

Chapter 9

Geeks for Good: Technology Evangelism and the Role of Circuit Riders in IT Adoption among Nonprofits

Paul-Brian McInerney

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several decades, information technology (IT) has become indispensable to millions of businesses. Despite great strides, nonprofits lag behind for-profit and government organizations when it comes to IT adoption (Corder, 2001; Irschenbaum; Unamneni, 2001). Several reasons are given for this lag. Research has shown that nonprofit leadership is often lacking in technology (Berlinger; Teeni, 1999). Some contend that foundations need to provide better support for IT initiatives (Robertson, 2001). Others argue lack of resources and expertise conspire to keep nonprofits behind the curve (Forster, 2003; Seley Wolpert, 2002). A group of technologically infused activists is addressing these problems simultaneously; they call themselves circuit riders.

Circuit riders travel throughout regions of the United States and parts of Europe providing technology assistance to nonprofit organizations. As one organization providing such services defines the group:

Circuit Riders are a community of people with technology skills who help nonprofit organizations be more effective through the use of technology. We share a spirit of generosity towards each other and a commitment to social justice, a healthy environment and human dignity. We hold a fundamental belief that technology and all of its benefits must be made available to everyone. (Media JumpStart, 2002)

Where did these modern circuit riders come from? What do they do? How? This chapter answers these questions, discussing the historical role of technology

circuit riders in the US nonprofit sector. Circuit riders, which subscribe to a specific model of nonprofit technology assistance provider (NTAP), are an increasingly important part of the nonprofit sector. NTAPs are organizations and individuals that consult and train nonprofit and grassroots organizations on information and communication technologies. As such, they are responsible for helping nonprofit organizations adopt information and communication technologies.

The NTAP field has grown considerably in the past ten years. Their trade association, the Nonprofit Technology Enterprise Network, estimates there are between two thousand and ten thousand groups and individuals acting as NTAPs, depending on how the activity is categorized. In contrast, there are more than 1.6 million nonprofit organizations in the United States (Weitzman, Alandoni, Lampkin, Pollak, 2002). However, NTAPs have significance far beyond their numbers. Among nonprofits, they act as what Czarniawska-Joerges (1990) calls "merchants of meaning" in the sector. In other words, NTAPs aggregate demand, make sense of technology, apply it in nonprofit and grassroots settings, and spread innovation throughout the sector. Within nonprofits, NTAPs shape the use of technology, which in turn changes the organization's structure and practices (Orlikowski, 1992, 2000).

Despite challenges from the many alternative models of technology assistance that have appeared over the years, circuit riders remain a vital and important source of technology expertise in the sector, especially for organizations in low-resource environments. The market for technology assistance to the nonprofit sector has been stratified by service provider and size of the nonprofit served (Marshall

McInerney, 2005). Circuit riders, however, continue to service small- to medium-sized nonprofits, with staff sizes of zero to twenty-five and annual budgets between zero and 500,000, sometimes as high as 1 million. Circuit riders, as will be explained later, tend to work in niches within the nonprofit sector but are particularly active among social justice, environmental, and advocacy groups. Their distribution is the result of political inclinations and path dependencies set in motion early in the circuit rider history.

The chapter proceeds as follows. After a brief description of the research methods employed in data collection and analysis, I describe the birth and growth of the circuit rider movement in the United States, showing how institutional entrepreneurs organized a field and carved out a space for technology in the nonprofit discourse. Finally, I explain why circuit riders have been and continue to be important sources of information technology expertise in the nonprofit sector.

METHODS

The empirical data for this chapter come from a three-year multisited ethnography, which combined several qualitative methods to collect data about the history of nonprofit technology assistance providers. I conducted field work throughout the United States at NTAP organizations, as well as at nonprofit technology conferences and similar events throughout the United States. Ethnographic fieldwork consisted of ten to twenty hours per week of participant observation as well as informal interviews. In addition to field work, I conducted eighty-four formal

qualitative interviews and three focus groups, all of which ranged from forty minutes to four hours. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Respondents included NTAP executive directors and staff members, circuit riders, and foundation program officers. Modified snowball sampling was used to select interviewees and field sites, the appropriateness of which were independently confirmed by historical data. I supplemented and corroborated field work and interview data by collecting and analyzing electronic and physical documents, including marketing materials, Web sites, e-mails, reports, memos, agendas, and so on. I collected documents from four sources: 1) field work, 2) NTAP e-mail Listservs, 3) Web site captures, and 4) the Internet Archive (<http://www.archive.org>). Web site captures allowed me to preserve the otherwise transient materials organizations and individuals post on the Internet. Internet Archive research allowed me to examine historical Web materials that have since vanished from the public record.

