

From Improving IT Infrastructures to Achieving Social Good:

Outcomes of Nonprofit Technology Assistance Providers (NTAPs)

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FOREWORD

In 2003, I prepared the following thought paper to help nonprofit technology assistance providers (and the grantmakers that support them) articulate the social impact of their work. They were struggling with how to characterize the ways that the array of technology support services they provided to NGOs – from installing local area networks (LANs) to developing sophisticated web-based tools – advanced their lofty long-term goals of social change. The paper provided Blueprint’s observations on which key characteristics of technology assistance providers and their clients tended to foster success. And, following from these, I offered recommendations for evaluating the impact of technology assistance programs.

Since 2003 information and communication technology (ICT) and the nongovernmental (NGO) sector have changed significantly. Most notably:

- In many places, NGOs have established and integrated basic ICT systems into their standard business operation. Networked computers, the Internet, and word processing and spreadsheet software are tools as fundamental for staff members’ work as their desks and telephones.
- New technology tools – especially highly interactive Internet-based ones such as wiki collaborative software, RSS, and mapping tools, as well as wireless and mobile technologies – are available for NGOs to pursue their programming in innovative and affordable new ways.
- Grantmakers’ interest in the use of technology in ways that directly help fulfill NGOs’ missions has grown, especially when considering how to support their grantees working in locations that lack stable, universally accessible public communication infrastructures or that have repressive governments.

As a result, more NGOs are looking to eRiders to help them creatively use ICT tools to advance their missions. Some eRiders have shifted their focus from helping NGOs use technology to improve their general operations toward helping them apply technology directly to pursuing new programmatic strategies. Instead of establishing Internet access and email accounts, setting up servers, and training staff the basics of how to use desktop computers, these eRiders are taking on project such as helping NGOs consider ways to disseminate videos of human rights violations online, employ global positioning systems (GPS) when combating illegal logging, and use personal digital assistants (PDAs) in rural health care.

Taking these changes into account, I offer the following clarifications to my original recommendations regarding NTAPs’ evaluation efforts.¹ These comments and the paper are drawn from Blueprint’s experience working with technical assistance providers that support NGOs in the United States. We hope that the observations are also relevant and useful for eRiders around the world.

¹ More detailed recommendations about evaluating eRider programs are available in the [evaluation section](#) of the eRider Toolkit. And, in 2004-2005 a lively and still highly relevant discussion about evaluation strategies took place on [Omidyar.net](#) with [CompuMentor](#), a San Francisco-based technology assistance provider.

1. Use evaluation to gather information that is useful for the eRider's own decision making. eRiders can integrate evaluation strategies into their standard practices so that they can continually learn from their experiences. Along with asking "What were the outcomes?" an eRider organization will want to know "How?" and "Why?" in order to be able to improve upon its work. When shared through vehicles like eRiders.net, the answers to these process-oriented questions can also help inform the broader eRider community. Simply attempting to assess outcomes may be useful for accountability purposes, but won't help increase eRiders' effectiveness or future impacts.

2. Recognize that as intermediaries, eRiders most often contribute to, rather than cause, the programmatic results of their clients. Characteristics of the client organization (e.g., the quality of their management capacities and program strategies) as well as environmental factors in the communities in which they work can significantly impact whether the NGO's increased technology capacities translate into programmatic outcomes. These additional factors need to be taken into account when assessing the impact of the eRider's technology assistance.

3. When assessing project outcomes, focus on those that would reasonably follow from the specific assistance provided and technologies implemented. In some cases, the expected results of an eRider's work will be modest, in others potentially profound. For example, the outcomes of installing a LAN will differ from the outcomes of implementing a contacts database or developing a large-scale innovative technology tool.

eRiders will need to work with their individual clients to identify the specific operational and programmatic outcomes that they hope will follow from the support provided. And, together they can identify a logical chain of events from the eRider's technology assistance to achieving those goals. The eRider and client can then assess whether the expected results occurred at the steps along that chain, as well as why they did or didn't happen.

It is especially important to determine whether the technology project is intended to directly affect an NGO's program outcomes, or to indirectly affect them by improving the organization's operations. This will inform the eRider's choices about the extent of the evaluation data collection effort and at which steps along the outcomes chain to focus attention. For example, the anticipated chain of outcomes of installing a LAN at a social service agency might look like this:

NGO's IT Outcome	NGO's Operational Outcomes	NGO's Programmatic Outcomes	Social Impact
Social service agency has working LAN	Improved information management Program staff more efficiently access and use information	NGO staff is able to provide job training assistance to more individual clients More clients have the skills necessary to obtain jobs	More of NGO's clients obtain jobs Rate of joblessness in community declines

In cases like this where a straight-forward, short-term project is expected to indirectly contribute to program outcomes by improving an NGO's operations, eRiders can capture basic outcomes information simply and affordably. It would likely suffice to document whether the LAN was installed successfully and what operational efficiencies the organization experienced as a result. In most such instances, quantitatively measuring changes in the NGO's programmatic outcomes that could be attributed to the LAN's installation would likely be more costly than the project itself and place an unmerited burden upon the NGO client to provide the necessary data. However, a sense of the project's indirect contributions to the NGO's programming and mission could be provided by simply, yet systematically, collecting qualitative data from the NGO – i.e., by asking the NGO's staff what programmatic outcomes they believe the technology assistance contributed to and how.

