

Trabian Shorters: Good morning. My name is Trabian Shorters. I’m the founding president of an organization called Technology Works for Good. Technology Works for Good is a network of stakeholders in this question of how do we use information technology to benefit our nonprofits and the sector.

What I’d like to do is speak about capacity-building in this space. And I will use terms that are general terms, like “digital divide,” and “technology” and “culture,” and these are things that we use to describe this space that we don’t exactly understand so it means different things to different people.

One of the goals of Technology Works for Good is to make the Internet and other digital technologies live up to the potential that they have as far as society through these organizations.

Technology Works for Good was founded by four principal interests – the America Online Foundation, Microsoft Corporation, Fannie Mae Foundation and the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation. These are four organizations that have very distinct interests in civil society as well as in this question of the role of technology in our civil society.

The actual mission of Technology Works for Good is to build nonprofit capacity. And in this case, it is through the use of digital technology. I emphasize that because capacity-building is the watchword here around all of the work that we engage in.

Why is it so important that nonprofits be able to use digital technology? Prior to coming to this work, I was a technology circuit rider. This is someone who would go out to nonprofits, help them to understand what are some of the ways that digital technology can specifically impact the work that they do, and then how we can develop plans, and then implement those plans to make that technology work better for those organizations.

One of the things that became very true to me as I was doing the work is that anyone – any organization, any person, and corporation – who is able to understand and master digital technology necessarily will enjoy a greater latitude in our democracy and a greater longitude in the economy.

This digital revolution that we’ve all been hearing about is all about opportunity. There is an essential nature of the Internet and the way that it functions. The Internet, more so than any technology that has come before it, makes it easier for us to identify people who share our interests, to connect to them around ideas, and to engage them in our mutual interest. For the time being, it’s an access that is not limited by class in the way that some others may be. Obviously, you have to have access to the infrastructure itself, but it is at this stage a more open resource for doing this very important work than we’ve seen in recorded time.

Since our goal is to increase capacity in nonprofits, I think it’s important to understand two things. First of all, what do we mean by “nonprofit?” Secondly, what is the current capacity of our nonprofits?

I studied for a number of years at the IU Center on Philanthropy, where the definition of the nonprofit space was made very clear to me. If we were to look at our sector in society, as we talk about the business sector and the government sector and the nonprofit sector, there are some essential functions of government and its role. There are some

essential functions of business. Businesses, whether they want to help society or whether they are engaged in only their self-interest, have to meet a bottom line. They are organized around turning a profit.

What is the nonprofit space? What is the human-service sector organized around? It's organized around making a better society. The nonprofit space is our civil society. It's where we voluntarily get together and engage in giving, engage in voluntary action, engage in creating organizations that are dedicated to improving the quality of life for all the people we can reach with those organizations.

It's for that reason that this space is not to be overlooked in this question of the role of digital technology in our society. It is this space, our space that will make or break the real value of the Internet and its related digital technologies.

What is the current capacity of nonprofits to master this technology, to use it well? We did a number of studies here in trying to form Technology Works for Good, but there are also correlating studies around the country. The numbers I'm quoting are from the National Association of Community Action Agencies. Forty percent of the organizations that they surveyed had computer equipment that was four years old or older. That doesn't seem like a long time, unless you reflect back on the fact that it was almost six years ago that we heard about Windows 95, and that it was supposed to change the way that we did our work. It was also the time period when the Pentium computer was hitting the market. And having modems and communication equipment built into your computer was more the norm, which means the computer was going from being a word-processing device to more of a communications device.

There really was a change that took place five years ago, sort of subtle to those of us who weren't involved directly in the industry, but also profound in its implications.

So a lot of our agencies don't have appropriate equipment.

Secondly, when it comes to using that equipment, although 55 percent of those surveyed said that their staffs had adequate knowledge of how to use technology, and 80 percent of them said that using technology was of great strategic importance to their mission as a nonprofit, only six percent of them said that they actually train their staff on a regular basis around how to use these technologies. There's a significant disparity there.

We also recognize that in the nonprofit space there is a sense that we are lagging behind. I'm not so sure that we are. What I am sure of is that when it comes to the questions of access to technology, education on how to use this technology in our organizations, and technical support to make this whole process sustainable, there hasn't been a concerted effort in the nonprofit space to address all three of these questions in some organized way. We're all sort of wrestling the beast on our own, ad hoc, to whatever degree that we can even though this internet and the related technologies give us an opportunity to be better connected and better organized in our approach.

That's macro. When we were looking at individual nonprofits, we also found that there's another factor that is very important in how we're able to use this technology. And that is culture.

