

The Strategic Role of
Technology in Philanthropy

STRATEGIC ROADMAP for IT in COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS

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Executive Summary

As financial institutions and new giving platforms provide enticing ways for donors to actualize their impact strategies, community foundations are facing increased competition for donor dollars. Understanding the strategic interplay of people, processes, the technology tools available, and the tradeoffs associated with pursuing one approach over another, is now more critical than ever in ensuring the resilience of community foundations. How can you remain relevant, achieve impact, and continue to define your unique value to donors?

We interviewed IT leaders from community foundations throughout North America, to understand the unique challenges and opportunities they are grappling with. Currently, IT within community foundations is thought of as serving the organization's strategy, goals, and objectives, rather than playing an integral role in shaping the strategy itself. IT departments are often asked, "Is there a tool that can

"It is tempting to dismiss the widespread adoption of these technologies as "far off in the future" and to note that so far the technologies have been adopted by mostly young or low-net-worth donors who aren't very attractive to the financial services firms and are not likely to be significant donors... but a massive disruption is underway in [the] industry."

[Community Foundation Business Model Disruption in the 21st Century, Council on Foundations](#)

do this?" rather than being invited to explain the transformative power of technology, and how it can influence and evolve the organization's strategy. In this report we explore the four key stages community foundations pass through on their way to truly integrating IT in organizational strategy formulation and outline some key actions you can take in each phase to lay the groundwork for the next.

[The Strategic Role of Technology in Philanthropy](#) is a series by the Technology Association of Grantmakers (TAG), which helps demystify the role of strategy and offers ideas for making it more approachable and actionable. In each publication,

including this one, you'll find insights and anecdotes gained from some of the best minds across the sector, leading to what we hope will become an elevated and inspired role for technology within your own organization.

As you explore the series we invite you, as community foundations, to embrace the “art of the possible,” a mindset that will allow you to set aside the constraints of how you consider IT now, and to imagine fully the range of possibilities that open up when IT is allowed a pivotal seat at the strategy table.

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1. Why Strategic IT matters

As community foundations you are clearly [unique and vital organizations](#), anchors in your communities, connecting the resources of individuals, families, and businesses to effective nonprofits, collectively identifying challenges and co-creating solutions. In the face of COVID-19, [community foundations fully embraced this role](#) as some of the earliest responders to the crisis. You and your peers quickly set up local relief funds, and worked tirelessly to process much higher volumes of transactions. The COVID-19 response efforts serve as a key reminder of just how unique community foundations are in their ability to sense challenges, mobilize resources quickly, and deliver them to those who need it most in their communities.

At the same time, we know your work isn't easy. Across our discussions with community foundations, we heard several common, recurring tensions. We heard that many of you are facing increasing competition from investment firms and online giving platforms. We heard how donor expectations are shifting as well, with donors preferring more online and impact-focused interactions. We also heard that balancing keeping the lights on, while staying in step with or ahead of change is a massive challenge that keeps many of you up at night.

“It seems everyone can be a quasi community foundation, and even the areas that community foundations have owned traditionally—local context and local philanthropy—have become more diffuse. Furthermore, while much time is spent discussing large financial institutions, Swipe, for example, a newer, smaller online and credit card payments processor, just got approval to be a national banking institution. How is that going to play out for us?”

Leon Wilson, Chief of Digital Innovation & Chief Information Officer, Cleveland Foundation

Leon Wilson, Chief of Digital Innovation at Cleveland Foundation, sums up the

extent of this challenge when he speaks of the rapid disruption caused by financial institutions: “It seems everyone can be a quasi community foundation and even the areas that community foundations have owned traditionally—local context and local philanthropy—have become more diffuse. Furthermore, while much time is spent discussing large financial institutions, Swipe, for example, a newer, smaller online and credit card payments processor, just got approval to be a national banking institution. How is that going to play out for us?”

