

# TechBridge

## Innovation through the Eyes of the Nonprofit



“Innovation through the Eyes of the Nonprofit”

By David McCoy  
Managing Vice President and  
Gartner Fellow Emeritus  
Gartner, Inc.  
[David.mccoy@gartner.com](mailto:David.mccoy@gartner.com)

### TechBridge Technology Innovation Award

Recognizing nonprofits, who want to leverage innovative technology to be more efficient and effective in serving the community

2009 Winner  
Tommy Nobis Center

2009 Finalists  
Habitat for Humanity – North  
Central Georgia  
Open Hand

“Innovation” is one of those rich words, a word that carries significant weight in our society. It’s a word we immediately recognize, even if we can’t properly define it. But who needs to define innovation? We all know what innovation is. We know what it looks like, where to find it, how to value it, and how to chase it. We can all point to examples of innovation as seen through our eyes: ultra-thin cell phones, shiny MP3 players, new engines in sleek new cars. We see products, ideas, services and toys... and we see innovation, the cool, sleek child of invention.

But what exactly does it mean to “innovate” within a nonprofit enterprise - an entity that does not follow the same dictates as does the commercial world of cars and audio products, of engines and toys? Does it even make sense to talk about innovation in the same breath with “nonprofit”? This is the catalyst behind this brief review of innovation as seen through the eyes of the nonprofit, and the first thing we must do is establish a shared understanding of the *act of innovation*.

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines “innovate” as: “*Introduce (something) for the first time; introduce as new.*” This definition matches the style of innovation we know from our consumer-driven behavior. Here, to innovate is to create and in the process of creation, build what has never been built before. Innovation is newness and newness begets demand – demand for noisy toys and revving engines. The OED has other entries for “innovate,” including one I particularly like: “*Change (a thing) into something new; alter; renew.*” As we will see, this rendering of “innovate” resonates in the world of the nonprofit. Here, the innovative act is tempered and adaptive; here, innovative activity is synonymous with renovation, renewal and transformation. “Transformation” is the critical word, one that helps us see innovation through the nonprofit’s eyes.

With this dual view of the innovative act we are better prepared to ask, “Does it make sense to talk about innovation in the same breath with ‘nonprofit’?” To answer this question, I reviewed 25 submissions for the 2009 TechBridge Innovation Award. My review was not a rigorous application of grounded theory and qualitative analysis, but I did look for acts of innovation among the submissions. I was not disappointed.

**To innovate by “introducing as new”** – Here is the bright-and-shiny view of innovation, and it was not lost on the nonprofits who submitted award applications. Applicants wrote of their plans for technology-driven innovation: software-as-a-service (SaaS), virtualization, portals, distance learning, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, collaboration, Web 2.0, virtual communities, cloud computing and other topics capable of stimulating the saliva glands of the average technologist. Having judged technology awards in the commercial world, I had no doubt some of the submissions for the TechBridge Innovation Award showed innovative merit. Even faced with rigorous commercial market standards, I believe 10 percent of the TechBridge submissions would attract attention for their innovative ideas. While the majority of the innovations proposed might not be considered as bright-and-shiny examples in the commercial world, within the nonprofit space there exists overwhelming proof of “introducing as new.” On this point alone, we can comfortably say that “innovation” and “nonprofit” can be uttered in the same breath.

**To innovate by altering and renewing** – The award submissions were overflowing with this second view of the innovative act – the act of altering, renewing and transforming. Among the 25 entries I reviewed, transformation was everywhere:

- 80 percent of the applicants were transforming core infrastructure: servers, networks and software systems.
- 88 percent were attempting to create stronger process visibility, providing renewed insight into the underlying operations of the enterprise.
- 40 percent of the applicants were transforming their disparate systems through the art of application integration, stitching together systems and services, users and partners, providers and volunteers.
- 76 percent were retooling, remodeling or replacing the core applications that power their critical efforts: inventory, service matching, volunteer tracking and financial.
- 92 percent were transforming core operations to increase productivity, performance, results, and impact.



# TechBridge

## Innovation through the Eyes of the Nonprofit

Here was the innovative act as seen through the less flashy, more mature lens. Here was innovation that was designed to transform the core of the nonprofit experience:

- Applicants were turning to the Web to generate revenue, deliver services, and provide volunteers, members and partners with a stronger sense of community.
- Applicants were using social computing and Web 2.0 concepts (for example, blogs, and applications like Facebook and Twitter) to reach new, younger audiences and to create an interactive forum for all.
- Applicants were seeking to rebalance activities and service levels, allowing volunteers to spend more time on the actual mandate of the nonprofit, and reduce the amount of non-productive time they spent entering data into a spreadsheet or copying paper reports.

Innovation is present among the nonprofit organizations. Innovation is not limited to richly-capitalized vendors or a few hot industries or any specific form of organization or business model. Innovation – regardless of definition – is a valid partner of the nonprofit. But, there is one important distinction, one that is apparent in our two definitions. The bright-and-shiny style of innovation is fleeting. Today's newest ultra-thin toy is a future antique to be sold on eBay. Today's brilliant discovery will soon be eclipsed by what comes next. The bright-and-shiny act of creation is a supernova that blazes and then dies, to be replaced by yet another brief flash of insight, investment and invention. Less explosive, the nonprofit's richer focus on transformative innovation - on renewal and "changing a thing into something new" - is actually the more substantial and more enduring act of innovation. An urban widow who returns to school, the former drug addict who is restored to society as a whole being, a world-class dancer who first pirouetted in a local arts program – these are the results of the nonprofit's innovative acts. This transformative innovation is life-changing, sustainable and meritorious. These results never fade, never become passé and never wane.

Finally, we see innovation through the eyes of the nonprofit. They see innovation as the productive use of assets to transform and renew your neighbors, our children, tomorrow's artists, today's homeless, the less fortunate and the underserved. Their eyes see innovation as more than the next bright-and-shiny toy. I have assured myself that the nonprofit understands the innovative use of technology. However, I believe their real innovations lie much deeper and much closer to the soul.

David McCoy is Managing Vice President and Gartner Fellow Emeritus at Gartner, Inc. The commentary provided here is Mr. McCoy's personal opinion and does not constitute a Gartner research position.

## Contact

Carrie Bates  
Director of Corporate Relations  
TechBridge  
Phone: (404) 879-5404  
Email: [cbates@techbridge.org](mailto:cbates@techbridge.org)  
Website: [www.techbridge.org](http://www.techbridge.org)



## About TechBridge

TechBridge is an Atlanta-based nonprofit with one mission - to help nonprofits use technology to increase capacity to serve our community. We focus on technology enabling nonprofits to focus on their mission. TechBridge has provided IT consulting, hosting and outsourcing services to hundreds of nonprofits, helping them harness the productivity gains long since enjoyed by the corporate sector. As an affiliate of the NPower Network, TechBridge has facilitated the donation of millions of dollars in Microsoft software and connects the needs of nonprofits with the skills and financial resources of the technology community. [www.techbridge.org](http://www.techbridge.org)