MOBILIZING COMMUNITIES IN A CONNECTED AGE

A Portfolio Assessment of Advocacy Organizations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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COMMUNITY / TECHNOLOGY / OPPORTUNITY

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Introduction

Advanced technologies in Web 2.0, social media, and mobile and cloud computing have become essential and integral to the operations of highly effective organizations throughout the U.S. and beyond, both in the private, public and nonprofit sectors. When used effectively, these tools can help an organization increase operational efficiency, lower operating costs, expand market reach, drive revenue, foster brand loyalty, and spur and accelerate innovation and organizational improvement. As these new technologies become more ubiquitous and pervasive in the everyday lives of average Americans, the use of these tools will become more a matter of survival rather than competitive advantage. Advocacy organizations in the nonprofit sector are not immune to such market changes. In fact, those that continue to find themselves unable to integrate some combination of Web 2.0, social media, and mobile and cloud computing technologies will increasingly come to experience — at best — stymied market growth, deterioration in supporter-base, and growing difficulty in affecting social impact. (See Glossary pages 7-8)

Purpose of this Report

The purpose of this report is to present findings on how well advocacy organizations supported by the Mitchell Kapor Foundation and ZeroDivide are leveraging the power of technology to achieve their missions based on interviews that were conducted with executives from these organizations. In total, there are 18 organizations included in this study — eight funded by the Mitchell Kapor Foundation, eight funded by ZeroDivide, and two external organizations that were interviewed for benchmarking purposes. In addition, this report assesses the funding landscape in which these grant recipient organizations operate, and identifies opportunities for increasing technology capacity for social impact through interventions by the philanthropic community.

Data Gathering & Analysis

The findings presented in this report are largely based on data gathered from interviews with executives from 16 nonprofit advocacy organizations that have either previously received or are currently receiving funding from the Mitchell Kapor Foundation or ZeroDivide. In addition, executives from two external organizations — Color of Change[1] and Credo Action[2] —were interviewed for benchmark purposes. These two particular organizations were selected from a list provided by interviewees as being examples of nonprofit advocacy organizations that were using technology effectively. Interviews were also conducted with two subject-matter experts who gave their take on the role of technology in philanthropy and provided insights on areas of innovation and opportunities for improvement in technology use by nonprofit organizations: Lucy Bernholz, Founder & President of Blueprint Research & Design, now a part of Arabella Advisors; and Steve Wright, Director of the Social Performance Management Center at Grameen Foundation, who had previously served as the Director of Innovation at Salesforce.com Foundation. All interviews conducted for this study took place between August and October 2010.

Other data sources used to generate this report include: printed marketing collateral provided by interviewees; official information garnered from grant recipient websites and GuideStar; and findings from a recent study by ZeroDivide on the funding landscape for nonprofits seeking to expand capacity through strategic use of new technology tools.[3] Based on analysis of data gathered, the 18 organizations included in this study were then grouped into three categories, each differentiated by social impact technology capacity levels: Leading, Aspiring, and Developing.

An organization's category was determined through a process that built upon a framework developed by Organizational Research Services for the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2007). Using the list of common advocacy outcomes referenced in "A Guide To Measuring Advocacy and Policy," we identified specific technologies being employed by each organization and matched them to each outcome. However, since the mere presence of a technology tool does not reveal how well integrated it may be within the organizational structure, a rubric was created to analyze whether technology in each organization is being used strategically and to what extent.

[1] Color of Change is a project of Civic Engagement Lab, which is a Mitchell Kapor Foundation grant recipient.

[2] CREDO Action is a wholly-owned division of CREDO Mobile, a private social enterprise formerly known as Working Assets.

[3] Perlstein (2011), "Amplifying Social Impact In a Connected Age: A Survey of Technology-Related Grantmaking for Social Benefit," a report prepared for ZeroDivide.

The four critical factors used in this rubric for determining social impact technology capacity follow.

1) the level to which each organization integrates Web 2.0, social media, and mobile and cloud computing technologies into their operations;

2) the level to which technology tools are integrated into communications;

3) the level of support provided by leadership on technology integration; and

4) the level to which organizational culture drives technology adoption and innovative technology use.