THE FIRST WAVE: EARLY NONPROFIT TECHNOLOGY ASSISTANCE

Some of the earliest models of technology assistance to the nonprofit began with support from Steve Jobs of Apple Computers. The Technology Resource Center was founded in 1982 as one of the first concerted efforts to provide information technologies to the nonprofit sector. The Technology Resource Center held nonprofit technology conferences annually, attracting consultants and computer enthusiasts and funneling additional technology resources into the nonprofit sector. Several successful NTAPs came out of these early meetings, including the IT Resource Center in Chicago (ITRC), Desktop Assistance in Montana, and ComputerMentor in San Francisco.

Aside from the Technology Resource Center meetings, early NTAPs worked mostly in isolation. If they met at all to recognize each other's achievements, it was at the periphery of management assistance organization meetings, like the Alliance for Nonprofit Management, which gained popularity and legitimacy in the 1980s as an academic field of nonprofit management was coming into existence at business schools and newly formed nonprofit education programs (O'Neill Young, 1988). The 1980s, however, were particularly difficult times for nonprofits. Many struggled to keep their doors open, unable to pay for what they saw as ancillary services, such as technology and management assistance (Beilefeld, 1992). In Chicago, the IT Resource Center survived the lean times with the help of local foundations and corporate volunteers. Much of what remained of the Technology Resource Center movement essentially ceased operating, eventually merging with the Alliance for Nonprofit Management and operating as an affinity group within its confines.

By the 1990s, the trends toward retrenchment in the nonprofit sector were being compounded with increased calls for accountability, especially in the wake of scandals. With issues of accountability and fiscal responsibility at the forefront of nonprofit discourse, the mantra for the 1990s became organizational effectiveness (Edwards Hulme, 1996; Herman Renz, 1997, 1999; Rojas, 2000). Foundations, nonprofit leaders, politicians, and the public were all asking the same

question: how could nonprofit organizations be more effective? One answer, given by management assistance organizations and business schools, was through better management and stronger boards (Bradshaw, Murray, Wolpin, 1992; Duca, 1996; Green, Greisinger, 1996). Another was to build technical capacity in the sector by rekindling the nonprofit technology assistance community.

THE SECOND WAVE: MODERN CIRCUIT RIDING

Aside from a handful of isolated providers, the field of nonprofit technology assistance appeared effectively defunct by the late 1980s and throughout the early 1990s. By the mid-1990s, rapid technological change and the growth of the Internet reduced the costs of computing and increased the number of reasons for using it, especially among nonprofit organizations. Keeping abreast of technological advances no longer meant being competitive in the private sector; it was simply taken for granted. However, the nonprofit sector lagged well behind both the business and government sectors and showed little sign of gaining ground (Associates, 2001; Corder, 2001; Hirschenbaum, Unamneni, 2001).

Several reasons were given for this lag: nonprofit leadership is often wary of technology (Berlinger, Teeni, 1999), foundations did not provide adequate support for IT initiatives (Robertson, 2001), and a lack of resources and expertise conspires to keep nonprofits behind the curve (Forster, 2003; Seley, Wolpert, 2002). Addressing these three problems simultaneously are a group of technologically infused activists organizing under the moniker Circuit Rider.

The Roots of Circuit Riding

By the late 1990s, computers were becoming less expensive and easier to use, the Internet was quickly becoming a mainstream communications medium, and Gavin Clabaugh was doing penance in the nonprofit sector. Clabaugh had worked as a futures consultant, doing trend analysis on software; he and a friend developed for large multinational corporations. It was not long before he considered a career change: "We decided, to save our afterlives, we were going to change our focus and begin to work with the progressive nonprofit community." (personal communications, August 6, 2002).

In making the shift, Clabaugh formed a partnership with the Telecommunications Cooperative Network (TCN), a cooperative that purchased and resold long-distance time for its member nonprofits. TCN also had a small consulting arm, which helped nonprofits purchase and install telecommunications equipment, such as phone systems and fax machines. Clabaugh, who became manager of the consulting department, noticed a sharp decline in demand for TCN's consulting services in the 1990s. He concluded that nonprofits lacked the discretionary income to invest in technology, that nonprofits are, by definition, dedicated to mission. If given a choice between a dollar for mission and a dollar for infrastructure, they will spend it on mission. (personal communication, August 6, 2002).