Wilson’s musings surface the essential challenge for all community foundations: juggling the vital work and maintaining core identity while staying relevant in a rapidly shifting context that includes threats from smaller, startup financial institutions as well as from the usual, larger suspects like Fidelity and Vanguard.

To help you envision new possibilities and solve the challenges inherent in an identity crisis prompted by rapid innovation all around us, we aggregated the experiences and lessons learned from your peers who are on this very journey. We then analyzed this data and information and distilled it to create a clear roadmap that reveals the phases in the journey, and the ways you can leverage technology—the tools, roles, and skills—in your own organizations. By following this roadmap, you will find steps to evolve and elevate the IT function in your own foundation, taking it far beyond the days of provisioning mice and keyboards, to a time and place where IT is squarely at the strategy table, enhancing your communities and meeting the considerable challenges head on.

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2. A Roadmap for Strategic IT—Asking “How” in the Digital Era

While you may currently see technology and IT roles primarily through an operational lens in your organization, creating strategies and plans without technology at


the table can be risky in the digital era. Imagine if local fundraising were limited to telethons to raise funds for disaster relief, or if you still had to ask each individual donor directly what they were interested in buying or donating to? Online crowd-funding, mobile giving via text messages and apps, and the ability to trace interests via web browsing and social media habits, are all relatively recent developments that have revolutionized the way community foundations operate, rendering old methods obsolete overnight.

Incorporating a digital lens from the outset means you have the ability to shift paradigms instead of simply iterating on outdated modes. Will Woodward, CFO, Greater Cincinnati Foundation, underscores this approach by insisting on bringing the right teams together, “You have to get the right people on the bus when thinking through big ideas...have them thinking from a real technology point of view. You need tech thinkers to challenge ideas and perspectives.”

Inviting technology to the strategy table has allowed organizations to move from simply wondering if certain changes are possible to instead asking: “How will we make them happen?”

From our interviews, we found that resilient community foundations ask “how”

while looking to their digital strategy for the answers, while travelling along a common trajectory. This pathway has four clear stages, each with a unique technology plan that leverages skill and roles in different ways. Yes, everyone has to start with the same basics, what we’re calling Essentials, but once you find traction and momentum along the path, moving through Enhancements and Elevation and finally into Transformation, the benefits and practice of strategic IT start to accrue and demonstrate considerable results.



“You have to get the right people on the bus when thinking through big ideas...have them thinking from a real technology point of view. You need tech thinkers to challenge ideas and perspectives.”

Will Woodward, Chief Financial Officer, Greater Cincinnati Foundation

The Road to Strategic IT: An Overview



Stage 1: Essentials

If your community foundation is here, you're focused on procuring your basic, core tools such as a relationships database, grants management tool, and online office productivity, to keep your day-to-day operations running smoothly. Foundations in this stage are often preoccupied with staying afloat, finding time to engrain more infrastructure to allow them to scale and advance to the next phase.

Stage 2: Enhancements

Here you start to integrate tools, making sure your core systems play well together and that information is moving between them fairly seamlessly. You may be considering updating or replacing some legacy systems if they get in the way of working efficiently. You're also rethinking how your team works in tandem with what tools you select, starting to appreciate the exponential benefits of coordinating your approach to people, processes, and tools.

Stage 3: Elevation

With your basic toolkit established and integrated, you're now able to leverage technology to explore new ways to better engage donors, stakeholders and even your internal team, allowing you to elevate the role of your foundation in your community. You are also always rethinking and reimagining your business processes as you select and implement technology. With the basics running so smoothly, you are able to move nimbly out of a purely operations mindset and invest in creating solutions like online grants marketplaces, well-designed donor portals, and in online

collaboration tools to increase engagement with your community's non-profits and other stakeholders

Stage 4: Transformation

Once you arrive here, your community foundation can focus on creating exceptional experiences and services customized to clearly defined audiences with specific needs. For example, donors with varied capacities to give or with unique accessibility needs may access services via different tools/portals and processes. You're also exploring how emerging technologies can augment or transform your current tech toolkit, from incorporating robotic automated processing to using AI to ensure accessibility standards across your web presence. As a result of this commitment to digital, technology roles are deeply integrated into the organization and the role of technology is always considered in strategy and planning.

