



# When Funding Windfalls Cause Technology Problems

Be sure you're prepared for tech-related donations.

*By Anna Murray*

**Y**ou run a mid-sized nonprofit. Suddenly, a funding source comes through big-time with the technology grant you've been waiting for. Time to pop the champagne?

Not so fast. Technology funding windfalls can cause disorder and disarray at nonprofit organizations. Here's why.

**Staff.** Accustomed to running on a shoestring, staff have honed their skills to economize. Many IT staff have never been given resources and have no experience in even medium-scale system upgrades.

**Legacy Systems.** Networks, hardware, and software in resource-strapped nonprofits can often have a chewing-gum-and-duck-tape setup. Funding for brand-new servers or tablets can be difficult or even impossible to deploy atop such systems.

**Lack of Internet Bandwidth.** Even medium-sized nonprofits tend to economize on internet access, with insufficient wifi points and third-tier providers. This results in unreliable broadband access. But many state-of-the-art tools rely on good access. If your nonprofit is funded for distance learning or given a high-end digital assets management system (DAM), it may be uncomfortable to learn your access doesn't support its use.

**Limited Timeframe.** Funding sources may require implementation within a certain amount of time. Upgrades and installations need to happen within that window.

Here are four tips to mitigate these problems and get to the champagne popping.

## Know your IT Situation

Whether or not a windfall comes your way, you need to answer this question: What is the state of your network, equipment, and staff? Before applying for technology-related funding, nonprofit managers should understand whether their existing infrastructure can handle a grant if they get it. Build these costs into your funding requests.

## Augment Staff

Imagine you're the leader of a school and your grant request was just fulfilled but you didn't plan ahead. You have 200 tablets arriving for your students, an IT director who graduated college last year, and a cobbled-together, outdated computer network.

The very first thing you need is IT expertise. An experienced person can quickly analyze what you need to absorb your new tech funding and get the most out of it.

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## Identify the Critical Path

Your IT expert will likely lay out numerous high-priority fixes. But, although everything needs to be done, it doesn't necessarily all need to be done now.

This is where critical path planning comes in. Such planning identifies the show stoppers and deal breakers. For example, if someone donates a Photoshop license to your organization, you need computers capable of running the latest version of Photoshop. Lack of those computers is a show stopper – absolutely high, probably number-one, on the critical path.

Consider the tablet example above. In this real-world situation, the school didn't have adequate wifi to support all 200 tablets getting online at once. But, with some questioning of teachers, the IT expert discovered that not all students needed to be on wifi at once. In fact, the teachers could coordinate among themselves so that at most 20 tablets would get online simultaneously. This situation could continue for a semester.

Fixing the wifi immediately came off critical path. Other items, such as developing a process to set up, roll out, and troubleshoot the new tablets, were much more important.

## Case-Study Your Experience

Networks, servers, and bandwidth aren't super sexy. It's often hard to get administrations and boards to pay attention to such nuts-and-bolts elements of operations. Perceptions may be, "Everything seems to be working okay. So what if we're down a couple times a month?"

A new source of funding can be a great ah-ha moment. Case-study your situation. By writing up a case study, you can show why it's important to put your organization in a nimbler posture to absorb technology investment. 

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