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Can Technology Fix The Social Services?

Five Points to Consider and Five Steps Forward

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Can Technology Fix the Social Services?

To meet the immense needs of the community, governments and social service agencies have looked to technology to assist them in delivering an array of services more efficiently. In Cuyahoga County, where the growing number of families in need are balanced against intense budgetary pressure, technology plays an important role in addressing community problems. Along with the opportunity to become increasingly efficient and effective, the introduction of new data management systems, and equipment such as tablets and smart devices, also demand new expertise and capacity. Upgrades to software and the purchase of new devices come with large capital investments, and their use gives rise to growing public concern over cyber security.

Such dynamic changes require a considered approach to implementing new technology throughout the industry. Administrators must acquire a broad understanding of the capacity for technology in Cuyahoga County and consider the opportunities and challenges of introducing new systems and devices into the field. While the human services community must be diligent in capturing the benefits of new technology, decision-makers must be thoughtful about the unique nature of the work and the impact of integration of new systems.

Cuyahoga County's Capacity for Tech

In November, 2013, The Center for Community Solutions conducted an online survey of youth-serving organizations in Cuyahoga County to assess their use of technology. There were 94 total survey responses, representing over 80 organizations, ranging from small neighborhood centers to large county entities. The results offer insight into the technological capacity of the community's social service agencies.

- All agencies reported having regular access to computers, and over 50 percent also use tablets, such as iPads; 70 percent use "smartphones" as a part of their regular work.
- Every agency stated that they have the ability to access the Internet, and 90 percent reported only occasional, rare, or no difficulties accessing the Internet. Almost 85 percent described their browsing speeds as fast.
- Respondents overwhelmingly reported having access to IT (Information Technology) support; however, 44 percent contract out for the service.
- Seventy-five percent of agencies have policies and procedures in place that address the use of technology.
- Three-fourths of those who responded reported their agency's technical capacity as good to strong, and over 50 percent measured their staff's technical savvy as good to very good.

Challenges and Strengths
Providers' Perspective

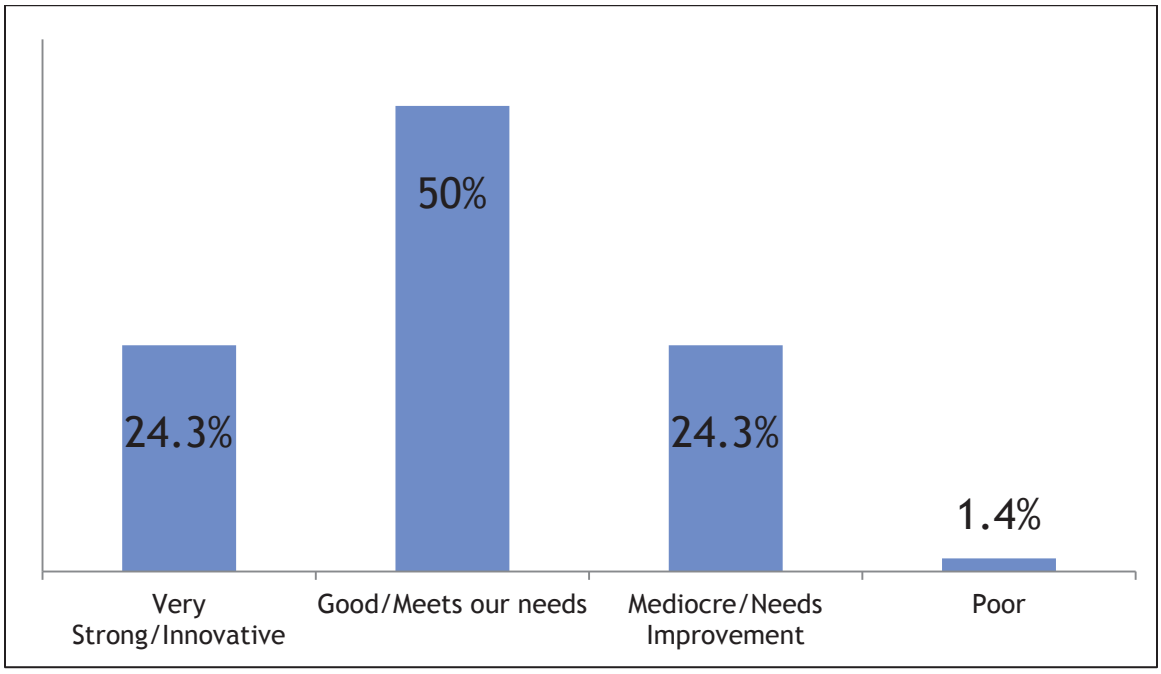
"Our services are provided in schools and community-based settings and it is sometimes difficult to get approval for usage of Internet connectivity. Also, some of the assigned spaces for our staff in the schools and community-based organizations do not have Internet connectivity readily available."