eRiders are increasingly helping NGOs to apply innovative technology tools directly to their program efforts. For example, the anticipated chain of outcomes of developing an interactive web-based job placement tool for the same social service agency might look like this:

NGO's IT Outcome	NGO's Programmatic Outcome	Social Impact
Web-based tool that facilitates matching the agency's clients with local employers	With the use of its new online employer/employee matching service, NGO successfully places clients in jobs	More of NGO's clients obtain jobs Rate of joblessness in community declines

In these cases, the eRiders, their NGO clients, and the project funders will likely want to expend more significant resources to assess whether using the new technology tool contributed to constructive changes in the NGOs' program strategies and whether and to what extent the NGOs achieved greater community impacts in turn. Moreover, learning what worked well, what didn't, and the how and why behind the project's actual outcomes will be especially useful and can be of value to the entire eRider community. Whether or not the intended outcomes were achieved in this type of ambitious pilot

project, eRiders, funders and NGOs can learn from its evaluation to inform future technology innovation efforts.

In addition, eRiders can complement their efforts to gather information about intended project outcomes with strategies that allow them to learn about important, but unexpected, results of their work. For example, an eRider and its client may expect that the NGO will be better able to communicate with people outside of the organization as the result of setting up staff email accounts. Yet, the NGO finds that the email accounts also help dramatically improve communications among the staff, which leads to programmatic efficiencies. This kind of unexpected result could be captured by the eRider consistently asking clients the same four simple questions:

- What was the most significant change in your organization's operations that resulted from the eRider's assistance?
- How did the eRider's assistance contribute to this change?
- What was the most significant change in your organization's programmatic outcomes that the eRider's assistance affected?
- How did the eRider's assistance contribute to this change?

eRidering can be a tremendously effective strategy for unleashing the power of technology to strengthen organizations and affect social change. It is our hope that the observations presented in this paper are useful to eRiders as they define what outcomes they aim to achieve, articulate how their program strategies lead to the fulfilling those goals, and determine how they will purposefully learn from their experiences and assess their impacts in order to improve their work.

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² These questions can be used as part of an evaluative process called the Most Significant Change technique, which was pioneered by Rick Davies and Jessica Dart. A [guide for its use](#) is available online.

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The field of Nonprofit Technology Assistance Providers (NTAPs) is made up of a diverse array of organizations and individuals using varied methods to assist their clients. Yet, broadly speaking, most share a common goal: to achieve social good (however the particular NTAP defines it) by improving nonprofits' technology infrastructures, capabilities, and uses. How the dots are connected between improving nonprofits' IT systems and the larger goal of social good is often unstated or unexplored by NTAPs and their funders. As a result, it difficult for some NTAPs to persuasively communicate exactly what outcomes they aim to achieve, how their program strategies lead to the achievement of those goals, and how they assess whether and why they are succeeding.

From Blueprint's experience working with and evaluating NTAPs, it appears that there are two predominant paths between improving clients' IT systems and achieving NTAPs' social good goals.

1. Through operations improvements:
 - By improving their nonprofit clients' IT infrastructures and technology management capacities...
 - NTAPs help improve their clients' day-to-day operations...
 - Which can help the nonprofits pursue their program strategies more efficiently, productively, and at a higher quality...
 - Which can lead to greater fulfillment of the clients' missions...
 - Which creates social good.
2. Through programmatic innovations:
 - By helping their nonprofit clients to use IT tools and methods to address their programmatic goals in new ways...
 - NTAPs help nonprofits pursue new program strategies...
 - Which can lead to greater fulfillment of the clients' missions...
 - Which creates social good.

Whether an NTAP is able to successfully improve their clients' IT infrastructures, capabilities, and uses, and how far these improvements lead down the paths toward achieving the NTAP's larger social goals, is influenced by the NTAP's program strategies and structure, organizational characteristics of their clients, as well as myriad environmental factors beyond the scope of the NTAP's activities.

Four recommendations for NTAP evaluation efforts follow from this overview of potential NTAP outcomes: focus most outcomes evaluations on client IT and operations outcomes, rather than longer-term outcomes that are less directly influenced by NTAPs' efforts; use findings from evaluations of exemplary NTAPs to inform evaluation designs for less established NTAPs; develop a common set of evaluation tools and strategies for the NTAP field; and pursue improvement-oriented evaluation to inform program design and development.

II. INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1990s an increasing number of Nonprofit Technology Assistance Providers (NTAPs), also known as Circuit Riders, have been working to help build nonprofit organizations' information technology (IT) infrastructure and capabilities. As the NTAP field has grown, a culture of peer learning has emerged among an international network of NTAPs, who have developed and shared increasingly sophisticated models and methods for effectively providing IT support to nonprofits. In large part due to this culture of cooperation, the field rapidly has reached a high level of maturity.

