SIMPLICITY:

Nonprofits Transforming Charlotte Through Technology

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Moving Nonprofits Forward
with Technology

Technology has been transforming how the world operates since its inception. Revolutionary technological innovations, like the first computer in 1958 and the internet in the 1990s, have increased efficiency and access to information, redefining convenience and making technology essential in today's society. There aren't any people, organizations or businesses that can thrive without technology, including nonprofits.

Nonprofits are focused on providing services that aid the development and upkeep of society in areas like health, education, environmental conservation, arts and culture and more. There is a passion and drive to deliver missions, with a sense of urgency and an expectation to do so with the most effective use of resources possible. That leaves little time or financial resources for employing technology solutions to improve the effectiveness or efficiency of service delivery. While many nonprofit leaders understand the benefits technology could bring to their organizations, they don't have adequate knowledge, bandwidth or funding for innovative technology to have a meaningful impact.

Recognizing this need, Apparo, a Charlotte-based nonprofit organization that connects other nonprofits to corporate volunteers to enable access to technology education, training and affordable IT solutions, partnered with The James S. and John L. Knight Foundation to create Simplicity.

What is Simplicity?

As the name suggests, Simplicity helps organizations make technology changes that simplify and transform the organization and the delivery of services in the community.

The Simplicity program took 13 nonprofit agencies on a transformative organizational journey with a change-management consultation to sustain the new processes and cultural behaviors. Each of the agencies made a three-year commitment to the program, making them eligible for two consulting sessions per year along with participation in collaborative workgroups to help maximize the new technology. This three-year commitment also partnered each agency with a remote help-desk company whose services were subsidized through the program. This subsidy was intended to help the nonprofits adjust to remote support and learn its value for the long-term sustainability of technology functions.

INTRODUCTION

In order to bring the entire cohort to similar operating efficiencies and remove the destabilizing cycle of hardware and software break-fix, Apparo's program equipped each agency with new laptop computers and state-of-the-art Microsoft operating systems and tools for all employees, as well as a networked printer/fax/copier. They were provided with a wireless network, web-based email and document sharing, data security backup capabilities, and a Network Access Storage device for archiving documents (Simplicity Suite of Tools).

Simplicity agencies were moved to cloud-based operating systems and processes, enabling them to reach their constituents in a mobile fashion, collaborate remotely as a team, and increase their ability to more effectively reach and serve the community. Participating nonprofits were each provided with a strategic review of their technology needs and current resources, as well as a three-year technology roadmap. They were coached repetitively on how to engage with the new software and processes and how to help their teams sustain the use of the new technology. IT Coaching volunteers were made available throughout the seven years to further sustain and expand the understanding and use of Microsoft Office tools.

Along this transformative journey, Apparo connected with corporate technology employees who had expertise in cloud computing, Microsoft Office tools, change management, strategic planning and data security. These skilled volunteers engaged with the nonprofits and found mutual benefit. The nonprofits received tech assistance for a more efficient business process, while the volunteers learned more about their communities and developed a camaraderie with others who volunteered. The volunteers also brought that team energy, along with newly developed initiative, leadership and out-of-the-box skills, back to the office.

