

## ***Capacity Building in the Age of Interactive Communication***

The cacophony surrounding new technologies and platforms for communication has shaped the way members of the nonprofit community understand capacity building. But preconceptions about what defines an appropriate capacity building project can limit an organization's available paths to furthering its mission or lead to a less-than-optimal outcome. This article explores some of the assumptions behind capacity building involving new technologies. Developing on a [previous article](#) about Digital Arts Service Corps alumni's experiences with Salesforce implementation projects, it also explores the process behind an implementation in order to make explicit the connection between the construction of a website and online database and the advancement of an organization's mission.<sup>1</sup> The case of [Appalshop](#), a community-based arts and media organization located in Whitesburg, Kentucky, attests to the benefits of assessment-based, customized capacity building when it comes to web-related media.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Complications of Capacity Building with New Technologies***

To define capacity building in general, we turn to two resources written for the nonprofit community. Evoking the words of Ann Philbin of the Ford Foundation, The Alliance for Nonprofit Management defines capacity building broadly as the "process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes and resources that organizations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in the fast-changing world."<sup>3</sup> Given this rather all-encompassing definition, we can surmise how a capacity building intervention – initiated by an organization on its own behalf through the efforts of staff or via a third-party – can occur in practically any area of the organization's work. However, while an intervention may take root in one region of an organization, a successful project will carry implications for all its parts. With this in mind, we refer to Venture Philanthropy Partners' pyramidal diagram to help visualize how different aspects of an organization's processes fit together.<sup>4</sup>

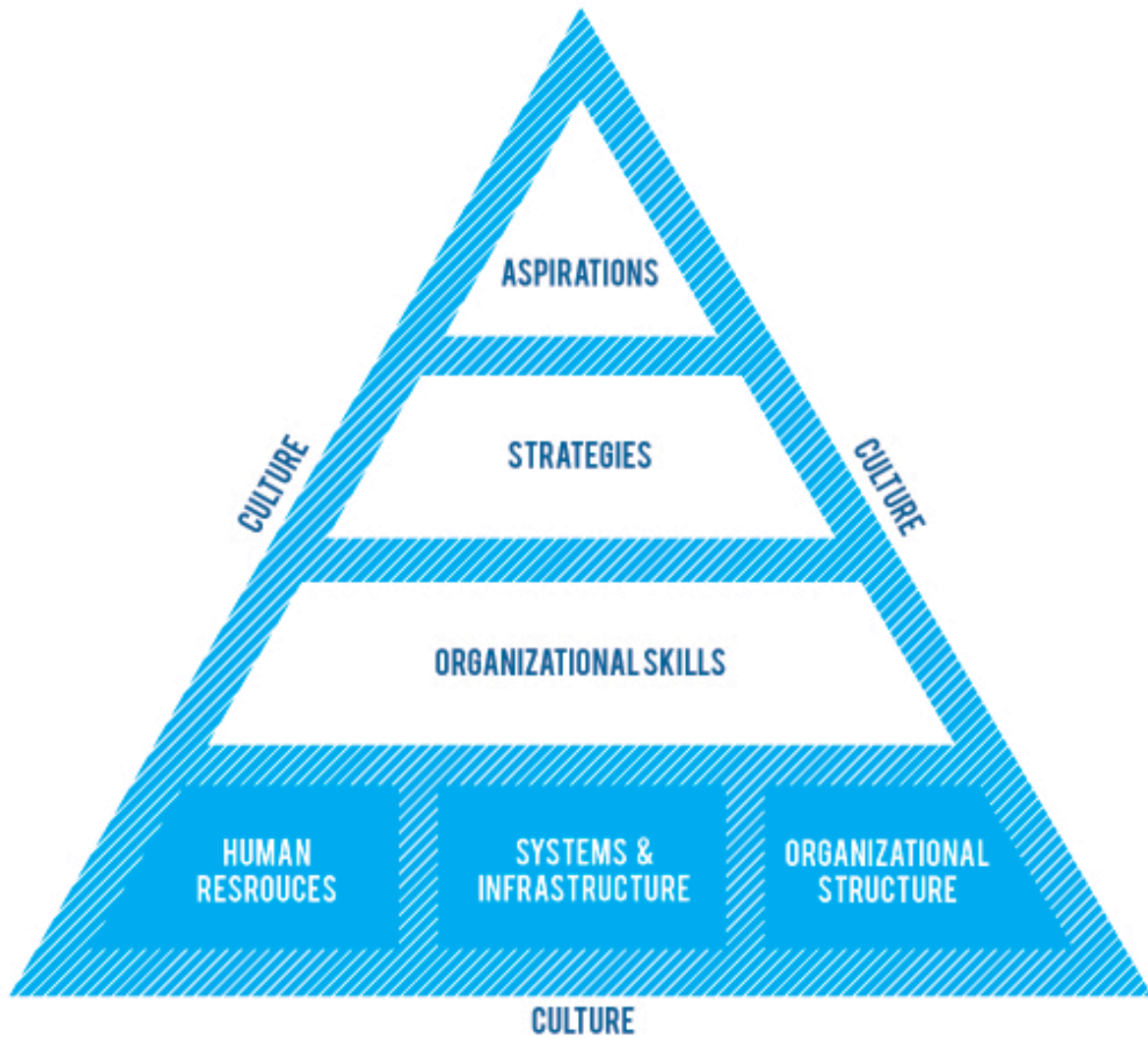
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<sup>1</sup> <http://transmissionproject.org/resources/2010/8/vista-and-the-database>

<sup>2</sup> <http://appalshop.org>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.allianceonline.org/content/index.php?pid=64>

<sup>4</sup> McKinsey and Company. 2001. *Effective Capacity Building in Nonprofit Organizations*, Venture Philanthropy Partners, 36.



