

Blender: integrating incoming data flows for BHF



Background:

The British Heart Foundation (BHF) sought to improve the quality of incoming data streams before they hit their database, and to make the process of optimising that data more efficient and cost-effective. BHF consulted Wood for Trees as part of a wider programme of development; we proposed our Blender tool as the basis for their solution. The project underlined the potential cost benefits of using Blender and the degree to which it can be configured to individual user environments.

Problem:

BHF was already using three import loaders, with more in development. They had identified a need for a generic import builder that could be used across all incoming data-feeds, giving greater control and status visibility to the organisation. The solution would need to be accessible by both data administrators and marketing teams.

Solution:

The potential return on BHF's investment would include faster data turnaround, lower staff costs, and crucially, a supporter database containing ever-more accurate records, forming a foundation for accurate, robust and insightful strategic analysis.

BHF's requirements were clearly defined and we worked closely with the charity to design the solution. Blender was configured to work within their database system (Blender functions effectively within all the principal charity database systems, including Care, BBEC, Raiser's Edge...), and several enhancements were added in to enable it to perform optimally both within the client's development environment and against their additional needs.

Each time we implement a new Blender solution for a Wood for Trees client, we review the improvements and build these with universal relevance into the software core, so Blender is in a state of constant development and improvement irrespective of its data environment.

In this instance it was important that Blender didn't write directly to BHF's database, so a 'communications layer' was developed, which provides an interface between the incoming, processed data streams and the main database. For BHF this meant that they retained full control over the content of their data; it respected the boundaries defined by the client and their vendor. Furthermore the communications layer provides effective future-proofing: if the database system changes in the future it can be dealt with through the communications layer without also having to redevelop any element within Blender.

Result:

The key benefits of Wood for Trees' Blender-based solution for BHF included:

- Runs pre-configured checks on new data before it is uploaded onto the main database
- Highly automated and configurable; avoids using up processing power at key times such as during the working day and scheduled backups
- Huge time savings: processes that used to take between three and seven hours for a BHF officer to supervise an 'end-to-end' run have been cut to between eight and 30 minutes – and the whole process is fully automated
- This installation of Blender has been set up specifically to deal with all known error types in the source file, dealing with them virtually instantaneously

The overall quality of BHF's data is significantly enhanced by Blender showing greater consistency and accuracy. Data officers spend more time working WITH the data rather than ON it, which in turn leads to more intelligent and ambitious use of the information, enhancing the supporter journey right from the start.

Conclusion:

Ciara Bosworth, Head of Supporter Services at BHF, said: *'Blender, as developed by Wood for Trees, is a cornerstone of [our] intention to run a cohesive and centralised dataset across all divisions, providing an holistic (single) view of all our vital supporters.'*

It means that we can ... make tactical and strategic marketing decisions with confidence, and gives us the edge we need to move forward.'