CultureSource 2022 Digital Cohort Study

Image courtesy of Class Act Detroit

Final Report of 8 Bridges Workshop

December 2022

Introduction

CultureSource was founded in 2007 to serve as a vehicle for connection and capacity-building for arts and cultural organizations in the seven counties of Southeast Michigan. To serve its member organizations and their communities, CultureSource has developed and delivered a varied menu of programs over its history, responding to the changing contexts, opportunities, and needs of the time.

For the past five years, CultureSource has prioritized the growth of digital capacity among its membership of 170 organizations. CultureSource is one of the only intermediaries and service organizations in the cultural sector in the United States to do so. Its work in this realm includes grants for digital equipment, consulting for members by its Technologist in Residence, workshops and programming related to digital skill-building, and research to understand and amplify the digital work and opportunity gaps its members face as they strive to meet audiences where they are, online. Much of this work has been generously funded by the Gilbert Family Foundation.

CultureSource Executive Director Omari Rush addressed the need for investment in digital capacity in his essay for the recent National Endowment for the Arts study, Tech as Art: Supporting Artists Who Use Technology as a Creative Medium.

"I offer a humble provocation for the nation's arts sector to proactively invest in administrative and programmatic digital cultures. I share this as a local arts agency executive director, state arts council chairman, and steadfast ally to creative people. If we do not engage these developments, we block organic evolution, invite future forced adaptation (likely painful), and deny access to both preparation and beauty."

Among the NEA study's conclusions and recommendations was that much deeper investment is needed in the technical infrastructure and expertise of cultural organizations. Cultural organizations need help to navigate the increasingly digital communications, entertainment, and operational environment. This study is one contribution to the field's understanding of the ways cultural organizations are doing this work, every day. We are grateful for the learning this study presents and for the generosity of participants who candidly shared their current challenges and successes as they strive to utilize available digital tools and platforms to expand their community service.

Image courtesy of CultureSource

Background

CultureSource launched its Digital Access for the Arts (DAAP) program in early 2021, after experimenting with programs and services responding to the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. DAAP seeks to improve the digital maturity of cultural organizations across the Detroit Metro. Gilbert Family Foundation now supports DAAP; previous support was provided by the Rocket Community Fund. The program is multi-faceted and includes workshops and consulting services for constituents, research, and funding. In 2022, CultureSource made grants to members for their digital work; added a "technologist-in-residence" who can help member organizations through one-on-one consultations; and researched and evaluated these efforts to determine how CultureSource can best advance the work. The multi-year nature of the Gilbert Family Foundation's support has enabled CultureSource to support important incremental progress and compounded the impact of its investments.

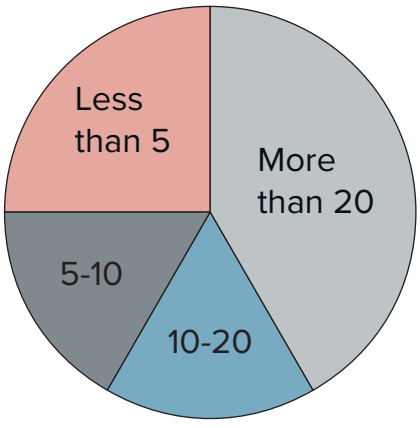
In late 2021, CultureSource conceived of a cohort research project that would follow and document the digital efforts of some of its members as they emerged from pandemic-related closures and navigated the ever-more digital landscape of creative activity and civic life. The study was intended to be a window into the digital practices of these organizations during difficult and uncertain times. When the study was designed, the Omicron variant of COVID was just starting to create renewed questions about how cultural organizations might respond to the pandemic's third year. CultureSource particularly wanted to understand how the cohort members made decisions about their digital work; how and why they set their priorities; which obstacles prevented them from executing their plans; and how they addressed those obstacles. CultureSource engaged as its research partner 8 Bridges Workshop, a St. Paul, Minnesota-based consulting firm that has also worked with CultureSource on past digital-related projects.

