

ONLINE TECHNOLOGY FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

FROM STRUGGLE TO STRATEGY

RESEARCHED AND AUTHORED BY

Leda Dederich

Tate Hausman

Susan Maxwell

INTRODUCTION

In late 2005, the dotOrganize team embarked on an unprecedented effort to map the current state of online technology in the social change sector. Over nine months, dotOrganize gathered survey and interview input from more than 400 social change groups, technology providers, and nonprofit technology capacity builders. Surveys and interviews were designed to identify what organizers need to support their goals, what tools are currently available, what does and does not work, and what's needed to strengthen the long-term capacity of the sector.

Great effort was made to obtain input from organizations with smaller budgets: 75% of organizations surveyed operate on annual budgets of \$1 million or less; 29% on budgets under \$100,000.

The full report provides a detailed view of the sector's present situation, gives voice to the organizers who are struggling with these issues, and offers recommendations for filling current gaps in strategy, software development, and tool adoption paths. For online and PDF versions of the full 30-page report, go to: <http://www.dotorganize.net/report>.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Enthusiasm and Wide-Ranging Interest

Social change organizers are extremely enthusiastic about the potential of online tools: 95% indicate that they believe technology is important or essential to achieving their mission.

Frustration with Current Capacity and Tools

59% of those surveyed report being frustrated or really struggling with their current technology. A surprising number of organizations lack the capacity to employ some of the most standard online organizing techniques – 39% do not use email newsletters and 47% do not accept donations online.

The Heart of the Problem: Data Disarray

Inadequate data management emerged as a major impediment to effective organizing. One of the areas hardest hit by this data disarray is contact management, or the tracking of people and relationships. More than half of survey respondents report using slips of paper, Excel spreadsheets, and personal address books to manage organizational contacts. Organizations across the budget spectrum experience similar difficulties. In the absence of infrastructure to manage information about constituents and communities, organizers cannot engage and serve them in the most productive ways.

Predictors (or Not....) of Technology Success

The number of dedicated technology staff in an organization, rather than size of budget, emerged as the most stable predictor of technology success.

Lack of Time, Money, and Expertise Prevents Adoption of New Tools

Regardless of organization size, organizers across the board report that money (57%), time (45%), and lack of staff expertise (34%) prevent their organizations from taking full advantage of databases and online tools.

Technology Struggles Stunt Impact

Organizations are struggling to master standard and emerging technology, as well as to manage data silos and ill-suited tools. These challenges result in lost time, missed civic engagement opportunities, lost money, and poorly-informed decisions. For example, 55% of survey respondents report not keeping email lists at all, and a majority have email lists with fewer than 1,000 supporters.

SUMMARY OF KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe there is no single solution for overcoming the technology obstacles outlined above. Rather, the sector requires a comprehensive, interrelated approach that helps organizations develop smart strategies and effectively implement technologies that support those strategies. Following are excerpts from the Conclusions and Recommendations section of the full report.

Define Best Practices for Online Organizing

Because “online organizing” is such a new medium, the body of knowledge about successful strategies is limited. The sector requires an organized set of technology-neutral case studies, best practices, success stories, and performance benchmarks. How do we define success? How can online tools support our campaign and program objectives?

Enhance Strategic Support and Information Resources

In order to support their objectives with appropriate technology solutions, organizations need access to comprehensive online information resources (including a searchable tools databases, tool recommendations, user ratings, and a repository of user-generated best practices and implementation guidelines). Some attempts have been made to centralize this kind of information in the nonprofit technology sector, but the results are often not helpful to non-tech savvy organizers.

New Models of Software Development

Once an online strategy is defined, the right tool will make or break that strategy. At the same time, a groundbreaking tool can often drive the strategy in ways previously unimagined. Appropriate, reliable tools rest at the heart of what's possible. Technology needs among organizers are too varied to render any single tool suite a viable sector-wide solution. "Ecosystems" of software that share data and build on each other's strengths, rather than stand-alone applications that seek to be all things to all organizations, are most likely to succeed. Specifically, nurturing a tighter integration between robust contact management tools and online engagement tools (email management, online fundraising, online advocacy) can address some of the data management woes currently experienced by the majority of the sector.

Support Adoption of On-Demand Software

The on-demand model affords organizers access to tools hosted online by Application Service Providers (ASPs). In the nonprofit sector, where organizations rarely have in-house technical staff or resources for an independent technology consultant, this model can be of great value.

Prioritize Documentation, Ongoing Support, and Training

Social change-oriented software projects need to be approached with a full adoption path in mind. Even the best online tools enjoy only short-lived success if they are delivered without adequate documentation, reliable technical support, or a means for accommodating ongoing feature enhancements.

Increase Offerings to the Full Spectrum of Social Change Groups

Many organizations don't have the money to invest in online tools, period. Moreover, volunteer-run groups, who do not possess nonprofit tax status, are some of the most influential and potentially effective contributors to progressive social change. They are organizing with their neighbors, in their communities, and they require support as much as foundation-sponsored organizations. As a sector, we need to create funding and service strategies that deliver technology to under-resourced and volunteer-run organizations.

THE WRAP

Organizers are clearly struggling, despite their general enthusiasm for technology tools. Regardless of budget size, they feel strapped for time, money, and know-how. They believe that their software lacks the features they need, that they lack the training and support to use the software, and they're frustrated by the lack of integration between existing tools.

Fortunately, the world of organizing and technology is ripe for change. Social change organizers have adopted enough new technology to know what works, what's missing, and most importantly, that the Web holds tremendous untapped potential. Organizers understand that online organizing tools can dramatically increase their capacity, and are demanding the know-how and tools to progress along that path.

Our current challenge rests in responding to organizers' growing enthusiasm with intelligent ways to leverage our limited resources for maximum collective impact. With constant advances in technology, the question becomes less about the limits of online tools themselves, but rather how we craft development, delivery, and adoption strategies to make them as useful as possible for organizers.