

“Community-Initiated Technology as a Regional Organizing Tool”

Presented by Barbara C. Peschiera,
Executive Director, Columbia Foundation,
PO Box 1094, St. Helens, Oregon
503-397-1139 or bcp@columbia-center.org

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Abstract

This paper starts with the assumption that the Digital Divide is a very real problem. It submits that due to the nature of the Internet, local communities are the strongest vehicle for ending the current disparity. However, the presentation focuses largely on a collaborative framework for building community because these organizing tools are critical to the success of local telecom projects. Furthermore the paper gives examples of how the Internet furthers the fundamental principals of our democracy and is in fact essential to functioning in society. The presentation will provide philosophical and historical background about Columbia Foundation as it implemented a community telecommunications project, and shows examples of the results. The presentation also will discuss concerns that advocating collaboration and learning values is critical for communities to best benefit from the advantages of having access. The paper concludes that just as technology is a community-building tool, community is a technology-building tool. Through this approach, we are using technology to build skills that are necessary to responsibly embrace technology.

Introduction:

The emphasis of this paper will be on the process of organizing collaborative community projects. It will outline how closely community development is linked with technology. Because of the similar natures of telecommunications, the Internet specifically, and the dynamics of local communities, this paper will conclude that successful telecommunication projects should emerge from a community level. A grassroots approach not only assists with the sustainability of such projects, but also allows appropriate content to arise, and when combined with community organizing processes allows for technology users to enjoy the benefits of telecommunications with a sense of social responsibility.

Assumptions:

It is helpful to understand that this paper is in part based on several assumptions about the telecommunications environment.

The first assumption is that a discrepancy, popularly referred to as the “Digital Divide,” in fact exists. Studies have found that urban and affluent communities enjoy a far greater level of technical access, infrastructure and support than do rural, remote and low-income communities.

A second assumption is that technology is a tool that enables communities to achieve larger goals. Columbia Foundation does not value technology as an end in its own, but as a tool for achieving greater goals such as education, commerce, and participation in community.

Thirdly, technology allows for traditional geographic, political and demographic barriers to be erased. As such, technology allows a process of reshaping community.

Finally, it should be noted that the Internet is inherently chaotic, decentralized and anarchistic. It is a medium and a strata of information that evolves through the choices of its many creators.

Affecting Change:

One of the Columbia Foundation’s premises of existence is a motto of “Expose Yourself to Change.” It is our belief, that communities will be most successful if they assertively embrace change. Either communities will embrace change, or change will embrace them. However, Columbia Foundation has learned that building community cooperation is not a simple task.

Before outlining some of the lessons Columbia Foundation has learned, several qualifying points should be made:

- Columbia Foundation learned about community building as its project unfolded. We did not follow a model, nor did our leaders have direct, personal experience in such a project. It could be said that we had more guts than brains.
- Similarly, the lessons learned were identified in hindsight. We did not consciously capture the lessons in the midst of the process.
- Columbia Foundation is still quite young, having just formed in 1995, so our conclusions are early indicators. We may find that our perspective will change over the next decade.

Community Building Lessons:

1. Prior to launching a broad-based community project, organizers may want to be mindful that no ready-made formulas exist.
2. Relationships are the heart of community building. When organizing a community project, we typically invite all the “stakeholder” groups to participate. While that may be necessary, you may find that the most lasting connections are in fact one-on-one relationships that you develop with individuals in the stakeholder groups.
3. Relationships require flexibility and respect for diversity. As is the case with any marriage, community-building relationships also require flexibility and a genuine respect for different viewpoints.
4. Meaningful community organizing efforts will not develop rapidly. Be patient; building relationships takes time.
5. As difficult as it may be to consider the opinions of naysayers, it is valuable in the long run to listen to opposing viewpoints. Your detractors generally have concerns that will need to be addressed at some point in the process, and their concerns are certainly held by others in the community. The more you can encourage the opponents to express themselves, the sooner you can understand the concerns and incorporate them in your process.
6. You can never say thank you enough. Community projects generally involve individuals who contribute time and expertise because they care about their community. These same

people are generally overtaxed. Recognize and appreciate contributions. It will encourage individuals to stay involved.