Methodology

CultureSource invited a group of its member organizations to participate in this study in early 2022. It sought to represent a range in disciplines, communities served, budget sizes, and locations within Southeast Michigan. When an organization agreed to participate, CultureSource and 8 Bridges asked it to nominate a primary contact person, who would answer research questions and attend check-in meetings with 8 Bridges. For seven of the twelve participating organizations, that representative was the organization's leader. For the other five, the representative was a staff member whose job responsibilities included digital work. Their titles ranged from marketing director to director of arts and culture to director of innovation. Participating organizations each received a stipend of $1,000 in appreciation for the time spent on this project.

The study began with a written questionnaire and Zoom check-ins with the organizations in February and March 2022. The initial questionnaire was broad, seeking information about each organization's general operations, digital programming, plans for the future, and the obstacles to those plans. The 8 Bridges team then checked in with each organization about once per month through October, with two more conversations held by Zoom and four additional written questionnaires. Each of the questionnaires focused on a specific topic identified in 8 Bridges' research. Questions for both the written questionnaires and the Zoom interviews were developed by 8 Bridges with input from CultureSource.

In November 2022, CultureSource convened the entire cohort for a virtual meeting as a capstone to the research. 8 Bridges presented its preliminary findings and invited feedback and discussion. The cohort representatives also spoke with each other about their work and their current challenges. Insights from the convening are incorporated throughout the findings and recommendations in this report.



Cohort organizational staff size

About the cohort

- Disciplines represented include museums, theater, visual arts, dance, and presenting organizations
- Communities served include children, seniors, people with disabilities, and people of color
- Most (about three-quarters) were not doing significant digital work before the pandemic
- Asked to rank their technical capacity for digital work on a scale from 1, "far behind" to 5, "well above average," the average cohort response was 2.8 at the start of the research project

Participating Organizations

The following organizations and representatives participated in the 2022 cohort.

Arab American National Museum
Diana Abouali, director
arabamericanmuseum.org

A2SF
Michael Michelon, executive director
a2sf.org

The Carr Center
Lumumba Leon Reynolds, technical director
thecarrcenter.org

The Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History
Leslie Tom, chief sustainability officer
Jennifer Scott, former staff
Germaine Williams, former staff
thewright.org

Class Act Detroit
Rashard Dobbins, executive director
classactdetroit.org

Detroit Opera
Matthew Principe, director of innovation
detroitopera.org

Eisenhower Dance Detroit
Allison Armfield, marketing director
eisenhowerdance.org

Hannan Center
Richard Reeves, director of arts and culture
hannan.org

Living Arts Detroit
Laura Scales, executive director
livingartsdetroit.org

Paint a Miracle
Shelly Propson Tyshka, executive director
paintamiracle.org

Planet Ant Theater
Darren Shelton, executive director
planetant.com

Sidewalk Detroit
Ryan Myers-Johnson, executive director
sidewalkdetroit.com

In their own words

Listen to brief excerpts from July 2022 cohort interviews here, where participants discuss lessons learned, obstacles, and the conditions making their work easier and harder.

Findings

The COVID-era pivot to hybrid operations and programming revealed the need for better operational software

As a result of operating pressures during the pandemic, many cohort organizations sought out better software systems during 2022.

- Several cohort members told 8 Bridges that the initial phase of the pandemic, when they could not produce in-person events, led them to examine their operations in the hope of becoming more efficient, either to conserve resources or to use the time productively.
- For others, having their teams switch to work-from-home or hybrid made them focus on the systems they used for staff collaboration.
- Creating digital events in the early days of the pandemic made some organizations reconsider the systems they used to track registrants and attendees, and bolster the ways those systems integrated with their methods of managing mailing lists and tracking donors.

CRM systems were a particular pain point for several cohort organizations.

- When 8 Bridges asked whether CRM systems were an obstacle for organizations' digital work, half responded that their CRM system was a "key obstacle," with another 30 percent citing it as a minor obstacle.
- For most of those organizations citing operational software as a key obstacle, the difficulties lie not only in identifying a system that will best meet their needs without extensive customization, but also in affording the cost of customized software if that seems to be the best course of action.
- Time for implementation was also cited as an obstacle. Staff members would need to learn to use the new program and embed its use into organizational processes.

