

## Technology's Role in Supporting Learning for Systemic Change

*Learning technology is essential to success in a more complex, interconnected environment. This article outlines an ambitious approach to integrating technology to support learning, an approach that is consistent with our sector's aspirations for systemic community change. Returns on investments in learning are exponential – they enable organizations to succeed through a networked and collaborative approach to social change.*

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*Isoph offers flexible learning management system software, along with instructional design and course development services to help our clients develop successful, sustainable learning programs.*

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## **Collaborative Systems Amplify the Impact of Learning**

Consider a new regional HIV/AIDS service delivery network formed to improve client services and streamline delivery systems. The network believes it can develop more responsive programs by involving all 20 collaborating agencies and their 100 staff and volunteers in decision-making. Yet, all 20 organizations in the network come to the table with different philosophies, levels of capacity, power, and internal resources. And all 100 persons bring widely divergent experiences, skills, and attitudes to the mix. Factor in the high turnover rates found among program staff and the challenge grows.

Likewise, consider the complex interdependencies among organizations in a period of crisis. The aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> and natural disasters such as the San Francisco Loma Prieta earthquake and Hurricane Andrew demonstrate the need for quick, coordinated action among hundreds of organizations and thousands of staff and volunteers. Both immediate crisis events and long-term community change initiatives require staff and volunteers to interact along multiple fronts.

As communities adopt holistic service delivery approaches, individual nonprofit organizations are increasingly dependent on collaborative partners and coalitions to accomplish their mission. In the isolated service-delivery model, one agency's under-trained or less-skilled personnel can have little impact on the community as a whole. But, in the interconnected service-delivery approach, organizations are co-dependent. Staff persons must interact and coordinate programs across organizational boundaries. Both competencies and deficiencies are magnified in the network. As collaborative environments become more complex and interconnected, the importance of training and learning grows exponentially.

## **Learning Technology to Support Collective Action**

The sector's dynamic, networked environment requires a multifaceted approach to training and learning. Isolated training "events" are not only limited in their effectiveness, but they are built for static, unchanging systems. A multifaceted approach recognizes the diversity of learners, continual turnover among coalition members, and constantly changing circumstances. Online learning technology, which enables universal access to personalized, continual learning opportunities, is an essential component of a comprehensive learning strategy. Technology can expand learning options and extend resources deeper into the learning community, providing both consistency and scale. And, using database technology, information on learning can be integrated with other critical data to evaluate and improve both services and capacity-building efforts.

*How Technology Supports Learning in a Collaborative Environment:*

- **Access to Learning for All Members of Collaborative Networks**  
Since a network's success depends on the skills and knowledge of each network participant, all participants must have access to training and learning opportunities that meet their individual needs. By removing geographic and time barriers, technology helps to make learning accessible for all participants – not just the few persons who can afford to travel to a workshop or conference. Learning can occur throughout organizations and collaboratives, accelerating the transfer of knowledge and transforming learning from an isolated instance of professional development into a powerful tool for organizational and sector-wide change.
- **Just-in-Time, Personalized Learning**  
Ad hoc or one-shot training events can no longer support a dynamic environment experiencing constant change and turnover. Technology can help new staff quickly get up-to-speed with online learning, enhancing the productivity of the entire network. Learner-directed programs can accommodate multiple learning styles and allow learners more control over their learning process.
- **Open, Risk-Free Environment**  
Especially important in diverse cultural settings, online courses provide a risk-free environment where learners can try new things and eliminate the embarrassment of failure in front of a group.

For instance, an executive director can learn about nonprofit finance without the fear of admitting a lack of knowledge. Likewise, students can explore issues such as race, sexuality, and religion.

### Infusing Technology: A Multifaceted Approach

In this interactive model, various types of learning build on one another and are most powerful when woven together as part of an overall learning strategy to support collective action. *Italicized* methods can use technology to support successful learning.

Type	Purpose	Use	Methods
<b>Foundational</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skills and knowledge that provide people with common language, frameworks, and shared history</li> <li>• Technical, issue-specific, and soft skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prerequisite to collaboration and connection</li> <li>• Necessary for true dialogue and exchange</li> <li>• Essential to integrating new group members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Orientation and skills training</i></li> <li>• <i>Mentors</i></li> <li>• <i>Manuals</i></li> <li>• <i>Storytelling</i></li> </ul>
<b>Immediate</b>	Coordinated, timely response and action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fundraising or advocacy campaigns</li> <li>• Coordinated reaction to crisis, issues or new legislation</li> <li>• New program or initiative launch</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community meetings</li> <li>• Conference calls</li> <li>• <i>E-mail updates</i></li> <li>• <i>Web conferencing</i></li> <li>• <i>Synchronous training</i></li> </ul>
<b>Archival</b>	Share collected knowledge, procedures, products	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Documentation</li> <li>• Re-use of materials</li> <li>• Common procedures</li> <li>• Streamline information-gathering</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informal peer connections</li> <li>• Libraries</li> <li>• <i>Content management</i></li> <li>• <i>Document sharing</i></li> <li>• <i>List serves</i></li> </ul>
<b>Motivational</b>	Peer support, encouragement, emotional connection	Essential component in all initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Celebrations</li> <li>• <i>Peer discussion and sharing</i></li> <li>• <i>Success stories</i></li> <li>• Fun</li> </ul>
<b>Reflective</b>	Critical thinking, analysis, evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Synthesize learning</li> <li>• Recognize patterns and macro issues</li> <li>• Generate new ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Case studies</i></li> <li>• <i>Storytelling</i></li> <li>• <i>Peer discussion</i></li> </ul>

## Enabling Foundational Learning

Foundational learning emphasizes the development of skills and knowledge that provide a common language, frameworks, and shared history amongst a range of stakeholders. To reach its full potential, foundational learning must be available for each network participant as soon as they join the network or need the requisite background skills or knowledge. Turnover among network members makes online technology especially critical to the provision of foundational learning.