According to this model, a new database like Salesforce's online platform would fall under the heading of Systems and Infrastructure. As McKinsey and Company note, changes in this region are some of the more obvious "levers of capacity" because when Systems and Infrastructure break down or function poorly, the results are often "visible, immediate, and embarrassing."<sup>5</sup> Thus, within an organization, it is easy to promote building capacity to improve systems, but as we will explore, it is important to address the broader implications of any project.

Despite the tendency for Systems and Infrastructure to be an easy sell internally, in practice, organizing a capacity building project around an online database or other technologies proves to be a complicated matter. Nick Szuberla, program director of [Thousand Kites](#), an initiative of Appalshop that inspires local communities to create dialogue around the criminal justice system, found that database and website management projects in particular are often "pushed to the side in favor of programmatic work."<sup>6</sup> When such projects are undertaken, they tend to be compartmentalized "in different rooms" from programmatic people when in fact technical support and staff need to work closely together in the context of a capacity building project.

Understanding the dominant thinking on how to get the most out of new technologies and communications platforms helps explain Szuberla's observations. Michael C. Gilbert raises his concern that a perceived need for technology in general, as opposed to the specific needs of an organization, may drive most technology-oriented capacity building projects:

I believe that most practitioners of nonprofit technology planning are asking the wrong questions. Because their questions are largely about technology, the results of these questions are answers dominated by the logic of technology itself, rather than *by the mission or methods of the organization*.

Many observers will agree that common complaints about technology projects – resistance to change, long sales cycles, inappropriate technology, unexpected costs, unused tools – are often the inevitable result of this technocentric planning.<sup>7</sup>

It is important not to conflate a project *about* technology with a project served *by* technology that refines one or more areas of an organization's work – its systems and infrastructure, its organizational skills, its strategy, etc. – and thus allows it to better pursue its mission. A deeper look into the decision-making that preceded Appalshop's efforts reveals that its Salesforce project was not motivated by "technocentrism" but rather that it constituted an arduous process that touched multiple aspects of the organization and deeply impacted the way it does its work.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.thousandkites.org>

<sup>7</sup> Gilbert, Michael C. 2006. *Asking the Wrong Questions: Challenging Technocentrism in Nonprofit Technology Planning*, news.gilbert.org. [<http://news.gilbert.org/WrongQuestions>]. Emphasis added.

### ***Capacity Building with Technology: Appalshop's Process***

Given our definition of capacity building as a process whose success is measured by the overall ability of an organization to fulfill its mission, understanding the important steps taken leading up to the Thousand Kites's Salesforce adoption and the creation of its new website requires some reflection on its mission, its methodology, and how these informed its capacity building project. In its own words, Appalshop seeks to "enlist the power of education, media, theater, music, and other arts" to promote dialogue amongst community members.

As a first step toward its capacity building project, Appalshop revisited its mission. Szuberla emphasized that the project's champions "spent way more time doing conceptual, planning work than actual implementation." This conceptual activity began long before the organization applied to receive the support of a Digital Arts Service Corps VISTA through the Transmission Project in 2008 and again in 2009. In early 2008, Appalshop initiated a consultancy with [EmcArts](http://www.emcartarts.org) to determine what its organizational priorities should be.<sup>8</sup> This collaboration resulted in Appalshop identifying a revised communications strategy "as the key project to address to raise organizational capacity," and Thousand Kites would be its testing ground.

Szuberla elaborated on the logic behind the decision to make online communication a priority. First and foremost, Appalshop serves a local community of only 1,100 people, is rural, and yet its programs have a national reach. Thousand Kites in particular is "a community-based performance, web, video and radio project centered on the United States prison system." It needed to be able to communicate with a number of geographically isolated groups. Szuberla cites as additional grounds for an online database that

- Thousand Kites's former database could not handle the complexity and number of its record of constituents, which exceeded 20,000 in number.
- The program needed an online platform that could be accessed remotely for when staff members were on the road.
- Leadership wanted a way to interact with users and community members that would provide more data and establish new metrics to assess strategy

Moreover, Salesforce in particular

- is flexible and customizable enough to plug-in to many different applications (Thousand Kites is a community-based performance project that incorporates web, video, radio, and theater),
- could link to Appalshop's CMS (Content Management System),
- was free cost-wise (although this did not include the cost of consultancy), and
- is associated with a strong support community.