Pre-COVID, more than one cohort member made do with some paper systems. By the end of the study period, all organizations had learned that upgrades for smoother operations are achievable and had made changes in their approaches.

The cohort spent significant time seeking out how-to guides and standard practices for digital work

For each digital task, whether operational or programmatic, the cohort members described many small steps that each required an informed decision. For example, a livestream involves choosing equipment; determining camera angles; selecting lighting, sound, and software for managing these inputs; promotion through social media; a registration system; a database to hold audience members' information; and more. Finding an approach for each of these steps aligned with the organization's work patterns and standards for quality takes significant time.

Cohort members sometimes described being overwhelmed by the prospect of combing through these choices. "You can spend days Googling how to do this," lamented one cohort member. Others described knowing they had knowledge gaps "but not knowing how to get the answers." This problem was accentuated by needing recommendations specific to the nonprofit world and sometimes to the size, discipline, and practices of the organization.

"I feel like there's so much information out there; it's hard to distill down into what will make my life easier."

We asked the cohort how often they needed to learn to use new software; about 80 percent answered that this happens either quarterly, monthly, or weekly. When asked how they learn to use new digital skills, about a third said they turn to Google searches, and about a half said they look to word-of-mouth or peer connections. None described strong formal training.

Austin T. Richey / Detroit Opera

Demand for digital programming remains strong

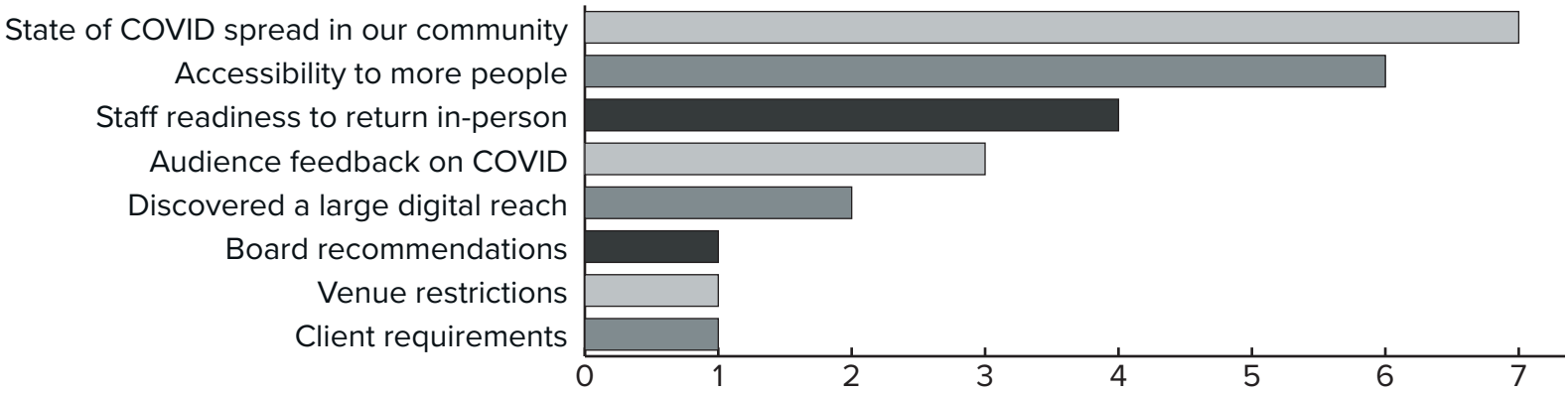
For many cohort organizations, deciding which events should be produced as hybrid, digital, or in-person remained a challenge through the summer and fall of 2022. A few made sweeping decisions about in-person programming early in the study. For those putting on digital and hybrid events throughout the study, no singular pattern of attendance was evident.

- Some organizations experienced broad, strong digital reach for their events, including for audience members who could not attend in person because of geography or other access barriers.
- Others reported decreased attendance for events, whether digital or in-person.
- Still others told us they saw "a rebellion" against pandemic-era digital work and a resurgence of in-person connection.

