Connecting a Far-flung Board

New communication tools can help your board work together more effectively. Which ones are worth investing in?

By Corinne Waldenmeyer

Nonprofits with a national or international focus have a particular challenge: they need to assemble a board that may be geographically dispersed, yet is still capable of operating efficiently and cohesively. For the largest of these organizations, significant outlays for board training, travel, and communication will be a necessary—and no doubt acceptable—cost of doing business. But for smaller nonprofits, such expenditures are harder to make and harder to justify. Traditionally, these organizations have faced a Hobson's choice: Rely on a local board, likely to be limited in expertise and reach; or assemble a far-flung board, better able to serve the nonprofit's mission, but less well-situated to work effectively with one another.

Fortunately for the nonprofit committed to having a truly representative board, technology-based tools are now enabling individuals to surmount geographic barriers electronically. Like the members of corporate teams who routinely work together from remote locales, nonprofit boards can use those same tools to collaborate, communicate and even convene when they are not co-located.

Data Distribution and Sharing

Every board must have timely and cost-effective ways to distribute agendas, minutes, financial reports, research data, and other relevant information. For a far-flung board, the advantages of using e-mail to distribute such materials are obvious. There is no paper, no postage, no delay—and the same electronic document can be conveyed to every board member simultaneously. Even board members who may not be able to receive or send e-mail at home or at work will more than likely have ready access to it elsewhere. Other than the cost of an Internet Service Provider (ISP), which can be as low as $10 per month, e-mail is for all intents and purposes free.

Web-posting, another efficient way to distribute data, eliminates the need for cumbersome e-mail attachments and the glitches they sometimes cause. It does, however, require that the organization have a capacity for online storage—usually at its Web site. From that point of entry, a password-protected page can be created for board members only. Links can then be

added and deleted from that restricted page—or set of pages—allowing members to retrieve documents, download them, and perform whatever tasks they need to accomplish with the retrieved material. (The original document remains intact, even if a board member changes his or her copy.)

Web-posting also makes it easy to create an archive that veteran board members can use as a reference library, and that new board members can use to learn about the history and operations of the board. To implement such a Web-based system, the organization must own a domain name and maintain an ongoing account with a Web host. The annual cost for a domain name averages between $40 and $70, while a 500 MB account with a Web host runs between $14 and $20 per month.

Organizations with greater financial means might consider leasing online space from a data storage provider. Separate data storage units for each member are accessible over the Web, and typically "map" to the member's computer as an additional drive. If the online data storage system includes "vaulting" or "check-in/check-out" capabilities, everyone with permission can read and download files, but no more than one user at a time can actually work on the file-eliminating the risk that documents will be changed without the knowledge of another user. The average monthly cost for online data storage is about $6 per 100 MB. Space requirements differ from organization to organization, but an active, functioning board interested in maintaining an archive should plan to start out with about 500 MB. Including images in the storage space—-for photographs, event invitations, ticket design and the like—will increase the space requirement significantly.

For an organization whose connectivity requirements may not be limited to those of the board, a better solution may a Virtual Private Network (VPN). A VPN is a private network that uses the Internet to link remote sites or users. Instead of using dedicated, real-world connections (like a leased line), a VPN uses "virtual" connections routed through the Internet from the organization's private network to the board members' computers. VPNs provide remote access to internal network resources, which means that once the VPN software has been installed on the board members' computers, they will have access to the organization's computers and whatever data resides there.

This can be extremely useful for an organization whose board is actively involved in data-intensive activities, such as membership development. For example, a VPN would allow board members to access the organization's membership-development database to analyze donor giving potential, to

review and compare the results of membership drives that took place over a long span of time, or to perform similar functions. Because these activities are data-processing intensive, they would be difficult to conduct without a VPN and the access to internal systems that it affords. Without this technology, the board's membership development committee would require many hours of staff support solely for the purpose of data-processing and distribution.

A VPN can be implemented as a service, a hardware device, a software application, or some combination. For a small organization that wants to try out a VPN without investing in a lot of hardware, VPN services offer low start-up costs and short-term plans. They are sold by Internet service providers as well as independent contractors, and there are specialized contractors who offer VPN design, implementation, and management, starting at about $15 per month per user. However, managing a VPN can be a formidable task, and organizations without competent IT staff should probably avoid them.

A new alternative to VPN connections is something called the Secure Extranet Appliance (SEA), a device that centralizes the management of remote users through a browser interface. The SEA Tsunami (http://www.safeweb.com) has a Web-based interface intended to make it easier to use, more compatible across platforms, and more secure than traditional VPNs. It's also less expensive—about one tenth the cost of a traditional VPN.

Communications and Conferencing

With either e-mail or "instant messaging"—the ability to send a message to someone who is also online, and to conduct a written conversation with that person in a computer's messaging window—-board members can communicate with one another and the organization's staff in a virtually free environment. E-mail is fairly ubiquitous these days, and most computers today also come equipped with messaging capacity, the most common being AOL Chat and MSN Messenger.

For committee meetings and full board meetings, Web conferencing (with or without video and telephony) is far preferable to the traditional conference call, since it provides more opportunity for visual give-and-take. Not only does it allow users to share a "whiteboard" to present material and interact with other attendees, it also allows them to share documents and software

applications during the meeting. So, for example, financial projections can be presented and even adjusted during the meeting--to demonstrate specific variables, such as a 5% increase in direct-mail fundraising.