The goal of the Simplicity program was not only to transform each agency technologically but to bring multiple nonprofits together to learn from and support one another while creating sustainable technology solutions and practices that would otherwise not be feasible for small nonprofits to sustain. The collaborative cohort approach was integral to creating relationships that would ensure that the change-management journey could be sustained.
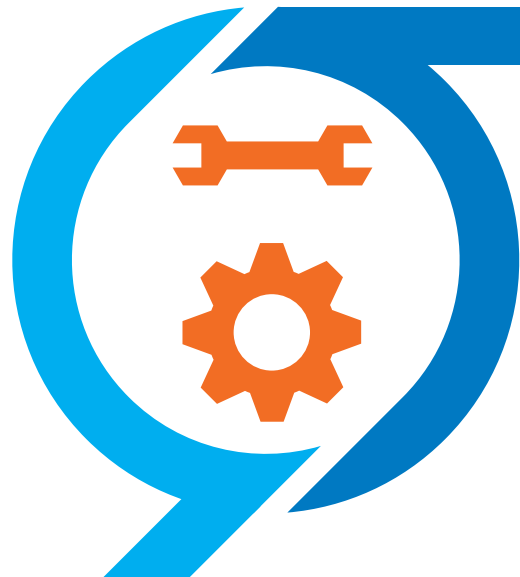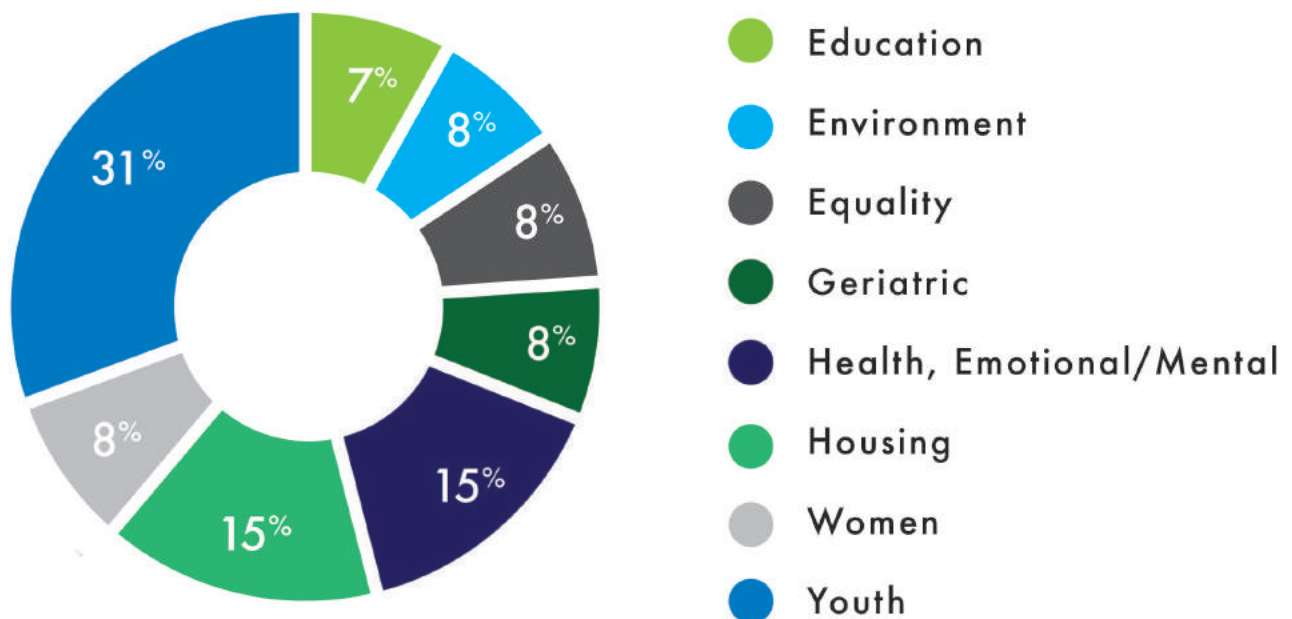
Launched in 2010 and ended in 2017, Apparo's Simplicity program served 13 agencies in three cohort groups. The nonprofit members enrolled in the program in the following incremental groups:

SIMPLICITY PARTICIPANT MISSION AREAS

PROJECT TIMELINE

2010

Bruce Irons Camp Fund, Dress for Success Charlotte, Lakewood Community Development Corporation, and Mental Health America of Central Carolinas

2011

Carolina Breast Friends, Community Building Initiative, Greater Matthews Habitat for Humanity, Lakewood Preschool Corporation, Right Moves for Youth, and The Speech Garden Institute

2014

Catawba Riverkeeper Foundation, Put on the B.R.A.K.E.S., and Shepherd's Center of Charlotte

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CASE STUDIES

The following case studies demonstrate just how transformational Simplicity can be for nonprofit agencies involved and for the greater good of the Charlotte community.

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Established in November 2003 by Kristy Adams-Ebel, Carolina Best Friends (CBF) is a nonprofit organization committed to helping women with breast cancer in all stages of survival. The organization caters to those who want to create a social and educational outlet for women who, through their shared experiences, are focused on survival and hope.