* * * * *

By moving towards the latter stages of this roadmap, you'll be able to tackle more of the emerging challenges that community foundations are facing: meeting increased donor expectations and operationalizing values such as DEI and accessibility. However, it's important to understand that moving through these stages isn't just about investing in new technology. It's equally about making small and consistent steps forward in how you think about technology roles and skills in your organizations. From our discussion with several community foundations, we were able to identify three key levers to pull in moving your foundation along the roadmap.

i) Technology: which tools you pick, how you select them, and how well you make them work together

ii) Processes: how your team works together across departments and with your key stakeholders to diagnose and respond to business challenges

iii) Teams: how your IT team is structured and how IT-related skills are nested in your organization

You'll likely be better at pulling different levers at different stages in your community foundation's journey. This is to be expected and is completely in line with what we've heard from your peers. However, we also heard that one lever cannot be left aside for too long, or left too far behind the others, or you'll start to see and feel considerable friction in your organization. For example, you may pull hard on the technology lever, implementing newly transformed and data-intelligent donor portals, but if your IT Team doesn't have the resources or relationships with your development team to keep current on donor expectations and update the portal and adjacent support tools reliably, then that significant technology investment will rapidly lose value.

In the next section we review in greater detail just how community foundations organize their technology, processes, and teams to flourish at each stage, and you can use these examples to build a path for your own Strategic IT roadmap.

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3. Four Stops on the Way to More Strategic IT

Whether you're starting out in Essentials or innovating at the Transformation stage, we invite you to find yourself in these stories and to draw inspiration for ways you can continue to move IT up the value chain, and unlock more and more of IT's full strategic potential.

Stage 1: Essentials

If you're in this stage, your organization may be recovering from technical debt—in-inefficiencies and challenges resulting from legacy systems that are no longer supported, or at the end of their life. Though they may not be very expensive to maintain, they are hindering your organization's ability to work effectively. To help recover from this, your IT team members are focused on operationalizing strategies

Stage 1: Essentials

and plans developed by leadership or other teams, researching tools that meet these requirements. As a result, there is little rethinking or questioning of business processes when implementing new tools.



Technology

In Stage 1, you focus on the procurement of core and essential tools to help support and continue your day-to-day work (even through disruptions like COVID-19!). In our interviews, we saw community foundations at this stage focused on:

- Selecting online cloud productivity tools like GSuite or Office365, video conference tools, and instant messaging tools like Slack or Teams to enable remote work or more functionality
- Researching, selecting, and implementing key priority tools like a relationship management system (CRM) or better financial management system (FMS) to help your community foundation track and meet donor needs and expectations
- Adopting all-in-one solutions (i.e., one system that handles donor portal, CRM, grants, and finance/accounting) to streamline the technology procurement, implementation, and management process

STAGE 1 - ESSENTIALS

- Online office productivity and web conference tools to ensure smooth interactions
- There is a tool that meets key/core functions (grants, finance, CRM) individually or together
- Sometimes donor portal is present



Technology architecture in the Essentials stage

Process

In this Stage, your foundation may encourage more cross-collaboration between teams when discussing problems and developing solutions. Teams may also be encouraged to open up their processes and workflows when technology is implemented.