"Our manager/supervisor manages the direct staff that have to help measure the 'dosage' of activities, and the data entry person that needs to be sure it all gets in there correctly and is reported correctly. This kind of tracking is staff intensive. It is not the kind of task you can just stretch the job description of service delivery staff or program supervisors or managers to include data duties. A data person is key to be certain the data given is what the data system needs. In the best case scenario, the funders that begin to require this information will take into account that additional skilled administrative personnel is necessary."

"Our agency is truly a data culture. We track and use data in every department—not just direct services—to gauge performance, quality, and operational improvement. We are actively developing a case management software product and have recently completed a complete infrastructure refresh as part of a building expansion. Our IT is very current and on a lifecycle plan."

"It is becoming increasingly important for nonprofits to be proficient in Web-based communications—like social media, or Web-based e-newsletter sites. Each of these places requires data entry above and beyond our agency database for U.S. mailing addresses. With the digital client tracking also required by funding contracts, an 'export' function of contact data would be immensely helpful because it would eliminate the need to double, triple, or quadruple enter contact information into our agency's contact database."

How would you rate your agency's current technology capacity?



- Approximately two-thirds of the organizations who participated in the CCS poll reported that their agency uses at least one instance of case management software. Over three-fourths of those responses described their case management systems as good to very good.
- Direct service staff were cited as the most common users of the software; however, some agencies reported having staff designated specifically for data entry. Other organizations stated that many individuals at multiple levels are responsible for data entry.

Other responses discussed perceived technology needs, such as export functions for their software programs, client navigation mechanisms, and improved access to Broadband/Wi-Fi throughout the community. Effectively utilizing technology (computers, tablets, netbooks, etc.) when providing community-based services was noted as a particular challenge. Others noted their agency's need for case management software. One response detailed the staff capacity necessary to fully implement case management software. Some agencies applauded their use of technology, citing innovative practices and sophisticated systems.

To see the complete survey results, click here.

Comparisons to other fields

While the survey results suggest progress is being made in human service organizations, significant strides are necessary to fall in line with other industries in performance management and the use of technology. In comparison, the fields of health care and education have been far more innovative in their use of technology to improve service delivery. Though not without missteps, both fields have instituted a data culture, through the adoption of Electronic Medical Records and expansive district-wide Student Information Systems.

In Ohio, the Department of Education (ODE) has been consistently modernizing and retooling the Education Management Information System (EMIS), since its inception in 1989.[1] To meet the challenges of delivering high-quality education, ODE relies on the technology of their information system to collect, analyze, and share data from buildings and districts to the state agency. Data collected through the EMIS is then repurposed for functions which include state and federally mandated reporting, funding eligibility, and academic accountability. The Interactive Learning Report Card (http://reportcard.education.ohio.gov/Pages/default.aspx), which also relies on data collected through EMIS, offers parents, researchers, and policymakers access to annual education outcomes and demonstrates how the industry's commitment to interoperable data management systems can be beneficial to service delivery.

Innovation in performance management and technology use is equally apparent in health care, where the $19.2 billion Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health Act of 2009 (HITECH) legislated the nation's commitment to integrate technology into service delivery. The investment was designed to encourage the digitization of medical records into Electronic Medical Records (EMR). As a result, health care delivery in Northeast Ohio has seen a large-scale commitment to EMRs, with the region's largest hospitals committing to EMR-sharing programs such as My Chart and CliniSync. While challenges have occurred throughout this transition, these systems are designed to provide portable, comprehensive, and easy-to-access patient information, critical to providing accurate and quality care.

Such examples highlight the gap between human service organizations and similar industries, while encouraging a response that brings technology use more in line with other service delivery standards.

