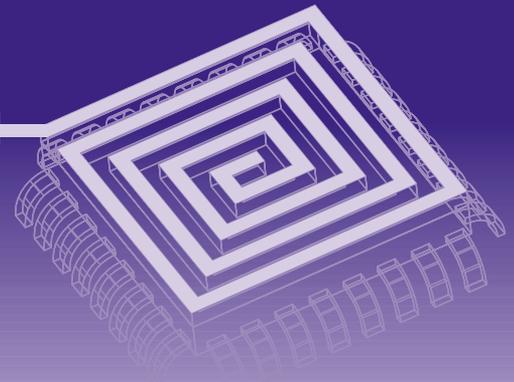


Tech Wise:

Nonprofits Join the Revolution



Are you a technology “have not”? If so, consider collaborating with a “have” to gain the benefits of technology.

By Lou Gordon

In the great technology race that is rapidly changing the world we live in, many nonprofits aren't even at the starting gate.

The technology revolution that has swept the corporate world and vastly altered the way business is conducted has yet to make significant inroads in the nonprofit sector. Many nonprofits lack the funding and resources they need to use today's computer technology. As a result, they're missing the benefits of technology that have become standard in the corporate world. In light of all this, what should nonprofits do?

Partner “Haves” with “Have Nots”

One solution that's working is the formation of partnerships that match technology “haves” with “have nots.” An example in the tri-state New York, New Jersey, Connecticut area that could provide a nationwide model began with a phone call last year.

For two years the Earth Pledge Foundation had been hosting seminars to introduce nonprofits to the benefits of the Internet. The foundation, one of the first nonprofits to establish an Internet presence, wanted to share with other nonprofits the expertise it had developed in building its own Web site. Earth Pledge had already hosted its “Net Basics: What Every Nonprofit Needs to Know About the Internet” seminar for more than 100 nonprofits in the greater New York area when it started to draw some conclusions about the Internet, technology, and the non-

profit community.

“It became clear to us that nonprofits were excited about the potential offered by new technology,” says Earth Pledge Executive Director Leslie Hoffman. “And after we had been working in this community for some time, it was clear that nonprofits needed a great deal more than an introductory seminar could offer. These

organizations needed computer hardware and software, technology planning, and Web site development.”

To increase the capacity of its seminars and to address other technology needs of the community, Earth Pledge began to look for partners. After several attempts to

establish relationships with high-technology companies, the foundation placed a phone call to the local office of the largest software maker in the world—Microsoft.

“We were at the point where we needed someone to help us do more than introduce nonprofits to technology,” says Hoffman. “We saw the need to take the next step and

Don't let “technology creep” overtake your organization.

What Nonprofits Need to Know About Technology

Here are a few guidelines that every nonprofit should know:

- 1. Technology is important to your organization.** Networked offices share information more efficiently and enhance your ability to fulfill your mission. An Internet presence expands your audience on a global scale. If the nonprofit community is to increase its role in society, technology will play an important part. Nonprofits that don't have an e-mail address, for example, risk losing their credibility and being unable to communicate with partners or the public in this rapidly preferred manner.
- 2. You must structure technology into your organization.** Integrating technology into your organization doesn't happen overnight, and it doesn't happen without commitment. You may need to set up a working group to address technology concerns. Someone must be in charge of planning for the incorporation of technology into your organization.
- 3. You must support your commitment.** Technology requires a budget. You may have to hire people to manage technology. You will have to consider a hardware and software budget. Training will likely become a must for your staff.
- 4. Free support can be problematic.** If your organization has only volunteer technology support, you may be vulnerable. Free support might not be available when you need it most. If your organization is serious about using technology to enhance your goals, you may have to evaluate your current technology support system and realize that you actually get what you pay for.
- 5. Your mission and goals should drive technology—not the other way around.** Computers can quickly become a black hole. To maximize your use of technology, set a goal and implement only the technology necessary to meet that goal. Stay focused on your mission and goals to keep “technology creep” from overtaking your organization.
- 6. It's not obsolete if it meets your needs.** When look-

ing to technology solutions, it's important to realize that the latest and greatest may not be necessary. Once you set up a system for solving a problem (merging letters, for example), don't feel the pressure to upgrade just because new software is available. New solutions bring new challenges (and problems). If a system works for your organization, don't change it. The technology might change, but that doesn't mean your system is obsolete. Remember, “If it ain't broke...”

