Unleashing Innovation: Lessons and Stories from a Pilot Program
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“We strongly believe that service innovation through technology is within the reach of any nonprofit.”

These words appeared in our 2012 research report, Unleashing Innovation: Using Everyday Technology to Improve Nonprofit Services. If innovation is within every nonprofit’s reach, then could we help them grasp it?

Our research showed that nonprofits were seeing positive results when they understood the technology available to them as well as their organizational needs, when they pulled in outside ideas to inspire innovation, and when they involved staff and board in piloting a new idea. Our research also revealed something else: this type of innovation is not only possible, but often cost-effective.

MAP’s next goal was to help more organizations unleash the power of innovation and improve the quality of services. We are delighted to share that we have arrived at a successful process.

Equipped with the Framework for Innovation detailed in the Unleashing Innovation report, we tested an approach to help these nonprofits identify viable opportunities for innovation. Joining us on this adventure were a wonderful group of advisors (the Innovation Team, also known as the iTeam) and 11 nonprofits comprising three cohort groups. One of the 11 withdrew during the process.

Each organization identified a team to participate in the pilot. The ideal team included the executive director/CEO, the person responsible for or most familiar with the organization’s technology, and an individual very familiar with the organization’s programming.
MAP facilitated the following process with each cohort group:

1. We hosted a kick-off meeting where organizations shared strategic goals and described how they were using technology.

2. Participating organizations completed an online survey of staff and stakeholders to take inventory of each organization’s technology resources as well as critical organizational goals and needs. MAP compiled survey results and provided a brief analysis, and participant organizations reviewed and prioritized results.

3. We convened the cohort group for a half-day facilitated session - an innovation retreat with the purpose of identifying key areas where technology could be better used to meet organization goals. Participants then ranked their ideas, and each group developed an action plan for implementing its top idea.

4. As a final step, organizations met individually with MAP to debrief, reflect, and discuss next steps.

The lessons learned and case studies included in this report illustrate that every pilot participant but one emerged with an action plan that addressed an organizational need. While some of the ideas and actions were more innovative than others, all were strategic decisions about the application of technology.

Based on the success of this pilot program, MAP will expand on this approach, incorporating the following insights and lessons learned.

- Participants cited interaction with peers from outside their organization as the most valuable aspect of this program.

- Communication within an organization was also an important success factor. Momentum for change appeared strongest when the executive director/CEO promptly shared survey results and action plans with his or her entire organization.

- Participants found that the retreat nature of the group session helped them to think more strategically and creatively.

- Cohort groups were most effective when they brought together organizations with similar levels of technical sophistication.

- Participants valued the facilitated process and also the one-on-one follow-up consultation.
The 2013 Innovation Pilot Program grew out of MAP’s in-depth research and understanding of how technology innovation works in small and medium-sized nonprofit organizations.

In August 2011, Idealware and MAP conducted a survey to learn how Minnesota 501(c)(3) human service organizations were using technology to substantially improve the effectiveness or efficiency of services provided to their community. Through our survey of 180 Minnesota human service nonprofits, and detailed follow-up interviews with 13 organizations, we identified core elements common to those using technology for innovation in program delivery. In 2012, we released *Unleashing Innovation: Using Everyday Technology to Improve Nonprofit Services*. The report is available at http://www.mapfornonprofits.org/resources.

**Key Recommendations to Foster Innovation**

The research and analysis in the report included key recommendations to foster innovation:

- Start with your needs
- Identify technologies already in use and familiarize yourself with available technologies
- Pull in outside ideas
- Start small, seek innovative uses of existing technology, and build on success
- Get buy-in from staff and board
Putting the Recommendations into Practice
Inspired by our research, we designed an approach to put the recommendations into practice. We invited a group of nonprofit organizations to participate in an Innovation Pilot Program, and together we set out to see if the approach would help the organizations identify viable opportunities for innovation, fast track their implementation, and increase their success.

