

Technology Planning for the Development Office

By Susan Packard Orr

Fund development depends on building relationships--connecting people with your organization in ways that promote long-term support. Today technology makes it easier than ever for even the smallest nonprofits to gather, organize, analyze and communicate the kinds of information they need to develop relationships more effectively and more affordably.

All too often, however, organizations allow their technology systems to evolve without deliberate oversight and without clear planning. Individual staff members are left to create their own mini-systems, without considering the impact on the organization as a whole. As a result, the development staff works with a patchwork of inconsistent spreadsheet and database applications. Each of these may be capable of performing its own discrete functions, but the data needed for solid relationship-building and wise decision-making and the vital connections among all that data--get lost in the shuffle.

For example, one large human-services agency based in San Francisco had historically spread donor and volunteer information across six different databases. With no effective mechanism in place to track their most important constituents, the development staff was unable to make much use of the donor histories it had painstakingly collected. Nor could staff members analyze past campaigns, since the disparate databases made it all but impossible to generate accurate reports. It wasn't until the entire operation was overhauled and technology functions were systematically coordinated that the development staff could do its work effectively and donor support began to grow.

As with any other aspect of your work, good planning lays the groundwork for good results. That's why technology planning is crucial. Not only does it give you a chance to review all the systems in place to support your development efforts. It helps you see them in a new light, discover new ways for accessing useful information, and ultimately improve your ability to build relationships with donors and prospects.

Before embarking on a technology plan, however, it's imperative that your organization already have a viable strategic plan as well as a viable development plan. The implications of the strategic plan on the development office must be clearly understood and brought to bear on the development

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plan. Many of your decisions about the future direction of the organization's work and the future course of your development efforts will inevitably affect your decisions about the use of technology. Do your plans include a capital campaign? Do you anticipate a greater emphasis on Web communication with constituents? Are you planning to operate from remote locations? What role will special events play? The answers to these questions and others like them will determine the kinds of hardware and software you will require, as well as the specific planning you will need to do.

If you do not yet have a clear idea of where your organization is headed over the next two to three years, you're not really ready for a technology plan. Devote your time to strategic planning and development planning first, using the results of those efforts to lay the groundwork for your technology planning.

If you have in fact already laid that groundwork, begin building your technology plan by focusing on the following three areas:

Decision support: Decisions are made on a daily basis in the development office. You decide how much to ask from a potential donor, when to send your next direct-mail piece, whether to change the giving circle recognition levels, and so on. The right technology can help you improve decision-making by providing more and better information, and by helping you sort through and analyze it properly.

Communication: You communicate with constituents in many ways everything from direct-mail to press coverage in the local paper. A technology plan helps you identify methods for improving current communications and helps you discover new ways to reach your constituencies.

Workflow: Whether you plan for it or not, data flows through your office constantly. It usually resides in different places, from word processors producing thank-you letters to accounting systems recording deposits. Technology planning helps you evaluate, integrate, and re-tool the various mechanisms by which data flows and work gets accomplished.

Decision support, communication and workflow never exist in isolation from one another. Better modes of communication will simplify workflow (as you begin accepting membership renewals online, for example). On the other hand, more sophisticated decision support may add complexity to the workflow (as you enter gifts into the system with more detailed codes, for

example). A good plan will take such interactions into account.

Who's in Charge?

Start the technology planning process by forming an oversight committee. This group will be responsible for gathering the necessary information, organizing it into the plan, and initiating implementation.

One of the major obstacles you are likely to confront at the outset is resistance to change. Veteran staff members who have developed their own way of doing things over the years often fall prey to this mindset. If they can get the job done now, why change? Inviting these individuals to join the oversight committee may help bring them around. Instead of sniping at the change process from a distance, they will gain a stake in making it succeed. Besides, they probably know more about how workflow is handled within the office than their less seasoned colleagues and in turn will bring institutional memory and valuable insights to the table.

