
Are Associations Using Technology to Full Advantage

Technology can be used to send messages around the world, faster than the speed of sound. It can be used to store vast amounts of information, and can recall detailed facts with the push of a button. It is enhancing knowledge management activities for organizations at an unprecedented rate. It can be used to help you run your association better. But are you using technology to your association's full advantage?

Do you remember a time before fax machines, word processors, and the Internet? Do you remember what it was like before spending all that money and investing all that time in purchasing and learning how to use new hardware and software? What was the point? Oh, yes the advantages: increased productivity, managing information, improving communications, creating opportunities, and maximizing processing efficiency.

Technology is a major investment for not-for-profits. If you are like most investors, you want to reduce risk, keep an eye on your investment and get a good return on your investment. How do you do this? How do you prevent over-buying, engaging in non-productive activities or failure to engage in productive activities? How do you ensure your association is using technology to its full advantage? Consider a technology audit and/or a benchmarking project for best practices to make the most of your technology investment and get the best return on your scarce resources.

Some of the attributes addressed in a technology audit are:

- Policy, security and documentation
- Training, user support and ease of use
- Hardware and software (design, maintainability and operability, system reliability)
- User needs and decision support (data accuracy and completeness, results delivery, output content and quality, data currency, special reports)

Benchmarking for best practices using literature, seminars and workshops, and special projects with high performance associations will help identify areas for improvements and possible solutions.

The best time to undertake a technology audit and/or benchmarking project is when your business plan is being developed to support new strategies. Do you have the necessary technology capacity to support the plan? If you need to improve capacity build the requirements into the business plan.

When considering the desired level of capacity, every association needs to make a decision about its strategic intent regarding technology. Will it require the association to be an innovative leader in technology? Or will the association be a follower of best practices used by others?

Associations and the Technology Agenda

Students in the Association Management Education Program report that many capacity building activities are und way to take full advantage of technology. Students do a critical analysis of databases used by their associations and identify what needs to be improved. They also discuss emerging trends and issues in technology. Some of the key findings are:

Databases

- Associations seem to be about to upgrade their database, an upgrade is in progress, or has recently been completed. Database projects are a challenge as not all staff are able to contribute to their development or implementation, nor are they able to participate in related training.
- Database improvements take a long time to complete and to be considered successful.
- Databases are not being used effectively for problem solving and decision-making as non-systems staff have trouble extracting relevant data. Staff are looking for more user-friendly report generation tools.

Trends and Issues

- Technology's role in association operations is becoming more significant, especially in communication, information storage and retrieval areas.
- Associations are starting to move beyond traditional two-way communication tools to three-way communications, using the Internet to increase member to member activity.
- There are challenges in the area of copyright laws and privacy issues.
- Access and training are issues for volunteers. Older volunteers may feel they are no longer of use, since they do not use a computer.
- There is renewed interest in videoconferencing.
- Web broadcasting is peaking the interest of association managers.
- Costs for increased processor speed, memory and data storage continue to decrease.
- Equipment software is becoming more compact, portable and user friendly.
- Access and work occurs from many sites other than the traditional office.
- Cycle time reductions in information exchange are increasing performance expectations.
- There is a growing concern about the lack of in-house expertise and meeting training targets.
- The technology investment continues to increase and there is a tendency to underestimate associated resource requirements.
- Some technology-based services have yet to add value and be used successfully.
- People do not have the time to go to your Web site, you have to go to them, based on their needs.

Based on the preceding trends and issues, the association manager will become even more involved in technology. The association manager's role will be to secure technological tools and the required training to best support the association in the attainment of its goals and ensure the association is using technology to their full advantage.

Technology astute association managers will:

- Understand the importance of the association manager's role in making technology work for the association
- Understand the issues and trends related to successful technology applications
- Understand how technology can help the association reach its goals
- Use current technology to complete work and make informed decisions
- Know the importance of keeping current
- Know the common "dos" and "don'ts", and
- Evaluate the use of technology and, through benchmarking, identify opportunities for improvement

Information on technology and associations can be found in a CSAE commissioned research report, "Technology in Not-for-Profit Organizations." The Voluntary Sector Initiative – Information Management/Information Technology Joint Table, has completed a Voluntary Sector – Environmental Scan. Another great source for current information is through participation in related CSAE learning activities.

This column features innovation and practical solutions applied to challenges, trends, issue and opportunities for the association community. Column editor Jim Pealow, MBA, CMA, CAE is a consultant and the Association Management Education Program Lead Instructor/Coach for CSAE. He can be reached at jim@amces.com.