Examining the “Accidental Techie” Phenomenon in the Nonprofit Sector:
An effect of the importance of information technology use coupled with
the lean nature of small nonprofits.

by
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Section 1

Overview of the “Accidental Techie” Phenomenon

“The number-one task of CIOs (Chief Information Officers) today is to create innovative ways of doing business that not only drive down costs, but also create new streams of high-margin revenue. This requires an in-depth understanding of competitive industry pressures and a firm grasp of new technologies - specifically what is needed to create an agile IT infrastructure that can respond effectively to rapidly changing business conditions. Top analysts will discuss how CIOs can combine first-rate business acumen with a deep understanding of emerging technologies to provide unmatched business value.”

– Executive Summary promoting a 2007 online Digital CIO Summit hosted by the editors of the online magazines eWeek, Baseline, and CIO Insight

Good business decisions are made based on sound strategic planning, which depends on good information. Strategic planning begins by understanding the organization’s mission, goals, and strategies. This is true for both for-profit and nonprofit entities. Management uses information about the organization and about the external environment in which it operates to analyze how well it is meeting its goals and where the organization can improve. A good strategic plan identifies for organizations the essential information necessary for making decisions. A good information technology (IT) system helps organizations create, store, exchange, and utilize information in its various forms. IT encompasses all technology for this purpose.

Nonprofit organizations (nonprofits) have the same basic information needs as for-profit companies (companies), including document creation and storage, electronic communication, finance and accounting, and customer tracking (for nonprofits this can range from clients to volunteers to donors).

Forward-thinking companies invest in information technology as tools that can increase their competitive advantage. They develop a strategic technology plan as part of the corporate strategic plan and build a technological infrastructure that supports the goals for achieving the company mission.¹

Nonprofits, on the other hand, have an internal drive to channel resources toward the actual work of their missions – and face societal pressure to do so. Therefore, unfortunately, nonprofits tend to view information technology as an administrative expense rather than as an investment that will make the organization more effective at what it does. They see owning IT as a necessary evil.

Nonprofits of course must automate the tasks they can, be able to access the growing resources on the world wide web, and offer constituents electronic access to the nonprofits. However, nonprofits have a difficult job of justifying to their donors the allocation of financial and staff resources to support administrative IT when it means steering these resources away from activities associated directly with the mission.
The reality of our Digital Age is that most nonprofits already own technology tools for rudimentary to sophisticated purposes, whether initially planned for or not. The reality is also that, while a large percentage of nonprofits have a technology budget, technology training is not always a part of that budget. This shortsighted strategy dooms any hardware or software purchase because the technology’s implementation and future maintenance will have little or no support.

Though the U.S. nonprofit sector is enormous—with an asset base of nearly $1.8 trillion in 2003—the vast majority of the 1.4 million nonprofits registered with the IRS are relatively tiny. Of those 501(c) tax-exempt organizations, 94 percent take in less than $1 million annually, and 81 percent don't even crack six figures. One organization, DTH, had fiscal 2005 revenues of $4.8 million, and is in the top 5 percent of nonprofits, though it's dwarfed by behemoths like the American Red Cross at nearly $4 billion.

"Size does matter," acknowledges Red Cross CIO Steven Cooper, noting that the global relief agency has an internal IT staff of about 600, plus another 250 or so contractors that it uses to augment staff or provide specialized skills. The annual operating budget of the IT organization is about $200 million, or about 5 percent of the relief agency’s total expenses, a slice of the pie more akin to a Fortune 500 corporation than a humble nonprofit.

Back in the world of the other 95 percent of nonprofits, when a piece of technology breaks and a business process dependent on that technology comes to a screeching halt, the organization scrambles to develop a workaround until someone can find and solve the problem, or can pay a consultant to solve the problem.

The lack of trained IT staff also leaves nonprofit executives without a technology advocate to nurture the organization’s technological capacity to further enhance organizational effectiveness. Nonprofits are fortunate today that there are many free and for-fee resources already tailored to their needs. But without at least one staff person dedicated, even part time, to identifying needs within the organization and navigating the ever-growing maze of products and services, the organization is missing opportunities to do a better job at meeting its mission.