This variability, along with continued pandemic uncertainty and a lack of staff bandwidth to offer every event in multiple formats, left some organizations struggling to determine the best medium for each program they produced, and little data to inform their decisions.

Tied into the demand for digital programming are struggles with access, which were top of mind for some cohort members. The access challenges for their communities range far beyond the basic question of whether a person had a computer and an internet connection. Some of the cohort organizations serve under resourced communities, seniors, and people with disabilities as core audiences. They described the need for an attendee to have a stable living situation with another person at home willing and able to help with set-up to attend each event. As one cohort member said, "the things that I think are simple are really difficult for some people." These complex equity and access concerns add to the difficulty of assessing community desire for digital or hybrid work.

Q: What is the source of your organization's motivation to maintain hybrid programming?



Staff members lack the time needed to build digital capacity

The most common theme among cohort members was that operating in both analog and digital spaces stretched staff members thin, taking at least twice as much time and more money than did producing in-person events pre-COVID. Facing these increased demands on their time, staff members generally found little time to devote to increasing their digital capacity, even though that time might eventually make their overall operations more efficient. “On top of digital work, we also have our day-to-day responsibilities and other events we are running in person,” explained one cohort member, and capacity-building “ends up becoming less of a priority.”

As one example, 8 Bridges asked organizations whether they could think of a task that could be automated or assisted by technology, but currently was not, and then asked whether they knew what technology was needed to solve the problem. Nearly half responded yes to both. The reasons they gave for not implementing the solution were generally time and bandwidth, for those who knew which solution was needed, and the time needed to research options, for those who did not.

A bit later in the sequence, 8 Bridges asked the cohort to imagine that they received an unexpected unrestricted grant equal to 10 percent of their operating budget. We asked what percentage they would dedicate to their technical capacity. All responded that they would use some of the money to increase capacity, most commonly between 25 and 50 percent. When asked where they would allocate the largest portion of the new funding, the most common answer was toward additional staff.

Johanna Medranda / Planet Ant Theatre

One cohort member, asked what they had learned about digital work over the course of the study, shared the learning that their organization did not build in any time to consider whether its digital processes were still working. “You have to build in time for evaluation, or these things can drag you down.”

> *“It’s hard to do anything that moves the ball forward. We just get done what we need to get done.”*

An effective, measurable digital strategy is crucial

During the early months of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, the ability to change plans on a moment's notice was critical. Now, organizations see a need to engage in longer-term planning. In the initial questionnaire, 8 Bridges asked, "Do you have specific goals in place for your digital work in 2022?" On a scale of 1 (absolutely) to 5 (not at all), the most common answer was a 3.

The same questionnaire also asked whether organizations had planned their digital programming for the rest of the year, with the most common answer a 2 out of 5 on the same scale–indicating that, understandably, "what" was coming slightly before "why" in this area.

8 Bridges did not repeat this question at the end of 2022, since little time remained for newly planned programming in this year. Instead, questions focused on whether the lack of an "effective digital strategy" ranked high on a list of potential barriers to digital work. The cohort ranked effective digital strategy as its fifth-highest challenge, ahead of problems like adequate hardware, access, and audience awareness. (For more on these rankings, in both February and September, see page 12.)

In July check-ins, multiple cohort members expressed the lack of a clear strategy as a barrier to their digital work. The initial pandemic years brought complete uncertainty, and cohort members described the strain of staying flexible and choosing not to plan too far ahead. That flexibility was valuable, but became difficult for staff to implement, when ultimately a longer-term plan was lacking.

Following up on these interviews, the cohort was asked through the next written questionnaire whether "not having a strong digital strategy in place" was a "key obstacle" to their digital work. No organization disagreed; 80 percent agreed this was a key obstacle, and 20 percent answered that it was a "minor obstacle." When asked for examples the following month, organizations described a sense of being reactionary in their digital work. They might not plan their digital programming or hybrid events when planning their season of work, for example, or post on social media when prompted rather than on a thought-out calendar. Notably, these observations came about evenly from cohort representatives who lead their organizations and those whose roles do not involve setting the organization's overall digital strategy.