We designed the pilot program approach to include:

- Interaction between organizations
- A mechanism to gain broad input and buy-in, and
- An emphasis on understanding organization needs first before jumping to technical solutions

We hoped to achieve the following outcomes for the pilot participants:

1. Actionable ideas for applying technology to address organizational needs - generated, then prioritized based upon feasibility and return on investment

2. Input from multiple levels and perspectives within their organizations, as well as peers in a cohort group, leading to better decisions

3. Momentum for change, as a result of broad organizational participation, tasting success, and building relationships with peer organizations

In 2013 we piloted the approach with three cohort groups, each consisting of three to four organizations.

Based on the success of the pilot program, we look forward to bringing this process to more nonprofits in 2014. We'll also seek ways to make the process available to nonprofits beyond our region. We continue to see enormous opportunities for nonprofits, support organizations and funders to do more to enable innovation.
Facilitation
Karen Graham, MAP’s director of Technology & Innovation, facilitated group sessions, provided survey analysis, and conducted most of the one-on-one meetings with participants. Amy Wagner, Matt Wandzel, Cary Walski, and Lauren Drow (volunteer) of MAP also assisted with these activities.

Methodology
To begin, each cohort gathered for a kick-off meeting. MAP staff, including Amy Wagner, Matt Wandzel, Cary Walski and Lauren Drow (volunteer) assisted.

Next, participating organizations completed an online survey. The purpose of the survey was to take inventory of existing technology resources, examine uses, and identify critical organizational goals and needs. A consultant compiled survey results and provided a brief analysis. Participant organizations reviewed and prioritized results.

With prioritized results in hand, the cohort convened for a half-day facilitated session - an innovation retreat with the purpose of identifying key areas where technology could be better used to meet organization goals. At the retreat, participants explored “what if” scenarios involving changes to technology, and interaction among groups sparked creative ideas.
Participants then ranked their ideas, and each group developed an action plan for implementing their top idea.

Finally, each organization’s leaders met individually with the MAP program director to debrief, reflect, and discuss next steps.

Evaluation and Continuous Improvement
By piloting this approach, MAP hoped to answer these questions:

1. Can we create favorable conditions for innovation, as indicated by the Framework?

2. How might a group consulting model maximize cross-fertilization of ideas and leverage a consultant’s expertise at an affordable cost?

3. What can we learn about a market value for this program and its prospects for financial sustainability?

After each cohort completed the process, MAP’s program director conducted individual exit interviews with each participating organization. Feedback was incorporated into the program design for subsequent cohorts. Upon completion of the pilot, MAP also made an internal evaluation of the program against participant objectives and goals for the pilot.

Lessons Learned
The program delivered on the participant objectives, with a few exceptions and variations.

Every participating organization but one emerged with an action plan that addressed an organizational need. Some of the ideas involved innovative uses of existing technology and one included a collaborative exploration of technology to be developed. Perhaps not surprisingly, several of the action plans sought to optimize use of existing technology in order to lay a foundation and provide a taste of success, before attempting to reach further toward innovation.

“This process of prioritizing action items will help us decide how to allocate resources, and give IT a little teeth to say no to things that are not priorities.”
(Community Action Program of Washington and Ramsey Counties)

“The most valuable aspect was coming out of this with a plan. We’ve all been to conferences where you leave with a bunch of ideas, but no clear next steps.”
(Rosetown Playhouse)

The program did build energy, and capacity for making strategic decisions about technology.

“We talk about tech a lot and feel frustrated, focusing on day-to-day hardware problems, but it turns out those are not the biggest priority. Before, the conversation was reactionary. Now it is strategic.”
(Minnesota Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome)

Interaction Inside and Outside the Organization was Valuable
Participants overwhelmingly cited interaction with peers from outside their organization as the most valuable aspect of the program. They
explained that it was helpful to get an outside perspective on their organization’s challenges and practices, learn about different applications of technology, discover that their problems were not unique, and establish or deepen relationships with peers in hope of future support or collaboration.

Input from members of their own organization was also valuable, but there was variation in the degree of participation and sharing of information with organizations’ staff and board members. Momentum for change appeared strongest when the leader promptly shared survey results and action plans with their entire organization. One effect we did not entirely anticipate was that ideas coming out of this program had added clout with decision makers.