Web conferencing augmented by video (video Web conferencing) is a powerful enhancement for dispersed boards, especially when members may not have had the opportunity to meet each other in person. It provides all of the functionality of Web conferencing plus the ability to see conference attendees. Video Web conferencing can also be more cost-effective if the audio is integrated, which means that computers handle the entire communication process without the support of standard telephony.

Web and video conferencing tools range from simple and free to highly complex and extremely costly. Free software, such as Microsoft's MSN Messenger for messaging and NetMeeting for web video/audio conferencing, are easily available. NetMeeting allows text chat for up to eight people, the ability to work on a shared whiteboard with eight people, the ability to share an application with those same eight people, the capacity to send files to all eight people at one time, and the ability to use Internet telephony and videoconferencing with another person.

Upgrades to the Microsoft "freeware" but still cost-effective are various software-based audio/video applications that deliver a wide range of collaborative Web tools. Among the facilities integrated into these easy-to-use Web plug-ins are document, spreadsheet and presentation delivery, collaborative Web browsing, text chat, real-time application sharing and multi-point audio and video. In some applications, each of these tools is delivered through a Web conferencing "skin" that allows a participant to choose his or her own vantage point (presentation-centered, video-centered or mixed view) for the Web conference. The best of these products offer quality sound with echo cancellation and high-quality multi-point video.

But they don't come cheap: Expect price ranges between $10,000 and $30,000 for near-business quality applications.

A more affordable alternative is to use video Web conferencing service providers. With their own phone line to create a conference call and their own video camera to provide streaming video, users are "bridged" into the service providers' equipment. Users get all the same capabilities delivered by video Web conferencing software, but the cost is based on a per minute/per user charge (anywhere from 30 to 80 cents). For a one-hour board meeting with 9 attendees, that might amount to approximately $400. Not inexpensive, but

far less than the cost of an in-person meeting requiring long-distance travel—and far better for the organization than a disjointed conference call or no meeting at all.

There are two major reasons to use purchased or leased video web conferencing instead of freeware. First, the quality of the communications is significantly enhanced. (Anyone who has sat through a bad video Web conference knows how annoying those blurry faces and garbled voices can become after a while.) Second, only the more expensive applications offer high-quality multi-point video, which means that only by using leased or top-tier purchased software can you conduct a virtual meeting that truly simulates an in-person environment. Multi-point video encourages board members to give their undivided attention to the proceedings; it helps them pick up the visual clues that are an essential part of all human interaction, and that can make meetings more stimulating and productive.

The Bottom Line

At a minimum, every board member will need to have access to an up-to-date computer—that is, one equipped with 128 MB of RAM, processor speed greater than 760 MHz, audio and video capabilities, plus appropriate Internet browser and office application software. Machines meeting those specs are not hard to come by, and while prices vary from brand to brand (starting at about $500), they have become increasingly affordable.

In addition, board members will probably need a phone with headset and, for video Web applications, a video camera. (A good headset costs between $14 and $40 and a video camera costs between $70 and $300.) To use Web video conferencing, members will also require a robust Internet connection (cable modem, DSL, or 128 Kbps ISDN—average monthly cost for those is about $40).

Finally, for board members to take full advantage of these new electronic tools, they must be willing to invest the time and effort necessary to learn about and use them. As with all technological enhancements, an appropriate training program is indispensable. Without that, the technology will be underutilized—and instead of facilitating the work of board members, it will only serve to frustrate them.

More Than Technology

Deciding which new technologies to employ isn't the only challenge that a geographically dispersed board will face. Actually using those technologies raises a host of other issues. Here are a few things that board members need to think about when considering the possibility of becoming a "cyber-board."

Access

One of the obvious benefits of electronic communication is that it makes individuals more accessible to one another—at least in theory. But access to appropriate hardware or software may be restricted by board members' special circumstances. Individuals with disabilities, individuals who are economically disadvantaged, or individuals who live in remote areas without a developed communications infrastructure may find it considerably more difficult to gain access to the same technologies that other board members take for granted.

Economic and physical-access issues can sometimes be mitigated by borrowing the facilities of another, like-minded nonprofit organization located where the board member lives. Or by making arrangements with a local university, corporation, or even a "friendly" cyber-café that might be willing to support the organization by allowing the use of their equipment during specific times.

Infrastructure problems are more difficult to overcome, especially if the organization has an international mission. Keeping board members actively involved may require more resourceful solutions, such as the use of videotapes for disseminating visual information, or conducting sequential board meetings, followed by a special committee's "synchronizing" of ideas and votes.

Law

When teleconferencing first became popular, many boards were in a quandary as to whether votes taken or resolutions passed over the phone could be deemed "legal governance." Today, most states have cleared up these gray areas and do allow board meetings to be conducted via teleconference or the Web, as long as these means are specified in the organization's bylaws.

Still, boards that are planning a change from in-person meetings to telephonic and/or electronic meetings should ensure that the new mode

complies with applicable laws and regulations in their state of incorporation. They should also ensure that the changes are reflected in their bylaws.

Change Management

Boards that consider transitioning from a traditional, face-to-face meeting format to a telephonic and/or electronic format may find that the greatest resistance comes from within the board itself. As with all major changes in process—and for most organizations, this will be a major change—it's a good idea to identify who supports the change and who opposes it, and attempt to reach a favorable consensus before moving to implementation.

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