The growth of the NTAP field also has been fueled by—and has helped fuel—a broader interest in strengthening nonprofits' organizational capacities, including governance structures, management practices, organizational cultures, and leadership. Funders increasingly have come to recognize that the effectiveness of their grantees depends upon the nonprofits' organizational capacities, including their information technology capacities.

Over this same period, philanthropic foundations and other nonprofit funders have started focusing attention on issues of grantee accountability and outcomes assessment. Increasingly, grant agreements include formal evaluation requirements. In addition, many nonprofits recognize the value of outcomes evaluation findings that can help “tell their story” as part of their development efforts.

Given the relative maturity of the NTAP field, the growing interest in nonprofit capacity building, and the increasing emphasis on program evaluation by funders and nonprofits, this is an opportune time for NTAPs to clearly articulate exactly what outcomes they aim to achieve, how their program strategies lead to the achievement of those goals, and how they assess whether and why they are succeeding.

The purposes of this article are to:

- Help NTAPs systematically consider and define the outcomes they are striving to achieve.
- Inform foundations' and NTAPs' understandings about what NTAP outcomes are most appropriate and reasonable to measure.
- Promote the development of a shared framework, vocabulary, and tool kit for NTAPs to evaluate the outcomes of their work.
- Take a first step toward research comparing the types of outcomes experienced by NTAP pursuing different program strategies. This type of research can help inform NTAPs' program design efforts as well as foundations' decisions about which types of NTAPs would offer the most appropriate services for their nonprofit grantees.

The ideas presented are drawn primarily from research conducted by Blueprint Research & Design, Inc. for The California Endowment's Circuit Rider Program; the Community Clinics Initiative, a joint project of Tides and The California Endowment; and CompuMentor.³ This research included interviews with NTAP field leaders, reviews of NTAP evaluation reports and relevant capacity building literature, as well as Blueprint's own primary evaluation research. (See Section VII below for the list of NTAP interviewees and evaluation reports reviewed.)

After a brief description of NTAPs, this article presents the outcomes most often expected and desired by NTAPs and their funders, including a framework for understanding how the outcomes relate to each other. It then highlights key factors of NTAP success: the characteristics of NTAPs and their clients that appear to help facilitate achieving those goals. The article concludes with recommendations for NTAP evaluation efforts that follow from the outcomes framework and success factors discussed.

III. NONPROFIT TECHNOLOGY ASSISTANCE PROVIDERS (NTAPs)

NTAPs range from one-person consulting firms to national organizations and networks such as NPower. The field is made up of for-profit and nonprofit entities and includes organizations pursuing fee-for-service business models, receiving subsidies from foundations, and even residing within foundations, such as The California Endowment's Circuit Rider Program. Whereas some NTAPs focus their consulting practices within their local communities; others assist nonprofits working in specific issue areas (e.g., community economic development, arts, children and youth); some, such as ONE/Northwest, assist a specific type of nonprofit within a geographic region; and still others assist a wide array of organizations across geographic regions.

The outcomes framework presented in the next section presents the outcomes often expected and desired of NTAP programs that share the following characteristics:

- Individualized Consulting-centered: The NTAP's assistance is provided through direct, in-person consulting to individual nonprofits. An NTAP may also provide group trainings, written resources, and other forms of assistance, but individually tailored consulting is central to the client engagement.
- Mission-focused: The NTAP's assistance and recommendations are grounded in the nonprofit client's own mission, program activities, and priorities. All IT enhancements are intended to help the client organization become better able to fulfill its mission.
- Assessment-based: The NTAP's assistance is also based on an assessment of the individual client's IT-related needs and capabilities: the client's operations processes, information and work flow, existing IT infrastructure, and existing technology management capacities.

³ Blueprint Research & Design, Inc. is a research, design, and strategy consulting firm serving philanthropic foundations.

