Moving on up

As department expands, new director brings long familiarity with ASWB's needs

Normally, "explosion" and "IT" are not words you want to see in the same sentence. But for ASWB, that combination is a good sign. In the last month, the IT department—it's now a separate department—has hired three new software developers and a project manager. These hires reflect a 200% growth in the department: an explosion.

"When I started as a systems administrator, I was in a cubicle up front," says Dan Sheehan, who was recently promoted to information technology director. "The servers were actually in my cubicle—and back then, they were super loud and put out a lot of heat."

Sheehan joined ASWB in 2000 as a call center representative, taking registration calls part-time on the evening shift while he studied systems administration full time. "I started helping out with the computers [at ASWB]," he says, "and that eventually led to a full-time position." Over the intervening years, there's been another type of explosion, this one in technology itself. At the time Sheehan became systems administrator, ASWB had many desktop computers that were networked and connected to the Internet, and an email server (one of the ones in Sheehan's cubicle, in fact).

Now, senior staff members often travel with compact laptop/tablet hybrids that dock into the network when they are in the office and connect through a secure VPN (virtual private network) when they're on the road. Plus, the expanded ASWB staff all have IT equipment—from PCs, monitors, and printers, to tablets and smart phones. Even the desktop phones are actually computers, Sheehan points out, connected to a phone system server that routes calls and tracks statistical information on call center volume and wait times.

Sheehan describes a big part of his career at ASWB as "keeping all our systems happy and working," but now, he's moving on to more strategic work. Sheehan will be managing his staff, as well as contractors, while collaborating with other department directors at ASWB to set priorities for the association's technology and to participate in strategic planning.

Why an explosion of software developers? Sheehan explains that ASWB now has more than 45 custom programs running to serve its members. "There are a lot of development needs here," he says. "We've had one developer who was a contractor for a very long time. She's done a fantastic job, but the workload got too big for one person."

Between online and desktop programs, ASWB runs dozens of proprietary software systems, all of which need to be upgraded to keep pace with the association's needs and changing technology. "There are a lot of development needs here," Sheehan says. "We've needed in-house development for a long time, plus project management expertise." The new project manager will work with other ASWB departments to develop software requirements, then coordinate that work within the IT department. "We need someone who can work closely with the developers on staff as well as the end users."

"We want to enhance what we're doing online now," Sheehan says. "We've developed programs that serve our members and they're functional, but we really want to make them even better." Sheehan sees his job to help the association set technology priorities "according to what our members need— they're our customers."

While ASWB has had good luck with outsourcing programming in the past, Sheehan sees that bringing the software development in-house will give ASWB several key advantages. "It's better to have people onsite," Sheehan says, where they can work with end users directly. "Having that relationship helps move things along. They can talk to each other, they know each other, and they're responsive."

Sheehan has seen this dynamic first-hand with the addition of Mark Evans, who was hired as a software developer in 2016. Evans specializes in desktop applications and works directly with ASWB's Member Services staff on projects like application processing software, and specialized database systems for the Approved Continuing Education (ACE) program. The other three software developers will round out this staff, with another desktop programming specialist, one who focuses on web development, and a third who works in both environments. "I see the potential for even more growth," Sheehan says. "It depends on where ASWB decides to go with services to our members. No matter what, our increased IT team will improve systems for ASWB staff and members."

Going from a one-person staff in 2015 to a total of six in 2017 is a big jump, Sheehan admits, but he sees the potential to not only tackle important software projects, but to find better technology solutions for the association and its membership. "Now we'll have six different people with different perspectives," Sheehan says, "to approach our members' needs and figure out how things can be done differently or better."

What's coming next

Sometimes, custom software is just what's needed. There's nothing on the market, for instance, that can provide the customization and security of ASWB's online registration system for exam candidates.

But sometimes, there's no need to reinvent the wheel. ASWB is moving forward in 2017 with implementation of an association management system, NetForum Pro. NetForum is a comprehensive system that will make it easier for ASWB to integrate data about our members and volunteers. With NetForum, ASWB is replacing at least three different systems within the organization—meetings, contact management, and email communication.

Melissa Ryder, volunteer engagement and outreach senior manager, has been steering this implementation. Cara Sanner, member services specialist, has been working with the software company to transfer ASWB's complex data into the new system.

When the implementation is complete later this year, NetForum will enhance many of the functions on members.aswb.org, the specialized subdomain for ASWB members and volunteers.