“Part of the value is in giving our director credibility when presenting plans to leadership. Input from the cohort and consultant gives objectivity to the agency; it’s no longer just me from IT saying this.” (Community Action Partnership of Ramsey and Washington Counties)

**In Composition of Cohorts, Engagement and Technology Knowledge Matter, but Similar Mission Focus Wasn’t Key Factor**

Participant feedback and MAP’s observations point to two important factors in the formation of a successful cohort:

- The first factor contributing to success is a high level of engagement by all participants, which is important for sustaining the energy all the way through to the end of the program. Pilot participants perceived a great deal of value in receiving ideas and feedback from other participants, and expressed that the program was hindered when key people were absent or unprepared for group activities.

- The second factor contributing to success is similar levels of technology sophistication within the cohort, resulting in an equal exchange of ideas, at a level that all participants can understand and use.

MAP experimented with two different approaches to the composition of the cohorts. For each of our first two cohorts, we selected organizations that were similar to each other in size and mission focus. Mid-sized organizations in the disability services field comprised the first cohort, and small arts organizations comprised the second cohort.

Participants in these groups had a shared language. Many already knew each other. They faced some similar strategic challenges. This common ground helped them make relevant suggestions to each other, and participants continued to compare notes after the program concluded.

In order to test an alternative approach to cohort composition, we chose a mixed group for the third cohort, with participating organizations varying greatly in size and type. We thought the differences might be an obstacle, but these participants seemed to have no trouble entering into frank discussions. In their feedback, they expressed appreciation for the perspectives of their diverse group membership.

Our conclusion was that while a similar mission focus allows participants to go to more depth on technologies that are specific to their field, it did not prove to be a key factor in group cohesion or quality of ideas. Similar levels of engagement and technical sophistication were more important.
Other Lessons
Having the IT staff on board with the program leads to better decisions and paves the way for implementation. When IT staff saw the program as a way to focus the organization’s attention on the importance of technology and teach them a new approach to generating and prioritizing ideas for innovation, they participated enthusiastically. Their cooperation gave leaders access to a technical perspective that was helpful in judging the feasibility and potential return on investment of ideas. And in organizations where an IT person participated in the cohort, they appeared to implement innovative ideas faster upon completing the program.

Time and space for reflection is important. The retreat nature of the group session helped participants to think strategically and creatively. Some participants reported that the most valuable insights happened on the ride home together.

Participants valued the facilitation and one-on-one follow-up consulting. Many expressed a desire for more in-depth individual consulting as a companion to the cohort-based program, but at the same time were unsure how they would find additional funds for this.

Conclusion
The action plans, when implemented, have the potential to improve back office efficiency, boost staff productivity and morale, provide access to information that leads to better decision making, and increase the quality of interactions with the program participants, clients, members and the public.

“Small challenges such as communication among board members were easy to tackle. There was not enough time to work through bigger issues, such as data management/integration. We weren’t sure what kind of investment might be needed to solve that problem.” (Eagan Arts Festival)

Based on participant satisfaction coming out of the pilot program, and initial reports on implementation (see Case Studies), we anticipate a positive impact from this program.
MAP and Idealware studied innovation in more than 100 nonprofits. MAP then used what we learned to develop and pilot an approach which helped organizations to identify viable opportunities for innovation, fast track their implementation, and increase their success. What comes next?

The pilot program demonstrated that our approach is a viable method for helping nonprofit organizations to envision and plan for strengthening their services through innovative use of technology. Organizations are realizing benefits to their organizations and value the unique approach piloted by MAP. As a result, we recognize that this is an important service to the nonprofit community, and will be rolling out Innovation Cohorts as part of MAP’s Technology Services in 2014.

Due to the success of the pilot program, we are planning only minor adjustments to the approach.

