Technology and Your Philanthropy
BY AKILAH MASSEY, PROGRAMS MANAGER IN THE 2013 (ISSUE 4) ESSENTIALS

The landscape around us is constantly evolving, and funders are adapting the way they work to ensure their efforts are effective and efficient. Among those changes, philanthropists of all kinds are turning to technology to inform their decisions, connect to stakeholders, streamline their processes, and otherwise make the most of their dollars and their time.

For example, the ASF (now Exponent Philanthropy) member Maine Health Access Foundation took to Facebook to receive feedback from the public on its Fund for the Future initiative. Writes MeHAF program officer Len Bartel, “The stated goal, or promise, of using Facebook was to build a better initiative and better projects, and I think the early results are positive. Time will tell if the projects were strengthened by this process, but engaging the public in new ways, such as on Facebook, can only make our work, and that of our grantees, better informed—and, we hope, more successful.”

We all have a responsibility to be fluent in technology, even if “technology” is not in our job descriptions. No matter our role, technology is part of everyone’s day. And particularly among small-staff philanthropists, without dedicated webmasters or social media gurus or other IT staff, accidental techies, or individuals without technology backgrounds, are often called on to step up. Sound familiar? Learn more.

All in all, as we know from the amazing capabilities of the smartphones that fit in our pockets, technology is too powerful to be overlooked. We want to see each of you leverage practical technology tools that meet your needs, fit your capabilities, and strengthen the impact of your giving—and we’re here to point you in the right direction. We also want to help you recognize and consider supporting the technology needs of your grantees. Too few funders do, and nonprofits everywhere struggle to fill this void.

Exploring New Tech Tools
As you consider new tools, it’s important to find a match for your goals and your capacities (financial and otherwise). A few considerations:

- What are your needs? Look for tools that make complicated tasks manageable, shrink the time you spend on undesirable tasks, or offer the potential to leverage the time and money you invest.
- How much do you want to spend? Is your budget proportional to the task’s overall importance?
- How easy is a tool to learn? Tools with steep learning curves, little support, or unclear benefits may belong at the bottom of your list.
- How much maintenance is required? What is the lifetime cost of a particular tool compared to the cost of maintaining your status quo?

How Technology Can Help

We know from ASF (now Exponent Philanthropy)'s Member Discussion List (subscribe at exponentphilanthropy.org) that members are thinking about technology every day, whether for websites, social media policies, file sharing options, or top accounting software.

Here are just some of the ways to apply technology to the work of philanthropy.

Streamline your operations. Just as in business, there is more to successful philanthropy than working hard; you must also work smart. And technology can simply make it easier to accomplish more with less. From accounting to grant tracking, scheduling and conferencing, data analysis and networking, philanthropists are using technology to get their work done in less time and with less money—and are achieving results that may have otherwise been beyond their reach.

Take board books as one example. During an ASF (now Exponent Philanthropy) webinar earlier this year, ASF (now Exponent Philanthropy) member Leigh Ann Gay Schaefer of the Grayce B. Kerr Fund shared how using the online storage solution Dropbox instead of traditional board books saved her foundation weeks of planning, hours of copying, storage space for binders, and substantial shipping costs.

Inform your decisions. Technology can help you access information quickly to learn about new funding areas or new strategies showing promise, exchange ideas with board members or staff, get feedback from community members or grantees, or track the outcomes of your efforts—all easier than ever before. Today’s technology also allows you to access and analyze relevant data for these and other purposes, including data that identifies needs, trends, and funding.


Expand your networks. Technology is certainly a great way to plug into the power of personal connections and build and maintain your networks. From low-tech to high-tech options, phone, email, listservs, photo sharing, social media, video chats, and more can facilitate conversations and connections one-to-one, one-to-many, and even many-to-many.

Many ASF (now Exponent Philanthropy) members use technology to connect to their board members and grantees, and some use technology wisely to connect grantees to one another (as a complement to, or in place of, in-person convenings). The Illinois-based Lumpkin Family Foundation created the website Good Works CONNECT, an online space and virtual resource center for its grantees and other nonprofits in Illinois. The site is a space for nonprofits to connect, learn, share successes, and avoid reinventing the wheel.

Technology also has the power to deepen and expand participation during in-person gatherings. Many facilitators find that text message audience polling (e.g., Poll Everywhere, SMS Poll)
As a powerful tool to share information rapidly and broadly, technology also is a way to see input and spark dialogue about needs, issues, or strategies to address them. As one example, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation’s Organizational Effectiveness team created a wiki (a website that allows a group of users to add or edit content; see packard-foundation-oe.wikispaces.com) to serve as a “see through filing cabinet,” allowing its partners a window into its internal thinking and a space to learn together about ways to increase organizational effectiveness.

As we continue to grow our networks through technology, it also will be vital to make conscious choices about when to unplug. After all, mobile security company Lookout found that 58% of smartphone users check their phones at least once per hour, and the percentage is even higher among those ages 18—34. Learn more.

**Amplify your impact.** Technology also can serve to amplify the impact of your giving—sharing lessons learned, inspiring fellow funders, engaging the public in critical conversations, and advocating for your grantees, among other outcomes. For example, foundations have been websites as their public faces for years—a place to communicate openly about history, funding priorities, and the work of grantees. Over time, video, blogs, Twitter, and other technologies have emerged to share the story of your giving even more effectively. And other tools are sure to be on the horizon.

Funders also can amplify their impact by investing in grantees’ technology. Doing so has a direct impact on a nonprofit’s ability to serve the causes and communities you both care about, as well as positions the organization to use your support—and that of others—more efficiently and effectively going forward. If ever there was a way to leverage your giving, this is one.

Technology will continue to evolve and proliferate at a rapid pace. By focusing on your needs and the mission of your work, all while being aware of the technology tools available, you can best position yourself to take advantage of the technology that makes the most sense for you.