- Encourage involvement of IT roles and voices when teams are discussing business challenges and solutions (e.g. if development teams are discussing challenges around tracking relationships with donors, involve IT to listen in)
- Encourage involvement of IT in developing requirements for technology (e.g. instead of handing off a list of requirements to IT, co-create the requirements list with IT roles and other team members)
- During technology implementations, encourage the team to be open about how their processes could change in response to the new tool/technology

Teams

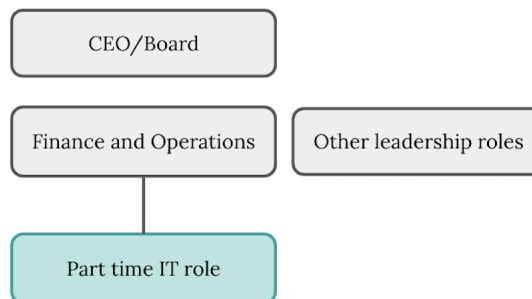
In Stage 1, the IT role in your organization is likely part time, and combined with operations responsibilities. To help your IT team (even of one) make the most of their role:

- Leadership may have a frequent check-in with IT and Finance and Operations at the table to share collective insights and decide on priorities together
- As IT is likely a jack of all trades role (from fixing computers and phones, to buying and supporting new software), ensure that there are frequent check-ins with your IT role/s to ensure they are supported in their time and to remove blockers
- Consider adding a budget for external managed services to help your IT role be less reactive and more strategic

Stage 1: Essentials

STAGE 1 - ESSENTIALS

IT is a shared role and sits under finance and operations.



Team structure in the Essentials stage

Spotlight on Essentials: The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving

Today, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving (HFPG) is happy about their move to all-in-one solutions and cloud-based office productivity, which has allowed them to transition easily to work-from-home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moving to systems with a great deal of flexibility meant they were able to do their best work without having to bend their processes to fit within the constraints of technology. These successes have inspired HFPG, showing many team members the benefits and opportunities of investing in technology.

The IT team is small but mighty, and recent leadership has equipped them with the resources and cultural support to put technology more front and center. To help maintain progress and equip the team to focus on future projects, the foundation has procured managed services to assist with website maintenance, and internal team members have taken ownership over the management of data that matters to them.

Going forward, the HFPG team wants to explore what tools and processes can better enable them to share and collect data and information to demonstrate impact and better connect with their diverse communities. Both leadership and the board are engaged, and are asking fruitful questions about how they can

see and use data for insights and decision making, fostering increased stability and resilience in their digital ecosystem.

Stage 2: Enhancements

In the Enhancements Stage, your community foundation is focused on making the most of the tools and gains from procuring core systems and getting teams to interact with technology more. To build on this success, you may introduce simple automations and integrations between tools and further encourage relationships between IT and other team members. As a result, your IT team and roles will require more resources and support to help the organization maintain and accelerate its successes.



Technology

In Stage 2, your technology projects will focus on making sure data and information can flow easily between your systems, and making that data more accessible to different users. From our research and discussions, your community foundation may want to:

- Continue to refine and optimize existing tools, improving tool configuration to reduce pain-points, and building integrations between tools to increase data flow (e.g. ensuring that your accounting system is giving updated financial data to your donor development systems)
 - In some cases, you may need to replace a core system due to its limitations—while this is not ideal and may seem like a “failure,” your organization

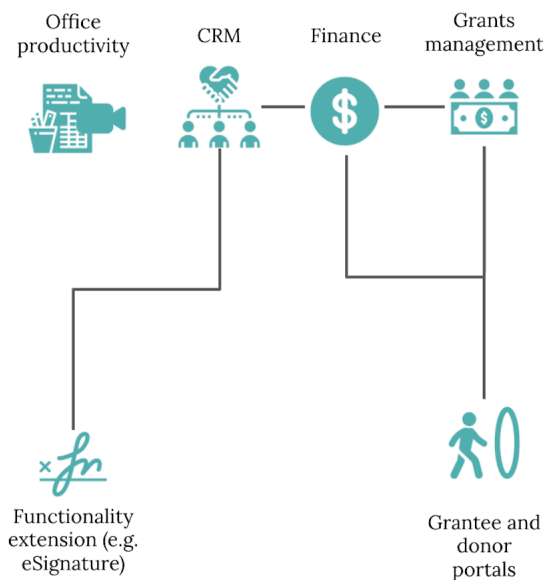
Stage 2: Enhancements

has learned a lot about how NOT to select technology, and can improve in finding its replacement