For a detailed explanation of the rubric, see the full report,
Appendix 2: http://zerodivide.org/tech_advocacy

Findings

1. INCREASING TECHNOLOGY CAPACITY IS LARGELY A LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT ISSUE.

Based on the rubric described above, we found "Leading" organizations not only give technology a prominent and integral role in their operational infrastructure, but weave it throughout all layers of organizational activity. The most significant determinant of an organization's likelihood to do so was whether their leader shares the following three characteristics:

- They have an interest in technology, whether it is for personal or professional use, and are comfortable with learning about and using new technology;
- They understand the technology value proposition and how its strategic use can help advance their organizations' mission; and
- They hire tech-savvy staff members that share the same characteristics.

These leaders integrated technology into their lives in a variety of ways, and they tended to be younger, though not exclusively. Essentially, a truly tech-savvy leader — one who can successfully weave technology throughout all aspects of an organization — must embody all three characteristics. Therefore, interventions for increasing technology capacity should be aimed at leadership development, first and foremost.

2. TO SEIZE THE SIGNIFICANT OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOCIAL IMPACT, AN INCREASE IN AWARENESS AND SUPPORT BY THE PHILANTHROPIC COMMUNITY IS NEEDED.

Respondents identified numerous examples of nonprofits' increased impact via technology strategies, demonstrating the tremendous possibilities in this realm. However, they were aware of only a small number of foundations who have provided funding explicitly for technology capacity and innovation (see full report for the list). Clearly, there is unmet demand for funding and technical assistance to support nonprofits seeking to use technology to increase organizational effectiveness.

Previous research by ZeroDivide identified a number of reasons why funders have not significantly invested in grantees' technology capacity and innovation. In an online survey conducted in 2010 — see http://zerodivide.org/funder_report — the 25 participating foundations named the following key barriers to increasing their support in this area:

- Lack of staff familiarity and expertise with the technology landscape;
- Lack of knowledge about service providers and effective technology strategies;
- Lack of ways to evaluate social impact and outcomes outside of social media "traffic";
- Lack of clarity by funders about investment strategies and funding priorities in light of current economic conditions.

The top recommendations by participating funders to strengthen the quality and quantity of technology-related grantmaking were "increased funder education and engagement" and "increased funder advising." These findings suggest that leadership development is needed in the philanthropic sector as well as the nonprofit sector.

3. CREATING SYSTEMIC CHANGE: RESPONDENTS CITED EIGHT WAYS FUNDERS CAN HELP.

When asked directly about how technology can help their organization increase advocacy impact and what the role of funders should be, interviewees provided responses that fell into the following eight categories:

Pair Funding with Consulting Services

Combine grantmaking with access to a vetted pool of consultants who will assist with technology planning and implementation for strategic improvement.

Fund Technology for Long-term Capacity Enhancements

Fund general support grants that expand social impact technology capacity over the long-term both for operations and program execution, not just hardware or software tied to specific initiatives that expire after a defined period of time, whose financial support ceases when the project ends. Extend the evaluation period beyond the normal one-year grantmaking cycle because it will take longer to show success.

Provide Thought Leadership

Take a leadership role in informing other foundations about the importance of funding technology. Bundle technology integration into grantmaking and encourage other foundations to do the same.

Fund Technology for Movement Building

Don't just fund technology; fund communications programs and initiatives that help catalyze and build movements.

Fund Integrated Database Systems for Constituent Relationship Management (CRM)

(See Glossary, pages 7-8)

Help nonprofit organizations integrate disparate databases that separately handle email lists, supporter contact information (e.g. donors, members and/or volunteers), donation and accounting information, etc.

Enable Automated Performance Evaluation — Metrics and Analysis

Fund and help set up technology systems for tracking pertinent metrics that can drive better management decisions and facilitate social impact measurement.

Build a Community of Practice

Provide ways for grant recipients to meet and learn from peers and industry experts. Build a network of practitioners who share ideas. Serve as a portal to knowledge and information, best practices and case studies. Fund in-person convenings to spur the formation of relationships with partners.