Unless nonprofit executives have the ability to conduct technology planning themselves, which detracts from their other leadership responsibilities, new technology initiatives do not occur except where current technology is so outdated that it begs for change. In this case, there is no technology planning, only reaction.

**The Accidental Techie Phenomenon.** Smaller nonprofit organizations, by their lean nature of few employees and small operating budgets, tend to be the ones with little to no support for IT. Within these nonprofits there is a phenomenon known as the “Accidental Techie” (AT). The AT was once a regular staff member, with programmatic or administrative duties. But, perhaps out of interest in technology or on a quest to minimize computer down time, this regular staffer becomes the most knowledgeable about the office technology, and therefore the default troubleshooter – or Accidental Techie. Managing technology usually was not part of the AT’s job description and typically the
AT does not have a technology background. But, inadvertently, the AT brings the organization a false sense of security that someone is paying attention to the technology so management can now focus on programmatic and other issues.

Unfortunately, the AT is caught in an ironic position. As the Accidental Techie, out of necessity or interest, becomes more knowledgeable about the capabilities – or lack thereof – of the organization’s IT, with little support in an organization he or she may become frustrated at the probable futility of hoping for technology upgrades, or may become frustrated at being depended upon to get the most out of the organization’s current technology. While coming to this position unintentionally, it is often up to the AT to convince management or the board of the value of investing in technology. The AT must help pave the way for strategic purchasing and decision-making.

Technology advocates at nonprofits typically have that role "thrust upon them, without the authority to go with it," says Jeffrey Forster, technology services director for the Bayer Center for Nonprofit Management at Robert Morris University, in Pittsburgh. Adds Forster: "The nonprofit techie is just a really lonely job."  

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to identify how nonprofit organizations in Dane County, Wisconsin – specifically those with paid staff but without designated IT staff or a designated IT position – manage their IT. This study seeks to identify whether there is a need for IT support in these types of organizations and the possible types of IT support needed.

**Research Questions**

This study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. What functions do nonprofit organizations use IT for, what is the importance level of the IT to those functions, and what is the satisfaction level for how the organization uses the IT to perform its functions?

2. Do nonprofits invest in technology by establishing a dedicated technology budget, buying outside IT services, or supporting existing staff to assume additional duties as technology manager?

3. In nonprofit organizations without designated IT staff or a designated IT position, is there a typical profile of or circumstances around the Accidental Techie?
Hypothesis

To support the development of the research questions, a hypothesis was developed that nonprofits utilize information technology, that small nonprofits harbor Accidental Techies, and that Accidental Techies are isolated and eager for support.

Rationale and Need for Study

There is a growing movement in Dane County wherein educational institutions, such as UW-Extension and Edgewood College; nonprofit federations (organizations that provide funding and technical support to its member nonprofits), such as Community Shares of Wisconsin and United Way of Dane County; and IT professionals, such as Danenet, understand the need for IT support in small nonprofits anecdotally and are coming together to develop a process to identify trends and to identify types of support that can be developed and sustained. This study begins to systematically identify trends around how small nonprofits manage their technology.

Operational Definition

For the purposes of this study, Accidental Techie has a five-point definition. An Accidental Techie:

1. Is an employee at a nonprofit organization that does not have a computer technology manager position
2. Was not hired to manage the organization’s computer technology
3. Before being hired, typically did not have a computer technology certification or education
4. Takes on the role of computer technology manager in addition to regular duties
5. May seek technology training while on the job

Section 2

Research Methods and Procedures

This study sought to identify how nonprofit organizations in Dane County, Wisconsin without designated IT staff or a designated IT position manage their computer technology. Specifically, this study sought to identify whether there was a need for IT support in these types of organizations and the possible types of IT support needed. Section 2 presents a discussion of the methods and procedures used to answer the research questions in Section 1.
Population and Sample

The population relevant to this study was organizations in Dane County, Wisconsin that were designated by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) as tax-exempt nonprofits and that did not have a designated IT staff position. Each respondent to the phone survey self-identified as the paid staff member within the organization who worked the most with the organization’s IT.

