement and positioning options so you can put together the program that will get you and your sponsors the best results.

Newsletter Management: Email is one of the best ways to push your website content out to your audience and the Bridgelin Newsletter module makes the whole process effortless. Use web content to build your newsletter and broadcast it out to a list that is integrated with your Directory and the backend Data Management module.

Event Registration: Who's coming? Who's paid? Now you can answers those questions just by lifting a finger and clicking a mouse. Integrated with the Event Calendar in your Content Management module, you design the form to collect the information you want, including online payment of registration fees.

Forms & Surveys: Versatile is probably the best way to describe this module. Use it for contest entries, business award nominations, membership applications, or surveys - any host of possibilities where you need to gather information and online payments.

Private Area: While the accessibility of the Internet is part of its advantage, you sometimes want to control who sees what. With a password protected private area, the only ones to get in are the ones you want in. Logins are individualized for optimum control – and users who have other access permissions use the same login for optimum ease-of-use.

Data Management: No matter what kind of organization you are running it doubtless has many relationships – with members, suppliers, prospects, staff, and volunteers. The Bridgelin Data Management module represents a unique and innovative way to manage the people and organizations in your sphere - in a way that better reflects reality and the multitude of relationships we all have. It is also the foundation for other backend modules, both standard and custom.

Membership Management: As a member-based organization your primary responsibility is to address the needs of your members – so the less time you spend doing administration, the more time you can spend on providing member value. The Bridgelin Membership Management module brings full automation to the renewal process including online invoicing and payment processing. The module is fully integrated with your Directory and QuickBooks so there is no duplication of effort for optimum efficiency.

Properties Module: This module is designed to inventory commercial properties within a given geographic area including the tracking of commercial tax assessments, ownership, status of rental units, tenants and all the people involved.

Custom Modules: If you have a highly specialized need, we can build you a custom module, at a fraction of the cost it would take to build something from scratch and in much less time. We will sit down with you to determine your precise requirements and then prepare a specification outline and a firm quote. Then just give us the word and we will get it done.

Appendix III: Bridgelin Platform Development Initiatives

The following is an outline of the development initiatives we have in mind for the Bridgelin Platform.

Bookkeeping Module: To develop an integrated bookkeeping module as a replacement for Quickbooks, Simply Accounting or Freshbooks.

Business Card Scanner: To be able to scan the data from business cards directly into the Platform, either as a Directory Listing or into the Data Management module or both.

Classifieds: To create a module similar in function to Articles, with repurposing and sharing but dedicated to classifieds, ideally with subcomponents such as Job Postings, things for sale, etc.

Content Exchange: To develop a capability for Users to merchandise their content contributions and for Web Admins to subscribe to those Contributors, including paying for content where appropriate.

Dashboard: To develop a customizable dashboard which quickly indicates all measurable as defined by the end-user.

DIY Database Module: To create a module which enables the end-user to create their own database which can be integrated as appropriate with the Platform Database.

Donations Module: To develop a module to facilitate receipt of donations.

Elections Database: To provide election campaign organizers with the ability to track all elections related data including preferred candidate, volunteering, signage and election day logistics (get out the vote, etc).

Email Client: To develop an email client (like Yahoo or Gmail) that is fully integrated with the Platform, especially the data management module, so that all emails are automatically associated to individuals, making it much easier to track correspondence.

Equity Exchange: To develop a module where people can seek outside financing. This module would be integrated with the Planning Module and it could be done both locally and globally.

FreshBooks Integration: To integrate the invoicing/payment components of the Platform with the online bookkeeping service FreshBooks as has been done with QuickBooks.

Geographic Tagging: To ensure that all content has the geographic tagging that will make it more viable for search, especially for the mobile app and the authoritative site.

Meeting Arranger: To provide the ability for users to organize a meeting, much like Doodle.

Membership Involvements: To consolidate all involvements a member may undertake (volunteering, participation in events, usage of services) so the organization can gauge a member's overall involvement and their likelihood of renewal.

Mobile App: To develop a Mobile App that is integrated with the Directory Module, so that the Directory can be displayed on Smartphones.

Payment Mechanism: To provide a fully integrated alternative to PayPal (perhaps backed by Credit Unions). It would still allow integration with other payment mechanisms where required.

Planning Module: To develop a module that would facilitate the development of Plans, especially Business Plans. This module would be integrated with WorkFlow and the Equity Exchange.

POS (Point-of-Sale) Module: To create a new module to be used in conjunction with the Product Catalogue Module, the POS module would facilitate in-store transactions as well as inventory control.

Product Catalogue Module: To create a Product Catalogue Module based on the Directory Module, which would have Products instead of Listings, including Shopping Cart capability. It would be possible for manufacturers, wholesalers and distributors to provide their retailers with their product catalogues for them to then price and update. It could also be integrated with the POS Module.

Search Site: To develop a site, possibly under a different brand name (eg BSearch), that enables a search of the entire Bridgelin database.

Shared Calendar: To enable Clients to track all appointments, organize meetings and note upcoming events.

Simply Accounting Integration: To integrate the invoicing/payment components of the Platform with the bookkeeping program Simply Accounting as has been done with QuickBooks.

Site Map: To develop an automated Site Map creator to aid in navigation and search engine visibility.

Social Media Integration: To integrate the Platform with the major social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn) so that updating content on a Platform site will also update info on the appropriate social media platform.

Statistics and Analytics: To develop an integrated module, which provides all the relevant metrics similar to Google Analytics.

Transaction Exchange: To make it possible for end-users to conduct transactions for goods and services.

User Collaboration: To develop the capability for users to interact with each other including project management and transactions – a major capability of the system to be developed over time.

Virtual Meeting Module: To make it possible for users to easily organize and conduct Virtual Meetings that would be like a combination of Skype and GoToMeeting, but where meetings could be setup instantly.

Voting Module: To provide the capability to conduct online elections.

Wiki Module: To develop the capability for users to work together on a document using a wiki.

Wooden Pole: To develop a module that would allow people to upload PDFs that would mimic posting a flyer on a neighbourhood telephone pole.

Workflow Module: To provide users with the ability to manage tasks, projects and to-dos through a highly flexible and easy-to-use system.

Bridgelin

Work better. Work together.

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