- 7. Networking is key.** Forget the Web! If your office isn't networked, start there. A good network will let staff share files quickly and efficiently. Your biggest technology leap will likely be in connecting staff with one another. You'll also find that networking is the cornerstone of all effective technology implementation in an organization. Database solutions—to manage fundraising efforts, for example—are greatly enhanced when they can be shared across an organization. And e-mail can truly benefit your organization only if everyone has access to it.
- 8. The Web is great...but prioritize.** It's true that the Web is the next greatest thing, and your organization will surely benefit from a Web site. Before you jump on the Web, however, review your other technology priorities. For example, if you build a Web site and you want the public to access your site and send you e-mail, you need Internet access and an e-mail account. You'd be surprised how many nonprofits don't have computers, yet they have Web sites. That's an indication that the organization's priorities are out of order.
- 9. Acquiring technology is only the first step.** Let's face it, once you purchase computers, you'll quickly discover what the technology industry refers to as “the cost of ownership.” Computers need maintenance and long-term attention. You'll need to be prepared psychologically, organizationally, and financially for that fact.
- 10. Seek to establish relationships.** Smart organizations look for partnerships, projects, and support to help fund their computer use and create new opportunities. Start talking to funders, businesses, and nonprofits about the

help nonprofits integrate the technology into their organizations.”

Fortunately, the New York, New Jersey, Connecticut Regional Office of Microsoft had been addressing the same issue: how to help the nonprofit community get the technology they so desperately needed. Microsoft's regional East Coast office is very involved in working with the community it serves on a local level.

“Our office was working hard on developing a strategy to efficiently help all of the local nonprofits that had called our office looking for our support,” explains Bob Jones, Microsoft's regional general manager. “When the call came asking us to support Earth Pledge's efforts, we were enthusiastic. We knew that Earth Pledge had expertise in working with organizations that we wanted to help. It made sense for us to partner with them to address this important community need.”

What Funders and High-Tech Companies Need to Know About Nonprofits and Technology

Grantmakers and high-technology companies have come under recent pressure to make their tools available to help the nonprofit community. Here are some points to consider:

- 1. High-tech companies face inherent challenges in giving to and working with the nonprofit community.** Technology companies don't understand how nonprofits operate. The cultures are very different, and each sector's perspective can make it difficult or awkward for them to work together. Support that is coordinated through organizations that specialize in working with nonprofits has the potential to yield greater success.
- 2. Not all nonprofits have the same needs.** Some nonprofits are very technologically sophisticated while others have yet to incorporate computers, networking, or telecommunications into their efforts. Support must be structured to accommodate varying levels of needs and skills.
- 3. Nonprofits are not the best at determining their own needs.** Ask nonprofit managers what type of technology support they need, and they're likely to say, "We need everything." In their quest for donated hardware, software, and support, nonprofits don't always consider whether they can actually use what they are given. As a result, well-intentioned "donations" end up as product "dumps" and no one benefits.
- 4. Clear needs must be identified.** Nonprofit managers often think on a grand scale and have trouble narrowing their aspirations to precise objectives that technology can help them solve. For example, "We need to use technology to enhance our fundraising efforts" can be translated into specifics, such as, "Our goal will be to create a fundraising database which we can use to target supporters."
- 5. Needs must drive the solution.** When high-technology firms interact with the nonprofit community, the first question should be "What are your needs?" rather than "Can you use this technology?"
- 6. Objectives and timelines must be set and agreed upon.** Nonprofits' level of interest often changes upon the state of their program activity. This fact of organizational life carries the possibility that assistance spread over time will lose its effectiveness. With clear objectives and timelines, both the nonprofit and the high-technology company have some assurance that assistance will be implemented efficiently.
- 7. Relationships require ongoing maintenance.** Too often technology support for a nonprofit organization occurs on a one-time basis. As the organization matures and technology changes, contributions can fail to have a positive, lasting effect.
- 8. Cash, hardware, and software are not solutions in and of themselves.** Cash contributions from high-technology companies have a tendency to be spent on what the nonprofit perceives as its biggest need—not always what it really needs most. Hardware isn't helpful without software, and software isn't helpful without training and support.
- 9. Support should be complementary, not competitive.** Technology companies should support existing nonprofit efforts rather than create entirely new programs. Support given to nonprofits may be more effective if given through well-established programs with technology expertise.
- 10. Expectations must be managed.** No amount of money, hardware, software, or support can solve all of a