With the pressure to return to in-person events, and with staff pressed for time, organizations that have considered why they are pursuing their chosen digital work seem likely to find it more sustainable in the long term. This also applies to internal digital operations: organizations that had a clear picture of why they needed to make improvements approached that work with greater confidence.

Digital capacity and the ability to produce digital content do not mirror organization size

The research cohort included a range of organization sizes, from single-employee organizations to one of the largest cultural organizations in Southeast Michigan. Findings did not show digital capacity, growth toward digital maturity, or digital programming mirrored the spread of sizes.

Image courtesy of Paint a Miracle

- Some small organizations benefited from empowered and engaged leadership, able to direct the organization with minimal red tape; the flexibility to change course quickly in response to feedback; and staff members accustomed to addressing competing or overlapping priorities.
- Regardless of organizational size, struggles were shared. The largest and smallest organizations had to deal with limited staff time and lack of or outdated equipment, for example.
- One small organization acknowledged this, saying that “a lot of bigger organizations share the same worries we have.” Another cohort member, near the middle of the group in staff size, agreed that they saw larger organizations “scrambling just as much as smaller organizations,” and shared that their digital offerings were not always more successful, particularly because all the organizations are competing with the world’s largest nonprofit and for-profit presenters for audiences’ attention.

Organization size does play a role in the ability to deliver regular digital content in quantity. One small cohort member pointed out that the ability to pay for tech support is a divider between very small organizations and larger ones. There may be a certain threshold size that better supports organizations seeking to deliver digital public programming on a regular basis; however, that was not always evident in this study.

Cohort organizations reported overall improvement in their digital work over the course of the study

Through talking with cohort members throughout 2022, 8 Bridges researchers noted that the study organizations were feeling calmer and more confident about their digital work at the end of the year than they were at the beginning.

Researchers saw common threads among these improvements:

- Cohort members reported that their staff gained experience and facility with digital tools. This happened through on-the-job learning over time, rather than through formal education.

> *"We developed the staff expertise over a couple of years; that just shifted."*

- Many cohort members engaged contractors for specific digital projects, like filming or photographing an event, updating a website, or creating content for social media. With their current staff members at capacity, and few cohort members adding staff, contractors were able to fill in some of the gaps in the cohort's work. One cohort member told us that it was easier to go "to the outside . . . rather than pushing the team to find the capacity to do something."
- Some cohort members acquired new hardware–often cameras and computers–that significantly improved their ability to produce hybrid or digital programs. In most cases, this was supported by grant funding. When the cohort was asked to rank the obstacles to their digital work, hardware was a significantly less pressing obstacle in September as compared to February.

Keeping digital practice top-of-mind has helped leaders advance the work

Leaders of cultural organizations have had a difficult few years, from pandemic-era closures, struggles to replace revenue, staff burnout, and the current reduced audience levels across the sector. In this busy and stressful environment, organizational leaders said that having a monthly reminder asking them to consider their internal and external digital work helped them keep the topic top-of-mind. Our questions, one leader said, made them remember, "maybe we should be thinking about these things." Another cohort member said that, when asked questions that they struggled to answer, "it made me think about what we were doing internally," and the leader then started asking more questions of staff members about how operations could be better.

> *"Interviews [for this study] have helped me devote more time and thought to what we need to do."*

Ranking the cohort's challenges

We asked the cohort to rank obstacles to their digital work, at the beginning and the end of the study. No ties were allowed–each respondent had to put these challenges in order. A ranking of 1 meant that this was the organization's top challenge and 8 (or 9, in September) the least important. The cohort's biggest challenges thus appear at the top.