Because it's important for any plan to have support from the top, you may also wish to consider including the boss (the executive director or development director). If you're lucky enough to have a tech-savvy board member, he or she would be another good person to recruit. In addition to providing expertise, that person can act as an advocate for the plan when you seek approval from the board as a whole.

It is also important to name someone as the systems administrator for the office, assuming you don't already have in-house IT staff. This will be the point person for implementing the plan and an obvious choice to chair the committee. If you do have IT personnel, however, don't feel obliged to make one of them the committee chair. The main qualifications for that job should be an understanding of workflow in the office and an ability to communicate with others in a non-technical way.

In addition to steering the oversight committee, the following tasks should be added to the chair's job description (or else delegated to someone under the chair's supervision):

- Oversee the implementation of the plan
- Be responsible for safety and security of the hardware and software systems
- Make sure back-ups are done

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- Maintain passwords and security rights
- Be responsible for the integrity of the data
- Keep procedures manuals up-to-date.

Information System

The information system is where important data about your constituents resides. That includes obvious things like names, addresses and giving histories. It also includes more detailed (and telling) information about personal preferences, relationships with other people and organizations, and special interests in your programs.

In assessing your present information system, think about how well it accommodates workflow and decision support. Can the workflow be streamlined, to reduce the amount of time spent on mundane tasks and increase the time for relationship-building? Begin by charting the current workflow and considering ways it can be improved. At the same time, compile a list of functions and reports that staff and volunteers will need to maximize results.

Once you have charted your desired workflow and determined what you need for decision support, aim for an information system that includes the following attributes:

- The information is "owned" by the organization, not by individuals
- It is integrated and centralized
- There are clear rules for data entry
- The rules are documented
- There is a plan for regular training
- Technical support is readily available
- The system is backed-up on a regular basis
- The system is protected by passwords
- There is a system administrator whose job description includes data maintenance.

A number of ready-to-use fundraising software products are available to help organize and present development data. These can assist in streamlining the workflow, communicating with constituents, and facilitating good decisions. A typical fundraising software package

- Provides a central place to keep all those bits and pieces of information about your donors and prospects
- Is designed to be a shared resource (since it runs on a server) and takes care of security issues
- Includes regular upgrades
- Includes access to training
- Includes technical support
- Includes documentation

Most importantly, good fundraising software establishes institutional memory. As your staff turns over, the data can be accessed and used by new staff (after reviewing the product documentation, or some additional training provided by the vendor, or possibly a simple phone conversation with the vendor's technical support team).

If you determine that ready-to-use software won't meet your needs and you absolutely must have a custom-built system, make sure you engage a reputable software development firm or an experienced consultant. In any event, don't attempt to construct a system all by yourself and don't rely on a volunteer. Any system should be built to last a long time. It will require periodic upgrades and ongoing technical support, which a volunteer may not be able to provide.

Communication

In reviewing your organization's strategic plan, you may find many ways that your Web site can be made more effective in carrying out your mission. Remember that a Web site is not a static phenomenon, frozen in time. A good technology plan considers how you can improve the site to better meet your development objectives, as well as how to maintain and update the site more effectively.

Don't forget that your Web site can provide two-way communication with constituents. It can be used for accepting donations, membership renewals or special-event responses. You can also use it to post surveys and gather opinions from people who share your organization's concerns. Or you can use it to sign up volunteers. Any data collected this way must be captured in your information system.

If your current use of e-mail for development purposes is limited to internal communication and occasional correspondence with constituents, consider

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expanding it to include things like a regular electronic newsletter, volunteer reminders or event invitations. Again, this requires interfacing with your information system, where e-mail addresses, salutations and important information about donor preferences are stored.

Hardware

The choice of software for both your information system and your communication vehicles will, to a large extent, directly affect your hardware choices. As a first step, you should assemble a careful inventory of all your current hardware. Once you know what you have, and you have a good idea of your software needs as well, a technology expert can be called in to assist with hardware planning.