To change this trend, Clabaugh went to where the money was: foundations. Foundations had played a significant role in founding TCN to do telecommunications buying, so the organization had strong relationships with the funding community. Clabaugh's idea was that rather than focusing on individual nonprofit organizations and improving their effectiveness, TCN could focus on programs and issues. personal communication, August 6, 2002. The logic was to engage foundations on a different level. Foundations prefer to support programs rather than infrastructure. As Clabaugh describes, Foundations do not like to fund general support. This stuff technology falls under general support. However, if you take it to an issue, it becomes voter turnout. Foundations fund projects they fund programs. personal communication, August 6, 2002. Clabaugh argued that by focusing across as opposed to within organizations, technology was programmatic, not infrastructural. This focus meant that instead of working with a single organization, TCN could work with a genre of nonprofits, such as social justice groups.

Making It Work: The Pilot Project

The first to try Clabaugh's novel approach was the W. Alton Jones Foundation (WAJF). WAJF supported environmental policy groups and, in 1994, funded a low-emissions vehicles zero-emissions vehicles initiative among fifty of its grantees. The grantees consisted of environmental groups, researchers, and scientists located throughout the United States. Clabaugh insisted that to do their work these groups needed the Internet, especially e-mail, to communicate. To this end, WAJF contracted with TCN to provide a consultant to connect the fifty grantees to the Internet. Clabaugh's innovation was connecting technology assistance to programmatic foundation funding. In doing so, he solved the problem of funding IT access and adoption among nonprofits, at least within specific niches.

Giving the model a name. With support from WAJF, Clabaugh had developed a new technology assistance model. Early NTAPs were simply multifunction consultants. They forged no affinity to the groups that hired them and often knew little about what the group actually did. With his model, Clabaugh sought to change this relationship, connecting the consultant to the mission. To differentiate the model, he first had to give it a name. Recalling itinerant preachers of yore, he called it Circuit Riding.

Hiring a circuit rider. Funding programs and forging an affinity between the consultant and the organization were more than rhetorical moves. They entailed a new orientation for foundations, nonprofits, and consultants. In 1995, with the support of WAJF, Clabaugh hired the first circuit rider, Jeremy Edes-Pierotti. Unlike other technology assistance providers, Edes-Pierotti had no formal training in technology or consulting. Instead, Edes-Pierotti had an insider's understanding of the policy environment. He explains why he was hired:

Because of my understanding of how public policy advocacy worked. They [TCN] thought that was a more important skill to have because the circuit rider for this particular project was going to be working with environmental and public health groups helping them figure out how to mobilize their

constituencies and to use technology for that. So the technology piece was a secondary emphasis added. That was the easy part to learn. It could have been much harder if they had decided to hire a technology person and teach them how public policy and advocacy and lobbying and all that stuff works in the United States. You cannot learn that in a couple of months.
 personal communication, August 23, 2003

Edes-Pierotti spent the next year traveling throughout the United States helping fifty WA F grantees connect to the Internet and to each other. Researchers have found that leaders in nonprofit organizations often resist the introduction of computers into their work. Berlinger (Teeni, 1999). The circuit rider was able to overcome any latent opposition because of his affiliation with the foundation. Edes-Pierotti explains:

There was a little bit of cachet I carried because when I called the nonprofit, I did not identify myself as being with TCN. I identified myself as being with the foundation, not as an employee, but working on a foundation project. All these organizations knew about it, and they wanted more money from the foundation. So, they were less likely to blow me off because if they blew me off and it got back to the foundation, it might jeopardize their opportunity to get future funding.
 personal communication, August 23, 2002

The early work of a circuit rider. At this early stage, the nonprofits with which the circuit riders worked had primitive, if any, information and communications technologies (ICTs). The circuit rider's job was most often installing basic ICTs and training staff and leaders how to use them. The primary task of Clabaugh's circuit rider experiment was to get the fifty selected WA F grantees connected to the Internet. At the organization, that entailed purchasing basic hardware, such as modems and network cards, and installing them. Computer interfaces were clunky, at best, during the mid-1990s, so some level of expertise was necessary to install and configure a modem. Connecting the rest of the office to a local area network was often a daunting task, requiring the circuit rider to spend up to a week working in a single organization to install, configure, and troubleshoot a network, a task that today would take an afternoon.