Foster Leadership Development

Provide training and guidance on how to make strategic improvements and implement best practices. Provide exposure to new tools, trends and ideas.

In addition, even though none of the interviewees explicitly stated a need for guidance on how to formulate and implement ways to leverage mobile technology, many reported beginning to think about its possibilities, regardless of their current technology capacity level.

Conclusion

Based on our findings, there is ample opportunity - and need - for the philanthropic community to help alleviate current funding and service gaps experienced by nonprofits seeking to build technology capacity for social impact. Seizing these opportunities, however, will require that funders overcome their own barriers to investment through increased funder education, collaboration and leadership development.

The Mitchell Kapor Foundation, ZeroDivide and other like-minded funders have a significant role to play in leveraging their expertise and core assets to grow the field of social impact investment through strategic technology capacity building.

We invite our colleagues in the philanthropic community to consider the findings described in this report, and to collaborate in fostering a robust community of practice that can strengthen this important sector and advance social change in our connected age.

Glossary

Cloud Computing or "the cloud"

Cloud computing refers to the practice of accessing data or software via the Internet, stored on remote servers, rather than needing it to live on your particular computer or device.

The principle behind "the cloud" is that any device connected to the Internet is connected to the same pool of computing power, applications, and files. Users can store and access personal files such as music, pictures, videos, and bookmarks or play games or do word processing on a remote server, rather than physically carrying around a storage medium such as a DVD or thumb drive. Web-based email programs such as Gmail, Hotmail, Yahoo!, and others make use of "cloud" email servers.

CMS

A content management system (CMS) is software used to manage work flow in a collaborative environment, often used to create very dynamic and easily updatable websites.

Drupal, Joomla and WordPress are examples of free, open-source content management systems (CMS).

CRM – Constituent Relationship Management

Constituent Relationship Management (CRM) refers to software designed to help manage the many types of information from interactions and relationships with customers, clients, stakeholders, etc. Various functions allow an organization to store information about, analyze, generate reports on, and enhance relationships with their audience.

Commonly known examples of CRMs include Salesforce.com and CiviCRM, a free and open source solution.

Mobile Technology

Mobile technology is a term used to describe the various types of wireless cellular communications technology. Examples range from a simple two-way pager to a cellular phone, GPS navigation system, an embedded web browser, Instant Messenger client, and a hand-held video gaming system.

Glossary

Social Media

Social media is the use of web-based and mobile technologies to turn communication into interative dialogue. Social media includes the various online technology tools that enable people to communicate easily via the Internet to share information and resources. It can include text, audio, video, images, podcasts, and other multimedia communications.

Some examples are:

· Social Bookmarking. (Del.icio.us, Blinklist) Interact by tagging websites and searching through websites bookmarked by other people.

· Social News. (Digg, Reddit) Interact by voting for articles and commenting on them.

· Social Networking. (Facebook, Twitter, Last.FM) Interact by adding friends, commenting on profiles, joining groups and having discussions.

· Social Photo and Video Sharing. (YouTube, Flickr) Interact by sharing photos or videos and commenting on user submissions.

· Wikis. (Wikipedia, Wikia) Interact by adding articles and editing existing articles.

SMS/Texting

Short Message Service (SMS), also known as text messaging, is a communication service component of phone, web, or mobile communication systems that allows the exchange of short text messages between fixed line or mobile phone devices.

SMS text messaging is the most widely used data application in the world. The term SMS is used as a synonym for all types of short text messaging as well as the user activity itself in many parts of the world.

Tech-savvy

Tech-savvy is a term used to suggest a person's high-level of proficiency in the use of various modes of technology, especially computers and digital media tools.

Web 2.0

Web 2.0 refers to computer applications that facilitate participatory information sharing, interoperability, and collaboration on the World Wide Web.

Such websites allows users to interact and collaborate with each other as creators of user-generated content, in contrast to websites where users are limited to the passive viewing of content that was created for them.

Examples of Web 2.0 include social networking sites, blogs, wikis, video sharing sites, hosted services, web applications, and mashups.