

Answering a Christmas SOS with DevOps

Expleo digitally transformed the Inner City Helping Homeless Christmas Appeal in six weeks, helping the charity raise more than €120,000 in the process.



Introduction

Soon after the mass disruption of COVID-19 in Spring 2020, Expleo launched the 'Rebooting Ireland' campaign, offering consultancy services to businesses that wouldn't ordinarily be able to afford them. The Inner City Helping Homeless (ICHH) charity in Dublin got in touch, asking for help regarding their annual Christmas Appeal.

Since 2013, the ICHH has provided outreach services for over 9,000 men, women and children who are living on the streets, in emergency accommodation and direct provision across Ireland. Their 'Santabox' appeal has become a fixture in the city calendar, with Dubliners packing clothes, toiletries, gifts and Christmas cards into thousands of festive boxes. These goodwill packages are then loaded onto a Luas (tram) on O'Connell Street, Dublin, attracting large crowds who will also donate funds in person.

Like many volunteer-led charities, ICHH relies on manual systems and elbow grease. Therefore, due to COVID-19 social-distancing restrictions, the 2020 Santabox Appeal was put in jeopardy.

The charity expected to take in just 10% of normal donation levels, removing a vital lifeline for people most in need at the toughest time of the year. What could Expleo do to help?

Right people, right place, right time

Expleo Ireland offered to help the ICHH launch its first ever virtual Santabox Appeal. The new online platform enabled donors to buy a box that was then packed and presented to those in need by a team of socially-distanced elves. Donors could select the contents of their box and also leave personalised messages for the recipients, which were then handwritten onto cards. The charity were determined to maintain the human link as much as possible which was paramount to the person giving and receiving the gift.

After such a challenging year, we were under real pressure to support people at Christmas, against severe public health restrictions. That's where Expleo stepped in with the Virtual Santabox Appeal. They developed an incredible campaign that ended up being the most successful fundraising campaign in the history of the charity.

The hand of friendship reached right across the country bringing smiles to many people's faces for Christmas.

Anthony Flynn, ICHH founder



We're delighted to support such a worthy cause by digitally transforming the Santabox fundraising appeal and ensuring ICHH could carry out their amazing work again at Christmas.

Phil Codd, Managing Director of Expleo Ireland

Our team set about building a responsive, next-gen web application that could support every device on every browser conceivable.

After all, if we only made it available to the latest devices, then that risked alienating potential donors. The system needed to be high performant and resilient. Imagine there was a TV broadcast appeal on Christmas Day and 100,000 people decided to donate at the same time. Could it meet that sudden demand? As it turned out, there were several spikes and the system coped well.

Distributing boxes out to the people on the streets was a mammoth challenge too, so we also provided an operational solution to help coordinate volunteers.



€120,000+
raised



Donations from

15+
countries



10,000+
boxes delivered

6 weeks

to digitally transform a manual fundraising and operating system



3

production releases



I found the work extremely emotional. We were helping to put a gift in the hand of a child at Christmas. Seeing the volunteers packing the boxes and the comments on the letters from all across Ireland and the world put a personal perspective on the work we do every day.

The main lesson learnt was the importance of a shared purpose. We all knew the charity and quickly pulled together. For a short timeframe project, when everybody was already busy, it was no problem making demands of each other. We were all in.

Siobhán Smith, Head of Marketing for Expleo Ireland

DevOps in action

At Expleo, we define DevOps as the combination of software development and IT operations to achieve continuous delivery of valuable software. Done well, it uses the latest technology to drastically decrease the time it takes to build, test and deploy high quality releases.

The aim is maximum value for minimum effort. Every decision and action is focused on the end outcome. In this case: how could we make it as easy as possible for people to donate?

Collaboration and communication is central to DevOps, making sure that all the right people are constantly working together, especially end users and customers.

This feedback loop is critical for continuous improvement – and one of the key differences from a waterfall approach that risks discovering any errors and changes too late in the process. For example, when we started, there was a wishlist of features for the site, including social media integration and a shopping cart functionality. The temptation is to push on through the whole list and then launch the new site as a ‘perfect’ finished product. Instead, we built change into the process, so we could adapt as new challenges and opportunities arose.



Taking an agile approach, we focused on the automated donation function, producing it to a high standard, and launching as quickly as possible. As it happened, we immediately started receiving valuable feedback, such as companies wanting to buy up to 50 Santaboxes in one hit, rather than individually. We then pivoted quickly to introduce a bulk-buy feature – securing another 50,000 euros that might otherwise have been lost. We eventually released three separate productions which proved more valuable than trying to do it in one go.



#1 Align everyone to a shared sense of purpose

#2 Choose the right approach

#3 Control the data from the start

#4 The right people doing the right job at the right time

#5 Don't find customers for your products, find products for your customers



Quality is another key word for DevOps. If customers typed their credit card details into the system, would it crash? Is your private information securely protected? Is it visually appealing and easy to navigate – including for people who are visually impaired? Finding the balance of speed and quality was vital for success. If people lose confidence in the product, then they will soon turn away. The damage to our own brand would be considerable too. However, the quicker we had the system operational, the faster the feedback and the more money raised for people in need.

By measuring the flow of data from the system, we allowed ICHH to adapt their public communications. For example, we discovered there was a shortage of donations for younger girls, so the ICHH made a targeted appeal on social media and local television.

I've been in development for over 25 years and for me, this has been the most rewarding project that I've ever worked on. We've been able to use our software best practices and DevOps approaches to make a measurable impact on people's lives. DevOps allows us to build change in the process, rather than firefighting.

It was exciting to see the donations come in, even as we were still working on the system. When you produce really good quality software quickly, then good things happen.

Graeme Clarke, Expleo DevOps Global Lead

Combining digital and physical

When people think about DevOps, they often imagine a team of developers churning out code. In fact, a quality piece of software demands a cross-functional team, including software designers and developers, user interface experts who understand the look and feel, performance and security testers, marketing and legal people, management and oversight. Like a movie, not everybody is needed on set at once, so it's important to coordinate resources to have the right people active at the right time.

Coding may look like an incomprehensible jumble of figures, letters and symbols on a screen. But this project showed the value of coding in real life, where the digital and physical combine.

DevOps translates into stacks of Santaboxes, each filled with gifts that come right from the heart. It means hand-written cards and messages of goodwill. And a better Christmas for people in their time of need.



For further information, or if you have any other questions, please write an email to info@expleogroup.com

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