- First, we have already modified our application process based on the pilot experience.
- Second, we may add one more meeting to the end of the program to reconnect participants and follow up on action plans.
- Third, because MAP values ongoing program evaluation and continuous improvement, we will develop a participant survey to use immediately after completing the program, and one year out, and use that in combination with the exit interviews to refine the program as we go along.
- And finally, for the long term, MAP is exploring ways to extend the program beyond Minnesota, strengthen synergies between Innovation Cohorts and the MAP TechWorks program, and develop self-serve resources for innovation (The MAP TechWorks program helps nonprofits effectively use technology through knowledge sharing.).

Rollout 2014
We plan to offer three to four cohorts in 2014, three in the St. Paul area and a fourth in greater Minnesota. We’d love to partner with a funder
interested in sparking nonprofit innovation through technology. Visit www.mapfornonprofits.org for cohort schedules and applications.

The participation fee will be $900 for organizations with up to $1.5 million annual budget and $1200 for larger organizations. As with all of MAP’s services, we will strive to make this program accessible for any organization that needs it.

MAP will accept applications on a rolling basis. One month prior to the start date of each cohort, a selection committee will review all active applications, and choose participants based on readiness and mutual fit.

**Longer Term Plans (2015 and beyond)**

**Beyond Minnesota**

If MAP’s Innovation Cohort program continues to deliver positive results, we believe it will be replicable beyond MAP’s geographic region. MAP will explore partnering with another capacity building organization to deliver the program in their region. This dovetails with a similar opportunity MAP is exploring, to roll out our TechWorks technology learning and networking program to other regions. The two programs have attractive synergies, as explained below.

**Understanding Technology through MAP TechWorks**

The cohort program exposes people to a lot of possibilities – including technologies which may be unfamiliar to them - and gives them some techniques for ranking ideas. However, the cohort program is not designed to address Understanding Technology, which is one of the key components in the Framework for Innovation. We believe a program or service that provides meaningful improvement in technology knowledge and skills is an ideal and necessary companion to the innovation cohort program. The MAP TechWorks program is already serving in this role, providing a trove of learning resources, including free and low cost workshops, videos, blog posts, an email discussion list, and networking events. We hope to expand MAP TechWorks to include more learning resources, particularly mentorship opportunities.

Why mentorship? First, it works. We’ve observed that one of the very best ways to improve technology skills is through hands on, one-on-one mentorship. Second, it makes a big difference to innovation. The top executive’s technical literacy and positive attitude toward technology can make or break whether the organizational culture embraces technology.

We experimented with mentorship in the summer of 2013, matching three pairs of executive directors with a volunteer mentor from an IT company. We are currently exploring a partnership with an organization that specializes in skill-based volunteering, hoping to work together to strengthen the “Understanding Technology” aspect of our ongoing program, especially with nonprofit executive directors.

**Self-Serve Resources**

There will surely be organizations that stand to benefit from aspects of the innovation program, but for one reason or another, it is not the right fit for them. Maybe they are located in a remote geographic region, unable to pay the fee, or have confidential issues that can’t be discussed in a cohort. Maybe they already have a relationship with a facilitator outside of MAP, or an IT director on staff who is well qualified to lead the process, and they wish to engage a wider swath of their own organization.

With that in mind, a final idea we’re exploring is to develop some self-serve resources to help organizations use some of the techniques we have developed to examine their organizational needs, generate innovative ideas, and choose ideas to carry forward. This might take the shape of a do-it-yourself kit or e-learning module.
RESIDENTIAL SERVICES, INC. (RSI) – Cohort One

RSI entered the program having recently implemented several technology systems, including a new database. Through the Identifying Needs and Understanding Technology survey – which they chose to send to the entire organization - they realized that internet bandwidth issues were making it difficult to use the new technology. They responded immediately by systematically checking every location’s internet connection, troubleshooting problems, and upgrading network components where needed.

