

# The Opportunities and Dilemmas of Technology Support Organizations

by Michael Gilbert

**A** DECADE AGO, I DELIVERED THE opening keynote address at the first Silicon Valley Conference on Nonprofits and Technology.

During my rather nervous talk, I described a vision that differed from that of most of the presenters and with the prevailing ethos of the years to come. I said that I couldn't wait until "all of this went away": that is, when new technology and nonprofits' relationship to it would become mature and ubiquitous enough that we could focus our attention on what we do best. During my talk, I wondered aloud whether we might progress so far that we could stop holding conferences on nonprofit technology.

Of course, that day has not yet come, and of course, we continue to hold conferences on the topic. Nonprofits are still distracted from their strengths by the opportunities, challenges, and powerful frames of reference posed by technologies that have the potential to transform our work. Various factors continue to undercut nonprofit progress in the area of technology adoption: (1) technology providers continue to use anxiety and technology insecurity as sales tools; (2) in technology decisions, nonprofits abdicate leadership responsibility and hope to shortcut the matter by paying for some tools and getting it over with; (3) nonprofits don't pay for—and service providers rarely offer—communication-centered

planning of technology; (4) organizations hide behind prevailing practices—sometimes falsely confused with “best practices”—without devising a method for assessing whether these practices are best suited for the organization; and (5) technology decisions often fail to reflect and build on the strengths of the organization that has made them.

How has this situation come about?<sup>1</sup> Technology providers rely heavily on earned income and other kinds of reinforcement from nonprofits. While these providers see the big picture, most cannot afford to lead their market. With some delightful exceptions, nonprofits prefer to shop around for technology cure-alls rather than plan for communication, and thus they abdicate responsibility for the strategic decisions involved. In essence, as a result of their own motivations and the structure of their relationship, technology service providers and nonprofits themselves together conspire to leave technology decisions in technology's terms rather than in the terms of fulfilling nonprofit missions.<sup>2</sup>

What nonprofits need is mindful technological change, but what they get is technological service. The distinction is critical. Change is about leadership and can come from either inside or outside the organization—and preferably both. But just as the nonprofit sector struggles

with the tension between social service and social change, nonprofit technology providers struggle with the same dilemma and often provide nonprofits with the service they want rather than the change these organizations need. Who can solve this dilemma? Funders could help unlock the dynamic, but I don't think that they will. Service providers do their best, but they are hamstrung by market forces. Nonprofits pay the ultimate price for poor technology decisions, so it's up to them to take the lead. The following, sometimes idiosyncratic, guide to the technology service-provider landscape is designed to help nonprofits take control of their technology decisions.

## The Service-Provider Landscape

In what follows, I've assembled a list of useful resources for nonprofits in the technology adoption process. My selection criteria are simple: I am familiar with these organizations and resources, they are in some way national in scope, and they are not primarily software providers or consulting firms. Unfortunately, this means there are major gaps in the list. It also means I have omitted some genuinely visionary organizations, such as ONE Northwest, which I believe is a model for unraveling the destructive dynamic I've described above.<sup>3</sup>

The Nonprofit Technology Network

(NTEN) is a membership organization for nonprofit technology professionals.<sup>4</sup> I am even less neutral about NTEN than I am about the rest of the field: I was a grumpy critic of the process that led to its creation and then, ironically, became its founding president. At the time, my feelings about NTEN were mixed. The central struggle was a microcosm of the struggle I have already described: Would NTEN take a leadership role with its members, or would it play it safe and provide discounts and other services that didn't rock the boat? Ultimately, the organization has chosen a smart path by leveraging service so it can pursue leadership, and especially under Executive Director Holly Ross, it's been the right approach.

NTEN has many things to offer its members: Its top-notch newsletter and weblog serve as platforms for some of the organization's more visionary members.<sup>5</sup> NTEN's discounts on third-party tools and services shouldn't be taken as recommendations, but if you already use some of these services, you can easily cover the cost of your membership fee. The organization's online seminar program, although delivered via a clunky, proprietary interface, covers a huge range of topics and is affordable, especially to members. NTEN partnered with TechSoup to produce the online vendor directory TechFinder.<sup>6</sup> Recently, the organization launched a speaker directory and an innovative peer-to-peer help desk it calls Office Hours.<sup>7</sup> NTEN also occasionally sponsors research, including the 2007 study of perceived impacts of technology assistance, which confirmed the rarity of planning in the sector and the earned-income pressures that drive it.

In the field, NTEN's Nonprofit Technology Conference (NTC) is easily the most important event.<sup>8</sup> While I wish NTC took a stronger leadership role in program development (the organization's grassroots process lends to a conference program

that is heavy on tips, tricks, and the latest fads but light on vision and strategy), everyone involved in nonprofit technology should at least check out the event. You can download materials from last year's conference on the NTC Web page.