- Procure supplementary technology to make information more easily available, and to help turn data into information and insights (e.g. data visualization tools to build dashboards and reports for business intelligence, eSignatures to smooth out day-to-day workflows)
- Work closely with vendors—you may be pushing the edges of your tools, so before jumping into a new system, consider working with vendors closely on their product development pipelines, especially if your team is on an all-in-one system

STAGE 2 - ENHANCEMENTS

- Integration pathways between CRM, Finance and Grants management are developed to increase workflow automation
- Donor portals and Grantee portals become standard
- Procurement and integration of tools to supplement digital experience (e.g. e-signature tools)



Technology architecture in the Enhancements stage

Process

In this stage, your IT team/roles and other team members are already working together more closely to discover, diagnose, and solve emerging challenges and problems in your community foundation. To make the most of the collaboration and to further trust, consider these best practices:

- Map out processes and discuss them openly to identify where problems exist, and to better understand the context for these challenges
- Consider all stakeholders involved before moving to solutioning for each challenge
- Rethink business processes during system selection and implementation, taking full advantage to incorporate the benefits of new technology into your organization's ways of working

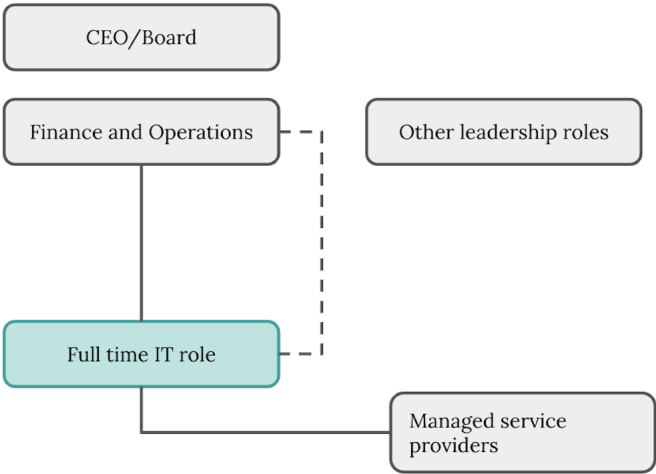
Teams

As your organization tries to do more and invest in its mission, IT-related responsibilities and roles will require more resources and autonomy. To meet these demands and to help ensure that your community foundation isn't flying blind through this roadmap, we suggest:

- Moving the IT role to at least a full time, that is its own separate function or has a higher-level of autonomy under Finance and Operations (e.g. the role/function may have its own budget line and annual work plan)
- Considering adding additional IT members to the team (scaled with the organization) to help work across more areas of the business
- Considering investing in and expanding the use of more managed services to support on hardware issues or software support, so that IT has more space to connect and work with internal team members on strategic projects and advising on solutions

STAGE 2 - ENHANCEMENTS

IT is a full time role and sits under finance and operations—IT may also have more autonomy in this role.



Team structure in the Enhancements stage

Spotlight on Enhancements: The Austin Community Foundation

The Austin Community Foundation (ACF) has been hard at work in its journey to use IT strategically. Originally, they were focused on the replacement of some core tools related to accounting, investments, and donor information tracking. Going forward, they are planning to extend their digital ecosystem with business intelligence tools to create dashboards—but they first need to understand what insights the team are looking for, so the tool can be fit for purpose and designed to succeed. Additionally, they are looking at extending their ecosystem by exploring how to integrate with an online payment system such as ACH. To meet emerging donor needs, the foundation has already implemented the use of a mobile donor engagement tool (Pinkaloo) to supplement the donor portal provided by their all-in-one system.