7. Even though community organizing takes time, heart, sweat, and at times may hardly seem worth the effort, don't give up. Small steps are big steps, even though they may not appear to amount to much at the time.
8. Create opportunities for the community to view its own success. Public relations is an important aspect of community efforts. Not only do such efforts promote your project, they also provide an opportunity to build a culture of success. The more often the community perceives itself as successful, the more likely the perception will in fact become a reality.
9. If a community project is genuinely valued by a base of the community, the less reliant the project is on certain individuals. Original leaders may drop off or become less involved, but new leaders will emerge. Genuine community building becomes self-perpetuating. The timelines and approaches for achieving goals may change with new leadership, but the project will be completed.
10. The definition of community often includes a sense of place or identity. If a community project involves relationship building, a sense of connection is possible in communities that trust in relationships.
11. Finally, Columbia Foundation found that it began with a clear vision, based on a commonly shared value, that was perpetuated with a physically visible measure of progress. The combination of articulating a vision that perpetuates a community value through a physical means, is important to maintaining and building momentum.

The Collaboration Framework:

Sometime after Columbia Foundation concluded the process of building Columbia Center, we learned of an organization called the Chandler Center for Community Leadership, located in Central Oregon. Among the work underway at the Chandler Center, was the development of a framework for collaboration in which a number of critical elements were identified. The Collaboration Framework is a useful tool in launching and continuing community-based projects.

The framework is based on the philosophy that our country (USA) was founded on a sense of self-determination, but that declaring independence is not enough to achieve results. The collaborative framework puts forth that projects need vision, leadership and a respect for individual viewpoints. Furthermore, projects that achieve their vision have a common framework for success that allows the process to move from dialogue to decision-making.

A simplified summary of this common framework is strikingly similar to the lessons Columbia Foundation learned. The critical elements are:

- To assess the community environment—This refers to the process of identifying a problem and would be the first step in launching a collaborative process.
- Vision—A vision for solving a problem is generated through the community assessment. This requires identifying the ROOT causes of a problem through an inclusive process that will result in a community action plan. The vision must remain prominent throughout the process.
- Outcome—An outcome is more than a goal. It is a community's response to a complex problem. It grows from the vision. For example, if the community problem were child abuse and a vision would be for all children to be safe, an outcome may be to build a center where abused children could live and receive help.

- Evaluation and Research—This is a process of gathering information about other similar projects. The more specific and comprehensive, the better for the process.
- Community Development—This is possibly the most critical point in the framework. It is at this point where the community agrees to solve the problem. It is at this point, where the community takes responsibility for achieving the vision. This includes a process of building partnerships and recruiting volunteers. This also includes a process of understanding the strengths, uniqueness and challenges of a community.
- Leadership—This encompasses the entire organizational structure that is proposed for completing the vision and refers to more than several individuals. The leadership configuration will be shaped by the vision and by the community development process. This includes asking for help and building a pragmatic working structure. One should accept that problems and turf battles will emerge and that organizers will get in over their heads. Having a core of leaders will ensure work moves forward. Reminding participants of the vision is helpful. A base of leadership leverages resources and raises the energy level.
- Developing Resources—The resources will emerge from the leadership structure. This element refers to building the community's capacity to share leadership to achieve the vision and solve the root problems.
- Sustainability—The true measure of success rests in the sustainability of a project. The issue of sustainability must be addressed early in the process. This rests in the community's ownership in the entire process and creates a culture that sustains ownership in the solution. The sustainability emerges from the vision, the outcome, the community development, leadership and the process of developing resources. Sustainability comes from within the integrity of the process, as opposed to an external source. It is the community's ownership that leverages other results into the future.

Two observations about this framework are: 1) It is a circular process, not lineal. Each of the elements are iterative. And 2) It is likely that a community activist who is not traditionally associated with the problem will emerge during the process. It is the passion of that advocate that will bring the process to success.

Technology assists communities in affecting change

In Columbia County, the community identified needs and solutions through a facilitated process. In a series of focus group meetings, community leaders identified and prioritized needs and trends without mention of technology, and then incorporated the tools of technology in the process of solving problems.

The focus groups concluded that: "Columbia County has an increasing problem of fragmentation and wants to increase the community's capacity to determine and influence its future."

Furthermore, the group concluded that: "Technology is a tool that will preserve the independent, rural lifestyle valued by the community."

It was through the focus group process, that the community created a philosophy that embraced technology. The participants themselves demystified technology, which prior to this, had generated some fear.

