Unleashing Innovation: Using Everyday Technology to Improve Nonprofit Services
Introductions

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Session Objectives

- Share research on how Minnesota nonprofits are using technology to deliver services
- Provide a framework for using everyday technology to innovate and improve services
- Highlight some examples of success
- Give you the chance to apply the framework for innovation
Research Process
Research Process

- **Definition Phase:** Expert Interviews, Literature Review
- **Broad Survey:** 179 Minnesota human service nonprofits
Research Process

- **Follow-up Interviews:**
  - Contacted 31 people
  - Conducted in-depth phone interviews with 13 organizations
  - Identified 9 case studies
Key Findings
People often think of innovation as futuristic, cutting-edge technology, but our research found that many are innovating with straightforward technologies.
Innovation Can Be Low Cost

Many Minnesota nonprofits successfully use existing technology to innovate in more subtle ways, implementing solutions that are often both low-cost and effective.
Innovating Services Is Within Reach

Innovation through technology is within the reach of any nonprofit.
A Framework for Innovation

- Identifying Needs
- Understanding Technology

- Connecting Needs and Technology
- Effecting a Change in the Organization
- Improved Service
Case Study: Domestic Abuse Project

DAPs provides therapy and advocacy for people who have experienced domestic abuse, and works closely with parole officers.

“Those were often last-minute phone calls saying, ‘I need to go to court, and I need this information to take with me.”
Case Study: Domestic Abuse Project

They modified the organization’s existing case management system—an online database—to allow probation officers to look up program attendance for themselves.

Results:

Staff has been able to focus on delivering services in new and innovative ways instead of being buried under a pile of unreturned phone calls.

The organization’s relationship with the probation officers has improved dramatically.
Diving Into the Framework
A Framework for Innovation

- Identifying Needs
- Understanding Technology

Connecting Needs and Technology

Effecting a Change in the Organization

Improved Service
Identifying Needs

- Five of the 13 nonprofits used a formal planning process to define the needs they ultimately addressed.

- For the others, innovations were a solution to day-to-day issues rather than needs identified out of planning projects.

“It was never a board decision where we sat down and looked at communication models or anything like that. It was just a way to meet a need.”
Let’s Innovate! Part 1

- Form groups of three to five people
- Introduce yourselves!
- Using the handout as inspiration, define two needs that seem relevant to your group
Back to the Framework...
Understanding Technology

- Five mentioned that knowledge about existing technology was a major factor in their innovation.

- Another seven mentioned that lack of knowledge, or lack of effective technologies, was a difficulty or hurdle for them.
Web and Email

- Website information about services
- Reach new clients using email
- Provide services via email
- Website information to educate other providers
- Websites to recruit more people to help clients
- Website articles to directly inform clients
- Interactive website functionality to provide services
- Websites or databases to refer clients
- A database of answers to frequently-asked-questions

Legend:
- This is integral to our work with clients
- Using it a bit
Reporting and Evaluation

- Report on how many clients received what services
- Report on the outcomes of clients
- Inform decisions about improving client services
- Record when clients act on referrals
- Data analysis to flag cases for different treatment
- Shared indicators to coordinate across organizations
- Share client data with other orgs

Legend:
- This is integral to our work with clients
- Using it a bit
Case Study: HOWA Family Center

“We’d always communicated with them by email, but they’d more or less stopped responding.”

HOWA enriches lives through mentoring for children, families, and communities. One of their programs works with high-school age mentors.
Case Study: HOWA Family Center

The program manager noticed that the students responded quickly to text messages, making that a cheap and easy way to reach them.

“It’s definitely increased our quality of services. Sometimes.. A mentor can even see their mentee that day.”
Connecting Needs and Technology

- No one right way to do this, but it requires concerted effort
- You’ll get a chance to try one method in the second part of our activity
- More to come on this from MAP for Nonprofits
Connecting Needs and Technology

The majority were inspired or supported by something outside of their organization. For example:

- Work of a similar nonprofit
- Speaker at conference
- Formal or informal peer conversations
- Funders
- Technology expert/consultant

“A funding organization choose us as an investee, and along with their dollars came expertise.”
“Our desire to get community-level info and track unduplicated numbers really drove us to look for a technology answer.”

They work to unite people and resources and improve lives in their community.
By creating a shared community database with a scannable photo ID for clients, they dramatically speeded up intake for each organization, and allowed them to track data across organizations.
Effecting Change in the Organization

It’s not enough to just have an idea.

- Six organizations defined innovations that required very little financial support. However, few interviewees said their innovations required very little staff time.

- Staff training and support were also key factors mentioned to help a project succeed.
Effecting Change in the Organization

4 interviewees mentioned a culture of change or generally positive disposition toward innovation as helping factors for implementing their projects.

“We’re always asking if there’s a better way of doing things, if someone else is doing something we can replicate, or if someone on staff has an idea we should be pursuing.”
What does success look like?

All 13 organizations said they saw at least some noticeable benefit as a result of technology solutions they’d recently implemented.

We categorized the benefits as substantial for nine of these.
What does success look like?

There was more effect on quality of services than cost savings.

- 12 reported some positive impact on the quality of their organization’s services.
- 6 reported a cost savings.

“It’s over-and-above changed the way we instruct people. It’s made them feel better about themselves, and improved the quality of education and training we provide.”
Case Studies: Lifetrack Resources

“A lot of these families are at home, or can’t travel... We knew they needed the information we were presenting but we needed a way to get it to them.”

By recording and close-captioning seminars, they were able to provide their information for parents of deaf children to a much wider audience.
Case Studies: Lifetrack Resources

“The trainer came up with the idea of having a blog to present an opportunity for students to practice their writing skills… and work on networking.”

As part of their support for job seekers, Lifetrack set up a blog to let students share their own experiences in the area of customer service.
Part 2 of Exercise

- We’ll give you two technologies at random.
- Brainstorm how either technology can help address either of your defined needs.

The group with the most out-of-the-box idea gets a valuable prize!
What Does It All Mean?
Recommendations for Nonprofits

- Start with your needs
- Identify existing technologies
- Familiarize yourself with available technologies
- Pull in outside ideas
- Consider starting small
- Get buy-in from staff and board
- Budget for both cost and staff time
- Measure and build on success
Recommendations for Funders

- Encourage organizations to consider their needs as much as technologies
- Help organizations understand existing technologies. Familiarize yourself with available technologies
- Support consulting structures to help organizations innovate
- Provide cross-pollination opportunities
- Encourage innovative uses of existing technology
To learn more…

- Find the full report at mapfornonprofits.org/innovation
- Thank you!