TechSoup is a project of CompuMentor, one of the oldest technology assistance agencies in the United States. TechSoup is primarily an online information resource center, with news, discussions, and a growing catalog of articles related to nonprofit information technology. Although it can fall prey to technocentrism, TechSoup is an excellent resource, especially if you have addressed strategic communication questions and are evaluating software.

TechSoup Stock is an online store that offers discounted technology products and services to tax-exempt organizations.<sup>9</sup> If you already know exactly what you want—whether it's hardware, hosted applications, or commercial software—the site makes sense for your organization.

When it comes to software, the TechSoup story is complicated. TechSoup's discounts for commercial software products are ample. (My understanding is that software companies donate products to CompuMentor, and nonprofits in turn pay a small fee for handling.) If you know which proprietary software product you need, I highly recommend TechSoup Stock.

But if you need software for a category of work and are open to different applications, browsing TechSoup's virtual shelves can close off options. The organization's business model may prevent it from distributing genuinely free software. Microsoft Office is prominently featured, for example, but OpenOffice is nowhere to be found. Windows is available, but Ubuntu, an open-source operating system, is missing. If you browse before you know what you need, TechSoup's approach not only restricts your options but also undermines the adoption of open-source alter-

natives, to which many for-profit companies as well as nonprofits can attest.

Another CompuMentor project called NetSquared has evolved into an exciting framework for competitions for technology-related funding.<sup>10</sup> It maintains a year-round program of blogging and affiliated local meetings called Net Tuesday, but the backbone of its work (and presumably its funding) is competitions. Past competitions, such as the N2Y3 Mashup Challenge, have been associated with a final event in the form of a conference. The organization's current competition, the 2008 USAID Development 2.0 Challenge, is entirely online.

IdealWare fills a critical gap in the nonprofit technology support ecosystem and is our sector's closest approximation to a *Consumer Reports* for software.<sup>11</sup> IdealWare understands how important it is to develop your organization's communication strategies and plans before selecting software, and it frames all comparisons, case studies, and news in this context. The centerpiece of its work is regular, research-based articles, but it offers blogs and online seminars as well.

I was hesitant to include my own organization, the Gilbert Center, as a resource; but without it, I believe this list would be incomplete.<sup>12</sup> The Gilbert Center focuses on strategic communication, technology planning, systems thinking, and network issues in civil society and targets the many technology-related issues that nonprofit organizations have given short shrift. The Gilbert Center publishes high-level publications and also offers online seminars, training, speaking engagements, direct consulting, and coaching.

The *Nonprofit Quarterly* is also a resource for nonprofit technology-related issues. You can consistently count on it to embrace systems thinking and visionary leadership, and it offers regular new online content as well as a newsletter and a weblog by Rick Cohen.

Our field offers several good peer-reviewed journals, which are sadly undervalued by what academics call “practitioners” (which is the bulk of the nonprofit sector). I’m familiar with only these seven (two of which I edit): *Community Informatics*, *Gender, Technology and Development*, *Information Technology and Social Change*, *Information Technology for Development*, *Knowledge Management for Development*, *Networks and Civil Society*, and *Technology in Counseling*.

While it would be good for mainstream nonprofit associations, communications consultants, and assistance agencies to assume greater leadership in the field of nonprofit technology, only a few have. The two main organizations that concern themselves in some way with technology and foundations are the Technology Affinity Group and Grantmakers for Effective Organizations.<sup>13</sup> (The Council on Foundations offers a technology track at its annual conference as well.)<sup>14</sup> In the rest of the sector, technology-oriented organizations are those focused on fundraising, such as the Association of Fundraising Professionals, and have taken an early interest in new technology.

No list of this kind is complete without NPower.<sup>15</sup> NPower is a franchised network of technical assistance agencies, seemingly modeled on the IT Resource Center, now known as Lumity. NPower has affiliates in 13 locations throughout the United States. Heavily supported by Microsoft, NPower’s offerings strongly emphasize Microsoft’s software. The organization also provides training, consulting, and other technology-related services and, unlike other organizations, emphasizes planning. Finally while the tool is somewhat technocentric, TechAtlas is a Web-based resource to help organizations manage their technology inventory and plans.<sup>16</sup>

To some extent, the Community Technology Network and the community technology centers and movement that it

supports have been overlooked. These organizations focus on bringing technology access to underserved communities rather than directly to nonprofit organizations. But these objectives—and their benefits—are intertwined, which gives these organizations a valuable systems perspective.