Survey Helps Organization Connect to Internal Tech Concerns

Reflecting on this later, the executive director was glad they had decided to extend the survey to the entire organization, rather than limit it to management and the technology steering group. The survey helped RSI leadership realize that employees – although expressing enthusiasm for adopting new technologies – had become frustrated with the rapid roll-out of recent changes.
As a result, RSI delayed the planned rollout of a new electronic medication administration record system in order to be more thoughtful about managing the change, and ensuring that infrastructure was ready to support the new technology. “We were seeing the signs of problems and frustrations among our staff,” said Executive Director Jon Nelson. “We put everything on hold while we implemented a plan to improve the equipment (modems, routers, firewalls) and work with the developer of the software to make needed improvements.”

**Improving Integration of Systems**

Through the pilot program, RSI identified that improving internal processes and systems like scheduling, time and attendance offered the most return on investment. Data silos were leading to inefficiencies, and stood in the way of data analysis.

As it turned out, employees were eager to try new tools. Within a month of RSI completing the pilot program, two locations were already piloting and evaluating two different timekeeping tools. Nelson explained, “If we had proposed a change to our timekeeping system from the top down instead of getting the idea from the people who use it, the change would have failed. The chance to learn and demonstrate responsiveness, as a result of this program, definitely built momentum for change.”

The scheduling and time and attendance project is moving ahead at RSI. They have been piloting multiple options at different RSI homes and have been working with a developer to fine tune a scheduling application. They also have broadened the scope of the project to look at software that would better integrate the scheduling and time and attendance data with other payroll data. In addition, they have been sharing questions and ideas with Community Involvement Programs, another participant in their cohort, looking for some common solutions.

Holding the implementation of their new electronic medication administration record system, in response to employee concerns, allowed the organization to identify and implement a plan to improve the equipment (modems, routers, firewalls) and the software.

The bottom line is that RSI is using several ideas that came from the pilot program to improve the use of technology at RSI, in an informed, prioritized manner.
COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT PROGRAMS (CIP) – Cohort One

Similar to the other organizations in their cohort (RSI and ODC), CIP identified integration between timekeeping, scheduling, payroll and billing systems as a future focus area. Their survey results identified frustration related to inefficient administrative tasks. They concluded that solving the software integration problem could generate improvements in productivity and alleviate a key area of frustration among managers.

CIP’s executive director was interested in working collaboratively with other disability service providers to tackle the system integration. The impact of the cohort on fostering relationships between organizational leaders, and laying the groundwork for collaboration around shared technology challenges, was a positive aspect of the pilot program’s design, and the CIP executive director suggested strengthening that aspect in the future. For the disability service providers’ cohort, of which CIP was a member, some relationships between providers already existed. This program deepened those relationships, providing a shared experience and a space to talk in depth about their challenges and goals and how they might address those together.

Since completing the pilot, CIP has invested in new software that will combine three of the four systems (timekeeping, scheduling and payroll). The pilot program helped them think through the investment, evaluate whether to make it a priority, and plan for a smooth rollout. At the time of report publication, CIP had successfully implemented its new electronic time sheet system.
OCCUPATIONAL DEVELOPMENT CENTERS
(ODC, INC.) – Cohort One

Survey results for ODC indicated dissatisfaction with an outdated accounting system. Leaders recognized the need to upgrade to a new system, and shared with cohort colleagues RSI and CIP the desire to have integration with scheduling. In addition, ODC identified its entire IT infrastructure was aging. With only one IT person to support multiple sites across the region, there are significant limitations on ODC’s ability to provide technical support and proactive maintenance.

ODC left the group session with mixed feelings. They appreciated the chance to gain an outside perspective, but were disappointed that there was not a clear next step for them. They said their survey and the discussion confirmed that they need to update and upgrade IT infrastructure, and they will be looking at data management tools in the near future. The exact next steps are fuzzy.

Thinking through the organizational needs and technologies illuminated the need for expert counsel to sort out these next steps. “We became aware we can’t do it on our own,” said the executive director. “We need a consultant with expertise in this area. It’s not a good option to push your way through it and hope it comes out right. There are so many different options.”

In their exit interview, the executive director said, “There was not a single ah-ha moment, but lots of little things. It’s good to know we were thinking along the right lines. And, it was good to meet with other providers and realize everybody deals with these types of issues.”