Initiatives to Enhance Technology are Critical to Improving Service Delivery

Cuyahoga is the most populous county in Ohio, and, accordingly, its social service system is vast. The scope of service delivery in the county has led to a great deal of complexity. Coordination and communication are challenges within the expansive system. Innovative, collective approaches to use technology to enhance collaboration and increase efficiency, at both the direct practice and community levels, should be explored.

As our survey reflects, most social service providers report using varying levels of technology in their day-to-day work, and have incorporated new technical tools into service delivery. Most providers seem to feel that keeping current with technology is important to their work to streamline systems and comply with requirements from funders. Currently, many agencies own case management software programs, allowing them to track their clients' demographics and

services within the confines of the organization. These advances improve agencies' abilities to maintain current records, decrease paper waste, and provide opportunities to track data more easily and accurately, leading to more coordinated and, presumably, effective services.

In addition to the use of computers and software programs, Cuyahoga County is benefiting from several recent initiatives. Recently launched by the State of Ohio, the new Ohio benefits portal (www.Benefits.Ohio.gov) enables those seeking to apply for Medicaid to apply exclusively online. The system is designed to interact with other government databases to verify income and other key information, avoiding delays in the process which may occur while county agencies wait on applicants to submit paper record verification. The system is expected to expand to include other benefit applications in the near future, such as child care and food stamps, eventually fully replacing a decades-old system laden with tech glitches. So far, reports indicate that the Website is running well.

The new system is critical for those who need help, and need it now, according to Joe Gauntner, administrator for Cuyahoga County's Department of Employment and Family Services (CDJFS). "A mother who wants to sign her child up for health care may not want to be deeply involved in working with a social worker—she would prefer the technology." The system, he explained, helps to make most efficient and least costly the cases that do not require a face-to-face interview, which should allow county systems to free up time to attend to the cases that need the most one-on-one help. While CDJFS is "nowhere near a paperless system," this important development should lead to increased efficiency in the benefits arena.

Direct service providers are also adopting innovative approaches to using technology in the field. Currently, Cuyahoga County is piloting a program to provide the use of tablets to employees of Children and Family Services. Cuyahoga County Councilman Dave Greenspan explains potential benefits, stating that staff will have "greater access to more immediate information instead of waiting for the social worker to get back to their office and type it into the system." This can prevent the loss of critical time in dealing with the highly sensitive situations that arise in child welfare. Overall, he notes, allowing people to share information more proactively will be of benefit to staff and consumers.

Points to Consider

While embracing advances in technology is critical to effective social service delivery, caution must be taken to improve the likelihood of success in these efforts. Substantive planning and careful implementation are vital.

1. Small Organizations Risk Being Left Behind

Small neighborhood houses and organizations may be at a significant disadvantage to utilize technology to the fullest in their social service work, which may hamper their ability to report on outcome data and, therefore, compete with large organizations for funding. Zulma Zabala, CEO at Cleveland's East End Neighborhood House, is concerned that there is a troubling unfunded mandate around the use of technology and tracking outcomes. She states, "When you do a grant for a national foundation, the form immediately has a line item that asks how much you will spend on marketing and technology updates. On a local level, there is no such thing—

they expect you will do that on your own—but they will still require massive technology and data collection requirements." She fears that "good organizations will be pushed out because they will no longer have the capacity to provide the outcome and data collection necessary to operate the programs with the requirements of funders." The ability to access advanced technology has proven to be an important variable when competing for funding.

> ***"It is a difficult place to be a non-profit right now."—Zulma Zabala, East End Neighborhood House***

When asked about this particular challenge, Greenspan agrees that this is an important question for the community, and County Council, to consider, but concedes that it hasn't been addressed yet. Funding technology upgrades at small nonprofits, particularly those not receiving county funds, will continue to be a challenge, and, he recognizes, could limit these organizations' abilities to fully participate in the social service network. "Could the county assist these organizations in receiving grant funds? Aggregate these organizations and facilitate a large scale grant request? We must explore different options."