Situation:

Carolina Breast Friends was in need of technology capabilities, as they had none prior to 2011. The organization didn't have hardware, software, server-based applications or any technology staff. To add to these inefficiencies, collaboration and internal communication were limited and there was no document file organization, security or strategic planning or budgeting for technology. When it came to technology, Carolina Breast Friends was starting from scratch.

When joining the Simplicity program, CBF's goals were to establish standard processes and implement tools to enable the organization to work remotely with survivors and allow staff to use virtual office hours. This would improve the nonprofit's efficiency, allowing them to touch more lives and expand their reach.

Results:

CBF has made tremendous improvement in their technology systems since being part of Simplicity. Currently, all aspects of the organization are up-to-date with technology solutions. CBF has streamlined communication, institutionalized processes, and integrated systems. In the word's of Melonee Hostetler, CBF's Executive Director, "Simplicity enabled our organization to work smart!" Simplicity increased CBF's operating capacity, decreased operating costs, and increased the team's technology knowledge.

Community Building Initiative (CBI) is a nonprofit organization established in 1997 by government and civic leaders to achieve racial and ethnic inclusion and equity in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg community.

Situation:

Prior to joining Simplicity, CBI had a technology plan and access to a shared server through another organization, but they didn't have anyone dedicated to managing or implementing their technology plan. Additionally, because they were on a shared server, they couldn't work remotely. The server-based network also caused issues of lost data and backup problems. On top of all this, the organization had recently become independent of a larger organization, which meant they needed hardware, software and technical support.

Results:

Converting from a server-based environment to the cloud has completely changed how CBI is able to work. CBI staff can now access what they need from anywhere, and they no longer worry about losing data. CBI's team's capacity for IT use has grown and they are much more confident in making decisions based on the partnership and insights from Apparo and others in the Simplicity group. Program Coordinator, Christi Lee, stated, "Frankly, I'm not sure what we would have done had Simplicity not come around when it did. It has certainly been invaluable to have Apparo and Simplicity at our backs."

CBI is now a technology trailblazer. The organization that was once dependent on another organization for their technology needs is now sharing their knowledge on IT and transitioning to Microsoft Office 365 with other tenants in their building.

DRESS FOR SUCCESS CHARLOTTE

The mission of Dress for Success is to empower women to achieve economic independence by providing a network of support, professional attire and development tools to help women thrive in work and in life. Dress for Success offers support and assistance to women identifying and striving towards professional and personal goals. By helping clients map out their future through financial planning, they make the achievement of objectives an attainable reality rather than a dream. Dress for Success's clients emerge from these programs as leaders who are self-sufficient and economically independent, forward thinkers.

Situation:

In 2008, Dress for Success Charlotte employed one full-time and one part-time staff member, serving 390 women in need. They had a computer lab for clients, but it was outdated, with used computers and software.

Their internal working systems were equally challenging, not allowing staff to collaborate, streamline financial, donor or client data, or prepare for client growth. At the same time, the US financial crisis was evolving, which caused the need for Dress for Success Charlotte services to rise dramatically. By 2012, Dress for Success Charlotte was serving 840 women. They needed more staff and a stronger business process supported by current technology and tools.

Results:

Dress for Success Charlotte joined the Simplicity program in 2010 and began the journey of streamlining their business processes and adopting technology best practices to offer more services needed in the community. As Dress for Success Charlotte's technology plan was created, the organization's leadership gained insight into how they could create human capital capacity by improving operational and program efficiencies. They also gained insight into how the plan could support bringing more technology to clients to help address the digital divide linked with socioeconomic status and generational culture.

During the six years of their involvement with Simplicity, Dress for Success Charlotte expanded their continuum of services to include job preparedness, job acquisition, employment retention and career advancement services. As a result, they became able to serve more people in need. Currently, Dress for Success Charlotte reaches more than 800 women annually. Dress for Success Charlotte's budget has grown from 179,000 in 2010 to 437,000 in 2017. There are now four full-time employees, two part-time employees, and two contract employees.