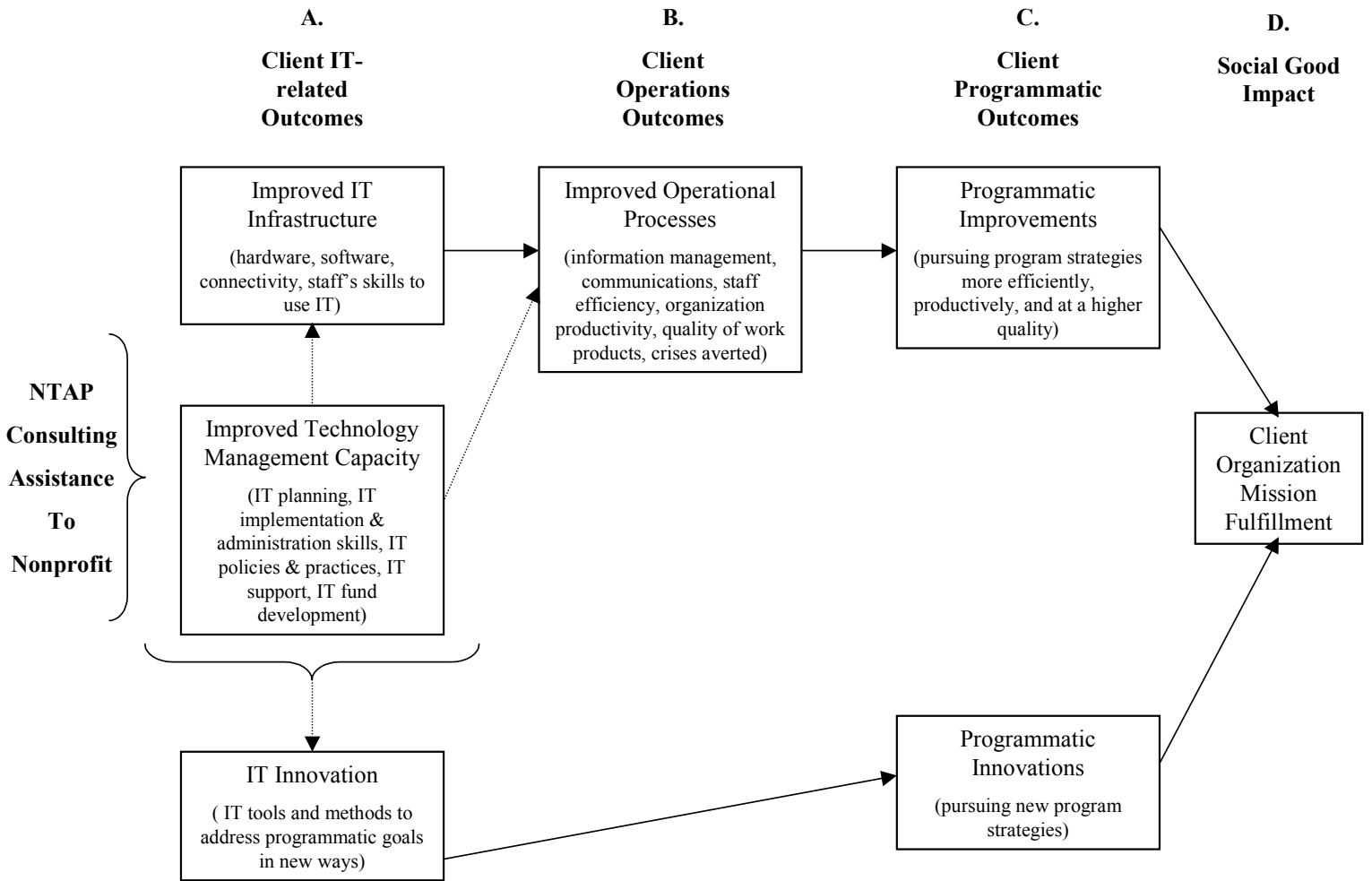
Most notably, the outcomes described below are not expected from NTAPs that serve clients solely as outsourced IT administrators and troubleshooters. Also, the ideas presented are drawn from experiences with NTAP organizations and programs; they may be less relevant to the one-person shops.

IV. DESIRED OUTCOMES OF NTAP ASSISTANCE

Despite the wide diversity among NTAPs, there appears to be a common set of outcomes that NTAPs work to achieve, as well as a shared, yet often unstated, understanding of how these desired outcomes relate to each other. Simply put, NTAPs pursue strategies to help improve nonprofits' technology infrastructures, capabilities, and uses so that the nonprofits are better able to achieve their missions. These IT improvements contribute to the nonprofits' fulfillment of their missions by helping to improve the organizations' operations processes and program activities. The broad outlines of this logic underlying the NTAP approach are represented in Figure A below.

This section briefly describes and discusses the types of outcome that NTAPs aim to achieve and provides a simple example of each.

FIGURE A
Commonly Desired Outcomes of NTAP Consulting Services



A. Client IT-Related Outcomes

The IT-related outcomes of NTAP activities fall into three areas: IT infrastructure, technology management, and IT innovation. These outcomes can be most directly attributed to NTAPs' efforts and are intended to be stepping stones to improving clients' operations and programmatic outcomes. Not every NTAP pursues activities that will achieve outcomes in all three of these IT areas. Whereas most NTAPs pursue activities to address nonprofits' IT infrastructure needs, a few more heavily target their efforts on achieving technology management outcomes. Many, if not most, NTAPs do not yet target IT innovation outcomes.

1. IT Infrastructure Outcomes

Most NTAPs work to help their clients gain better, more appropriate technology tools, as well as the skills necessary to use these tools. These IT infrastructure improvements can include:

- New or improved Internet connectivity
- New or improved local or wide area networking
- New or upgraded hardware
- New or upgraded software
- New or improved data systems
- Virus protection
- Back up systems
- Knowledge of how to use new and improved tools and systems

For example, an NTAP installs a local area network and an Internet router at a client organization.

The specific IT infrastructure outcomes a nonprofit client achieves will depend upon the NTAP's activities during the specific client engagement. Those NTAP engagements that include the installation of equipment and software, as well as training are more likely to lead to these outcomes than those that end prior to equipment installation—following the development of a technology plan, for example. Also, the infrastructure outcomes will be achieved much more quickly and will be directly attributable to the NTAP assistance when installation and training are included in the NTAP services.