That person might be a member of your IT staff or, if your needs are relatively simple, a knowledgeable volunteer. If the needs are complex, a qualified computer consultant should help select, install and maintain your hardware network.

You may not be able to afford to implement the entire hardware plan initially. If so, you can probably continue to use at least a portion of your old equipment. Whether or not you replace everything from the start, your plan should include a regular replacement cycle, and the cost of replacements should be reflected in the budget.

Training and Support

A common mistake in implementing new technology is to neglect ongoing training and technical support. Of course your plan should include initial training, but it should also account for regular trainings in the future. The turnover rate at most nonprofits is high especially among development personnel and that reality must be factored into your planning. Besides, with any complex information system, there is always something new to learn. The first training usually covers the basics. But there is only so much you can absorb in a single training session, so plan for follow-up sessions once the system is up and running.

Most fundraising software comes with a month or two of free technical support. That's probably not enough. To save valuable staff time and spare yourself needless frustration, plan to renew the support contracts annually.

Security

Security has many aspects:

- Safety -- the computers are kept in a secure, locked environment; the hard drives are backed up on a regular basis; the systems are protected from viruses and hackers.
- Password-protection -- access to data is restricted to authorized users.
- Integrity -- data is entered in a careful, consistent manner; rules for data entry are documented.

A good technology plan reflects all of these. To maintain a safe environment, you may need to invest in better security for your building. Hard-drive failure is a common cause of data loss; but loss due to theft or fire must also be prevented.

Most organizations already have virus protection software. Your plan should include a procedure for regularly updating that software. Your network will also need firewall protection against attack from hackers. You should determine how your system will be backed up, and how the back-ups will be handled and stored.

Your information system will be storing sensitive data about your constituents. For their protection as well as your own, you will need a process for maintaining passwords and changing them on a periodic basis.

The most commonly overlooked aspect of data security is data integrity. The information you have recorded about donors and prospects will be useless if it cannot be retrieved in a coherent fashion. Data must be entered consistently over time, and new staff must be able to understand how that entry has occurred and what the various codes and notations mean.

The best way to ensure data integrity is to develop a carefully designed set of rules for data entry, and then to train all users in following the rules. Consider documenting them on your organization's internal Web site (intranet). The technology plan should include not only plans for developing and implementing data integrity rules, but also plans for ensuring that those rules are regularly reviewed and modified.

Budget

The question of which costs should be considered capital expenditures and which should be allocated to the operating budget is one that can be discussed with your accountant. There are a number of criteria that might be used, such as the type of asset, its expected life, and the size of the initial investment. Different organizations have different rules for making these determinations, and your plan should reflect your own organization's standards.

Some percentage of the technology budget will inevitably be counted as an operating expense, and this is as it should be. The use of technology carries with it the need for a regular budgetary line item to cover the cost of maintenance, upgrades, technical support and training.

A thoughtfully designed, well-implemented technology plan should enable you to raise more money for your organization. But to know if your investment is really paying off, you will need to include realistic outcome measures in your plan and then use those measures to evaluate results once the plan has been implemented. This kind of evaluation, performed on a regular basis, will help you know if and when the plan needs to be altered or adjusted.

Timeline

The magnitude of the changes called for in your plan will largely determine the timeline required to execute it. Budgetary constraints and staffing requirements will have an impact. In developing the timeline, you first need to detail all the tasks to be undertaken and identify the persons who will be responsible for carrying them out. If you are applying for a grant or for in-kind donations, factor in the time that this process will take. If you don't have the money to pay for some tasks, you may have to extend the implementation period in order to deal with those funding realities.

Finally, remember that the planning process itself will take time. Don't rush headlong into it. A careful, well-conceived plan is a prerequisite for good results.

Technology planning provides you and your organization with a rare opportunity to examine the overall systems needed to support your development efforts. It's an important step toward realizing your organization's strategic goals and advancing its mission.

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