To get to this stage, the ACF formed a dedicated IT group within their Operations team, a group equipped with trust and agency to move forward with technology decisions and projects. Importantly, this smaller IT-focused team also works hard to engage all stakeholders in the organization, listening to individual concerns and addressing any fears throughout this process.

Next, they plan to move forward with improved donor portal functionality and using data better for insights in order to support impact reporting in response to emerging donor expectations and to address leadership's desire to be more data informed. ACF plans to focus on improved partnerships with their technology vendors in order to have more influence and input so that product evolution better aligns with ACF's own plans and goals.

Stage 3: Elevation

In this Stage, your community foundation builds off its early tech successes and invests in creating new experiences for your stakeholders. Some key examples include highly customized donor portals, grantmaking marketplaces, and exploration of online conference and collaboration tools to increase stakeholder engagement. Your IT team and roles also shift from a pure technology role to include championing user needs and experience. IT roles continue to form deeper connections with others in the organization and move towards design and planning roles in technology.



Technology

In Stage 3, as your organization has built up a good practice of selecting and implementing tools that help streamline its core processes and connect data for insights, you may consider expanding your toolkit to handle more diverse needs of different external stakeholders. Community foundation experiences in this stage encourage:

- Investing in tools specialized for different audiences and stakeholders (e.g.

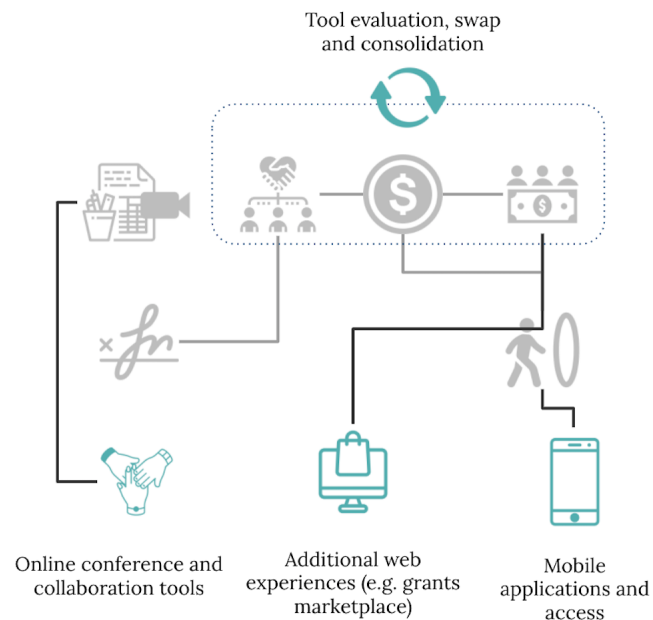
Stage 3: Elevation

tech-focused donors may use a separate donor portal/application than donors who prefer more in-person service)

- Revising their website and digital presence to support new brands and new front-facing functionality for donors and other stakeholders (e.g. grantmaking marketplaces)
- Exploring how additional productivity tools can better connect donors, non-profits and other community members with your team members (e.g. online whiteboard tools, online event/conference tools)
- Building a regular habit of evaluating, tweaking, and replacing tools in response to increased service specialization and diversification (e.g. financial system may need replacing as fund complexity increases) and communicating this to leadership frequently

STAGE 3 - ELEVATION

- Additional layers of digital interaction are added to the overall experience (e.g. more sophisticated donor portals, grants marketing places, online convening events)
- Core tools are replaced as they restrict the needs and aspirations of these newer digital experiences



Technology architecture in the Elevation stage

Process

In this Stage, organizations have built habits around process mapping and reviewing problems more holistically. To move in this direction, your own community foundation may start to:

- Use a stakeholder-centered approach to defining problems instead of using generalizations, so that you can get the best solutions (e.g. segmenting your donors instead of treating them as one population, to better understand types of solutions you could deploy)
- Explore and test solutions early in the problem solving process to validate assumptions and explore new opportunities (e.g. start a process to trying out sandboxes or usable demos of tools to learn how they work to further inform your needs)
- Get clear on which problems are solved by technology and which are related to process or governance issues to manage expectations and design realistic solutions