According to Dress for Success Charlotte's Executive Director, Kerry Barr O'Connor, "One of the best things about participating in Apparo's Simplicity program is working in the Cloud. It gives our staff the flexibility to work from wherever they are and therefore serve more women in need. We would not have been able to efficiently meet the rising demand of our services during the economic downturn without Apparo's flexibility, training and strategic support."

Lakewood Community Development Corporation (LCDC) is a neighborhood-based nonprofit organization focused on comprehensive revitalization of the Lakewood Neighborhood.

Situation:

LCDC had pieced-together technology, which included a mash-up of desktop computers - each with a different version of the Windows operating system; three-generation old software; and a variety of email platforms. They also didn't have a shared server to help share documents or a backup system to secure agency data. Due to budget restraints, the organization was also not able to secure the computer hardware resources it needed.

"Our technology mix made communicating with each other difficult, especially since we work from two locations and are often out in the field," said Scott Terry, Executive Director of LCDC.

This environment was described as very counterproductive.

Results:

LCDC became a more productive organization. Staff was able to collaborate on documents saved to SharePoint, and scheduling became easier with shared calendars. LCDC was so excited about the benefits they experienced in Simplicity that they became ambassadors of the program, recruiting Lakewood Preschool to participate in Simplicity, too. In the words of Scott Terry, Executive Director, "Simplicity really provided an opportunity to put our organization together with technology, so we could work more efficiently and productively."

In the long term, LCDC became such an effective organization that they were able to partner with other agencies to create stability in the Lakewood Community. Partnerships with Habitat for Humanity and Charlotte Mecklenburg Housing Partnership resulted in 125+ new or rehabilitated homes being constructed or repaired to improve quality of life for Lakewood's residents. LCDC's collaboration with stakeholders, parents and faith partners also increased neighborhood involvement in the development and management of their community. Now, more than 12 community members lead a nonprofit Community Advisory Board to maintain the community's strides toward improved living conditions, increased safety, better educational opportunities and quality of life for its residents.

SIMPLICITY White Paper

LAKEWOOD PRESCHOOL CORPORATION

Lakewood Preschool Corporation (LWPSC) is a licensed, tuition-free preschool and family education program. It is a cooperative service among parents, children, staff, neighbors, and volunteers to address the educational, emotional, physical and social needs of preschool children and their families living in and around the Lakewood Community.

Situation:

Prior to Simplicity, LWPSC did not have technology as a part of their strategic plan. The organization depended on extremely outdated desktop computers that used dial-up service to access the Internet and there was no dedicated IT staff. Records are an important part of LWPSC, and until LWPSC joined Simplicity, they were managing their records using a manual paper filing system.

Results:

Today, LWPSC is operating with updated hardware and software and is completely wireless. Their filing system is now digital, and they have a dedicated technology person to maintain and manage the use of their technology. The implementation of the strategic plan provided by Apparo improved internal and external communication and business processes. Executive Director Courtney Alexander stated, "Simplicity improved our technology immensely. We learned what we needed and were able to acquire it at a low cost. We learned a lot by networking with other small nonprofits."

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Mental Health America of Central Carolinas (MHA) is a nonprofit driven to improve and enhance the local mental health services' delivery system through a variety of programs, including prevention services for all; early identification and intervention for those at risk; and integrated care, services and supports for those who need it. Its goal for all clients is recovery.

Situation:

MHA was a growing organization. Their staff had increased by 50 percent, but wasn't operating at full capacity. The organization was not able to perform its best work because of old laptops, outdated software and insufficient equipment. The organization was also operating mostly on a server-based network platform, with one exception - donor database eTapestry. There was also no designated staff for IT, with technology management support being shared between executive director and assistant director.

Results:

After working with Apparo, MHA has seen an improvement with cyber security, data and document sharing, and file structure and accessibility. The organization has better quality hardware and software, which has increased their overall efficiency.

PUT ON THE B.R.AK.E.S.

Put on the B.R.A.K.E.S. (Be Responsible And Keep Everyone Safe) is a nonprofit whose mission is to prevent injuries and save lives by training and educating teenage drivers and their parents about the importance of safe and responsible driving.