Circuit riding was not a hit-and-run operation. Part of Edes-Pierotti's job was to maintain the networks he installed. Because these networks were situated throughout the United States, this job entailed phone support. Edes-Pierotti knew the inner workings of the policy arena, but, as noted, he lacked formal technology training. Technology support tasks were distributed throughout TCN, which had an in-house technical staff. The circuit rider, although alone in visiting organizations, had a strong staff on which he could rely for technical support.

Writing the gospel: The W Alton Jones circuit rider report. The contract between TCN and WA F was meant to support only a pilot project. At the end of the year, staff from both organizations dutifully wrote a report describing the project's outcomes. The report featured a description of the circuit rider model, case studies of organizations helped by the program, details of the project's success, and lessons both organizations learned in the process. By many indicators, the project was a

success. Groups working with the circuit rider were satisfied, WA F's Listserv about low-emissions vehicles zero-emissions vehicles was abuzz with discussions about the potential of new transportation modes, and more than fifty nonprofit organizations were now communicating with each other over the Internet at a cost of less than \$125,000 (TCN, 1996).

The report's findings, however, could have implications beyond satisfying funder requirements. They provided a set of guidelines for future applications of the circuit rider model. Some of the key findings from the report, which were later adopted by others, include the following:

Circuit riders are best organized around a specific issue or initiative. A rifle, not a shotgun approach (TCN, 1996, p. 19). By drawing the boundary around work this way, TCN grounds circuit riding in affinity relations with the nonprofit organizations they assist.

Circuit riding should be a component of grant making. The report calls on foundations to include technology assistance as part of their grants. This idea connects to a larger discourse around organizational effectiveness and capacity building among nonprofits, which was popular at the time (Cutt Murray, 2000; Forbes, 1998; Nauff, Berger, Gray, 1991; Light, 2000; Murray Tassie, 1994). Circuit riders were often uneasy about the connection between their work and the dialogue around capacity building. Instead, they preferred to think of their work as serving some higher good, like toughening environmental protection laws. However, connecting circuit riding to grant making also ties technology to philanthropy, which lends legitimacy to the circuit rider and information technology.

Circuit riders should keep their independence (TCN, 1996, p. 22). Although circuit riders are foundation funded, they remain free agents. They enter the nonprofit with foundation legitimacy and resources but can remain neutral to the politics between grant makers and grantees.

Circuit riders aggregate experiences among the organizations they serve, spreading best practices throughout. As circuit riders traverse the country, they share and translate ideas about what works on the organizational level. In this way they are merchants of meaning (Czarniacki, 1990). Nonprofit leaders are often wary of technology (Berlinger, Teeni, 1999). It is not enough to come into the nonprofit with foundation cachet. Circuit riders had to build trust in order to get their work done successfully. According to the report, building trust entails meeting for drinks, meals, or a quick game of tennis (TCN, 1996, p. 23). Dirk Slater, a longtime circuit rider explains, "I think beer is very important for us. I mean going out and having beer after the day and having some social time is really important. Personal communication, June 5, 2003."

The WA F circuit rider report became an important part of the dialogue about technology assistance to the nonprofit sector. One circuit rider, Carnet Williams,

described it as one of the early milestones of where the circuit riders came from personal communication, September 16, 2003

Practicing what they preach: The WA F circuit rider program The W Alton Jones Foundation, impressed with the success of their pilot project, decided to pick up the program internally, eventually hiring two circuit riders, Sean O'Brien and Todd Oym. Like Edes-Pierotti, neither had formal technology training, but both had policy backgrounds. O'Brien has a recent Ph.D. in rainforest ecology. Oym had a master's degree in public affairs. Pete Myers, director of WA F, described the foundation's decision to pick up the project in a video made at the 2000 Riders Roundup: The foundation decided to step in and bring new resources and hopefully some new thinking that would allow experiments to play out about how the Internet and a variety of new uses of electronic communication could be brought to bear to achieve programmatic goals. O'Brien, 2000

The idea of being a circuit rider remained foreign to most in 1997. Circuit rider was not a job title that WA F could list in a newspaper to solicit candidates. O'Brien explains how he became aware of the position:

They WA F called me up and said to me this thing you are doing, is this something you would be interested in. When I learned more about it, I was definitely interested. What a cool thing to do. I think if I had seen the job description, I probably would have been interested in applying, but I probably would have assumed I was not qualified. I might have gone for it anyway, but I do not know that I would have thought this was for me. personal communication, August 14, 2002

As the WA F circuit rider program grew, the position became increasingly technical. Edes-Pierotti had laid much of the technology infrastructure for WA F grantees. O'Brien carried the torch, continuing Edes-Pierotti's work and taking advantage of the rapid changes taking place in Internet and networking technologies. O'Brien explains:

