



Create an Environment of Discovery

As information explodes around you, you need to approach it in new ways.

BY BRUCE GLASRUD

Business as usual is an increasingly risky strategy. Conventional wisdom about what's needed to accomplish your goals and serve your mission may no longer be valid next year, next month, or even when you wake up tomorrow. The mission niche or community need you've always served may disappear overnight. Another issue or need may appear just as suddenly. The doubling time for available knowledge in many fields is measured in years, if not months.

We've moved from the information age to the knowledge age. We see signs of it in the proliferation of information sources. If you're like most of us, you're overwhelmed with a barrage of snailmail, voicemail, and e-mail. You think you're doing well just to return your phone calls and find the bottom of those piles. As a rule, there's little time to catch up on your professional reading, much less other information sources. Even your favorite information source, *Nonprofit World*, may languish for days before you find time to even skim through the articles.

And professional reading in your primary field alone won't provide the information you need in today's fast-changing communities. Instead, you must be especially vigilant to information from outside your usual channels. As Peter Drucker argues, the leadership imperative is "to organize outside data because change occurs from the outside." Drucker observes that an obsession with internal data leads organizations to be blindsided by external forces.

As information resources bulk up, you need new approaches. Information is useless unless you integrate it into strategic knowledge. Positioning your nonprofit as a knowledge-age organization is the most crucial leadership and management activity you will undertake in the early 21st century.

Scanning the environment for changes is essential. But nonprofits too often undertake environmental scanning in a static and blinkered fashion. Someone performs a fixed-in-time investigation of the environment and writes up the results. Much of this information languishes for lack of strategy. The rest is outdated before it hits the file drawer. Clearly, you must move beyond a periodic scan and create an ongoing scanning process. How can you accomplish this with limited resources?





Information Overload?

If you're having trouble keeping up with the piles on your desk, consider these figures:

- More information has been created in the last 30 years than in the previous 5,000 years.
- Every day, more than 20 million words of technical information are produced.
- There are 1,000 new book titles released each day.
- Nearly 10,000 different periodicals are released per day.

Engage Your Organization

New technology can help you get a better handle on the information deluge. Yet you must also imbed "people processes" into your information systems. Ask staff and board members to help scan the environment for new data. Turning "information gathering" into "information discovery" will make it an adventure rather than a chore.

What information discovery sources are you overlooking in your organization? Who in your organization holds pockets of knowledge that might be useful? How well do you know what your staff and board know? What did they "used to be" before they were in their current position with your organization? What are their hobbies? Who do they hang around with? What are their information resources? You'll find that your staff and board have a wealth of untapped resources that they'll be honored to share if you engage them with a respectful approach.

Bring Information Forward

It's one thing to have folks out there discovering information for you. You must also use that information in a strategic way. Typical staff and board meetings consist of reporting out. Reporting about what has been done. Reporting about what needs be done. Reporting about what is about to be done. Reporting what didn't get done.

Why not transform these reporting-out routines into reporting-in occasions? Ask people to share the information bubbling up from their data discoveries. The information they bring forward is only a partial benefit. This exercise also accustoms people to a strategic way of operating. They become the organization's eyes and ears. This future-seeking attitude can keep you on the leading edge of your mission area.

And don't stop with your staff and board. Who else knows the stuff you need to know? Here are a few ideas:

- members and clients and recipients
- funders and donors
- vendors and contractors
- nonprofit and government colleagues

Expand your relationship with such people. Ask them to become your information discoverers. Remember that they will be flattered that you're looking to them for information and opinion. You will be building solid relationships along with picking their brains.

Build information-discovery tricks into your program feedback loops. Are you, for example, collecting program outcome data to document your effectiveness? Why not integrate the discovery of "incoming" data into those same collection functions? Survey questions on trends and community changes can easily be linked to your outcome assessment tools. Collecting such data will keep you proactive. It will impress the heck out of your funders, too!

Seven Steps To Information Discovery

1. Get started by creating an environmental scanning plan. Focus on outside factors that may impact your nonprofit's objectives and mission. Be forward-thinking about your information needs. Get input and buy-in from all stakeholders.

2. Get organized. Spell out strategies for scanning the environment. Specify how you will integrate



the new information into your operations. Create a common frame of reference and vocabulary.

3. Get serious. Construct a solid infrastructure for your scanning operations. Build this responsibility into everyone's job description—including your staff, your board, and yourself. Provide incentives and rewards for the discovery of new information.

4. Get prepared to act on information discovered. Inability or unwillingness to act will quash the proactive, future-seeking mindset.

5. Get smart by building high-tech and low-tech information-discovery pipelines into your organization. Include formal and informal reporting-in procedures, places, and times. Creativity counts big-time!

6. Get everyone involved by asking them to feed you competitive intelligence. Don't forget to involve your staff, board, former staff, former board, clients, recipients, funders,

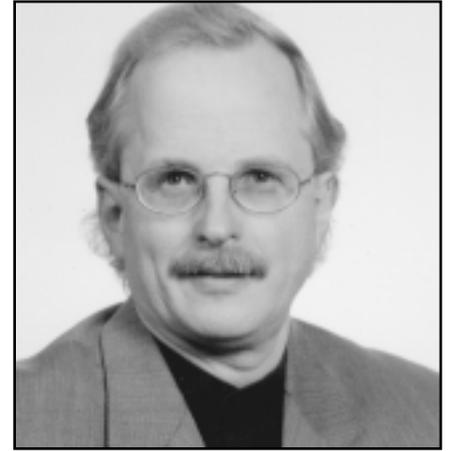
contractors, and all the other mission stakeholders you can muster.

7. Get dynamic. Use discovered information to revisit your goals in light of likely changes in the environment.

Creating a knowledge-discovery culture within your organization won't happen overnight. As with any investment, the payoff won't occur overnight either. Indeed, if done right, the benefits may be almost imperceptible. A good knowledge-age organization will seamlessly integrate information into operation. The only way to tell if you got it right may be

You think you understand the situation, but what you don't understand is that the situation just changed.

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to sit back and watch as your nonprofit proactively thrives while other nonprofits reactively strive. ■

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