Situation:

Before joining Simplicity, Put on the B.R.A.K.E.S. had no IT staff, cloud capabilities, or hands-on computer help. Their program was experiencing a rapid national expansion and they were in need of technology solutions to manage and monitor their programs. Put on the B.R.A.K.E.S joined Simplicity with the of goal operating more effectively and efficiently.

Results:

In joining the Simplicity program, Put on the B.R.A.K.E.S. began adapting to an empowering new way to work. Apparo's cloud-based program allowed the nonprofit to organize their agency data and create storage systems that enabled collaborative work processes. This new system of managing files helped them increase workload efficiency and allowed them to collaborate and work smarter. Officer Manager Jane Johns said, "Simplicity propelled us to leap from the basic office operations to fully functioning at the capacity we needed."

Right Moves for Youth (RMFY) is a nonprofit organization working to reduce the occurrence of student dropouts in grades 6-12 in Mecklenburg County. Their mission is to provide the resources and guidance to help students graduate high school with a plan for their future success. RMFY is the leading provider of school-based student support and youth development services through group mentoring and social-emotional learning. Right Moves for youth serves 1800 students at 29 Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools sites.

Situation:

RMFY didn't have a budget for technology. Their computers (which were donated by corporate partners after they discarded them) and software had become outdated, and they didn't have a plan for updating or maintaining the hardware or software. In an attempt to create a solution to the problem, the organization entered an agreement with a hosting service that housed all of their software and documents. Issues arose when the hosting service experienced internet disruptions, which made it impossible to access or work on documents, often for hours at a time. The organization also struggled to connect employees and volunteers working at different locations.

Results:

RMFY's participation in Simplicity transformed the way staff worked together, utilized their programmatic data, and moved their programs forward. The technology tools and processes allowed employees to monitor and manage the scheduling of calendars for their student programming, making it easier to more easily and accurately track events and employee schedules. Employees could also more easily reserve vans for student field trips, schedule internal conference rooms, and share calendars.

The technology empowerment of Simplicity allowed RMFY to serve more and do more. Over the five years participating in the program, RMFY was able to revamp their program model, thereby increasing services by 28%, staff by 57% and the operating budget by 44%. Because of the strategic technology plan that Apparo helped create, RMFY has been transformed. There is now a plan in place for the cost-effective replacement of aging hardware, timely software updates and acquisitions, efficient student and donor management systems and an easy-to-maintain website. They would not have been as effective at this work if their technology and business processes had not been fine-tuned, understood and adopted by the team. Simplicity was an essential element in making this happen for RMFY.

RMFY Executive Director Tayuanee Dewberry said, "There was a notion that we couldn't have good technology because we are a nonprofit. Apparo's Simplicity program has given us a cost-effective way to upgrade and maintain our system. And it isn't just software, laptops, wires or technology. This type of support provided by Apparo is essential in helping students graduate high school and pursue their dreams. Apparo helps agencies like RMFY strengthen the fiber of our community and turn obstacles into opportunities."

Simplicity provided 13 small nonprofits with the capacity and infrastructure to sustain their missions and deepen their impact in the community. When surveyed, Simplicity participants said their experience was valuable, rewarding and informational.

One hundred percent of participants agreed that Simplicity improved their knowledge of IT, and believed that the initiative improved their agency's ability to fulfill its mission.

Volunteers who contributed their technology and business process skills found great reward in the program. They were exposed to community services of which they had previously little to no knowledge, which engaged them; they were energized by the quick impact their skills could have in a short amount of time; they discovered a fresh appreciation for their employers who both allowed and enabled the partnerships; and they returned to the office with improved morale and enlivened understanding of just how much of a difference their skills can make.

More than 95 percent of the participating agencies agreed that :

- *Simplicity was transformational to their organization.*

- *They would recommend the Simplicity User Group to others.*

- *Simplicity increased their team's Microsoft Office/technology knowledge and skills.*

- *Simplicity increased their organization's operating capacity, allowing their teams to deliver their mission more effectively.*

- *Simplicity increased their organization's ability to serve more.*

IT COACHING   OUR IMPACT   CIO INSIGHTS   COMMUNITY IMPACT PROJECTS