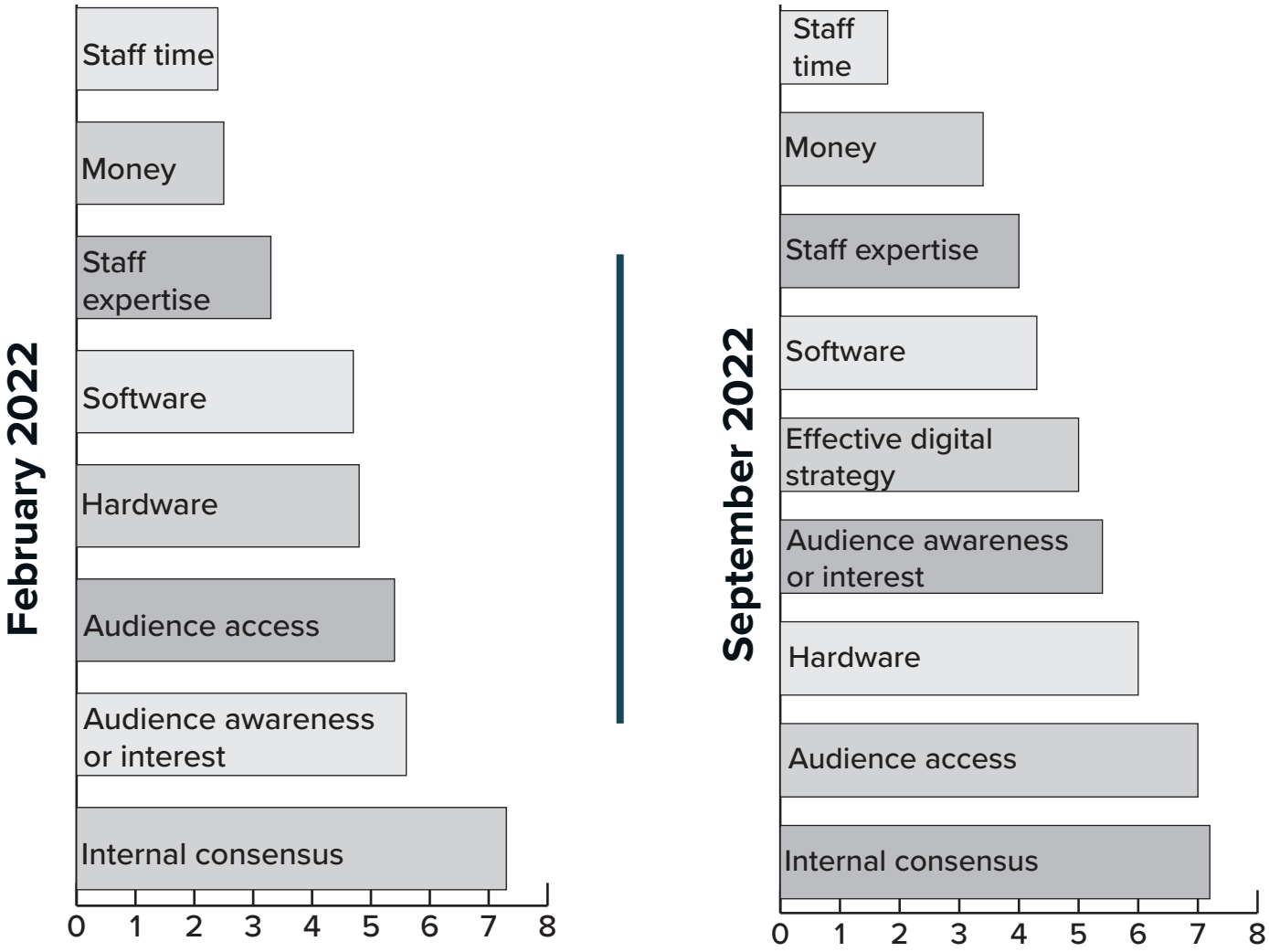


Image courtesy of Hannan Center

Recommendations

For grantmakers and funders

Organizations need funding for the basic building blocks of digital work.

Cohort organization needed basics like software licenses, computers, and high speed internet. They described difficulty in securing funding for even these basic needs, for which a grant may not seem as important as it actually is.

Ask about and support organizations' digital capacity needs.

For the most part, this study showed that cohort members were aware of gaps in their capacity. One said that if they received a grant to produce specific digital programming, that would be welcome, but they would not have the support system in place to fully utilize the funds without a corresponding investment in long-term capacity. As another organization put it, "A lot of what we are doing is finding creative ways to cut corners."

Consider the replacement and maintenance costs required to keep basic tech needs up to date.