The IRS website (www.irs.gov) offers a free list of all U.S. nonprofit organizations, but was too cumbersome for the researcher’s IT to extract only the organizations for Dane County. Therefore, a list was purchased through TaxExemptWorld.com that was a Dane County-specific subset of the IRS list or nonprofit organizations.

TaxExemptWorld.com statistics showed that, as of July 9, 2006, there were 31,703 tax-exempt charitable organizations in Wisconsin and 3,480 in Dane County. According to TaxExemptWorld.com, these figures do not include religious organizations or governmental entities.

The main criterion for choosing which of these organizations to survey was size. It was assumed that the largest organizations would have IT staff and therefore would not qualify for the study. It was also assumed that the smallest organizations would most likely not have any paid staff to survey. The purchased list did not include information on the number of employees, so reported income was used as an indicator of organizational size. The size of the Dane County list was reduced by eliminating all organizations with reported income at or above $10 million, organizations with less than $100,000 in reported income, and organizations that had no reported income listed because they were not required to file an income report with the IRS (Form 990). This last group included those categorized by the IRS as church, income less than $25,000, religious organization, and all other.

The final list included 952 organizations. Regarding contact information, the list included organization names and addresses but no phone numbers, email addresses, or website addresses. Once this list was randomized by computer, the researcher began at the top of the list and used at different times the Google and Yahoo web search engines — entering the supplied name or street address as search keywords, and periodically the local telephone directory, to find an organization’s phone number. Typically the search engine would display probable website links to the organization in question. Almost all of the organizations searched for had websites. When the website of an organization in question was found, the researcher would use the site to determine whether the organization had paid staff and then whether it had an IT staff person or position.

The sample size of 20 was chosen by the research adviser. The researcher surveyed by phone the first 20 organizations that were reached and that met the qualifications of having paid staff but no designated IT staff.
The Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was developed after reviewing the sparse literature about how small nonprofits manage their technology and after many discussions with nonprofit staff, IT professionals, educators, and one doctoral student researching this same topic. The final instrument was reviewed for validity by an IT professional who works with many nonprofit organizations in Dane County. It was tested on a nonprofit manager and revised to make the language more familiar to the intended audience. For example, the nonprofit manager recommended that the phrase “computer technology” replace the phrase “information technology” and the abbreviation “IT.”

The survey itself had to take a small enough amount of time to ensure that staff at the targeted nonprofits – notoriously short on time for regular duties – would answer this survey. The survey also had to be relatively easy to answer, in that it wouldn’t require of the respondent a lot of deep thought that would lengthen the time of the survey. Of the 15 survey questions, 5 asked for a yes or no answer; 5 ask for short answers regarding the respondent’s experience, 3 asked for a rating on an importance or satisfaction 3-point scale; 1 asked for 4 pieces of demographic information (number of employees, operating budget size, technology budget size, and organization type) and the researcher was to observe and record the gender of the respondent; and 1 was offered a multiple-choice answer. The researcher recorded all comments by the respondent. The survey was timed at on average less than 10 minutes when the respondent did not have a lot of extraneous comments.

Data Analysis

Questions requiring yes/no or female/male answers were scored using a 1 for Yes/Female and 0 for No/Male and tallied simply for a total count of each answer and a percentage of the total sample.

Questions requiring a rating – the satisfaction and importance ratings – began as 3-point scales, from important/satisfied (scored as 3) to neither important/satisfied nor unimportant/dissatisfied (scored as 2) to not important/dissatisfied (scored as 1). However, respondents added a qualifier “very” or another similar word to the highest point in each scale. Thus, upon scoring, the scales became: very important/satisfied (scored as 4); important/satisfied (scored as 3); neither important/satisfied nor unimportant/dissatisfied (scored as 2); and not important/dissatisfied (scored as 1). These questions were tallied simply for total count of each answer and a percentage of the total sample, plus the average of all scores.

Common keywords were applied to open-ended answers when possible. These were tallied simply for total count of each keyword. It was possible that a respondent’s answer included more than one keyword, therefore it was possible that the total number of tallies for all of the keywords could be greater than the number of respondents (20).