By the time the W Alton Jones Foundation was looking for a second circuit rider, we wanted someone who could program. We wanted someone who had real hardcore experience, because it was not a matter of installing modems and convincing people for the very first time they needed a Web site or e-mail. It was no, you have a Web site, now let us integrate it with your membership database. It was a whole other level of information and knowledge that was required. I was sort of working myself out of a job in some ways. personal communication, August 14, 2002

Enter Todd Oym. In October 1999, Oym came across the job posting on Idealist.org, a Web site for nonprofit jobs. He had a background in environmental policy and almost a decade of professional technology experience. Oym describes why he decided to apply for the position:

I knew that I was the right person for the job, and I knew that they were going to know that. They wanted somebody that could work primarily with environmental organizations. They wanted somebody with knowledge of

environmental work. And here I am. I had a masters public affairs with a specialization in environment and technology and a couple of years experience with an organization they funded. They wanted somebody with technology skills. And I had professional experience, and I had actually implemented a project with the help of the circuit rider program already, so they knew me and my work. To me it seemed like a good fit, and it seemed like a good fit for them, too. personal communication, April 12, 2004

Even though WA F had hosted circuit riders from 1996 to 2000, the job description remained amorphous. Circuit riders were given small budgets and assigned to a portfolio of organizations. The portfolios consisted of grantees selected by the trustees, with the circuit riders guidance. The circuit rider program had a hybrid status within WA F. It was not formally a department but rather a program that received grants from the foundation. In other words, WA F made a grant to itself to fund a program it ran. O'Brien and Oym could attend meetings with the foundation trustees to pitch their projects. The trustees voted to fund these individual projects the way they voted on distributing other types of grants. This practice made the circuit riders independent from, but accountable to, the foundation.

Part of the position, however, entailed evangelizing for the evangelists. While Oym was out in the field, O'Brien, as part of his job, was charged with organizing the circuit rider movement. O'Brien explains:

The model that we worked on was the foundation made a grant to itself, essentially to start the circuit rider program to support its specific set of grantees, but also to support the concept of circuit riding, to build that concept. So I had a double mandate. I was given free rein to spend as much time as I wanted to organize the circuit rider roundup, because part of my job was to build a community. And that was the model that Rob Stuart and Gavin Clabaugh thought was going to be a very common model when they first invented the word circuit rider. personal communication, August 14, 2002

As the needs for technology in the nonprofit sector became more sophisticated, the WA F circuit rider program adapted, hiring staff with greater technical expertise and sending them to nonprofits in need. By doing so, the circuit rider model solved yet another problem articulated at the beginning of this chapter: lack of resources and expertise. Circuit riders delivered both.

Spreading the Word

The W Alton Jones Foundation Circuit Rider Report circulated widely and caught the attention of several foundations, most notably the Rockefeller Family Fund. Clabaugh recalls, I got a call at that point after the Circuit Rider Report was released from Rob Stuart. He said, Hi, my name is Rob Stuart and I am

working with the Rockefeller Family Fund and I want to be a circuit rider. Can I come and talk to you? — personal communication, August 6, 2002

Stuart had been a booster for technology in the nonprofit sector. He first worked with the Public Interest Research Group in Vermont, building membership databases. In 1997, Stuart was working as a fellow at the Rockefeller Family Fund when he heard about the WA F program.

Circuit Rider — Gavin Clabaugh coined the term circuit rider. Rob Stuart turned it into a brand name. Many of the early circuit riders with whom I spoke named Stuart as the person who brought them into the movement and who is most responsible for pulling it together in the early days. Richard Morza, who started his nonprofit technology career with legal services in the mid-1980s, said, "When Rob Stuart came in and started to build a network that was much more about transformation IT and progressive social change, then the network started to build. What has happened is so organic that you cannot point to any particular thing. If you pull Rob out of the picture, I think it the network does collapse." — personal communication, September 6, 2003. Clabaugh and Stuart are institutional entrepreneurs, actors who shift prevailing understandings and institutional contours and spark innovation. Garud, Jain, Kumarasamy, 2002; Rindova, Fombrun, 2001; Troast, Hoffman, Riley, Bazerman, 2002. Institutional entrepreneurs are champions of certain innovations. Their task, which is often unsuccessful, is to challenge existing understandings and institutional frameworks and substitute their own. In this way, institutional entrepreneurs are agents of social change. Fligstein, 1997.