2. Workforce Challenges

The human service workforce struggles to keep up with constant demands to adjust to changes in technology. Largely, colleges and universities have not adapted to fully prepare students for the realities of practicing in a tech advanced world. A local social worker and Cleveland State graduate, Amanda, explained, "I'm using technology more than I anticipated, because I wasn't aware of the multitude of databases I would use for one project. Teachers always said document, document, document, but there was no focus on systems and databases. "

Gauntner concurs. "It has been an increasingly automated environment. So it has been few and far between for a staff member to not have to learn a new system over five years." Zabala also worries that staff working in the field are suffering as technology requirements increase. She describes the generation divide that many working in the field have experienced. "Social workers with such valuable long-term experience in direct service are balancing the demanded ability not to just record, but to act as an IT expert. Their time is being consumed by data entry instead of spending valuable time with their clients. "And she fears that, "this will jeopardize some who wish to continue in this field. The changes and demands are happening very quickly with minimal support for capacity building."

Agency culture may interfere with the support and commitment necessary to implement new technology into everyday practice. Busy staff may be resistant to significant changes to their work methods. Also, front line staff are often not asked to participate in decisions made around the use of technology, minimizing their support of any changes. Inadequate training and technical assistance can lead to frustrated employees who see technology as a burden, rather than a means to improve practice and save time.

3. Complexities of Community-based Work

Community-based service delivery poses additional challenges when incorporating technology into daily work. A lack of regular access to Wi-Fi jeopardizes the ability to collect and store data while working in the field. Safety presents further concerns, as more social service workers are providing services using tablets, laptops, and smartphones. Additional precautions must be taken to keep staff safe as they carry expensive equipment, which could make them a target for theft.

4. HIPAA and Confidentiality

Client confidentiality and adherence to HIPAA adds to the complexity of technology integration. During a time of mounting concern over cyber security, measures must be taken to ensure the protection of clients' private, identifiable health information. Digital records offer the potential to be a safer alternative to paper records, which are inherently easier to misplace, more difficult to trace, and generally harder to protect. In order for these potential benefits to be realized, however, precautions must be taken to avoid theft and meet regulatory compliance. The encryption of emails containing sensitive client information, records tracking, and secure servers are just a few of the new measures that must be considered in a process that may prove to be safer but ultimately more complex.

5. Relationships with Clients May Suffer

An inevitable consequence of more automated systems, online applications, and service gateways is less direct contact with social service consumers. While mostly lauded as an improvement to the system, these changes significantly impact a social service worker's ability to develop rapport and build trust with clients—basic principles that guide the profession and are often associated with improved outcomes. Likewise, less direct client contact decreases the worker's abilities to assess and identify complimentary service areas that may benefit the client or the client's family. The extent to which all clients benefit from wraparound service delivery, and who is best held responsible for initiating these services, is up for debate. Gauntner believes that other social services are more appropriate for identifying wraparound services for families in need than CJFS, especially where there are very high caseloads. He also acknowledges that, "more and more, what we do has less to do with social work."

As with automated systems, the use of tablets, laptops, and smart devices in the field can also disrupt the relationship-building process. Meaningful interpersonal interactions require engaged participation. The introduction of electronics into that interaction can potentially hinder a provider's ability to stay engaged with their client. While providers are increasingly involved in real-time data collection on devices, the loss of eye contact and engaged body language can work against building a strong rapport with consumers. Similarly, the use of such devices may further perpetuate the consumer's perceived income gap with their provider and further strain the relationship-building process. This dynamic poses an important challenge for the field.

Steps Forward

Multiple opportunities exist to improve and enhance the ways that groups in Cuyahoga County deliver social services, and technology is critical to these efforts. "The more tools we can provide our social service personnel in doing their job at a level that is unseen right now would be beneficial," says Greenspan.

1. Communication and Collaboration Are Key

Increased communication and collaboration regarding technology in social services are necessary to generate meaningful system change. As the reach of government services and private nonprofits overlaps considerably, success is contingent upon the involvement of both systems. Zabala envisions "a coalescing of the minds in which everyone comes to the table—agency directors, funders, and especially neighborhood leadership—to clearly identify what is going to be asked for and needed, and how we are going to meet these requirements with support."

2. Better Prepare the Workforce

Furthermore, we must work to improve the ability for social service professionals to more easily adapt to rapid changes in technology impacting the field. In order to do so, local colleges and universities would be wise to respond with course material specific to case management systems, documenting billable units, and understanding the complexities of delivering social services in a technologically advanced world. County-sponsored trainings would be beneficial to provide additional opportunities to increase the tech savvy of the workforce.