Technology has become essential

Columbia Foundation believes that access to technology is now an essential tool for functioning in community. Furthermore, community-based technology extends the fundamental principles of democracy.

Consider the First Amendment that guarantees free speech. Telecommunications is a vehicle of expression.

Consider the Bill of Rights, which states that “The enumeration of certain rights shall not be construed to deny or disparage others.” One could extend this sentiment regarding telecommunications as a goal of providing access to all citizens.

The Thirteenth Amendment provides for “Equal protection under the law,” which would emphasize all citizens’ rights to government safeguards.

And of course the Civil Rights Act of 1963 states that we will have “equal protection in education.” Again, without universal access to telecommunications, many students would not have equal opportunities in schools.

Telecommunications is as powerful for communities as the Industrial Revolution and the Civil Rights movement.

Unfortunately, we know wide disparities to access exist. Internet traffic doubles every 100 days, but 80% of computers worldwide are in 10% of the countries. This indicates that not only do disparities exist within communities, entire countries are isolated from the fundamental applications that telecommunications allows.

Columbia Foundation

Columbia Foundation was formed in 1995 after a Columbia County rancher expressed a desire to build a new public library in St. Helens. She felt St. Helens had a minimal library because the community had not placed a high value on the library. She did not want to build a new library only to have nobody use it. Consequently she pulled together 20 community leaders from businesses, schools and civic organizations, forming an ad hoc group called the Columbia Roundtable.

The Roundtable discussed trends and problems facing Columbia County. Its members discussed the fact that public schools were slow to integrate technology into the curriculum, and that voters were consistently rejecting bond measures to boost funding for schools. The Roundtable discussed the changing economic paradigm. The community was losing its historical rural, timber and river-related economic base and was becoming a bedroom community for employees working in urban areas. The Roundtable desired for collaborative community projects that would build synergy as a self-perpetuating force. Furthermore, it discussed that many residents felt they had little control over the community’s destiny. The Roundtable viewed volunteerism as a sign of a healthy community.

It identified technology as a tool to assist in resolving many of these issues. Clearly technology would augment learning resources provided in schools and libraries. The members also concluded that technology would promote dialogue about the future of the community. In addition, technology would serve as a mirror through which the community could view itself. Finally, the technology would provide an image of the community that could be displayed outwards.

The Roundtable decided to accept a \$1 million donation from Diane Kem and committed to raising another \$1 million. It then got busy organizing working committees, designing the building, planning for construction and raising money. The Roundtable reached its financial goals after 18 months, primarily from Columbia County families and businesses. It was a project that conflicted with the community's prior sense that it could not succeed at such an ambitious endeavor. Columbia Center opened in May 1996.

In short, referring to the Collaborative Framework, the Roundtable identified a series of problems and identified that a community-based technology center co-located with the public library and community meeting rooms, would be appropriate outcomes to solve the problems. Furthermore, they created a vision of a community that would use the tools of technology to determine its future and to embrace change.

Learning Organization Values

Another factor in the Columbia Foundation's approach to community-initiated technology access, is the Foundation's operational values as a "Learning Organization." We view ourselves as a learning organization and we promote those values throughout our community involvement. It is our goal that this perspective will be adopted by many community leaders. One facet of the learning organization is specific tools of communicating, managing meetings and working with groups.

A second facet is to adopt certain values. Among those values are:

- Encouragement to ask for help. Asking for help is not viewed as a weakness. We reward those who have the integrity to ask for help when they know they need it.
- Respecting others learning, and acknowledging that various people are on different levels of a learning curve. It is all of our's responsibility to assist and support each other as we learn new things.
- Mistakes are accepted. A critical element of learning new things is to encourage people to tackle new challenges. Often, mistakes are made. We believe that if we stop to analyze what we learned from our mistakes, that we will learn from them, improve our abilities, and not repeat them.
- Contain and discuss tension. It is often uncomfortable to feel tense and it is easiest to disregard one's tension. However, we encourage people to feel the tension very consciously and to analyze what it is about a situation that causes it.
- Push outside your comfort level. It is our belief that when an individual feels tension, or discomfort, that they are learning. Conversely, if they are at ease, that they are not learning. We encourage our associates to remain in a state of discomfort.