Simple tallies were applied to questions using dollar amount ranges.
Section 3

Findings of the Study

Sample Demographic Information

Sample Qualification. As stated in Chapter 3, the main criterion for choosing which Dane County nonprofit organizations to survey was the size of the organization. The best indicator of size available from the data source was Income Range reported by organizations to the IRS. To capture organizations mostly likely to have paid staff to survey but least likely to have an IT staff position, which would disqualify an organization for the survey, the Income Ranges chosen were: $100,000 to $499,000; $500,000 to $999,000; and $1 million to $4.9 million.

Organization Demographics. To further estimate the size of the organizations being surveyed, respondents were asked the dollar amount of their organizations’ Operating Budgets. The table below compares the targeted Reported Income Ranges and the associated number of organizations surveyed within each range to a comparable set of Operating Budget ranges reported by respondents and the number of organizations surveyed within each Operating Budget range.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization Size: Income Range Previously Reported to IRS Compared with Respondent Report of Operating Budget</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reported Income Range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100,000 to $499,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$500,000 to $999,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$1 million to $4.9 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total # surveys</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An additional measure of organization size – the number of employees of the organization, standardized as full-time equivalents (FTEs), was also asked of each respondent. The average FTE for the survey sample was 5.29 and the range of the number of FTEs was from 1 to 12.
A final organizational characteristic captured was type of organization as indicated by the respondent. The table below details the responses to a multiple-choice question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization Type</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health (incl. Mental Health)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Services</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chamber of Commerce</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition (supporting organization of organizations)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fraternal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostel/Education travel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Land Use</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Services</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Respondent Qualifications.** The ideal respondent was an employee within the qualified organization who, although not hired to manage the organization’s IT, worked the most with the organization’s IT and did so in addition to regular duties. The researcher depended upon the respondent’s self-qualification.

**Respondent Demographic Information.** Research Question 3 asked, In nonprofit organizations without designated IT staff or a designated IT position, is there a typical profile of or circumstances around the Accidental Techie? The demographic information collected from the respondents included:

1. The respondent’s gender.
2. Whether the respondent held a computer technology certification or degree.
3. Whether the respondent considered herself or himself to be an Accidental Techie.
4. The respondent’s position and duties.
5. How the respondent came to manage the organization’s technology.
6. What resources the respondent seeks or might seek to support the technology management responsibilities.
The table below details the respondent demographic information collected.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent Demographic Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Gender (Researcher Observed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female: 16 (80%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male: 4 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Technology Certification or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Held?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No: 20 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Self-considered an Accidental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Techie?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes: 16 (80%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No: 4 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Position and Duties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Assistant: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator: 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Manager: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO/Executive Director: 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data specialist: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office/Building Manager: 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Came to Manage the Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Default: 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one else to do it/small staff: 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in Computers: 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Participation in a Community of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accidental Techies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-Face Trainings: 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-Face Networking: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-line chats/blogs: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webinars: 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teleconferences: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website: 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-line courses (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Targeted or hands-on training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAQ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No time: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Interested: 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Note</strong>: 4 others advised &quot;limited interest&quot; in learning more about the technology. (Total of 9 (45%) reporting No or Limited Interest)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Technology Use in Sample Organizations**

Research Question 1 asks, What functions do nonprofit organizations use the IT for, what is the importance level of the IT to those functions, and what is the satisfaction level for how the organization uses the IT to perform its functions? The information regarding the
sample organizations’ use of technology that was collected from the respondents included:

1. What functions the technology is used for.
2. The level of importance of using technology to perform the functions mentioned.
3. The level of satisfaction of the organization’s use of technology.

