

Tech Success Stories: Innovative Uses of Technology by Nonprofits

by Joe Baker

TECHNOLOGY FOR THE HOMELESS? Paging all blood donors? Community organizing through e-mail?

Nonprofits are using information and communications technologies to support their missions in innovative ways. Many of these organizations are achieving great results with limited amounts of money and technical expertise.

Nonprofit technology has experienced three great waves of development. In the first wave, organizations computerized their internal operations. This wave continues today, but is now reaching smaller nonprofits and more deeply affecting their core business processes. In the second wave, organizations are tapping the Internet's potential to communicate with, motivate, and mobilize their supporters and volunteers. In the third wave, which is just beginning, organizations are using the Internet, cell phones, and other communication technologies to provide direct services to clients.

Internal Operations

Goodwill Industries of San Francisco, San Mateo, and Marin Counties, Inc. provides job training, vocational counseling, and employment services to individuals with significant barriers to employment, such as homelessness,

poverty, language, and a history of incarceration or substance abuse. Goodwill funds these programs primarily through the sale of donated goods in 17 retail stores in its three-county area.

In 2003, Goodwill decided to replace an antiquated cash register system at their retail thrift stores. For Peter Campbell, Goodwill's VP of Information Technology & Facilities, the technology challenge was to provide top-class technology on a shoestring budget. After evaluating eight different point-of-sale packages, Campbell decided the best solution was to purchase an inexpensive point-of-sale product designed for much smaller businesses and develop a custom enterprise reporting and management system. Campbell, who had a little programming experience, developed the reporting system using open source software. He said the programming task was straightforward, and the main requirement was understanding the financial concepts underlying the reporting.

Campbell stated that if he hadn't had the experience in-house, Goodwill would have used a consultant to evaluate different packaged solutions, and would not have hired an outside programmer. They would have purchased a point-of-sale package with stronger reporting capabilities, but at higher cost

and without the flexibility of the custom reporting system.

Sales data is now processed nightly from all stores, and a detailed sales analysis system has given the organization key strategic data with which to run the retail business. Goodwill also installed modern retail technology (bar code scanners, computerized terminals) that better prepares clients for jobs in the retail sector upon completion of their programs.

The retail system won an *InfoWorld* "Top Technology Innovators" award, possibly due to the surprisingly small project budget: \$5000 for the server, \$30 for a text editor, and \$30 for O'Reilly's *SQL in a Nutshell* reference.

According to Campbell, the new reports now drive Goodwill's retail strategy, identifying which items are selling well in each of their stores, and determining pricing and stocking strategy. Not only have store profits increased, but the system has also helped Goodwill significantly reduce returns from the stores; because items are donated, the cost of handling goods is a major expense factor.

Management distributes the reports throughout the organization, which is helping to open up communications. Campbell says that the retail reporting is the first step in developing a "dashboard" of measures for all segments of the business. The use of open source

for the reporting system will make it easy to integrate the new measures. New reports will include client tracking, human resources, and customer relationship management. While there is always a balancing between the value of reports and the effort needed to create them, Campbell says that Goodwill values accountability and execution, as well as the measures of their effectiveness. Cross-functional measures, such as comparing dollars spent to the number of clients served, help them to ensure that all of their actions are directly tied to their mission.

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Motivating and Mobilizing Supporters and Activists

Rogers Park Community Action Network (RPCAN) is a membership organization working for community empowerment and social justice in the Rogers Park area of Chicago, one of the most economically and racially diverse communities in the country. Over the last year, RPCAN has mixed online eAdvocacy tools with traditional mobilizing efforts to protect the rights and community life of Rogers Park.

RPCAN has been at the center of much of the community mobilizing efforts to combat the effects of gentrification. Because many of its members are not online, RPCAN has relied mostly on traditional mobilizing tactics. However, a recent campaign led them to develop a new strategy.

The organization was protesting a condominium project that their local councilmember had approved without consulting the community. With the councilmember not responding to their traditional means of pressure, RPCAN discovered that some new online advocacy tools are inexpensive and simple enough for use by a small, volunteer-run organization. Using CitizenSpeak, a free e-mail advocacy system for nonprofits, RPCAN launched an e-mail

campaign targeting the councilmember. CitizenSpeak (<http://citizenspeak.org>) is a free Web-based advocacy system that allows nonprofits to run e-mail campaigns. According to Francis Tobin, a longtime RPCAN volunteer, "The really amazing thing was that although only a few dozen people sent letters, it was enough to catch our councilman's attention and get him to agree to meet with us. People from the city said that the e-mails demonstrated real opposition to the condos and support for more green space."

