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## Innovation starts with embracing change

IT'S BEEN SAID THAT FORTUNE FAVORS THE BOLD. THIS YEAR, many recipients of InfoWorld's highest honor — for those who have made the best use of technology to improve their business — would be inclined to agree. IT managers are using the word “transformation” more than ever to describe initiatives ranging from SOA application infrastructures to rip-and-replace upgrades. The inspiration to effect sweeping change varies widely. For Capital One, it was the need to reduce delivery time of products and services. The catalyst for Accenture was to be rid of cumbersome legacy systems. But regardless of the motivation, high ambition unites them all. They're not just playing it smart, they're going all out. Our honorees are proof-positive that innovation starts with a degree of daring to embrace change on a grand scale. The results speak for themselves. Congratulations to all the winners.

## Allegheny County Maps Data to an Array of Services

MAYA Design helps liberate reams of data to create communities around shared information

**I**T TAKES MORE THAN TECHNOLOGY to make some tech projects succeed. It requires diplomacy, dedication, perseverance, a willingness to embrace change, and the vision to come up with new ways to solve old problems.

When the Allegheny County Department of Human Services teamed with MAYA Design in June 2004, it hoped to create a data warehouse for the thousands of service providers in the Pittsburgh metro area. But they ended up creating something much bigger: a new model for building communities around information.

HumanServices.net is a gateway to an "Information Commons" — a distributed database that brings together a wide range of information and data types into a single, easily searchable repository. The site contains detailed profiles of everything from daycare centers and drug counselors to free clinics and food banks, along with photographs, maps, directions, and even the nearest bus routes. The site has changed how case workers do their jobs, says John Pierce, who directs the office of information management at the Allegheny DHS. In the past, a case worker might spend three or four hours calling agencies to find out if they offered certain services needed in a particular neighborhood.

"Now they go online and do it in minutes, and they can look up all the agencies in that neighborhood, not just the few they might already know about," Pierce says.

Best of all, the department did it without spending a dime of taxpayer money. Pierce says the project has cost \$750,000 so far, all provided by more than a dozen Pittsburgh-area foundations.

Building the Commons required breaking down deeply entrenched information silos, both technological and bureaucratic. In fact, the technology was probably the easiest part, says Josh Knauer, MAYA's director of advanced development.

To extract data stored in Oracle and FoxPro databases, Excel spreadsheets,



Marc Cherna,  
Director, Allegheny  
County Department of  
Human Services

and the like, MAYA used a universal format it invented called the u-form. Each u-form consists of a small unit of data — such as one row in a relational database — along with attributes such as the data's source, the set it belongs to, and any digital signatures or intellectual property rights associated with it.

MAYA uses XML and SOAP to pull u-forms from each source, then distributes the database on a peer-to-peer network co-hosted by each major stakeholder — such as the Allegheny DHS, the local chapter of the United Way, and A+ Schools, an educational advocacy group — all of which offer their own customized gateways to the Commons.

But the biggest hurdles were political and practical, not technical. For example, no agency wanted to cede control over its data or its tools, Pierce notes. In MAYA's scheme, they don't have to. Each agency updates information using its existing database tools; the Commons then extracts the data in the background. It turned out to be a cheaper route, Knauer says. "Using a distributed data infrastructure, where everyone in the Commons participates in creating, editing, and updating the information, is a heck of a lot less expensive than having one central server and one organization managing all the data," he says.

The key to making it all work was having 3 Rivers Connect ([3rc.org](http://3rc.org)) manage the project, Knauer says. 3rc also hosts DHS's database and performs day-to-day maintenance.

MAYA is helping communities from Washington state to Vermont develop similar data repositories.

The public is also invited to participate in the Commons. Each profile on [Humanservices.net](http://Humanservices.net) features a comments field where individuals can update or correct information.

"We actually get a smile on our face when see corrections happen," Knauer says. "The fact is, no one can guarantee data quality. The point of the Commons is that's it all out in open."

— Dan Tynan

### Allegheny Dept. of Human Services

[infoworld.com/4623](http://infoworld.com/4623)

**Project summary** Distributed Database of Human Services Programs

**Project lead** Marc Cherna, Director

**Industry** Government

**Project description** A distributed database of human services programs. System uses XML and SOAP to pull u-forms from each source, then distributes the database on a peer-to-peer network co-hosted by each major stakeholder.