The result is that Earth Pledge and Microsoft have created a partnership project—Showcase New York—that takes advantage of each organization's unique skills. Earth Pledge fields requests from nonprofits, and Microsoft provides its products to qualified nonprofits free of charge. The two work together to offer nonprofits much-needed consultation, training, hardware, and software.

Since its launch in 1997, Showcase New York has

provided more than \$200,000 in software and support services to organizations such as the Public Theater, the Fund for the Borough of Brooklyn, the Feminist Press, People Against Sexual Abuse, the New Jersey State Aquarium, and a host of other organizations. The program, which has as its motto "making technology work for the nonprofit community," is growing steadily and attracting a lot of attention in the New York area.

"We're still in the beginning phases of our program,"

Internet Resources

Organizations Providing Technical Assistance to Nonprofits

Benton Foundation (www.benton.org) provides model projects and tools to nonprofits to promote more strategic use of communications technology.

Council on Foundations (www.cof.org) provides resources for and links to the grantmaking community.

Desktop Assistance (www.desktop.org) has a timely and compelling mission: to empower nonprofits with information technology.

Essential Information (www.essential.org) provides low-cost Internet service to nonprofits.

Institute for Global Communications (www.igc.apc.org/docs/resources.html) is host to many progressive organizations and has compiled an extensive guide to online resources.

ONE Northwest (www.onenw.org/html/tech.shtml) helps conservation organizations and activists in the Pacific Northwest make effective use of electronic networking tools.

Internet Primers

20/20 Vision (www.2020vision.org/cyberact.html) offers Cyber Activism, an excellent primer for online organizing.

Earthlink-Internet & Web Help (www.globalvillage.com/gcweb/tour.html) provides an Internet tour.

Internet 101 (www.paradesa.com/teionline/inet101/internet.html) gives the basics of using the Internet.

Learn the Net (www.learnthenet.com) is one of the best and most complete guides to the Internet, including Internet software (much of it available for free). It has comprehensive file listings, rat-

says Hoffman. "We've reached out and helped a number of organizations, but the need is great and we have a lot more work to do." A greater supply of free computers and a more ambitious training schedule are in the works, she says.

How Can You Join the Revolution?

Programs like Showcase New York are addressing a much bigger question: How can nonprofits join the potentially costly and complicated information revolution?

As a first step, nonprofits need to understand and embrace the power of technology. They must be willing to accept the initial disruption of networking their computers, for example, realizing that networked offices have more communication, cooperation, and productivity. They must be open to new fundraising and marketing ideas, understanding that a level of sophistication once possible only by expensive direct-marketing firms can now be obtained with a computer and a few hundred dollars worth of database software.

It's vital that nonprofits appreciate what an invaluable tool technology can be in achieving their missions. A Web site, for instance, can reach a far greater audience than any direct marketing piece and do it much more cost-effectively. And some nonprofits are already conducting successful campaigns raising money on their Web sites.

An example of online fundraising that didn't cost the organization anything, thanks to donated efforts of online companies, happened during the 1997 holiday season when a pay-per-view Tori Amos video hosted on RAINN's (Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network) Web site (www.RAINN.org) raised more than \$5,600 in less than three weeks. Currently RAINN's Web site is raising \$2,000 a month in contributions.

"While none of the online programs are enough to cover our budget," says Scott Berkowitz, president of RAINN, "they're certainly starting to help more and more. I suspect in a few years they will become an increasing part of our fundraising efforts."

