



## How to decide whether your group needs a tech upgrade

By Barry VanderKelen

The rapid pace of technological innovation may cause “analysis paralysis” in a nonprofit organization sorting through the options. How does a nonprofit adopt technology? What are some of the things it ought to consider, because even technology that makes the organization more effective has costs associated with it. I posed these questions to Josh Richards, an information technology consultant based in Grover Beach.

“First, I’d forget about the technology and hone in on what needs to be achieved, what the priorities are, what has been tried before that has or hasn’t worked,” Richards says. “Any technology decisions need to be evaluated: What are the highest priority problems or opportunities? What’s the anticipated return on the investment of capital and time?”

Richards suggests that nonprofits seek solutions that emphasize results rather than the technology. “With technology, it’s not important to have the latest and greatest. It’s about choosing what makes the most sense for your organization. If you spend the extra time figuring out what the most important levers are in your organization, it’ll be easier to identify what technology solutions may play a role in tackling them.”

When adopting technology, Richards says

there are a few things to consider:

- Be skeptical, but not cynical. If someone can’t explain a new program to you in a sentence or two, move on to the next option.

- If implementation or convincing everyone to start using it — an oft underestimated task — will take weeks or months, you better be sure you really know what you are getting yourself into.

- Don’t confuse a fancy and expensive Web site with an effective marketing strategy. A low-cost Web site can communicate a lot of information and bring in a lot of money. It’s not about having the prettiest Web site — it’s about how you use it.

Richards encourages nonprofits to explore free, or nearly free, and low-risk solutions to day-to-day organizational needs. For instance, consider installing Open Office ([www.openoffice.org](http://www.openoffice.org)) instead of purchasing Microsoft Office.

For some, opting for Ubuntu ([www.ubuntu.org](http://www.ubuntu.org)) may even make more sense than purchasing Microsoft Windows (and it may run better on older hardware). Look at Basecamp ([www.basecamp.com](http://www.basecamp.com)) for project collaboration.

Utilize Paypal ([www.paypal.com](http://www.paypal.com)) and Google Checkout (<http://checkout.google.com/seller/npo/>) to ac-

cept donations via credit card online.

Consider results-oriented relationship management systems such as HighRise ([www.highrisehq.com](http://www.highrisehq.com)) that intentionally leave out extra features so that people can get their job done.

If you can’t afford everything you want, you probably can’t afford to waste money on tech solutions to problems that aren’t paramount to your aspirations, Richards explains. As the organization matures, these technology needs will have to be re-evaluated and the organization can adopt new solutions when needed.

Richards encourages all organizations to consider online services that may relieve staff of time-consuming activities.

For instance, newsletters, direct mailing solicitations and thank-you cards can be sent using the U.S. Postal Service’s Direct Mail online service ([www.usps.com/createmail/createdirect.htm](http://www.usps.com/createmail/createdirect.htm)) or SendOutCards.com. These services are available on demand.

Richards ([www.joshrichardsit.com](http://www.joshrichardsit.com)) concludes that technology is valuable only if it allows an organization to accomplish what it needs to do.

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### Resource Use

- Support nonprofit leadership
- Board development/training
- Strategic planning

### Nonprofit Business Column of The Tribune

The San Luis Obispo Tribune publishes a column every other week in the Business section dedicated to the business practices of nonprofit orgs. Barry VanderKelen, Executive Director of the San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation writes the bi-

weekly column to help strengthen nonprofit organizations in the community. Each column is reprinted here as a one-page handout for use by local organizations. Barry can be reached at 543-2323 or by e-mail at [barry@slocf.org](mailto:barry@slocf.org).