Networking without foundational learning is not only ineffectual, but can also be damaging. If we really want to bring people together to exchange ideas and discuss issues, we must have a common base of knowledge to facilitate communication. Without a shared foundation of knowledge and learning, networking can serve to *amplify* power differentials.

A recent conference experience illustrates this point. During the unstructured networking time, more experienced group members chatted among themselves and exchanged industry news. Newer group members felt left out and complained that their needs for skills training were not being met. The networking session not only failed, it highlighted the disconnect among attendees and led to resentment on the part of the newer group members. Without a common foundation, networking meetings can easily reinforce group differences rather than encourage dialogue and cooperation.

## Case Study: Technology to Support Foundational Learning

Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH), is a rapidly growing, global nonprofit public health organization. Given its rapid growth and the need to coordinate activity in over 20 developing countries, PATH developed a leadership training program to provide foundational learning for all of its managers and supervisors. However, PATH's rapid growth and geographical dispersion required an innovative approach. To provide foundational learning to all of its managers, PATH provides online training in conjunction with a series of classroom-based workshops and additional learning resources.

PATH's customized learning portal is designed to support staff members with older technology and low-speed Internet connections. Learners can choose from among five leadership certification courses and over 30 additional learning topics. The fully automated portal allows learners to register and access courses at any time, according to their individual needs. PATH can automatically create detailed reports on course enrollments, track individual learner progress and performance, and collect and analyze course evaluation feedback and statistics.

[www.path.org](http://www.path.org)

### **Strengthening Traditional Face-to-Face Learning**

Learning technology does not replace instructor-led learning, but can provide a powerful supplement to in-person training that maximizes the classroom experience. For example, one of the most frustrating aspects of classroom training is the differing skill and expertise levels among learners. A pre-class e-learning supplement can cover the basics and provide a common base of knowledge before the classroom event, reserving instructor time for higher-level, interactive activities. Likewise, learners can use e-learning modules to augment and sustain their learning after completion of a classroom-based experience.

Consider the recent experience of the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving's Nonprofit Support Program. When the program combined an online course with a series of classroom-based workshops to strengthen grantees' financial management capacity, they found that an online component enabled the program to extend learning deeper within an organization. Learners noted that since more than one person prepares budgets, it was useful for others in their organization to access the online budgeting course. The online component made it possible to involve an organization-wide team in the learning process. Using learning technology, knowledge and training are no longer dictated by time and location. They can be continuously accessed and continually re-used.

In addition, a number of nonprofit organizations are experimenting with learning technology to improve circuit-rider, train-the-trainer, and other dispersed training programs. For example, online learning resources can help train-the-trainer programs augment the trainer's presentation and overcome the inherent challenges of frequent content updates and consistency among trainers.

Facilitated learning programs combine the power of face-to-face training and mentorship with the depth of resources and expertise that can be offered online. Using this strategy, a community technology center might offer an online database course supported by in-person training coaches. Since subject matter expertise and technical knowledge is provided online, facilitated programs allow trainers to focus on motivation, coaching, and personalization -- the critical roles that make training a success.

### **Case Study: Technology to Support Ongoing Collaboration**

Forum EMPRESA, a Brazilian NGO focused on corporate social responsibility in the Americas, needed a vehicle for sharing knowledge among its members.

The organization developed the eForum, where members are able to share documents, post important information, and access online courses. In addition, members can use a variety of tools to promote collaboration, including live online meetings with voice over IP, video, and slide presentation capabilities.

Using online technology to reinforce its members' person-to-person connections, Forum EMPRESA has made it easier for members to work together on shared projects and to exchange knowledge. In addition, the eForum has dramatically reduced the costs for its members to collaborate.

*[www.empresa.com](http://www.empresa.com)*

## **Leadership & Strategy Make Technology Succeed**

Online learning technology is necessary to enable learning, especially in dispersed collaborative networks. The dynamic nature of collaborative work – the continual integration of new persons, new knowledge, new issues, etc. – requires a multifaceted approach to support ongoing learning. Learning technology must be implemented as an integral component of a thoughtful, comprehensive learning strategy. Case studies repeatedly show that leadership and peer support are critical components in successful online learning and knowledge management initiatives in the nonprofit sector. To realize our sector's ambitious plans for holistic change, funders and leaders of collaborative networks must prioritize learning for *all* stakeholders.

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### NOTES:

Additional case studies and nonprofit program profiles are available at the Isoph Institute:  
<http://www.isophinstitute.com>

See Wired, "Encyclopedia of the New Economy" for more on the power of knowledge in networked environments: [http://hotwired.lycos.com/special/ene/index.html?nav=part\\_three&word=network](http://hotwired.lycos.com/special/ene/index.html?nav=part_three&word=network)