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<sup>8</sup><http://www.emcartarts.org>

The way Thousand Kites analyzed how it does its work and chose the right technology for its purposes serves as an example of the principles of “assessment-based” and “customized” capacity building recommended by the Alliance for Nonprofit Management and The Urban Institute in its article *Building Capacity in Nonprofit Organizations*. The fact that the choice of communications technologies was internally motivated and based on Appalshop’s needs and mission demonstrates that Appalshop was not “building capacity for the sake of building capacity [or technology], but rather for increasing the organization’s social impact.”<sup>9</sup>

The process was not without setbacks. When the Digital Arts Service Corps member arrived to manage the implementation, create an inventory of relevant data, and “weed the garden,” as Szuberla put it, the project’s proponents first wanted to experiment on their own with the technical aspects of Salesforce rather than engage a technical consultant to work alongside the Corps member from the beginning. This resulted in a drawn-out implementation process that required Appalshop to eventually apply for a second Corps member to continue where the first had left off by training staff and creating communications templates. Szuberla admits that, in retrospect, “it would have been a lot quicker and a lot less painful to bring someone in.” However, once third-party help had been sought out, Szuberla and the Corps member found that they could learn from the consultant, and thus the burden of Salesforce’s rather steep learning curve was alleviated. Apropos of this trend, Szuberla reports, “Working with our consultants and VISTA staff we learned about the importance of having defined roles in the work flow and the importance of outside experts in jump-starting a process.”

### ***An Intimate Connection between Communication and Mission***

Although the VISTA and staff encountered problems with the technological platform for its project, Thousand Kites did eventually achieve its original goal: improved intra- and inter-regional communication around pressing social and economic issues. This success is certainly evident in the more tangible outcomes that Szuberla had to offer, such as increased program participation, a small bounce in donations, and more staff availability. He notes that, in the past, processes such as organizing and sending a shipment of postcards to constituents would take a week or more; now it only takes an afternoon.

The processes of implementing Salesforce and transitioning to a new communications platform have also given way to cultural changes within Appalshop. It has begun to alter the way Appalshop’s leaders think about technology’s ability to help them pursue the organization’s larger goals, such that it is better poised to make future changes. “Changing organizational culture around a technology implementation is a tall order in any non-profit,” says Szuberla, “[...] The lessons we learned from our Salesforce adoption will be important in implementing new technologies and practices in the future.”

While the organization’s internal experiences with the Salesforce-backed website are certainly important, the full impact of the project can only be grasped when considered from the perspective of Appalshop’s mission and the way it serves its community. Salesforce’s potential to integrate with other applications, such as social media, contributes

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<sup>9</sup> *Effective Capacity Building*, 56.

to the way Appalshop measures its own success by providing what Szuberla calls a greater “depth of data.” “You can pop into the CRM (Constituent Relationship Manager, i.e. Salesforce), enter a zip code, and see how many people are being reached in that area,” he says. By refining the way in which it interacts with its national pool of constituents and deriving data from those interactions, Appalshop has done more than increase public awareness about its program through a website; it has enhanced its community engagement, an important part of its mission.

Given that Thousand Kites is a community media project at its core, its new approach to online communication has also aligned the program more closely with Appalshop’s goal of fostering dialogue – that is, while the database has improved the amount and kind of feedback between organization and community, the website facilitates communication between community members themselves. Appalshop offers training programs in digital media literacy through its *Appalachian Media Institute* and the *Community Media Initiative*. These initiatives work toward the goal of educating community members in the skills necessary to use video, audio, and photographic media, among others. Thousand Kite’s website, by way of its more interactive elements, now reinforces the flip side of digital media literacy: utilization, which refers specifically to the use of media in a way that is relevant and meaningful to the members of a community and the people they care about. Many aspects of the site depend on user input, such as its StoryLine page, which encourages users to call in with their thoughts on and experiences with the criminal justice system, or its mapping project, which aggregates data on detention facilities across the country. Other pages provide suggestions for how users may draw on the site’s resources and use them in their own way. It offers a facilitation guide, for instance, and a printable version of the Thousand Kites play, which users are free to adapt to make more relevant to their communities.

Thousand Kites’s new strategy embodies the philosophy of two-way communication – that community members not only require access to content, but must be creators and communicators of content themselves if they are to become agents in the process of changing their communities for the better. To say this in another way, we look to the Center for Social Media’s words on public media programs: “People come in as participants in a media project and leave recognizing themselves as members of a public—a group of people commonly affected by an issue. They have found each other and exchanged information on an issue in which they all see themselves as having a stake.”

Just as a “one size fits all” solution cannot successfully address the needs and challenges of local communities, especially those that are rural, isolated, and low-income, a pre-packaged capacity building project will not aid an organization seeking to address a specific community’s needs. The strength of organizations like Appalshop – now amplified by the implementation of a new database – is their ability to undergo what Gilbert calls “difficult reflection”: to measure their effectiveness and adjust their approach to better serve its constituents. For this reason, the Transmission Project does not endorse technology unconditionally; it advocates the strategic and meaningful application of technology by and to the benefit of organizations, communities, people. Thousand Kites’s ability to generate a project that aligns new media with the program’s specific needs and the organization’s larger goals has caught our attention, and we are proud to have contributed to this process through the addition of a Digital Arts Service Corps member.

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