Another example of Web productivity is D.C.-based Taxpayers for Common Sense (www.taxpayer.net), a nonprofit watchdog organization that cites wasteful spending on a variety of issues. "Our Web site has been particularly helpful in building a broad-based activist network," says Christian Sinderman, a spokesperson for the organization. "We've had more than 300 responses to our online registration form in the first 60 days—and it didn't cost us a penny. As a small organization the Web has allowed us to give information to the outside world beyond the Beltway more effectively and we're reaching a greater audience than we could with our limited mailing budget."

But before such achievements can become reality, non-

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profits must begin weaving technology into their plans. They must be willing to reach out for help, try new ideas, and form partnerships with other groups.

Throughout the country, initiatives like Showcase New York are helping nonprofits by forming unique collaborations between technology-savvy nonprofits, high-tech companies, and the funding community. One approach these programs are taking is to match a technologically astute volunteer with a nonprofit seeking to solve a specific technology challenge.

One such program was pioneered by CompuMentor (www.CompuMentor.org) in San Francisco, where technology volunteers are matched with local schools and nonprofits. CompuMentor's program consists of mentor matching, software redistribution, and staff-based consulting.

"We're now in our 11th year and we've been hugely successful," says Phil Roseberry, CompuMentor's program director. "Over the years we've done thousands of mentor projects of which 80 percent are for nonprofits. We've helped fill a hole in the Bay Area and we've begun to expand our services to other states by using the Web as our primary recruiting tool."

In Chicago, ITRC (Information Technology Resource Center) has been assisting nonprofits for nearly 14 years. ITRC's services, which consist of computer consulting, hands-on training, and orientation sessions, are subsidized to nearly 300 nonprofits annually. ITRC's Web site (<http://npo.net/ITRC>) hosts nonprofit job listings, funding information, and a calendar of events.

"We've worked with everything from small all-volunteer nonprofit groups to large social service organizations the likes of United Way," says Deborah Strauss, ITRC's executive director. "There's been a definite need for our services because generally speaking nonprofits cannot afford private consultation."

ONE Northwest (Online Networking for the Environment) helps nonprofit conservation groups in the Pacific Northwest get online and use e-mail, the Web, and other technologies to become more effective in their work to protect the environment. Services are provided free of charge and include consulting (needs assessment), equipment, installation, training, e-mail, listserv services, and information for online activists available from their Web site.

"We work within a community of more than 1,000 conservation organizations in Alaska, British Columbia, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington," says Steve Albertson, ONE Northwest's director. "Since 1995 we've helped more than 350 organizations in the region. I've really enjoyed watching technology being put to use for something as important as environmental activism. It has restored my faith in the good that technology can do."

As nonprofits help nonprofits access the latest technology, grantmakers are facilitating the process by offering more technology support. The two-and-a-half-

year-old Rockefeller Technology Project, for instance, has provided 150 nonprofits with a quarter million dollars in technology assistance.

Rob Stuart, director of the Rockefeller Family Fund's Technology Project, says that more effective use of computers as communication tools requires a shift in thinking by both the nonprofit and grantmaking communities. This "technology shift" is necessary to move groups to the realization that computers and electronic communication capacity are critical to any group's fundamental purposes. (See "What Nonprofits Need to

Know About Technology" and "What Funders and High-Tech Companies Need to Know About Nonprofits and Technology" on pages 38 and 39.)

"New tools are available to help realize greater program achievement and to empower organizations like never before," says

Stuart. "These tools, if used properly, are most definitely force multipliers."

But technology is not enough in itself. Says Stuart: "The human capacity is 70 percent of the equation—that means the people who use the tools have to understand what the technology can do and how to implement it properly."

Programs like Showcase New York, ITRC, ONE Northwest, and various efforts by the funding community are addressing a real need for the nonprofit community. As these programs grow and others like them are developed, we can expect to see more and more nonprofits gain in their technology sophistication.

"If you pick up any computer magazine today, you will see ads for this company and that company all talking about the technology revolution," notes Hoffman. "With Showcase New York we understand that if you c a n , t connect, you can't participate." ■

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Nonprofit World • Volume 16, Number 5 September/October 1998
Published by the Society for Nonprofit Organizations
6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, WI 53719 • (800) 424-7367

One approach is to match a technologically savvy volunteer with a non-