2. Technology Management Capacity Outcomes⁴

Along with working to improve their clients' IT infrastructures, some NTAPs aim to improve the nonprofits' abilities to manage technology effectively. Potential technology management outcomes of NTAP assistance include:

- Improved IT planning capacity
- Improved IT policies and procedures
- Improved IT decision-making practices

⁴ We first heard this bundle of outcomes described as “technology management capacity” by CompuMentor staff members.

- Improved capacity to implement and administer technology tools and systems
- Improved ability to support technology tools and systems, or to access support from external resources
- Improved knowledge and understanding of the potential for IT to contribute to fulfilling the organization's mission

These technology management capacities are understood by some NTAPs to be essential for the long-term sustainability of their clients' effective management and use of their technology systems. For example, following from work with an NTAP, a nonprofit integrates technology into its strategic plan, as well as its annual work plans and budgets.

Whether technology management outcomes are achieved and sustained following an NTAP engagement will depend upon whether the NTAP intentionally pursues activities designed to build their clients' own capacities in this area. For example, the NTAP can provide technology management training and written resources, explicitly model effective technology management practices, and direct clients to the myriad technology management-related resources available online.

3. IT Innovation Outcomes

Some NTAPs help their clients use IT to accomplish their missions by pursuing new programmatic strategies. For example, with the assistance of an NTAP, a hypothetical environmental organization devises a way for its volunteers to use personal digital assistants (PDAs) to enter water quality information directly into an electronic database. Prior to the use of PDAs and the electronic database, the monitoring information was cumbersome to manage and only used internally by staff members. The new data collection and management tools can be used by the organization to more easily work with the data, conduct more sophisticated analysis over time, and share the findings with a wider audience.

Currently, many NTAPs do not pursue activities aimed at achieving IT innovation outcomes. However, as clients' basic IT infrastructures and technology management capabilities increase, they will likely become better situated to envision new ways of using technology to achieve their goals. Some NTAP activities that could help nonprofit clients move in this direction include facilitating peer learning opportunities, providing examples of creative new uses of IT within the nonprofits' own sectors and communities, and directing clients to resources where they can learn about technology advances. Assisting clients in this area requires NTAPs to have a greater depth of knowledge about their specific field.

B. Client Operations Outcomes

Most NTAPs work to improve clients' IT infrastructures, technology management capacities, or both in order to improve the nonprofits' operational processes. Some potential operations outcomes of NTAP assistance include:

- Improved and increased external communications

- Increased organizational productivity
- Increased efficiency of staff members
- Improved internal communications
- Improved quality of work products
- Increased access to outside resources
- Improved business practices
- More efficient workflow

For example, after the installation of a local area network and training about how to use and manage it, an NTAP's client's staff members are better able to share information and materials with each other, communicate with colleagues outside of their organization, and access information on the Internet.

In addition to these visible operations improvements, some NTAP activities help avert operations-related crises. These crisis-prevention outcomes are not directly apparent, but can be equally important as the improvements mentioned above. For example, following the installation of virus protection software and staff training of how to use and manage the tool, an NTAP's client does not experience any systems damage from the latest worm attack.

C. Client Programmatic Outcomes

NTAPs work to help their nonprofit clients fulfill their missions—and therefore achieve social good—by increasing their clients' effectiveness and ability to serve the needs of their communities through program improvements and innovations.

1. Programmatic Improvements

Programmatic improvements involve clients undertaking the same program strategies as before the NTAP assistance, but doing so more efficiently, productively, and at a higher quality. NTAPs often intend for this type of programmatic outcome to follow from the operations improvements described above. For example, an after school program improves its curriculum, a meals on wheels program expands its services to additional neighborhoods, and a local environmental advocacy organization successfully adds a land protection initiative to the next election ballot.

2. Programmatic Innovations

Programmatic innovations involve clients pursuing new programmatic strategies following the NTAP assistance. This type of programmatic outcome may be achieved when an NTAP's activities are explicitly targeted at helping their clients use IT in innovative ways. For example, the hypothetical environmental organization using PDAs to collect water quality data produces a compelling factual report using the data collected and managed using its new IT tools. The report represents a new type of program strategy for the organization that previously relied almost exclusively on grassroots organizing.

Whether an NTAP's consulting engagement with a nonprofit leads to either of these types of programmatic outcomes is influenced significantly by the client's management capacities and staff skills in areas outside of IT. For example, whether a social service agency effectively uses information from the new client database it acquired with the assistance of an NTAP to better target its outreach will depend upon a) whether the agency's leaders value using data to inform their decision making—as opposed to simply following their gut instincts, b) whether the leaders and programmatic staff have a clear set of questions they want to address using the data, and c) whether the organization has access to someone with the analysis skills necessary to accurately interpret the data.

D. Social Good Impacts

The long-term impact NTAP consulting programs aim to achieve is virtually always some form of social good, often involving positive social change. NTAPs work to achieve their long-term social goals through assisting their client organizations to achieve increased programmatic success.