One insight from ODC, which was valuable to MAP in shaping improvements to the program, was the value of internal conversations immediately after the group session. Their two group session participants traveled from several hours away to attend the group session. The shared ride home gave them a chance to digest new information, reflect, and deepen their understanding in a way that was not possible within the fast paced group session.
ROSETOWN PLAYHOUSE – Cohort Two

Rosetown Playhouse is a small, community-based theater organization led by a tech savvy board and executive director. They expressed very positive attitudes toward trying new things and incorporating technology into their work. Their challenge was thinking strategically about how to best leverage tools that were within their means.

The survey responses showed that external communication and audience engagement were priorities, which led to a decision to enlist supporters to blog about productions, in order to reach new audiences, and engage more deeply with the bloggers.

Rosetown Playhouse’s survey identified some frustration with the way they were sharing and storing information internally. They sought solutions through brainstorming and seeking ideas from other members of the cohort. Eventually, they formulated a plan that included forming a private Facebook group for the board to facilitate information sharing, and using Instagram for visual records of productions. Both Facebook and Instagram are free, and board members were already using them for other purposes, so using them in this new way was an easy change.

Their next steps will be to evaluate success of their Facebook group, plan for long term maintenance of Instagram archives, establish guidelines for bloggers, recruit bloggers, evaluate the impact of the blog strategy, and recognize and thank bloggers.

Overall, MAP thought this was a great example of everyday innovation using existing technology. Rosetown Playhouse’s plans require little investment other than a modest amount of time, playing to their strengths, and allowing them to better engage with their audience. Their new use of technology should be simple to evaluate over a short time period.
Northfield Arts Guild had a real dilemma: they had two areas needing attention, but did not have the resources to do both at once. The survey responses pointed strongly to the website as a missed opportunity for furthering the mission of the organization. An equally strong theme was inefficiency and redundancy in data management. Data silos were causing frustration.

The Arts Guild participants used the innovation program to help them deliberate over whether to first pursue a new website, or a new unified database. In the end, Northfield Arts Guild’s action plan focused on a new website. Input from the cohort was that it might be better to complete the website first, then the database, ultimately because the website potentially has stronger mission impact.

Next steps were to present the website plan to board and staff and gain approval and buy-in, seek funding, and then flesh out details of the plan including site goals, project goals, timeline, roles/tasks, budget, etc.

Since the pilot program ended, the Arts Guild has received a National Endowment for the Arts grant for the new website and hired a designer.

Overall, Northfield Arts Guild survey respondents sounded eager to embrace new technology, and reported enough basic technical literacy that this is not a major cause for concern moving forward. After the innovation program, the executive director said she feels more comfortable about opening up discussions, and not as hesitant to dive in and ask questions about technology. She also remarked, “I feel there is a resource to ask MAP for recommendations and information.” To them, the value of participating in the program was in removing themselves from the day to day work and harvesting the cohort’s collective intelligence.
EAGAN ART FESTIVAL – Cohort Two

The Eagan Art Festival’s survey identified internal communication as a priority. The challenge of coordinating tasks and information among board members and intermittent volunteers was critical to the organization achieving its mission.

Eagan Art Festival’s action plan was to explore various technologies to improve communication among board members, giving everyone access to the most up-to-date information, and cutting down on confusing email chains. Next steps were to gather input and assess feasibility of Facebook as a board communication tool.

Following the innovation retreat, the executive director emailed board members about their communication preferences, then led a discussion on that topic at the next board meeting. She inquired into specific tools board members were already using for calendars and document sharing, particularly Google and DropBox, and discovered that they prefer to communicate via email and calendar links. They will pilot one new tool at a time, perhaps over two to three meetings, giving people time to adjust and work out the initial kinks, and start experiencing the benefits of improved communication. Finally, they know it will be important to recognize and thank board members for trying something new.

As part of the discussion about communication tools, it became clear that a change in communication style might also be helpful. The board invited a more directive leadership style, with assignments and due dates. The executive director said, “Even though that had nothing to do with technology, it was a great interpersonal outcome.”