The table below details the information regarding the sample organizations’ use of technology collected:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technology Use in Sample Organizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Technology Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications: 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Database Management: 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event Registration: 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances: 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Office Use: 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website: 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio/video production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forms management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General business management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GIS mapping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graphic design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grants development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Level of Importance of Technology Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 – Very important: 15 (75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 – Important: 4 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 – Neither Important nor Unimportant: 1 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 – Not Important: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average: 3.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Level of Satisfaction of Technology Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 – Very satisfied: 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 – Satisfied: 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 – Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 – Dissatisfied: 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average: 2.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section 4
Summary, Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Summary
The purpose of the study was to identify how nonprofit organizations in Dane County, Wisconsin – specifically those with paid staff but without designated IT staff or a designated IT position – manage their IT. This study seeks to identify whether there is a need for IT support in these types of organizations and the possible types of IT support needed.

The population relevant to this study was organizations in Dane County, Wisconsin that were designated by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) as tax-exempt nonprofits and that did not have a designated IT staff position. Each respondent to the phone survey self-identified as the paid staff member within the organization who worked the most with the organization’s IT.

A list was purchased through TaxExemptWorld.com and those organizations that did not meet the size criteria based on reported income – large enough to have paid staff but small enough to not have IT staff – were eliminated, leaving the final sample list of 952 organizations.

The results of the study show that there is a need for IT support in the targeted nonprofit organizations but that the types of support needed vary greatly.

Discussion
Use, Importance, and Satisfaction of the Organization’s Technology

Use of Technology. Respondents were asked to list the business functions their technology was used for without the aid of a multiple-choice list. Therefore the list is related to what was top-of-mind for the respondent and is not exhaustive. Respondents could list more than one function, therefore the respective proportion of uses will total to more than 100%. The functions listed most frequently were: General Office Use (12 or 60% of respondents); Database Management (11 or 55%); Communications (9 or 45%); and Event Registration (6 or 30%).

Importance of Technology. Regardless of the uses of the technology, 95% (19) of the respondents advised that using the technology to perform their business functions was important or very important. Some of these respondents added their own scale modifiers, including “quite,” “extremely,” and “critical.” Other comments regarding the importance of the technology included: “when the computer goes down, there’s not a lot to do.”; “99.9% work is done on computer.”; “We can’t function without it.”; “We’re totally laid flat when the computers are down.”; and “We can’t do anything without it.” On a 4-point
scale for which 1 was not important and 4 was very important, the average score of the respondents was 3.7.

**Satisfaction of Technology.** 85% (17) of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with their organizations’ use of technology. Some comments regarding the respondents’ satisfaction with their organizations’ use of technology included: “To some degree our knowledge could be expanded.”; “There are things I wish I had time for, but I work another full-time”; “We are upgrading our database soon … it does everything we need it to do.”; “Everyone’s pretty open-minded about new things.”; “I think we do very well.”; and “I recognize that there’s much more that could be done but right now I’m quite impressed how they use what they have.”

Those respondents who were dissatisfied with the use of the technology generally were not interested in the technology and would rather have someone else manage it.

**Organizational Investment in Technology through Budget, Outsourcing, and Staff Development**

**Technology Budget.** 10% (10) of respondents did not know if the organization had an annual technology budget or what the technology budget amount was. Two respondents knew there was no money budgeted specifically for technology; four advised the budget was between $1,000 and $3,000; and two advised the budget was between $10,000 and $12,000. The remaining two respondents advised that the budget was “whatever it needs to be.” Overall, the respondents had little information about the size and/or use of the technology budget.

**Outsourcing.** 90% (18) organization use outside services to support the use of technology. Unfortunately, all respondents were not asked the type of outside service they used. But of those who were asked or who volunteered the information without being asked, eight organizations used a professional (for-fee) service, two organizations used a professional service paid through their parent organizations, and four relied upon volunteers.

**Staff Development.** 60% (12) of respondents advised that they did talk with other Accidental Techies, though only 40% (8) advised that communicating with Accidental Techies was important or very important. In fact, 60% (12) advised that communicating with Accidental Techies was neither important nor unimportant or it was not important. On a 4-point scale for which 1 was not important and 4 was very important, the average score of the respondents was 2.2.