Because NTAPs work to achieve their social good goals through their client organizations, an *NTAP's desired social impacts need to be aligned with the missions of the organizations with which it works*. When defining its desired long-term social impact, an NTAP must either adopt the goals of its clients; or if the NTAP already has a clear sense of the specific social changes it would like to achieve, it will need to target its assistance on nonprofits that are dedicated to achieving those ends. For example, if an NTAP defines its own mission as improving the health status of low-income residents in its community, it will need to work with clients that are pursuing strategies aimed at achieving that goal.

Whether an NTAP's desired long-term social impacts can be achieved is influenced significantly by numerous client-related organizational factors beyond the scope of the NTAP engagement. Most notably, if an NTAP's clients' own theories of change—the clients' understandings of how the programmatic activities that they pursue lead to the fulfillment of their missions—are not correct, then no matter how much the nonprofits' capacities are increased due to the NTAP's assistance, the NTAP's long-term desired impacts will not be achieved. In addition, myriad environmental factors influence whether NTAPs' nonprofit clients successfully fulfill their mission.

V. KEY SUCCESS FACTORS FOR NTAPS

A. NTAP Strategies & Program Structure

Although different NTAPs often aim to achieve similar outcomes, the ways they go about pursuing these shared goals can vary significantly. Several aspects of an NTAP's strategies and program structures will influence whether, and to what degree, it will achieve the IT-related and operations outcomes described above. The following nine program strategies and structures are likely to facilitate sustained positive outcomes of NTAP assistance.

1. Intentionally Designed Program

Does the NTAP pursue strategies and activities aimed at improving clients' IT infrastructure, technology management capacity, IT innovation capabilities, or some combination of the three? Unless an NTAP has developed strategies intentionally designed to meet these goals, it is unlikely that they will be achieved. For example, NTAPs cannot assume that their clients' technology management capacities will be improved as a positive externality of working with the NTAP.

2. Multiple IT Outcomes Targeted for Sustainability

Does the NTAP pursue strategies designed to help achieve *both* IT infrastructure and technology management capacity outcomes? Clients of NTAPs whose activities intentionally target both types of outcomes are more likely to experience lasting IT and operations improvements as a result of the NTAPs' assistance, and to be better able to build upon the improvements gained. This is because technology management lessons that are learned within the context of a concrete IT infrastructure improvement project are more likely to be integrated into an organization's practices than if the same information were provided to the nonprofit in the abstract. Equally, the IT infrastructure outcomes following from an NTAP's assistance are most likely to be sustained when they are coupled with improved technology management capacity. Without the skills and abilities necessary to manage technology, nonprofits will not be able to effectively maintain their newly improved IT systems over time.

Similarly, although it may be possible for a client to implement IT innovations without solid IT infrastructures and technology management capacities, the sustainability of the new technology-supported programmatic innovations are less likely without them.

3. Documentation, Support Resources, and Longer-term Planning

Does the NTAP provide its clients with project documentation, support resources, and a longer-term IT plan? The resources provided to clients at the conclusion of a project will influence whether they are able to sustain the positive outcomes experienced from the NTAP assistance.

- Clients that receive documentation of the NTAP project—including an inventory of their current IT infrastructure and management capacities, written procedures for using and managing their new technology, and all receipts and warranties for new equipment—as part of the project wrap-up process will be better able to effectively use and support their improved IT systems.
- Information and recommendations about where a nonprofit client can access troubleshooting and technology management assistance for their new tools and systems following the NTAP engagement will help ensure that the organization is not left in the lurch when problems arise or the organization is ready to move to the next level of IT sophistication.
- Moreover, clients that work with their NTAP consultant to develop a 3-5 year IT plan, including IT budget projections, will be poised to sustain and build upon the

improvements gained through the NTAP project. Without such a roadmap, a nonprofit's IT infrastructure and management capacity can remain stagnant wherever the NTAP engagement left off.

4. Ongoing Client Relationships

Does the NTAP maintain ongoing relationships and pursue multiple projects with clients, or does it provide assistance primarily on a one-time project basis? By working with clients on multiple projects over time, an NTAP can help continually build the nonprofits' technology management capacities, as well as increasingly promote innovative uses of IT as the nonprofits' staffs become more comfortable with technology. However, for the ongoing relationships to increase clients' technology management capacity and IT innovation capabilities, the NTAP must pursue strategies aimed at transferring these skills to the nonprofits—rather than simply serve as the nonprofits' outsourced CIO.

5. Clustered Assistance

Does the NTAP work with clusters of clients within a geographic community or specific issue area, or does it work with a wide array of nonprofits spread across many communities? By working with nonprofits within a geographic community, NTAPs can develop a deep understanding of the technology-related resources and needs of the community. For example, the NTAP will know which local Internet service providers offer the best prices and customer service and can build group purchasing relationships with these vendors. Those NTAPs that specialize in working with nonprofits in specific issue areas (e.g., housing, education, healthcare) can continually build a knowledge base about the technology needs common among similar nonprofits, which will inform their engagements with subsequent clients.

By targeting their assistance on groups of nonprofits with common needs, NTAPs can help facilitate IT coordination to achieve economies of scale or implement technology solutions that would be too complex for any of the individual organizations to undertake on their own. Working with clusters of nonprofits, NTAPs also can create opportunities for peer learning among their clients.