Organizing the circuit riders — Stuart began organizing the field by creating a Listserv, an e-mail list to which members, namely circuit riders, could contribute. The initial riders Listserv began with twenty to twenty-five members and has since grown to about fifteen hundred. From the Listserv, Stuart developed a Web site to share ideas among early NTAPs. We reasoned that in fact there were often times lone missionaries out there doing great work but not having a set of peers to reflect with and bounce ideas with and to strategize with, he explained. — personal communication, May 31, 2002.

As a result of Stuart's relentless organizing, interest in the concept continued to grow. He said:

One of the reasons I think the movement grew as we were very quick to help people identify themselves as circuit riders. They had never called themselves that before. They were maybe consultants, or they didn't know that they were. By giving them a name we helped the movement along to establish circuit riders. We began to grow as actual numbers and in fact have more formal circuit rider programs being supported. Then we used the subsequent roundups in a sense and the Listserv as a vehicle through which those folks were supported. — personal communication, May 31, 2002.

By giving a name to the activity, people came to recognize that they were doing as participating in a larger movement. I have interviewed independent NTAPs

ho tell me they have been doing technology assistance for years but never knew they were circuit riders before coming into contact with another rider, or stumbling across a Web site. Marshall Mayer, an early adherent to the model, explains:

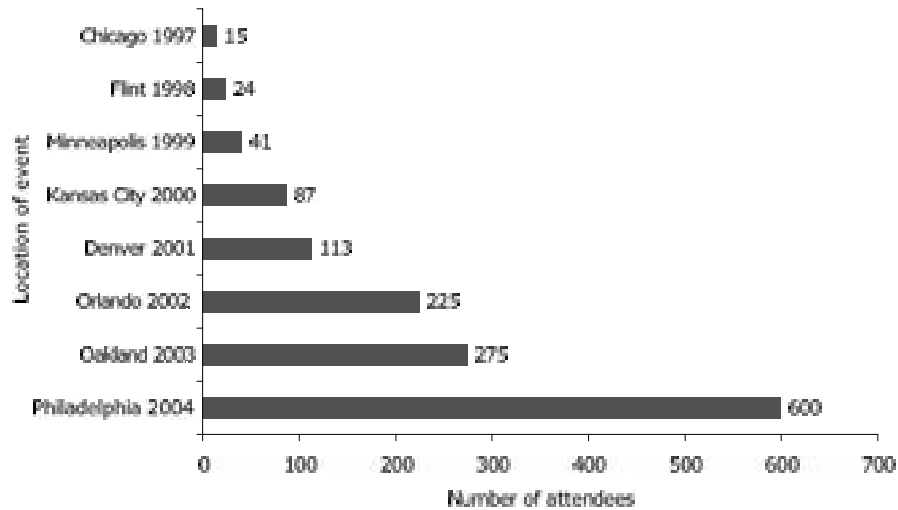
Most of us who were in the first Roundup meeting said, I have been doing circuit riding. In my case I had already been doing it for ten years. I just never called it that. I did on-site technical assistance for nonprofits since 1989, or actually, in my case, since 1986, it was not my full-time job, but I was doing it. Many of us in the room were the same way, we just had not called it that. Literally by just calling it that, we created a methodology and a buzz that went along with that methodology that actually raised more money for each of our programs because we had, in essence, a consistent message to give to funders. So they could see an industry being born, and they wanted to be a part of it. emphasis added. personal communication, May 14, 2002

The name gave more than organization to a set of activities. It bestowed meaning on the work and began to set boundaries on the field. As circuit riders, they shared not only a common affiliation, but more important, a common set of values, a stated ideology. It was important for people doing this kind of work to call themselves circuit riders. Their ideology was about connecting technology to mission, rather than simply building the capacity of nonprofit organizations. Rather than asking, Will this technology make the organization more efficient? circuit riders ask, Will this technology help solve the problem of homelessness?

