

**Working with
Community
Organizations:**

*Suggestions
for Technology
Consultants*

Ellen Wahl
Laura Jeffers

*EDC's Center for Children
and Technology*

ACCESS *by Design*

TECHNOLOGY IN SERVICE TO COMMUNITY



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Working with Community Organizations: *Suggestions for Technology Consultants*

Introduction

Community-based organizations have a significant role to play in addressing technology access for the people they serve. They may have contacted you for help in getting their own agency equipped so they can provide more effective services, or they may want help in informing the community at large about the issues and choices that the new technologies present. Either way, you can help by understanding more about the nature of these groups and how they differ from other institutions you may have worked with.

There is a vast range among community organizations in size, scope, and purpose. Many are tax-exempt, which means that they perform a service to the public that the government deems important but does not itself provide. They are responsible to the public and their primary duty is a civic one, in contrast to a corporation, whose legal responsibility is to its directors, stockholders, and bottom line. While the following may not be true for all community agencies, these considerations may be particularly useful when working with those most concerned about the impact of the technological revolution on poor and disenfranchised communities:

1. Honor, understand, and advance the mission.

Community organizations are driven by their missions. Technology needs to serve the constituency and the purposes for which the organization exists. Learn as much as you can about what the organization does, whom it serves, and what its leaders and members are passionate about accomplishing.

What is the desired outcome for the use of technology? Bigger, better, faster? More collaborative, inclusive, responsive? Are the means consistent with the end?

The advantages of a technological solution may sometimes be outweighed by other concerns.

One organization was considering transferring its membership files from index cards into a database. This would streamline and simplify updating and follow-up, as well as automate the process of bulk mailings. The organization usually hired people from the community to address their mailings, however, and the benefits of providing some paid work and the opportunity to make a contribution were not something the organization wanted to lose. In this case, they needed to weigh the value of efficiency against the value of community involvement.

2. Gather as much information as you can about what people do, how they do it, and what they care about preserving and promoting in the way they do it.

Do staff tend to collaborate or work independently? Do they commonly share resources? Are there private areas for staff, or is everything in the organization accessible to participants as well? Who has to be protected from what, and what has to be protected from whom? What does the current physical space support or preclude in people's working together? How can virtual connections build on the positive relationships and eliminate bottlenecks?

Any introduction of technology and communications media should support the way people prefer to work and get things done. Especially in places where the goal is social change and social justice, the technology needs to reflect the values and support the positive norms that people are striving to effect.

A youth agency that prides itself on being a totally safe place where you can leave your valuables around without fear of theft—"because this is a place of respect"—was given computers by the local Board of Education that the school system required they keep in a locked room. The leadership found itself in a dilemma and wondered what kind of message this was giving to the young people about the value of the technology compared to the value of trust and the attempt to create a community of peace and justice.

3. Recognize the financial constraints.

Scarce resources, little discretionary money, and operating budgets stretched to the hilt are the norm rather than the exception. Funding is usually through contributions and grants. It is difficult to find sources of funding for major capital improvements such as a technology infrastructure requires. Operating budgets are not designed to support the ongoing maintenance costs and upgrades for technology. Time and money for staff training and professional development are limited.

Decisions to allocate resources for technology equipment and staff development will mean raising new money, creative financing, or making hard choices between technology and other essential community services. There is more pressure on both the organization and the consultant to make careful decisions and avoid mistakes. Make it clear not just how much it will cost to install a new technology, but also what the ongoing costs will be for supporting its use and maintenance. Are there real savings in time or financial resources that introducing the technology will realize, or are these just hype?

4. Bear in mind that introducing technology can exacerbate existing staff development dilemmas.

Staff training is essential to good use of technology. If your contract includes staff training, there are several issues you may need to take into account.

First, staff turnover tends to be high in community organizations, so basic training is a constant need. Your role may be both to help design initial training and to devise strategies for ongoing development. Second, if the technology use goes beyond administrative functions and is intended to enhance the learning and development process, staff may need more intensive, longer-term support. This may exceed what organizations tend to allocate for staff development generally. Finally, staff who acquire new skills become more employable and may leave for higher-paying jobs in the private sector. When the staff are from the community the agency serves, this advancement can be seen as a victory, but still leaves the organization with the cost of hiring and training a new person. Encourage the organization to train several people so they're not left in the lurch if one of them leaves.

5. Use plain talk and explain the technology to the uninitiated.

If you use tech talk, do it deliberately, as if you were a teacher of a foreign language. Translate as you go along. Terms that have become everyday usage to you may not yet be part of the local lexicon. Be prepared to explain terms and concepts, in words and pictures.

Most people have limited knowledge of the technology's capacity and potential. It's hard for them to imagine how technology might help them do something better if they have only a dim idea of how the technology works or what it can do.

The more you can ground your explanations in examples from the client's own experience, the easier it will be for them to grasp the issues and make informed decisions.

6. Build a collaborative working relationship that includes mutual education. Respect local knowledge and build local capacity.

Staff time for actual planning may be limited. The leadership and staff are probably already doing more than one job, and they'd probably heave a big sigh of relief if you could just come in and take care of it. But chances are they wouldn't get what they want and need.

Take some time especially at the beginning to learn about each other's passions and areas of expertise. You know about the technology, and they'll know what will work in their community. Part of your job is to probe, to encourage them to share their knowledge, and to legitimize what they know. Model this process and reflect out loud about the potential benefits and possible negative effects of one choice versus another. Point people to resources that can help them learn more. Help leaders to identify staff who can take on some of the ongoing tasks or who have talent and interest in acquiring new skills. In this way, you can start building internal capacity, performing valuable service to the organization that hired you and making a contribution to promoting a more equitable society.

About Access by Design

In 1996, Education Development Center, Inc./Center for Children and Technology, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and Campbell-Kibler Associates, Inc., began a research and action project about the equity issues in technology. We conducted interviews with community leaders and organizations in more than 50 places across the country, in small and large cities, in rural areas and Indian reservations, with people from a range of ethnic, language, class, and racial groups. We spoke with people with disabilities and disability rights advocates, representatives from industry, community leaders and activists, youth workers and educators, funders and policymakers. We worked closely with a number of community-based and national organizations to examine the issues related to technology access, including how technology is designed and how well—or poorly—it serves diverse communities. Our partners included the Progressive Baptist Church in New Orleans, the Rhode Island Indian Council, El Puente in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, the Oyotunji African Village in South Carolina, the Accommodation Resource Center at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, the Young Scientists Club in East Harlem, New York, the Collaborative Visualization (Co-Vis) project of Northwestern University and their afterschool career program at the Kelly High School in Chicago, and the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development of the National 4-H Council.

The work began much earlier, however, among educators and activists in a variety of settings, including the Center for Children and Technology (CCT), established in 1980 at Bank Street College of Education and now part of Education Development Center. In pursuing how the new computer technologies could best support teaching and learning, researchers at CCT became aware of inequities in access and decisions about design that favored some groups over others, noticing first the gender issues and subsequently race and disability concerns. Yet even by 1996, relatively little attention and few resources were being dedicated to these concerns.

Access by Design was an attempt to gather together educators, activists, policymakers, and industry representatives to build awareness and action for increased equity and diversity in technology.

The products from this effort include materials for community leaders and organizations, as well as a report and action agenda based on the interviews, meetings, and policy efforts conducted from 1996 through the beginning of 2000.

