

Teknology

Filling the Gaps

How Two Nonprofits are Helping Other Nonprofits Help Others — and Getting People Connected

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photo by: Tshombe Roberts



Technology. We take it for granted nowadays — Internet, e-mail, networks, PDAs, cell phones, Treos ... they enable us, define us and make our lives easier. Without them, we'd be reduced to doing business the old-fashioned way and our lives would suffer because of it.

But what about the nonprofit sector — the single most unilaterally “disabled” sector of business — and the single most deserving? How are these organizations getting what they need in order to survive in this world of information on demand? Are they getting what they need and, if so, how are they getting it?

You might just be surprised.

BUILDING THE BRIDGES THAT REBUILD LIVES

What do you do when you're an organization like Samaritan House, which provides services to and manages programs for thousands each year? Not only does it exist thanks, in large part, to donations from the community, but it also relies on a very limited paid staff and a cadre of volunteers. How do you manage the information technology and infrastructure necessary to keep things status quo while, simultaneously, communicating your mission and vision to the community at large and soliciting for the funds necessary to keep things growing and serving? Do you even have the resources — financial and human — to build and maintain that technology and infrastructure?

Yes, you do.

Meet Michael Nachman and Anthony Young, chief information technologist and director of client development, respectively, for Atlanta's own TechBridge (www.techbridge.org). Founded in 2000 and affiliated with Seattle-based NPower (npower.org), TechBridge exists solely to ensure its clients' information technology needs are met not only today, but also are extendable and sustainable for tomorrow as well. With a staff of 16, eight of whom are on the service team, TechBridge helps its clients help their customers by providing its services and collective years of public sector expertise in manners and means that are affordable to even the most IT- and finance-challenged nonprofits.

On any given day, Nachman and Young do what many of us do: check e-mails, review accounts and meet with clients, as well as ensure clients' needs are being met not only from project perspectives, but also from mission and vision perspectives. But what differentiates “them” from “us” is that they made the cognitive choice to give up their public sector jobs — and the money and perks that go along with those jobs — in order to provide their collective expertise to those who serve the underserved.

“Shortages” are the biggest challenge nonprofits face with regard to day-to-day and overall operations, including shortages of headcount, time and money. Oftentimes, the “network administrator” is the person who attends to the laundry in the morning, serves the soup at lunch time, prepares the evening's meal in the afternoon and intakes clients in the evening — and then has 10 free minutes at some point in which to try to figure out why the facility's director can't access the inventory reports. Thanks to the TechBridge team, though, help is no more than a phone call or an e-mail message away.

“It's incredible how nonprofits are struggling in various areas, particularly with regard to technology aspects and making ends meet,” says Nachman. It's due to this recognition that TechBridge, along with associates inclusive of Accenture, strives to provide high-quality services that enable its clients not to have to worry about things like network failure, Web site functionality and access to inventory reports.

If you visit TechBridge.org, you'll notice something very quickly: it's accessible and not just from a human/computer interaction standpoint. Read the “People” section to learn more about the team members, visit the “Outreach” section to see how the organization gives even further back to the community through its initiatives and watch the video.

TechBridge is a very “real” organization staffed by very real people with expert skills. Moreover, these people have true commitments not only to affect positive change within the Atlanta community, but also to use their respective and collective brainpower to do just that. If you don't believe me, just take a look at the case studies — or better yet, stop by Samaritan House's Cafe 458 for a weekend brunch and experience for yourself the impact that TechBridge has had on this very unique and valuable resource to the community.

However, 16 people, albeit mighty ones, cannot serve the Atlanta community on their own. “A message needs to be broadcast so that people realize their help is needed and not just financially,” adds Nachman. “There are so many areas folks can help out in other than monetarily. Get involved with a nonprofit helping people or animals. Just find a cause and commit yourself to getting involved and embracing it.”

Consider this your broadcast, Techbridge, and consider this your call to action, Atlanta.