The learning values not only assist us as we embrace change as a community and as we learn to collaborate together, they also are relevant to a community that is learning to use technology. By acknowledging the discomfort that comes with learning to use technology, it demystifies some of the fear that is associated with new challenges

Our Mission

As a result of the conversations convened by the Columbia Roundtable, the following mission statement was adopted:

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“To create and nurture an environment which values life-long learning and building community relationships.”

It is clear that the Foundation’s mission extends beyond technology, but it also is clear how technology is a tool that advances our larger mission.

Once our Columbia Center building was complete and our technology center was ready to open, we adopted a mission statement specifically for the Columbia Technology Center. The mission is:

“To provide our community with a window to a wider world by enabling learning opportunities within an ever-changing environment”

Again, our goal in operating the technology center has been to emphasize the people who use the technology and their learning needs.

Results of the Process

The technology center opened in May 1996, offering computer training, a public computer lab, Internet Service, webpage hosting, as well as emphasizing the benefits of library usage and managing the public meeting rooms.

Since we opened, we have served a significant portion of the community.

- 2,500 Dial-up Internet Accounts.
- 2,000 students took computer classes in 1998
- Computer lab used as much as 700 hours/month.
- 400 hours of volunteer work contributed each month.
- Extensive community website designed by volunteers in the community.
- 12,000 people used meeting rooms in 1998.
- Library usage has tripled since relocating to Columbia Center.

A sampling of our website illustrates some of the ways that community technology projects achieves the larger goals of community building. The site was developed by volunteers in an organic process, where the individuals involved, developed pages that had the content and design that they were interested in. Our website is distinguished by its lack of cohesion, and while I grow impatient with that appearance, I also understand that it is just as chaotic and decentralized as the Internet itself. Perhaps that is an inherent element of community technology.

Among the pages to sample are:

- The Columbia Technology Center page, showing our hours and services.
- Our Computer Class page, showing curriculum and schedule of classes.
- The prominent link to Portland Community College’s distance learning department, with which we cooperate to encourage Columbia County residents to access college classes conveniently.
- The Columbia County frontpage, with the links to activities, clubs, government, utilities, banking, education, recreation and history, land-use regulations.
- A link to a schedule of Public Meetings (created by a local newspaper).
- The weekly straw poll: An unscientific, but locally organized measure of public opinion on a variety of issues from international to local.
- St. Helens Fire District page where burn permits can be acquired on-line.
- A page of Job Search and Job Application sites.

- A page developed by a local shoe store, one of the first local businesses to enter into on-line sales.
- Public Swim pool page with classes, schedules, membership rates.
- Tide Tables for Columbia County, which was requested early in our planning process.
- The community theater's page, with its performance information, administrative information, children's theater and other information.
- A page about recycling services, which was of interest to one member of the webteam.

These pages illustrate how technology can be used to access government services, participate in democracy, conduct commerce, access education and community services, or to participate in community projects and events.

The Case for Communities to drive Telecommunication Projects

The fact that telecommunications is chaotic and decentralized brings to mind a quote by Mario Andretti, a professional race car driver: "If you think you're in control, you're just not going fast enough."

Compare the rapid pace of change to a sad fact that large bureaucracies are too centralized to drive telecommunication projects. Refer to Don Mazziotti, Oregon's Chief Information Officer, who stated recently that "Oregon spends \$1 million a day on telecommunications and has no plan."

In contrast, communities are well-positioned to move forward with flexibility if they have the capacity to organize themselves. Communities know their needs and are capable of designing projects and solutions. Communities must first see the importance of telecommunications and how technology factors into the quality of their participation in community, ranging from education to commerce to government services. Communities need the freedom to evolve their telecommunication plans. However, local leadership is critical to their success. The organizing tools and collaboration skills are critical to communities ability to succeed.

Conclusion

From a learning organization viewpoint, communities may want to remember the words of Bill Myers, director of the Internet Council, when he said, "Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good." It could be said that the perfect is an unattainable goal when it comes to community technology projects.

The model and approach of Columbia Foundation has been successful because the Foundation relies on three components: Community strength and support; Learning Organization values; and Technology.

Because access does not equal capacity, the community building is important. Telecommunications allows us to access information, but do we know what to do with it and, how to use it responsibly? Communities need the freedom inherent in telecommunications to develop their agendas. By combining community-building with implementing telecommunications, we are using the technology to build the skills that are necessary to responsibly embrace technology.

Finally, just as technology is a community-building tool, community is a technology-building tool.