Organizing, Mobilizing, and Professionalizing: The Riders Roundup

Building a movement of circuit riders took more than a Listserv and tour of the United States. As part of his work with the Rockefeller Technology Project, Stuart began to organize a meeting of circuit riders, calling it the Riders Roundup. Stuart had a small budget with which to organize the event, so he relied on other foundations to share the burden. Following their pilot project with WA F, TCN reorganized, withdrawing from technology assistance altogether. Clabaugh left during the shuffle to become vice president for information services at the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. From his position there, Clabaugh was able to support the Roundups financially. The Riders Roundups were first organized as a way of building the movement. This was particularly true of the earliest meetings, which attendees told me were very much like movement meetings, featuring idealistic speakers espousing the revolutionary potential of information technology in the nonprofit sector. As the meetings grew, much of the political progressivism was shed in favor of professionalization and capacity-building discourse. Figure 9.1 shows how rapidly attendance at the Riders Roundups grew. By the fourth roundup, at which time a newly founded trade association for NTAPs began convening the meeting, many more groups and individuals had become involved, including a group of more-mainstream foundations and corporate sponsors. As trade associations indicate the legitimacy of a field (Greenwood, Suddaby, Hinings, 2002), the circuit riders, in many ways, had arrived.

Figure 9.1 Roundup attendees by year



CONCLUSION

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed the historical role of circuit riders in bringing technology to the nonprofit sector. The nonprofit sector is a heterogeneous set of organizations that share more than just legal status. Nonprofits differ from for-profit and government agencies in their commitment to altruism (Clohesy, 2000). They are also said to be value-pressive organizations (Evans, 1992). Rather than relying on for-profit consulting firms, nonprofits can work with circuit riders, technology consultants who are an active part of their community and share their values. The first circuit riders—Edes-Pierotti, O'Brien, and Oym—each came out of progressive political or environmental movements before plying their technology skills in the nonprofit sector. Marshall Mayer, founder of Desktop Assistance and later CEO of Tech Rocks, explains:

The fact that most of our Tech Rocks staff do have actual organizing or advocacy experience helps them immeasurably in offering that really specialized service to our clients, because we know from real life experience what they are going through. We have been very conscious to attract that kind of staff that has actually been doing this work. So they know exactly what an organization is trying to do. (personal communication, May 14, 2002)

Circuit riders occupy space among several institutions: the nonprofit sector, philanthropy, and the technology industry. As such, they protect nonprofit organizations from the cutthroat practices of for-profit consulting firms and the unnerving pace of technology change. In doing so, however, they have also faced

constraints and demands on their way of doing technology assistance. As the field has grown, it has had to tone down some of its progressive ideology and adopt the language of capacity building, which is less threatening to foundations and potential corporate funders. They have also had to adopt more professional practices, such as developing a trade association, a move that signals the legitimacy of their field and attracts external funding. Abbott, 1988; Greenwood et al., 2002.

The circuit rider model was created to solve the three problems previously outlined: nonprofits' uneasiness about IT, a lack of foundation support, and a lack of resources and expertise. It grew and survived through the institutional entrepreneurship of people such as Gavin Clabaugh, who connected the model to foundation programs, and Rob Stuart, who organized the circuit riders into a bounded field. Following changes in the nonprofit sector, the future of circuit riding is unclear. For now, circuit riders continue to service the technology needs of nonprofits in low-resource environments. Their ability to continue doing so is threatened by competition for resources and legitimacy from other models of technology assistance to the nonprofit sector, such as commercial NTAPs and for-profit consulting firms. Recently smaller movements within the circuit rider community have been advocating for free open source software as a strategy for fending off the influence of corporate firms and proprietary technology solutions into the sector. Though the move appears to have great promise, it is too early to tell if this strategy will be successful and circuit riding will thrive once again.

References

- Abbott, A. D. 1988. *The system of professions: An essay on the division of expert labor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Associates, P. S. R. 2001. *Wired, billing and ready: Nonprofit human service organizations' adoption of information technology*. Princeton: Princeton University.
- Beilefeld, W. 1992. Funding uncertainty and nonprofit strategies in the 1980s. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 2(4), 381-401.
- Berlinger, L. R., Teeni, D. 1999. Leaders' attitudes and computer use in religious congregations. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 9(4), 399-412.
- Bradshaw, P., Murray, V., Wolpin, J. 1992. Do nonprofit boards make a difference: An exploration of the relationships among board structure, process and effectiveness. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 21(1), 227-249.
- Clohesy, W. W. 2000. Altruism and the endurance of the good. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 11(3), 237-253.
- Corder, J. 2001. Acquiring technology: Comparing nonprofit and public sector agencies. *Administration and Society*, 33(2), 194-219.
- Cutt, J., Murray, V. V. 2000. *Accountability and effectiveness evaluation in nonprofit organizations*. London: Routledge.
- Czarniawska-Skorgias, B. 1990. Merchants of meaning: Management consulting in the Swedish public sector. In B. A. Turner (Ed.), *Organizational symbolism*. pp. 139-150. New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Duca, D. 1996. *Nonprofit boards: Roles, responsibilities, and performance*. New York: Wiley.
- Edwards, M., Hulme, D. 1996. *Beyond the magic bullet: NGO performance and accountability in the post-cold war world*. West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press.
- Fligstein, N. 1997. Social skill and institutional theory. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 40(4), 397-406.