When asked how a respondent might participate in a community of Accidental Techies, 45% (9) respondents indicated that they were not interested or had limited interest in learning more about technology. The respondents were given a multiple-choice list of possible development activities and were able to provide their own answers. 4 respondents chose “face-to-face trainings,” but additional comments regarding trainings included the desire for on-line courses, training specific to the respondent’s skill level and
information needed, and hand-on training. Respondents also chose webinars (5 or 25%) and access to a website for Accidental Techies (4 or 20%) as ways they might participate.

Respondents were asked to comment on the type of support they wanted, assuming they would keep the responsibility for managing the technology for awhile. 4 (20%) respondents advised they needed nothing more and 3 (15%) advised simply that they wanted staff. 5 (25%) respondents wanted new or upgraded technology and 4 (20%) wanted training. Some respondents indicated a need for very customized support, including software recommendations and consulting.

Accidental Techie Profile

Gender and Technology Background. The basic demographics of the respondent population was that 80% (16) were female and 20% (4) were male, and that 100% of the respondents did not hold a technology certification or degree.

Self-identification. After being read the study’s operational definition of Accidental Techies, respondents were asked whether they would consider themselves to be an Accidental Techie. 80% (16) advised yes; 20% (4) advised no.

Assuming the Accidental Techie role. The employment positions held by the respondents were typically administrative: 40% (8) of the respondents held the positions of CEO, Executive Director, or Administrator and 45% (9) held office manager or building manager positions. When asked how they came to manage the organization’s technology, 85% of respondents advised that it was by default, in that there was no one else to do it. 3 of the respondents indicated that they did have an interest in computers.

Conclusions

Respondents acknowledged the absolute necessity of computer technology to the functioning of their organizations, though it was not obvious from their comments how their organizations prioritized this necessity. Ironically, when the researcher was introducing the purpose of the study to a potential respondent, respondents often laughed out loud at the idea of “how nonprofits manage their technology,” as if nonprofits were more reactive than proactive regarding their use of technology.

Respondents were also amused by the term “accidental techie.” Some respondents advised that they hadn’t thought of themselves in those terms before. In fact, when asked whether they communicated with other Accidental Techies, a few respondents replied that, since they hadn’t thought about that concept before, they couldn’t say for sure whether others they spoke with might also be Accidental Techies.

While it appears that Accidental Techies are generally satisfied with the way their organizations are using technology, it’s possible that – because they don’t have the
background (and some don’t have the interest) in technology management – they may not realize there may be ways for their organizations to use technology more effectively.

Also, while Accidental Techies might seek resources to help them manage the organization’s technology, they typically would rather not be managing the technology at all.

Because technology is essential for the functioning of the target nonprofit organizations, but the budgets and staff to support the technology are limited, there is a need for IT support in these organizations.

However, when developing tools to support nonprofit technology management, Accidental Techies may be the most challenging target audience for these tools because they may not know who they are and they don’t really want to be doing it anyway.

**Recommendations**

To understand the level of IT support needed in a nonprofit organization, it is important to understand how nonprofits are using technology (for which business processes), the kinds of technology they are using, the effectiveness of the technology, and the type of support they already employ.

Nonprofit executives should be surveyed to determine this, but professional IT service vendors who work with smaller nonprofits should also be surveyed for their important perspective.

It will also be constructive to discover how nonprofit executives value the technology that is so critical to their functioning because if nonprofits do not or will not pay much attention to how they are using technology, then it will be difficult for them to value support for that technology.
References and Resources


With many thanks for valuable insight and feedback to:

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Kathy Martinson
Amy Mondloch
Erin Thornley
Garth Yaezel

And the survey participants.

(Please forgive me if I left out anyone.)
APPENDIX
Survey Call Guide
Accidental Techie Research Project

My name is Elaine Glowacki. I am a graduate student at Edgewood College here in Madison and I’m working on a research project related to how nonprofits manage their computer technology.

I’m actually trying to reach organizations that do NOT have a person with the specific responsibility for managing the organization’s technology, which can include someone who makes purchase recommendations or does set up, maintenance, and upgrades.