Tobin added that while RPCAN has had only had one meeting with the councilmember and still faces a long struggle, the online advocacy tools are helping RPCAN to protect the community's right to open spaces. She said, "They expand participation by involving people who might not come to a meeting but will click on a link. And they send a powerful message to representatives that there's an organized constituency out there that means business."

Providing Direct Services to Clients

One morning, Ozzie Sutcliffe, an IT consultant, was walking into Yorkville Common Pantry (YCP), which distributes food to families in the Upper East Side and East Harlem, NY. He encountered a client leaving with her three children, a ticket, and no food. He asked where she was going. She said that she had waited in line to receive a ticket for her grocery package, but there were so many people ahead of her that she wouldn't be getting her groceries for three hours. She would take her children to school, and come back later to wait for her groceries.

Every Thursday and Saturday, the Pantry supplies groceries to 700 low-income families. According to Daniel Reyes of YCP, the established process was labor intensive for staff, and inconvenient for clients. Clients would wait in line in the morning for a ticket, and then wait for their number to come up. Staff would manually look up their records

and then key the distribution information into a database.

Sutcliffe thought there must be a way to make the process easier for clients. The solution he devised was to issue cards with unique bar codes to each client. He then linked a bar code reader to the existing database by using a "software bridge," a program that can mimic the actions of a person typing information into the database. This was much cheaper than having a custom interface built between the bar code reader and the database. The total system cost about \$1500. It took about six months of planning to build support for the idea, and about one week to implement the system.

Now, when clients come in, their cards are scanned, their information is pulled up, and the system automatically records what food items are distributed. The time required to distribute the groceries has been reduced by 50%. Once Yorkville Common Pantry moves into a new facility, clients will be able to register to receive their groceries during a particular time slot, so there will be essentially no waiting.

The system has had a number of unanticipated benefits. The cards have helped to forge a bond between the clients and the Pantry. The Pantry is able to record additional details on their clients' records, such as how many children they have and what their ages are. This information can be used to distribute toys at Christmas, or to identify families that need extra food. They can also identify when someone hasn't picked up their food. If the client is in a high risk category (for example, over 80 years old and living alone) they can have a social worker call or visit. Repeated unscheduled visits can indicate that a family needs more food, and the packages can be adjusted accordingly. The database now has much more accurate information and it is much easier to provide detailed reports to funders.

The system has also helped the Pantry to improve its operations.

Reporting just takes a few mouse clicks, rather than wading through hundreds of index cards to perform a manual tally. YCP can forecast food purchases more accurately, buy staples in bulk, and better schedule fresh produce.

The Pantry is investigating how the cards can simplify other services it provides, such as food stamp distribution, by eliminating the need for clients to supply the same information over and over. This will also enable the Pantry to better understand how clients are using their full range of services.

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Summary

Many nonprofits, even very small ones, are using technology in innovative ways to improve their operations, involve their supporters more deeply in their work, and better serve their clients and communities. Nonprofits don't need to go it alone: there are many places to turn for help. Nonprofit Technology Enterprise Network (N-TEN) is dedicated to connecting nonprofits to the people and organizations that can help them to effectively use technology. N-TEN's Web site (<http://nten.org>) includes links to a wide range of resources. TechFinder (<http://techfinder.org>), a joint project of N-TEN and Tech Soup, helps nonprofits find technology consultants and vendors who serve the nonprofit sector. Nonprofits can search by service type, nonprofit type, and geographic location. N-TEN's conferences and online seminars teach best practices, and have tracks for tech staff, fundraising and communications staff, and nonprofit leaders. N-TEN's 501 Tech Clubs are social networking groups that connect nonprofit staff and consultants in many cities. Tech Soup's discussion boards are a great place to find answers to technology questions, and Tech Soup Stock is a great way for nonprofits to get software and hardware at very low prices.

JOE BAKER is the executive director of N-TEN. He would love to hear your examples of technology success stories. Contact him at joe@nten.org.

N-TEN's Partnership with NPQ

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