For Eagan Art Festival, there were a two important organization needs that did not get addressed: community engagement, which showed up in the survey; and database management and data integration, which was a common challenge for all of the arts organizations in the cohort. They chose not to make either of these needs their focus for the group session and action planning, because they felt they were too complex to resolve within the scope of this program, and they didn’t feel confident that they had enough technical knowledge to assess options and begin meaningful action planning in these areas.
MISSISSIPPI RIVER FUND – Cohort Three

Mississippi River Fund is the nonprofit outreach and fundraising arm of the Mississippi River National Park. Although the Fund is a small organization with three staff members and a lean technology infrastructure, its need for complex connections to the National Park and other agencies and government partners means that every technology decision must be considered carefully, and coordinated with stakeholders.

Their main objective was to organize and streamline data management and digital communication systems to improve efficiency and engagement with visitors to the park during and beyond their visit. The survey responses strongly supported this choice for their focus area. In order to improve data management and digital communication while working within the constraints of the modest time and money available, their strategy was to begin with learning more about tools they were already using. This meant making time for training on key software. After mastering their current tools and understanding the relationships between different tools and communication channels, they will choose one area to consolidate or integrate systems. A related action item is to use analytics and feedback to learn more about their audience and unify messaging with partners.

When considering a focus area, they had also thought about using technology in program delivery. Brainstorming about mobile apps and interactive maps was inspiring, but they lacked technical expertise in this area, as well as financial resources to develop or customize technology for the programs. They concluded that making the different pieces of database and communication technology work together had a better chance of success and positive impact on engagement with park visitors and supporters. It plays to their strengths because it builds on existing knowledge and the self-described “scrappiness” of staff members.

For Mississippi River Fund, the most useful aspect of the pilot program was bringing partner agencies to the table. They included a park ranger – an important external stakeholder – in the cohort. They also extended the survey to partner agencies. The executive director said this helps them see the collective needs and strengthen the relationships, and that moves them forward. Another valuable aspect was that they formalized and articulated a direction, and moved beyond complaining about the current situation, to action.
COMMUNITY ACTION PARTNERSHIP OF RAMSEY AND WASHINGTON COUNTIES – Cohort Three

CAPRW was different from other organizations in the pilot program because the energy assistance and innovation group which participated is a department inside a large agency. Unlike most other nonprofits, CAPRW has created an organization chart where the IT department reports through a program director. This gives them a unique opportunity to align technology closely with program needs and create a laboratory for new technologies within the energy assistance program.

As part of the pilot program, CAPRW surveyed 25 people including employees in the energy assistance program, some human resources staff and IT staff. The survey responses didn’t seem to point to a single shared need. Staff training and internal communication were two themes. Other suggestions for improvement included minimizing paper forms, providing clarity about where/how various data were stored, and improving communication with participants about their status.

The survey showed technical skills and usage varying quite a bit by individual. Program leaders felt this was holding them back from using existing technology effectively, and standing in the way of bolder innovation in service delivery. They settled on a focus area of bringing all staff to a basic level of technical proficiency, by fostering a technology-positive culture.

Some of the specific items in their action plan were:

- Provide information easily through an employee portal, dashboard, or home page; and supplement this with display screens in the facility. The first step is to determine the content and platform for the portal.
• Identify and train super users who can be the go-to person in each department for tech questions, and be role models of staff members using technology well.

• Design a fun “PR plan” for technology, emphasizing benefits like time savings.

• Consider how success might be measured.

Upon completing the innovation pilot program, MAP met with the participants to talk about how we might help implement their plans. Some of the ideas we explored were designing customized classroom training for CAPRW, and pointing them to free MAP TechWorks resources such as the Tech It Up a Notch curriculum. They expressed the desire for help in developing an agency wide strategic plan for technology, and building their IT staff's capacity to do IT planning. MAP is currently working with CAPRW on a related consulting project.
MINNESOTA STATE BAR ASSOCIATION (MSBA) – Cohort Three

When MSBA entered the pilot program, the organization was in the middle of implementing a new association management software package (AMS), and had already slated several other routine but resource-intensive IT upgrades. Part of their reason for joining the pilot was to stay mindful of the organization’s overall IT needs in the midst of these projects, and begin identifying the next thing on the horizon.