In addition, when working with a set of nonprofits that have a common mission, NTAPs can provide assistance to help the community meet its shared goals. For example, an NTAP may help a group of nonprofits establish data systems and communications infrastructure to help improve collaboration and information sharing among the participating organizations.

For these reasons, it is likely that those NTAPs that work with cohorts of clients will achieve more significant and lasting outcomes than those that do not focus their practice.

6. Depth of Internal Expertise

Does the NTAP have a wide range and depth of expertise on staff? NTAPs that include staff members with complementary skills and knowledge to draw upon are more likely to

be able to address nonprofits' wide range of IT-related needs, resulting in more positive outcomes.

7. Access to Related Resources

Do the NTAP's staff members have easy access to knowledgeable peers and relevant resources? NTAPs whose staff members are well-connected to a broader community of nonprofit IT support providers through regional and national conferences, the "Nonprofit and Nongovernmental Technology Assistance Providers (Circuit Riders)" online discussion list, national affinity groups such as the Nonprofit Technology Enterprise Network (N-TEN), and local networks of NTAPs have greater access to peer learning opportunities, the field's evolving best practices, and trouble-shooting assistance. Because of these benefits, the well-connected NTAPs will likely achieve better outcomes than their isolated peers.

8. Additional Support Services

Does the NTAP provide complementary support services to its consulting clients such as group training opportunities, online resources, and access to discounted equipment or software? When coordinated with the consulting services, these types of additional support can augment the effectiveness of the NTAP consulting practice and lead to better client outcomes.

9. Clients' Financial Commitment

Do clients pay for the NTAP assistance, or is the assistance provided for free? Because financial commitment indicates and promotes the buy-in of a nonprofit's leadership, we would expect that those NTAPs that work on a fee-for-service basis would experience better outcomes than those that provide completely free services.

However, by gaining foundation or other support to partially subsidize the cost of their assistance, NTAPs can charge clients fees that effectively promote buy-in, while relieving some of their financial burden.

B. Client Readiness Characteristics

Whether NTAP clients achieve their desired outcomes is also dependent upon characteristics internal to their client organizations. Most notably, a client's organizational management capacities, adaptability, and leadership's IT vision significantly influence the organization's readiness to effectively work with NTAPs to achieve the desired outcomes.

1. Strong Organizational Management Capacities

Clients with strong management capacities, including clear missions and visions, sound decision making practices, effective organizational planning processes, a sound financial footing, and effective board governance are more likely to successfully work with NTAP consultants.

2. Culture of Learning and Adaptability

Organizations with cultures that promote and reward learning and foster staff members' openness to change and adaptability will be most able to benefit from an NTAP's assistance.

3. Leadership with IT Vision

Nonprofits whose executive directors have a strong interest in using IT to better achieve their organizations' goals and that model this enthusiasm are also more likely to experience the desired outcomes from their NTAP consulting experience.

4. Currently Prioritize Addressing Technology Capacity Issues

Along with strong organizational management capacities, a culture of learning, and an executive director supportive of IT enhancements, the nonprofit needs to be able to focus staff resources and attention on the NTAP engagement. Organizations that have identified IT as an organizational priority, whether in a strategic plan or some other planning process, are better positioned to attain desired outcomes. By contrast, if the organization is distracted by crises or other immediate priorities (e.g., organizing a large fundraising event, coping with the impact of recent government budget cuts on their programs, replacing the board chair, developing the budget and work plan for the next fiscal year), the NTAP engagement is less likely to achieve the desired outcomes.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NTAP EVALUATION EFFORTS

A. Focus Most Outcomes Evaluations on Client IT and Operations Outcomes

Most evaluations of NTAP outcomes should focus attention on clients' IT and operations outcomes such as expanded Internet access, improved IT planning capacity, and increased external communications. NTAPs can expect to achieve many of these outcomes within a year of a consulting engagement—some IT outcomes will even be evident immediately following the NTAP project. Along with being the outcomes that are most readily apparent in the short term, these are the outcomes that are most directly attributable to NTAPs' activities, and therefore most appropriate to measure.

It is also possible to systematically evaluate the client programmatic outcomes that NTAPs aim to achieve. However, evaluations of these types of outcomes will need to take into account the client-related factors that significantly influence these outcomes but that are beyond NTAPs' control, such as the nonprofits' organizational management capacities and data analysis skills.

Although creating social good by helping nonprofits achieve their missions is the primary goal of most NTAPs, this is also the outcome most beyond NTAPs' control and the most difficult to measure. In most cases, it would not be appropriate for NTAPs or NTAP funders to dedicate the significant resources necessary to evaluate these long-term impacts. In some unique instances it may be possible for an NTAP to integrate the findings from an evaluation of their clients' social impacts into its own evaluation efforts.

B. Extrapolate from Findings of Evaluations of Exemplary NTAPs⁵

Foundations should support outcomes evaluations of well-established, well-implemented NTAP programs that are designed and undertaken to help inform the rest of the NTAP sector. The findings from these evaluations can be used to define a set of NTAP characteristics and practices that account for the outcomes experienced by the exemplary programs. We can then infer that NTAPs that share these characteristics and pursue these practices will likely achieve outcomes similar to those of the model programs.