**Does your organization have a computer technology manager?**

**If yes:** Unfortunately for me, I must end my interview here. But before I do, would you please tell me the number of full-time-equivalent employees you have? ______

Also, if you know it, would you please tell me what your operating budget is? ______

**If no:** If I read you a list of ranges, will you tell which range your budget falls within? (If still no, drop it!)

- [ ] Less than $100,000
- [ ] $100,000 to $499,000
- [ ] $500,000 to $999,000
- [ ] $1 million to $4.9 million
- [ ] $5 million to $9.9 million
- [ ] $10 million or greater

Thank you very much for your time.

**If no:** May I speak with the person who works the most with your computer technology?

**If speaking to that person already:** Would you be willing to answer some questions about your organization right now or is there a better time for you? (About 15 – 20 minutes.)

This survey is confidential in that only I will know your name, unless you allow me to cite your name when referring to any of your comments. So I hope you will speak frankly with me.

**If new person:** My name is Elaine Glowacki. I am a graduate student at Edgewood College here in Madison and I’m working on a project related to how nonprofits manage their computer technology.

Would you be willing to answer some questions about your organization? Do you have some time right now or is there a better time for you? (Appx. 15 – 20 min..)

This survey is confidential in that only I will know your name, unless you allow me to cite your name when referring to any of your comments. So I hope you will speak frankly with me.
BEGIN SURVEY

What is your name?

1. Do you have a computer technology certification or degree?
   - [ ] No   - [ ] Yes   Comments if given:
      
      If yes: Did you earn it after you got this job?
      - [ ] No   - [ ] Yes   Comments if given:

2. I’m going to read you a definition of the term “Accidental Techie.” When I’m done, I’m going to ask you if you would consider yourself to be one.

   An accidental techie:
   - Is an employee at a nonprofit organization that does not have a computer technology manager position
   - Was not hired to manage the organization’s computer technology
   - Before being hired, typically did not have a computer technology certification or education
   - Takes on the role of computer technology manager in addition to regular duties
   - May seek technology training while on the job

   Would you consider yourself to be an Accidental Techie?
      - [ ] No   - [ ] Yes   Comments if given:

3. What are your official position and duties?

4. How did you come to manage the technology?

5. Does your organization use outside help or services to support your technology?
   - [ ] No   - [ ] Yes   Comments if given:

6. What kinds of things does your organization use computer technology to do?

7. How important is using technology to do these things? (Respondent may answer in general or may give an answer for any or all of the things just mentioned.)

   Item:
   - [ ] Important   - [ ] Neither Important nor Unimportant   - [ ] Not Important

   Item:
   - [ ] Important   - [ ] Neither Important nor Unimportant   - [ ] Not Important

8. How satisfied are you with the organization’s use of technology?
   - [ ] Satisfied   - [ ] Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied   - [ ] Dissatisfied

9. Assuming that you will remain “technology manager” for now, what would you personally need to make this responsibility easier for you?
10. Do you “communicate” with other Accidental Techies?

11. How important is it for you to be able to talk with other Accidental Techies?
   - Important
   - Neither Important nor Unimportant
   - Not Important

12. How might you participate in a community of Accidental Techies, for example:
   - Periodic face-to-face trainings
   - Periodic face-to-face networking
   - On-line chats/blogs
   - Webinars (simultaneous conference call and online presentation)
   - Teleconferences
   - Website
   - Other: _________________
   - Not interested

13. Demographics
   A. How many full-time equivalent employees are there in your organization?
   B. What is your operating budget?
      - Less than $100,000
      - $100,000 to $499,000
      - $500,000 to $999,000
      - $1 million to $4.9 million
      - $5 million to $9.9 million
      - $10 million or greater
   C. What is your technology budget?
   D. How would you categorize the type of your organization? For example:
      - Advocacy
      - Arts
      - Environment
      - Education
      - Funder
      - Health
      - Social Services
      - Recreational/Sports
      - Religious
      - Other: _________________
   E. Gender (researcher’s observation): M   F

14. And my last official question is: May I follow up with you if I need you to clarify something for me?
    - If yes: is phone or email the best way to reach you?
      - If phone: Confirm the number
      - If email: What is your email address?

15. Do you have any (other) questions or comments for me?

Thank you very much for your time.