Survey responses showed membership recruitment and retention as a priority. Barriers between the organization and its priority included staff and volunteers who were feeling spread too thin, incomplete/inaccurate member data, and a website perceived to be weak on branding and engagement. Overall, respondents seemed positive about technology.

In their exit interview, the MSBA participants said this process has helped them become aware of some new possibilities. However, they affirmed their decision to stick to the basics for now, and get what they have working smoothly before experimenting with new technologies.

One thing that drives membership recruitment and retention is emailing valuable information and resources to members. MSBA emerged from the pilot program with an objective to improve accuracy and completeness of member information, especially email addresses, in order to reliably reach members with information that adds value to their membership in the association.

In order to reach its objective, MSBA needed a creative way to obtain the information, while making the most of staff time. The new AMS will require members to log in with email addresses in order to access benefits online, so much of their plan intersects with roll-out of that new platform.

MSBA Ideas and Next Steps:

- Design a communication plan
- Remind members to update email addresses
• Create incentives or contests to motivate members to update their records

• Investigate list enhancement services that append email addresses to a mailing list

• Phone members to update information and get them more engaged

This organization discovered some creative solutions to an issue that is connected to their top strategic challenge, namely keeping members engaged with relevant content in order to support strong member acquisition and retention. That was a positive outcome of the pilot project. However, there weren’t any truly innovative solutions. We think that is because the organization was already using all of its innovative bandwidth on the AMS project. The timing was not right to make an innovative leap, as key parts of their IT infrastructure were already in flux.
MINNESOTA ORGANIZATION ON FETAL ALCOHOL SYNDROME (MOFAS) - Cohort Three

MOFAS came into the pilot program hoping to identify ways to use technology better, and remaining open to whatever needs and possibilities presented themselves. Their survey responses indicated that staff and board members wanted to improve efficiency in internal processes, especially participant data management. External communication and volunteer engagement were also potential areas to strengthen. The survey showed technical skills and usage varying by individual. Respondents expressed an overall positive attitude toward using technology, yet leaders worried that too much change in a short time frame could undermine this positivity.

After discussing survey results and delving into organizational needs, the MOFAS group chose a focus area. Their main objective was to increase the comfort level using existing software, and decrease resistance around technology. “What we learned from the survey is that our staff was frustrated with the software we use (not the hardware like we previously assumed) and that there wasn’t a clear understanding of what software skills were expected from each staff member,” said Jennifer Stieve of MOFAS. “So, we’ve listed all the skills and divided them into levels. Now we are assigning levels to each of the staff positions we have here and developing the plan for implementation and training.”

MOFAS felt their objective was the most practical step for them and also a crucial precursor to more inventive or experimental uses of technology in the organization. Ultimately they are striving for culture change, where using technology well is the norm throughout the organization.

“Identifying focus areas was strong for us. We’ve already used that to make a decision not to pursue a new software package, because we were focused on our priorities. The survey was imperative in helping us do that.”
In order to reach that goal, MOFAS will have a few obstacles to overcome. Mastering software requires a lot of staff time. They asked themselves, how can we create time and space for learning about technology? Their strategy is breaking the goal into manageable steps. Since completing the program, they have steadily moved forward on their plan.

The exercise of choosing a focus area was valuable for MOFAS. Shortly after completing the pilot program, they reported that they had already referred back to the priorities they identified, and based on those priorities they decided not to pursue a new software package. They said the survey was imperative in helping them make that decision with confidence. Their focus keeps them from becoming sidetracked by lower priority items, and keeps them moving forward. “We talk about tech a lot but feel frustrated, focusing on day to day hardware problems. It turns out those are not the biggest priority; software is. Before we were being reactionary about technology, and now we are being strategic,” said Stieve.