C. Develop a Common Set of Evaluation Tools and Strategies for the NTAP Field⁶

Just as NTAPs share their technology assessments and other tools of their trade with each other, a set of evaluation strategies and tools (such as surveys and interview questions) can be developed for the shared use of the NTAP community. This common set of tools will help eliminate the need for each NTAP to reinvent the evaluation wheel and can help the field better understand how the outcomes of NTAPs pursuing diverse program strategies differ. Specifically, NTAPs can work together to develop a set of measurable indicators of IT and operations outcomes. Many of these indicators can be culled from existing resources such as NTAPs' technology assessment forms and the technology literacy benchmarks for nonprofit organizations created by NPower.⁷

D. Pursue Improvement-Oriented Evaluation⁸

Although many NTAPs and their funders are interested in assessing whether or not their programs' desired outcomes have been achieved, it is equally important—if not more so—for NTAPs to systematically ask and address questions that can help them continue to improve their programming. This is especially true for new NTAP organizations and for NTAPs pursuing new and innovative program strategies. An NTAP's improvement-oriented evaluation questions may include:

- What are the NTAP consulting program's strengths and weaknesses?
- What challenges have arisen?
- What refinements would enable the program to operate better?
- Which types of clients and projects are making good progress and which types aren't doing so well?
- What kinds of implementation problems have emerged and how are they being addressed?

⁵ Gary Walker and Jean Baldwin Grossman persuasively argue for this type of approach in their April 1999 article "Philanthropy and Outcomes: Dilemmas in the Quest for Accountability," published by Public/Private Ventures.

⁶ NPower and NTEN have started in this direction with their three-year evaluation project funded by The Carnegie Corporation, the Cisco Foundation, and the Surdna Foundation. The project is described at <http://www.npower.org/services/projects/evaluation.htm>.

⁷ NPower's technology literacy benchmarks, published by the Benton Foundation, are described in a PDF document available on the Benton Foundation's website at <http://www.benton.org/publibrary/stratcom/techlit.pdf>.

⁸ The improvement-oriented evaluation questions listed in this section are borrowed liberally from page 68 of the third edition of Michael Quinn Patton's Utilization-Focused Evaluation: The New Century Text published by Sage Publications, Inc. in 1997.

- What's happening that wasn't expected?
- What are staff and clients' perceptions of the program's strategies?
- Where can efficiencies be realized?
- What new ideas are emerging that can be tried and tested?

By conducting evaluations that address these types of questions, NTAPs can draw lessons from their experiences that will inform and strengthen their future programming.

VII. INTERVIEWEES AND EVALUATIONS REVIEWED

During the course of evaluation research conducted on the behalf of The California Endowment, the Community Clinics Initiative, and CompuMentor, Blueprint interviewed and worked with numerous experts in the field of nonprofit technology assistance. These experts informed and influenced the ideas presented here. In addition, some organizations generously allowed us to review their internal evaluation reports.

Nonprofit Technology Experts Interviewed (Fall/Winter 2001)

- Gavin Claybough, Vice President - Information Services, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation
- Ellery July, Technical Lead, Northwest Area Foundation
- Beth Kanter, independent consultant
- Todd Koym, former Circuit Rider, W. Alton Jones Foundation
- Dirk Slater, Senior Circuit Rider, the Welfare Law Center's Low Income Networking and Communications Project (LINC)
- Jillaine Smith, Communications Capacity Building Program Director, Benton Foundation
- Jon Stahl, Program Manager, ONE/Northwest
- Michael Ward, former Senior Consultant, Techrocks

Staff of The California Endowment

- Alicia Daniels, Circuit Rider
- Diko Maybalian, Circuit Rider
- Jose Marquez, Program Officer
- Charles Williams, IT Manager

CompuMentor Staff

- Tom Dawson, Senior Program Manager, Healthcare
- Bennett Grassano, Associate Director of Development
- S.A. Kushinka, Healthcare Technology Consultant
- Mark Liu, Director, Program Development, Evaluation and Research
- Marnie Webb, Director of Consulting Services

Community Clinics Initiative (CCI), a joint project of Tides and The California Endowment, Staff and Consultants

- Nanette Falkenberg, independent consultant
- Ellen Friedman, Vice President, Tides Foundation
- Kathy Ko, Program Director, CCI

- Jane Stafford, Program Officer, CCI

Other Evaluations of NTAP Programs Reviewed for this Article

- “An Evaluation of the Child Care Center Technology Initiative (CCCTI),” conducted by Fred Setterberg for CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, 2002
- “Evaluating the Impact of ONE/Northwest,” conducted by Alison Han, 2000 (unpublished)
- “NPower Evaluation Report, 1999-2000,” conducted by e*valuation
- Unpublished evaluation of the Community Technology Foundation of California’s Capacity Building Initiative, 2003
- Welfare Law Center Low-Income Networking and Communications (LINC) Project report to the Ford Foundation, 2001

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