



## **BEST PRACTICES IN NONPROFIT TECHNOLOGY: A Case Study in Leadership and Culture** Pace School, Churchill, PA

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Nonprofit Management*

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What makes for an effective infusion of technology into a nonprofit? Think leadership and culture, for starters. The culture of a tech-savvy nonprofit must not only be mission-centric but promote constructive change through continual knowledge enhancement. Leadership must communicate priorities clearly, focus on the bottom-line as well as have a longer perspective, and have the courage to abandon familiar yet ineffective practices. Nonprofit technology phases are further defined in *“The Cultured Approach to Technology Development in Nonprofits”* in the August 2000 issue of *The Nonprofit Quarterly*. As Trabian Shorters, founding President of Technology Works for Good noted, “Technology change is more about how people and organizations handle learning and conflict than about how they handle computers and the Web.”

Pace School is well acquainted with both learning and conflict. As a specialized educational option providing integrated special education and mental health services, the organization has learned to balance pressures from the vagaries of educational funding,

*“In the unique social setting that is Pace School, we understand that the creation of sanctuary is fundamental to progress for our students, takes commitment at every level of the organization and must begin with a deep-seated respect for the complex challenges facing our children and youth.”*  
-- from the Pace School website

accrediting bodies, regulations such as HIPAA and the sometimes incompatible needs of its students and other constituencies with grace and thoughtful responses. In their words, they “do not get blown away by change” and this has translated into an ability to view and utilize the ever-changing world of technology as a strategic advantage.

How did Pace School evolve into this very rare culture for nonprofits and other small organizations? As might be expected, sound technology decision making is made possible by a marriage of leadership who “know what they want,” technology staff who “know what is feasible” and an atmosphere that is conducive to meaningful dialogue and open to change. Through several years of refinement, Pace School has been working to streamline its business and administrative processes, increase accountability and readability in reporting, and provide students and staff with appropriate resources and tools that will engage them productively.

Due to the complexity of issues Pace students face, no single information system meets all the needs of its teachers, therapists, administration, and reporting bodies. Instead of succumbing to the tyranny of incompatible systems, Pace technical staff constantly seek and absorb input on how these systems could be more useful and usable. By developing their own MS Access databases utilizing Visual Basic Access code, IT staff have enabled student demographics from the main database to automatically populate to the custom mental health database, eliminating the need for therapists to spend valuable time

recreating or maintaining duplicate information. On the reporting side, this has increased the ability to easily create meaningful graphs and charts from these multiple sources and track trends, map progress and focus attention on real problems.

As understanding the connections between different information sets is crucial to the mission and work of Pace School, staff are not satisfied with these improvements. The focus continues to be increasing the interaction of administrative and instructional systems by eventually applying the Schools Interoperability Framework blueprint to existing technology. This blueprint is a set of platform independent, vendor neutral rules and definitions for K-12 software that enables diverse applications to interact and share data. (For more information about SIF, visit [www.sifinfo.org](http://www.sifinfo.org).)

In addition to the use of technology for progress tracking and reporting, it is also used extensively in student instruction and staff development. The skills learned in each setting cross-over into other applications to make technology usage and life ever easier for Pace School staff. For example, many of the Pace School teachers access the Internet when developing lesson plans. A natural extension was to use the navigational skills acquired and post internal materials on the Pace intranet. At the beginning of each school year, all staff are required to visit the policies and procedures manual online and sign off digitally. Some in-service presentations are also posted to the intranet for absent staff or new hires to review.

*"Good leaders make people feel that they're at the very heart of things, not at the periphery. Everyone feels that he or she makes a difference to the success of the organization. When that happens people feel centered and that gives their work meaning."  
--Warren G. Bennis*

Within the last four years, Pace School committed to including technology skills in all job descriptions and ensuring all staff receive annual technology training. Most in-service days incorporate technology components, either demonstrations of system refinements or new applications. New implementations are accompanied by a trainer-led orientation, time for staff to safely experiment, and ongoing support from Pace staff through a help desk application. Pace has found that this multi-tiered approach is essential to staff skill and comfort levels. In one case, a teacher of 20 years who was "afraid of breaking the tiny little boxes" finally gained enough confidence in her abilities to use instructional technology after engaging in a scheduled 'play session.'

By investing in staff knowledge and promoting reflection and continual improvement, Pace School is able to adopt necessary changes with a minimum of stress and disruption. Organizationally, priorities are clear and practical and the lines of communication are open. Technology goals are reviewed monthly to ensure relevance by a technology committee composed of representatives from various levels of the staff. Leaders are knowledgeable enough about the complexities of technology to understand which initiatives will provide the most return for the investment of time and money without being misled by unrealistic promises. Staff remain open to possibilities and commit the time to explore without getting sidetracked by interesting but unproductive options.

Above all, Pace School recognizes that technology, like life, does not reach a magical point of stasis but is an ever-evolving process. There is always the next step, the next integration, the next upgrade, all based on the organization's priorities and needs and a culture and leadership who continually ask "How can we keep getting better." Credit is due to management for recognizing and embracing technology's role in the organization as well as to technical staff who have taken the initiative to make sure that technical directions sustain and enhance Pace School's mission and goals.

*"Pace School is a non-profit Approved Private School serving students of elementary or middle school age who have diagnoses within the special education and mental health systems. Enrollees have an extensive history of inability to function successfully in mainstream education. Pace School organizes its services to promote the academic progress, mental wellness and behavioral self-management of each youngster. Highly individualized instruction and therapeutic intervention, all in the context of creating and maintaining safety in a social environment, are key features of the program."*

*For more information about Pace School, visit <http://www.paceschool.org>.*

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