This applies to aging equipment as well as software and other digital processes. As one cohort member said, "Yesterday's advances are today's outdated practices." Another told us, "When you're spending the money, it's already old." These are new items in organizational operating budgets and need time to be built into regular budgeting processes.

Remember the sheer volume of new equipment needed as digital programming expands.

To create digital work, an organization might need a set of computers or mobile devices for staff, updated regularly. Organizations that offer classes and educational programs might need a classroom-sized set of computers, tablets, and other tools—all replaced frequently to adapt to changing technology needs.

Consider the costs of implementation and IT support for all new technology as grant-worthy.

Technical support was a pain point for the organizations without the funds to pay for it. In addition, a lack of support for implementation and usage can lead to the most technically proficient staff member becoming, as one cohort member put it, "the tech person" by default, diverting that person from fulfilling their core role, and missing an opportunity to learn from experienced tech support workers.

Recognize that hybrid events can cost at least twice as much to execute well as in-person events.

Making an event available as hybrid can be an attractive solution to COVID conditions, and a way to boost an organization's accessibility and reach. But for an organization's staff, these events are complex, time-consuming, and expensive to produce. "It costs us more money to do what we are doing than it did before COVID," one cohort member said.

Support the time needed for internal experimentation, assessment, and learning.

Organizations were aware that they needed to try new things and embrace the resulting learning: "If it fails, it fails; we can learn something." They were also aware that they needed to take the time to assess what worked and what did not. "To do this work really well takes planning, resources, and a lot of thought." All of these activities take time that then cannot be used for producing new content or for established in-person events.

With staff spending more time online, be mindful of the screen time demands of long virtual meetings, lengthy emails, and other digital demands.

Cohort members described screen time and Zoom exhaustion, particularly when outsiders expected them to sit in virtual meetings all day without the freedom to move around, find water or food, or behave in other ways that would be normal in an in-person day. Cohort members also said that email demands from funders have increased, and fewer will accept updates through a phone call or another means with a more relaxed response time.

Image courtesy of Living Arts Detroit

Recommendations

For CultureSource and other intermediaries

Assume that staff are stretched thin.

One cohort member described immense pressure on their time, causing "a feeling of wanting to come up for air." Intermediaries must balance their ability to provide useful information and training to organizations with the need to be as efficient as possible with their time.

Look for ways to improve cultural organizations' uses of specific pieces of technology that are in use field-wide.

Organizations are turning to YouTube or Google rather than a provider with information and support specific to cultural organizations. While this may be appropriate in some cases, there is an opportunity to develop training specifically for cultural nonprofits and for specific functions.

Consider developing recommendations for core technology needs.

For example, an intermediary might create a single-page handout comparing five top choices for CRM systems, including notes on prices, integration with other software, and key features that nonprofits look for. Member organizations already using a particular system could be referenced and could serve as mentors for those exploring options. Of course, these handouts would need to be regularly updated.

Help cultural organizations access better technical support.

Most small and mid-sized organizations cannot afford to have dedicated in-house tech support. With many organizations turning to contract services, intermediaries could play a role in helping organizations pool resources or identifying a list of local providers familiar with the demands of the nonprofit sector that have been vetted by peers.

Continue to emphasize and advocate for digital capacity to member organizations and grantmakers who support the cultural sector.

Cultural organizations are focusing on their day-to-day needs and not always looking at the progress toward greater digital capacity in the context of a changing world that grows more digital every day. This is a space where intermediaries can bring their own strengths and perspectives, focusing both cultural organizations and grantmakers on the most pressing needs for improvement.

Model digital maturity for member organizations.

Intermediaries should not lose sight of their own digital proficiency, both for their operations and for their programming. Intermediaries actively confronting these challenges internally, learning from what they try, and reflecting on their processes can speak with greater sincerity and insight to their member organizations, and can help move the sector forward by demonstrating the benefit of these practices.

Mary Jaglowski / Detroit Opera

Thank you to CultureSource, the Gilbert Family Foundation, and the twelve participating organizations for supporting this timely and important work.

Image courtesy of Class Act Detroit

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