

Microsoft Azure for Nonprofits

Hongdandan made digital inclusion possible for visually impaired people via the cloud with Microsoft Azure

Founded in 2003, the Beijing Hongdandan Education and Cultural Exchange Center (Hongdandan) aims to promote social inclusion for visually impaired people in China. One of the nonprofit's key initiatives is delivering audio book services for the visually impaired, and making these resources easily accessible via computers and mobile devices.

The old system

China is home to more than 12.6 million people who are blind or visually impaired. With only two organizations in China producing around 100 audio books per year, many visually impaired people lack access to resources in audio format as a means of learning and enrichment.

"To meet this pressing need, we decided to develop an online audio library that will provide a wealth of resources for people with visual disabilities to access audio books easily and via any device," said Xin Zheng, CEO of Hongdandan.

The new system

With Microsoft Azure, Hongdandan found a comprehensive, cloud-based solution to adapt to its changing IT needs and make its "Eyes of Soul" online audio library a reality.

Hosted on Azure Media Services, the library is integrated with the nonprofits' social media channels for users to easily access audio resources on their mobile devices via popular instant messaging applications such as WeChat. Voice-based search technology further simplifies the user experience, allowing visually impaired people to search for books, by just speaking into their mobile devices.

Azure enabled Hongdandan to:

- Scale its IT infrastructure to meet the needs of a growing number of beneficiaries
- Achieve greater operational efficiencies and staff productivity
- Reduce overhead costs and channel more resources towards improving its services

Solutions used:



By building its online audio library on Microsoft Azure, Hongdandan has been able to:



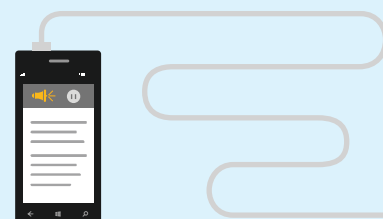
Scale up its infrastructure to support more than 100,000 beneficiaries



Boost staff productivity



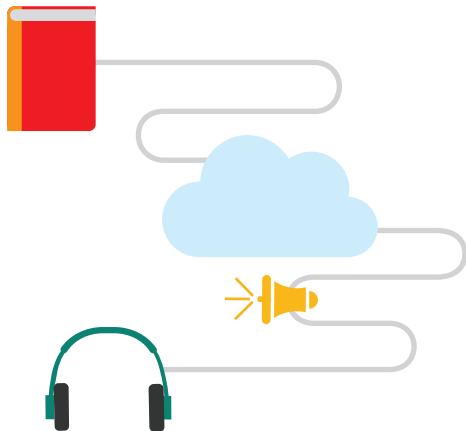
Reduce costs by up to USD30,000 and channel more resources to services



"With Microsoft Azure, we have been able to make the most of our existing resources, and focus more on improving our services through technology in ways we have never imagined possible."

- Xin Zheng, CEO of Hongdandan

Benefits from the new system



Scalability to meet a growing number of beneficiaries

For Hongdandan, building the “Eyes of Soul” online audio library on the cloud allows for a growing volume of digital assets to be uploaded without storage constraint. Virtual server capacity can be flexibly ramped up to cope with any potential spike in traffic, and ensure that the audio books are readily available for on-demand streaming by a large number of users via Azure Media Services.

Since its launch in 2014, more than 570 audio books have been made available via the library, with an average of 15 new books uploaded every month. As a result, more than 100 schools in major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai are able to leverage the cloud-based learning resources. To date, Hongdandan estimates that more than 100,000 member users have registered to access the online audio library.

Boosting staff productivity and operational efficiency

Leveraging the cloud, Hongdandan experienced a significant boost in staff productivity. Besides saving time on system upkeep, the nonprofit’s staff can now upload new audio books in a matter of five to six minutes, where it would have taken more than 10 hours in the past.

“There has been a noticeable improvement in the way we operate, since we started hosting the audio books in the cloud. Our staff were impressed by just how simple it is to manage the infrastructure, from uploading audio files to ensuring that they are securely backed up in the cloud. Next, we are exploring ways to incorporate more sophisticated functions into the audio library, so as to improve the overall user experience,” said Zheng.



Achieving significant cost savings

The Microsoft Azure donation also enabled Hongdandan to reap significant cost savings, especially in terms of reduced overhead costs and not having to invest in dedicated server capacity.

It was estimated that Hongdandan saved up to USD30,000 in setting up and maintaining the audio library—enabling the nonprofit to channel more resources into enhancing its operations. For instance, Hongdandan is currently focusing on securing partnerships with major audio book publishers to further improve the quality and variety of content.

“With Microsoft Azure, we have been able to make the most of our existing resources, and focus more on improving our services through technology in ways we have never imagined possible. We will continue to explore the use of cloud technology to bring digital inclusion to more blind and visually impaired people in China,” concluded Zheng.



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