- Forbes, D P 1998 Measuring the unmeasurable: Empirical studies of nonprofit organizational effectiveness from 1977 to 1997 *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 27 2 , 183 202
- Forster, 2003 Revolution or evolution : A longitudinal study of technology use by nonprofit organizations 2000 2002 Report Pittsburgh, PA: Bayer Center for Nonprofit Management, Robert Morris University
- Garud, R, Jain, S, Kumaraswamy, A 2002 Institutional entrepreneurship in the sponsorship of common technological standards: The case of Sun Microsystems and Java *Academy of Management Journal*, 45 1 , 196 214
- Green, C, Greisinger, D W 1996 Board performance and organizational effectiveness in nonprofit social services organizations *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 6 4 , 381 402
- Greenwood, R, Suddaby, R, Hinings, C R 2002 Theorizing change: The role of professional associations in the transformation of institutionalized fields *Academy of Management Journal*, 45 1 , 58 80
- Herman, R D, Renz, D O 1997 Multiple constituencies and the social construction of nonprofit organizational effectiveness *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 26 2 , 185 206
- Herman, R D, Renz, D O 1999 Theses on nonprofit organizational effectiveness *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 28 2 , 107 126
- Leavens, T H 1992 When the management is the message: Relating values to management practice in nonprofit organizations *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 2 4 , 403 417
- Lirschbaum, J, Samaneni, R 2001 Bridging the organizational divide: Toward a comprehensive approach to the digital divide Oakland, CA: PolicyLink
- Naught, E B, Berger, R A, Gray, S T 1991 Profiles of excellence: Achieving success in the nonprofit sector 1st ed San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Light, P C 2000 Making nonprofits work: A report on the tides of nonprofit management reform Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, Aspen Institute
- Marshall, N P, McInerney, P B 2005 The nonprofit for-profit continuum: Theorizing the dynamics of mixed-form markets *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 34 1 , 7 28
- Media Jump Start 2002 Media Jump Start's vision Retrieved March 3, 2002, from <http://mediajumpstart.org/index.php?name=vision>
- Murray, V, Tassie, B 1994 Evaluating the effectiveness of nonprofit organizations In R D Herman Associates Eds, *The Jossey-Bass handbook of nonprofit leadership and management* pp 303 324 San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- O'Brien, S 2000 Roundup 2000 and First Day of Service, Kansas City, MO Charlottesville, VA: W Alton Jones Foundation
- O'Neill, M, Young, D R 1988 Educating managers of nonprofit organizations New York: Praeger
- Orlikowski, W 1992 The duality of technology: Rethinking the concept of technology in organizations *Organization Science*, 3 3 , 389 427
- Orlikowski, W 2000 Using technology and constituting structures: A practice lens for studying technology in organizations *Organization Science*, 11 4 , 404 428
- Rindova, V P, Fombrun, C 2001 Entrepreneurial action in the creation of the specialty coffee niche In C B Schoonhoven, E Romanelli Eds, *The entrepreneurship dynamic: Origins of entrepreneurship and the evolution of industries* pp 236 261 Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press
- Robertson, B 2001 Beyond access: A foundation guide to ending the organizational divide Washington, DC: National Committee on Responsive Philanthropy
- Rojas, R R 2000 A review of models for measuring organizational effectiveness among for-profit and nonprofit organizations *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 11 1 , 97 104
- Seley, E, Wolpert, 2002 New York City's nonprofit sector New York: The New York City Nonprofits Project
- TCN 1996 Circuit riders: Pioneers in non-profit networking Report Charlottesville, VA: W Alton Jones Foundation

162 Nonprofits and Technology

- Troast, G. R., Hoffman, A., Riley, H. C., Bazerman, M. H. 2002. Institutions as barriers and enablers to negotiated agreements: Institutional entrepreneurship and the Plum Creek Habitat Conservation Plan. In A. Hoffman (Ed.), *Organizations, policy, and the natural environment: Institutional and strategic perspectives*. pp. 235-261. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Weitzman, M. S., Alandoni, N. T., Lampkin, L. M., Pollak, T. H. 2002. *The new nonprofit almanac and desk reference: The essential facts and figures for managers, researchers, and volunteers*. New York: Jossey-Bass.