Each organization has a culture. And when we talk about technology, let me define what I mean by technology. Technology is new tools. It's new tools and the processes related

to using those tools. That's technology. And I define it in that essential, basic way because maybe 10 years ago there was technology thrust upon us called the fax machine. I remember that this new technology was slowly adopted in a lot of organizations because you stick the piece of paper on a machine, it goes through a roller, and then it comes out the other side and nothing happened.

The promise that a document had been delivered somewhere was not something that many folks early on felt that they could trust. How do you know that this thing has happened? Why do we have to use this machine?

Nowadays, we don't think of the fax machine as technology. But obviously it is. We don't think of the television as technology; obviously, it is. We don't think of radio as technology; obviously it is.

So technology isn't just tools, and it's not just digital. Technology is the new stuff. That's important to understand.

The first part of the technology cultures is technology; the second part of technology culture is culture. By culture we mean that set of beliefs and activities that allow an organization to survive. In this case of technology cultures, what are the beliefs and activities around the use of technology that relate to the survival of our nonprofits?

We found there were four different stages in how you approach technology in your organizations. These are essential markers. By that I mean that you'll see some variation, but essentially some nonprofits regard technology as unessential – unnecessary to the work that they do. Yes, it's important. It's important to other people. Sure, it could be good. But we help children. We work on education. We work on workforce development. Technology isn't exactly what we do, and we don't want our people wasting a bunch of time fiddling around on the Internet.

These are things that I've heard. An organization in that culture will upgrade their technology as an absolute last resort. I went to organizations where executive directors actually bragged that they were able to keep their 386 running and piping along for so long. I was impressed and that was good, but obviously these are technologies that are not supported any more, that lack certain capacity. And if you view technology as unessential to the work you do in your organization, you're less likely to upgrade, you're more likely to have mixed-platform software, you're less likely to invest in training, et cetera.

The second group regards technology as necessary, but evil. You know you have to use it, so you acquiesce to the fact that you're going to use this technology, but you'd really like to use it as little as possible because I know that it will disrupt the way that I've done things before. I know that it will break down when I need it most. I know that I will be required to use it, and it will make new work for me in ways that I never intended.

A third culture is the group that regards technology as necessary and good when they think about the work they do, but still they have challenges around what is appropriate technology, what am I supposed to use and why, how am I supposed to handle that IT consultant who speaks some arcane language about what I thought was a simple process and then charges me a lot of money for it.

Even in the “necessary good” column, we have work to do.

The fourth group regards technology and has been able to use it as a strategic advantage in the work that they do.

In our study, we found that about 10 percent of our nonprofits have this immediate rejection of the role of technology in their organizations. Another 60 percent do understand that we have to tackle this question; they're in the “necessary evil” category. About 25 percent are in that space where it's necessary and good and they're making the commitment and the resources to try and master technology actively. And about five percent have reached some plateau of understanding about using technology and they're able to take strategic advantage of in a way that's sustainable in their organization.

Those are our four layers.

These, as you can tell, are multifaceted issues. But we were able to break down the problem into three types of activities.

First is the question of access. How do we get the equipment and the tools and the available knowledge to nonprofits? The second is around education. Staff level, volunteers and, in particular, executive directors of organizations need a better way of understanding the role of this technology in the work that they do and then how to use it. And the last is around support.

When we look at access, education and support, there are stakeholders in this question outside of nonprofits. They are, if you're talking about access, the IT vendors and the software providers. If we talk about education, then it's schools, it's the training providers. And if we talk about ongoing support, it is the consultants, and technical-support people, and maintenance-agreement people, and the funding community that could make this work for us.

So Technology Works for Good was organized by our founding funders and our founding board members to help organize the effort to make digital technology work for nonprofits. So we work with these stakeholders. We work with the IT companies to reduce their prices. We want them to drive down the cost of technology, so at least our nonprofits who tell us, “Yes, it's important to have technology,” and, “No, we don't want to pay for it,” that they have a chance to try to take some brave new steps.

The second thing that we do is help those executive directors, board members and program officers in the philanthropic space to understand the strategic role of technology, and then what are their strategic questions around fundraising, client management, outreach, and marketing, all the things you do to keep your organization going. How does technology give you a chance to do it better and faster?

The third thing we do is work with the consultant community, both management consulting and IT consulting, around how to provide a better-quality product and service to nonprofits.

We have three initiatives around working with these stakeholders. The one that you'll probably hear about the most, because people understand it the easiest, is circuit riding. A technology circuit rider is someone like me who has a great appreciation for the real value of the nonprofit space. I think we often sell ourselves short, and get sold short, for the work that we contribute to society. They have a real value in that, but they're really

kind of geeky. Not in a bad way, but they're very technologically inclined. At the same time, they are human beings and they can translate techobabble. They have an affinity for the work that nonprofits are doing, and they go on site and work directly with them in the course of trying to implement new technologies.