I would also encourage you to explore Aspiration, which runs several programs uniquely related to the software needs of nonprofits.<sup>17</sup> Social Source Commons is a living compendium of the remarkable range of tools used by organizations around the world. The Penguin Day mini-conferences take place throughout the United States and are a great way to become familiar with free and open-source software.<sup>18</sup>

I want to mention two other publications. The first is Tech News.<sup>19</sup> Though published by the United Way of New York City, the majority of its articles are of broader utility than that might imply. The second is the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* and its affiliated opinion blog, both of which heavily favor new technology as a basis for innovation.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, to start browsing on your own, begin with the resources discussed here. Many of these organizations serve as portals to communities of practice via their discussion groups, directories, and events. In addition, there are myriad knowledgeable people blogging about nonprofit technology. You can also find a wealth of information by browsing on the “npotech” tag on the social bookmarking site, which alone lists more than 18,000 articles.

## Being a Good Consumer of Technology Services

With this vast landscape of resources available, it would be easy to retreat to the familiar dynamic of dodging the strategic decisions in favor of technological selections. Therefore, I have three recommendations for nonprofit leaders striving to take charge of new technology and its

promise.

First, invest in documenting the information and communication practices of your organization. Understand what you do well so that you can best adopt technology that suits you. Avoid the default of so-called best practices and the anxiety about adopting the latest cool thing and decide what is best for your organization.

Second, invest in strategic, communication-centered technology planning. Exploit the knowledge you’ve gathered about your communication methods. Accept that planning is a major part of your technology budget and may even be the single largest cost for some projects. When combined with the other “soft” investments such as training, what you consider technology costs may often be the smallest piece of the pie. Often you will find that you get more from your planning processes than you do from the technology itself.

Third, adopt a multiphase technology purchasing model. That is to say, develop your planning needs and pay for that with one vendor, and then hire another vendor (or the same vendor in a clearly separate negotiation) to provide the implementation. This model applies to internally sourced projects as well: Assemble a team to do the planning, incorporating stakeholders in addition to those who provide the technology. Then specify your requirements based on these plans. The outcome of this model is a separation of conflicts of interest and, more important, conflicts of frame of reference. This is how you can translate asking the right questions into taking the right action.

With luck, these three practices will put you in charge of your technology and, thus, your organizational infrastructure. You’ll be in control not because you speak the language of technology but because you speak the language of communication, which is what that technology ultimately serves.

The field of nonprofit technology prac-

tice is leaving its youth, when decision making was characterized by anxiety and approval seeking. As the field matures, it will become more visionary, authentic, and directed from the heart of our work. With a little insight and a lot of dedication, that maturity is at hand.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Previously, I've written about these issues from several perspectives ([www.gilbert.org/programs/publications](http://www.gilbert.org/programs/publications)).
2. NTEN, "Technology Service Providers Report Their Views on the Impact of Technology Assistance to Nonprofits" (<http://nten.org/research/techimpact/research>), 2007.
3. ONE Northwest Web site ([www.onenw.org](http://www.onenw.org)).
4. The Nonprofit Technology Network Web site ([www.nten.org](http://www.nten.org)).
5. For NTEN's newsletter and blog, see

[www.nten.org/newsletter](http://www.nten.org/newsletter) and <http://nten.org/blog>, respectively.

6. TechSoup Web site (<http://techsoup.org/techfinder/index.cfm>).
7. TechFinder's speaker directory ([www.nten.org/members](http://www.nten.org/members)); Office Hours ([www.nten.org/officehours](http://www.nten.org/officehours)).
8. NTEN annual conference page (<http://nten.org/ntc>).
9. TechSoup Stock Web site ([www.techsoup.org/stock](http://www.techsoup.org/stock)).
10. NetSquared Web site ([www.net-squared.org](http://www.net-squared.org)).
11. IdealWare Web site ([www.idealware.org](http://www.idealware.org)).
12. The Gilbert Center Web site ([www.gilbert.org](http://www.gilbert.org)).
13. Technology Affinity Group Web site ([www.tagtech.org](http://www.tagtech.org)); Grantmakers for Effective Organizations Web site ([www.geofunders.org](http://www.geofunders.org)).

14. Council on Foundations Web site ([www.cof.org](http://www.cof.org)).

15. NPower Web site ([www.npower.org](http://www.npower.org)).
16. TechAtlas Web site ([www.webjunction.org/techatlas](http://www.webjunction.org/techatlas)).
17. Aspiration Web site ([www.aspirationtech.org](http://www.aspirationtech.org)).
18. PenguinDay.org Web site ([www.penguinaday.org](http://www.penguinaday.org)).
19. Tech News Web site ([www.technewsnyc.org](http://www.technewsnyc.org)).
20. *Stanford Social Innovation Review* Web site ([www.ssireview.org](http://www.ssireview.org)).

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