3. Research Technical Capacity and Digital Divide Locally

Additional research into the technical capabilities of both the social service workforce and consumers could be of benefit. While it is a widely held belief that service delivery must keep up with a tech savvy consumer base, more information is necessary to support decision-making in this regard. Amanda, cited earlier, explained that the high-risk, low-income populations she works with are "not as tech savvy as you would think. A smartphone is easy and straight forward, but when you move them to the PC, they struggle to understand the simplest of programs." The digital divide continues to exist, but to what extent requires further investigation.

4. Improve Access

Expanding the availability of Wi-Fi on a county-wide level would be one step toward improving access for low-income populations, and would also improve the ability of community-based providers to use technology in the field.

5. Increase Funder Support

Acknowledgement by funders of the extensive costs and human resources capacity required to introduce and effectively use technology could lead to greater, more innovative use by all providers. Financial support of these endeavors may support improved client outcomes in the long run. Additionally, funders may be in a unique position to move the county forward in the use of tracking common metrics at a community level using technology.

Technology Can Help Advance Collective Impact

Ultimately, advances in technology may enable Cuyahoga County to move forward collectively in improving the lives of those in need. While agencies frequently track basic demographics, as well as dosage and length of service, many organizations struggle to connect this information to improved results for their clientele, and more importantly, to community-wide change. There is currently no uniform way to track clients and services, or progress toward goals. Collective impact involves the joining of organizations to work toward a common agenda for greater social change. Successful collective impact is contingent upon identifying community goals and having a shared agenda and metrics, and is heightened through the use of a common tool for collecting data and outcomes.

In the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (2011), John Kania and Mark Kramer, who introduced the concept of collective impact, describe why a shared measurement system is critical for success:[2]

> Developing a shared measurement system is essential to collective impact. Agreement on a common agenda is illusory without agreement on the ways success will be measured and reported. Collecting data and measuring results consistently on a short list of indicators at the community level and across all participating organizations not only ensures that all efforts remain aligned, it also enables the participants to hold each other accountable and learn from each other's successes and failures.
>
> It may seem impossible to evaluate hundreds of different organizations on the same set of measures. Yet recent advances in Web-based technologies have enabled common systems for reporting performance and measuring outcomes. These systems increase efficiency and reduce cost. They can also improve the quality and credibility of the data collected, increase effectiveness by enabling grantees to learn from each other's performance, and document the progress of the field as a whole.

Furthermore, common software systems, or software programs that "speak" easily to one another, would allow agencies to track consumers of health and human services as they move or transition to new services and to best identify and support their needs. A common case management software system can act as a portable social service record, with benefits similar to those which an Electronic Medical Record is able to provide. Social Worker Amanda stated, "Shared information would make my life a lot easier. If I knew a student [client] was receiving therapy, I wouldn't be referring him to duplicate services, or I would have some insight on the full host of benefits and services he was receiving." Many clients are receiving a wide variety of services from multiple social service agencies. Frequent moves, reflecting the transitory nature of many high-risk families, are a significant issue hindering continuity of care for consumers of social services.

Though initial investments of time and money are necessary, social workers and other personnel will often report that, once fully implemented, using technology in the field saves valuable time and increases efficiency. In addition to using software to alleviate burdensome

data collection processes and linking efforts to outcomes, there are multiple opportunities to integrate technology into the social services. The use of online assessment tools, Internet-based mental health services, and sharing resources and creating communities via social media are just a few examples. Supervisors and managers can utilize performance management software functions to monitor caseloads and hold staff accountable for their work, while identifying gaps in service delivery. Many of these tools are underutilized.

Technology offers multiple opportunities to begin to standardize reporting required by funders, eliminating onerous and duplicative reporting deadlines for providers. The more we can move in the direction of tracking data and outcomes collectively, the less of a burden is placed on organizations reporting to multiple funders. This would also allow funders and administrators to aggregate data from across programs, not only to compare and contrast, but to examine collective impact and identify trends or emerging concerns, as well as gaps in services. The comprehensive use of a standard reporting tool could position the community to create a national model for effective collaboration, extending our reputation as a leader in the social service world.

While always staying mindful of ethical considerations, we do a disservice to the vulnerable populations we serve when we discount the impact of technology in social services.

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[1] The Ohio Department of Education
http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Data/EMIS

[2] Brown, Kania and Kramer, Collective Impact. SSI Review Winter 2011
http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/collective_impact

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