Chapter 26
Improving Practice Through Non-Instructional Technology Platforms:
A Case for Technology's Role in a Nonprofit Network

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ABSTRACT

This case study describes the processes and outcomes of intentional efforts to formalize and enable learning, communication, and collaboration in a network of nonprofit practitioners to enhance the capacity and effectiveness of member organizations. After identifying a need for nonprofits in Central Illinois to have increased awareness of others' efforts and work together to a greater extent, a technology-enabled Community of Practice (CoP) was formed to facilitate positive change. After a short period of implementation, an evaluation found that the virtual CoP was valued by members as an important source of learning, networking, and finding resources. Further, intentional efforts to facilitate nonprofit network activities and productivity led to meaningful outcomes in this community and members' performance. This case study serves as a non-instructional Human Performance Technology (HPT) example for consideration by organizations seeking to support informal learning among nonprofit employees and stakeholders in order to improve and sustain members' performance.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

With nearly one million public charities operating that account for 9.2% of all wages and salaries paid in the U.S. (National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2012), the nonprofit sector is being defined by a number of major trends. These trends include demographic shifts that are redefining participation, technological advances, networks that enable new ways to organize work, increased interest in civic engagement and volunteerism, and the blurring of sector boundaries (Gowdy, Hildebrand, La Piana, & Campos, 2010). The convergence of these trends has serious organizational and leadership implications. This case describes how a family foundation supported intentional efforts to formalize and enable informal learning, communication, and collaboration in a network of nonprofit practitioners through a technology-enabled Community of Practice (CoP) for the purpose of enhancing the capacity and effectiveness of member organizations.

The Lumpkin Family Foundation (hereafter the Foundation), based in rural Illinois, has a mission to support people pursuing innovation and long-lasting improvements in the environment, health, education and community access to the arts. They do this in a 16-county region where the wealth of the family was generated through a telecommunications company.

SETTING THE STAGE

As one of the larger foundations outside of the Chicago region, the Foundation realized that in order to make the most impact with their grant dollars, they needed to support capacity building efforts for their nonprofit grantees. Their theory of change was that a vibrant nonprofit sector was one where 1) nonprofits communicate, cooperate, and collaborate, 2) nonprofits have strong management, leadership, and governance, and 3) nonprofits are supported by an invested constituency.

The Foundation recognized the lack of affordable and appropriate professional and organizational development services in the region for nonprofits, including their grantees. In response, they founded the Nonprofit Excellence Program (NEP). Through the NEP, the Foundation offered trainings, conferences, and grants around areas related to nonprofit organizational leadership and development. As a grantmaking entity, however, they did not envision providing direct services for an extended period. The Foundation's intention from the outset had been to build a program whose value would be evident enough that a community partner could be attracted to take on the role of service-provider. After a few years of financially supporting and organizing these efforts internally, the Foundation turned its attention to this transition. They retained a consultant to determine how the NEP could be effectively embedded in the community.

The consultant recommended the creation of a nonprofit resource center to be located at a local university and endowed by the Foundation. Although the recommendation aligned with the Foundation's early expectations for the transition, the Foundation reached a different conclusion from the consultant's findings. The Foundation's board concluded that a focused investment in a single institution overvalued the underlying interest of the local university and failed to fully appreciate the resources and geographic reach of other organizations in the region that had started to provide capacity building services since the NEP was established. An alternative solution was desired that would better align with the Foundation's theory of change.

Four key concepts and trends converged to inform how the Foundation progressed toward their goal of achieving a vibrant nonprofit sector: 1) capacity building, 2) networked governance, 3) nonprofit

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