

Technology Market: EVOLVING THE WORKPLACE

BY MICHAEL NILSEN



(This is the first in a series of occasional columns about the expanding technology fundraisers are using in the workplace and what options are available to charities. These columns won't provide reviews but will give readers a sense of what is out there and how fundraisers are effectively implementing technology to support and augment their everyday work.)

If you're a fundraiser and the issue of technology comes up, you're likely to think of databases and social media—systems, programs and devices that will (should!) help make your fundraising easier and capable of reaching more people effectively and efficiently. But technology is having just as profound an impact on our workplace itself and how we work, including communications, data-sharing and the preparation of documents and presentations. And some of it integrates so easily into our typical workday routine that the average person (read: donor) isn't likely to notice.

Take, for example, Tides Canada, headquartered in Vancouver, which works to help Canadians secure a

healthy environment in ways that promote social equity and economic prosperity. Call its offices, and you wouldn't realize that they do not have any phone lines. Tides Canada transitioned to Skype for Business just this year, and it's installed on its computers and all staff members' smartphones. Instead of spending money on phone lines, the organization invested in ensuring its building had sufficient Internet access to make the idea work effectively.

"It's been a great change and allowed us to be more mobile, share screens and generally be more productive," says Melissa Leite, senior development coordinator for Tides Canada. "We did have to engage in some significant training, but the system is seamless, and donors don't even notice unless I specifically set up a call with them. Best of all, our setup with Skype for Business has been more cost-efficient than using phones, and with a lot more features."

Moving to the Cloud

Of course, any discussion of technology and its impact on the workplace has to start with cloud-based computing. You've probably heard of it, and more than 90 percent of charities are using the cloud, according to a survey by Techsoup Global of organizations in 88 different countries, though companies are using the technology mostly in very limited ways. (If you're afraid to ask, and you shouldn't be, cloud-based computing refers to the accessing, storage and usage of data and programs over the Internet instead of using your computer and its hard drive. The "cloud" simply refers to the Internet and is a better image than a bunch of vacuum tubes!)

The Techsoup Global survey found that charities are mostly using the cloud for email (55 percent of charities

say they use it for that purpose) and social networking (47 percent). And there's still a number of charities (36 percent) that say they don't intend to transfer a significant portion of their operations to the cloud, with another 11 percent planning on the change taking more than three years.

In contrast, Dave Tinker, vice president of advancement for ACHIEVA in Pittsburgh, Pa., has seen his organization move completely from Microsoft Office to Google Drive and integrate the cloud into almost all of their operations. He cites the ability to retrieve information and files at any time, and from any location or device with a connection to the Internet, as transformative for his organization.

"Because my agency has many sites in a multicounty region, it was important that everyone could use the same system," says Tinker. "Cloud-based technologies have allowed us to do just that and keep the same computing capabilities we had with desktop versions of word processing, spreadsheet and presentation software. The move also saved us money on server costs, as well as freeing up our IT staff to work on other projects since they were no longer needed to constantly maintain our own servers."

Convenience and Cost

One of the biggest benefits of new technology—and the widening availability of technology—is the seemingly constant reduction in the costs of such technology. Nonprofits can save money (and often a lot) by switching to cloud-based or other technologies, and at the same time, the decreased costs of technology may open up new opportunities as well.

For example, John Dawe, president of Dawe Consulting in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., notes that the integration of video conferencing using Google Hangouts has changed the way organizations communicate with their teams and constituents. The technology is integral to working with Equality Pennsylvania's geographically diverse board and staff. The group holds some of its regular "face-to-face" meetings without the necessity of costly travel. The group has also used technology to hold telephone town hall meetings, group updates with key constituent groups and some donor meetings. Dawe notes that many donors have appreciated that the organization is not spending lots of travel money when these meetings are possible online.


But communication is just one way technology can transform organizations, and the possibilities are

endless when one starts thinking creatively. Lynne Wester, founder and principal of Donor Relations Guru™, brings up this idea for your next fundraising event: Embedding iPads into each table's floral arrangement, so attendees can easily follow along with the presentation and access other information about the organization and its cause.

"There is a lot of technology out there that can dramatically affect the way we work," says Wester. "But one of the great challenges of our sector is that most organizations don't have a great way of training people about technology. We're often given new programs—or if we're lucky, new smartphones—and told to 'Go to it' with very little or no training. Given the resources of most organizations, fundraisers are going to have to get into the habit of taking the lead and being proactive in finding what kind of new technologies are out there and what we can best make use of."

Dawe agrees, but urges that fundraisers and nonprofit leaders should be concerned and cautious about the integration of technology and information security. "The first thing we think of is typically financial transaction security and the care and management of credit card transactions," he says. "But we must also be concerned about confidential donor information, personnel data and public-facing information."

Dawe noted that in the book *Good to Great* by Jim Collins, the author talks about how leaders use technology. It is not simply as a solution to a problem but as an accelerator to take existing best practices and increase effectiveness by standardizing processes and driving engagement. Collins asserts, "When used right, technology becomes an accelerator of momentum, not a creator of it." Great companies refrain from adopting technology because it's trendy. Each tool they choose to leverage is carefully selected.

Amazing transformation is possible through technology, and even changes in basic, fundamental areas such as communications can bring about significant impact. Fundraisers should not be afraid to experiment and move forward with new technologies, but not without good planning and solid fundamentals. 

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