Spotlight on Elevation: The Greater Cincinnati Foundation

To help learn more about and address the needs of younger donors, the Greater Cincinnati Foundation (GCF) has formed a small team called NEXT that engages directly with this growing generation. NEXT not only enables GCF to learn more about the giving preferences and expectations of younger donors, but it also allows them to test and experiment with new tools and services, and most importantly, builds relationships based on action-oriented research, data, and collaboration.

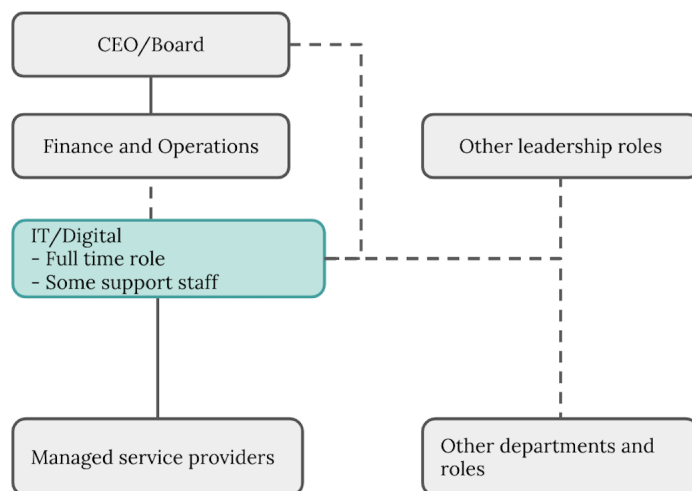
Teams

In Stage 3, your community foundation has already begun to invest more in IT roles, skills, and resources. To continue to amplify this investment, you may want to start distributing these skills throughout your organization to build resilience and create space for your IT team to continue to work with the entire organization strategically. To help with this consider:

- Encouraging digital and technology skills developed in other team members who express interest, but may not have an official IT/technology job title
- Equipping IT with more supporting team members, or the ability to borrow team members from other departments to assist in IT projects
- Continuing to support dedicated decision-making and resources for IT roles and projects within your organization
- Continuing to lean on managed services to provide consistent support in keeping hardware and software running to support your day-to-day

STAGE 3 - ELEVATION

IT continues to gain dedicated effort and resources, with more direct reporting paths to leadership. IT has more resources via support staff or managed service providers.



Team structure in the Elevation stage

Spotlight on Elevation: Foundation For The Carolinas' journey

With a diverse tool set in place to address multiple needs ranging from managing scholarships to donor portals, the Foundation For The Carolinas (FFTC) is making tactical and strategic changes to continue to meet stakeholder's needs and explore new possibilities. Recent changes like moving to cloud-based systems and office productivity have demonstrated that a large complex system can make these changes effectively, if the whole team is committed and on-board to the change.

FFTC has continued to pivot to a stakeholder-focused approach, surveying donors to understand their needs and wants, and exploring customer or donor experience framework. Following this, they have begun to diagnose what is actually causing tension—a better donor portal may solve some interaction pain-points, but better internal data around how long it takes to process different kinds of gifts will better help manage donor expectations. With this lens, the FFTC is starting to explore which tools and workflow changes will best help solve these challenges, and what a well planned shift in technology looks like for them.

To support this journey, the FFTC moved to dedicated IT roles instead of sharing resources with other functions (like HR). They have also invested more resources in supporting technology projects, allowing IT to more actively participate in strategy planning and execution. Being able to earn quick wins with low investment has also been critical in building trust and confidence across the team in engaging on larger and more complicated projects moving forward.

Stage 4: Transformation

In this stage, your community foundation continues to lean into the stakeholder-focused approach in technology, using unique combinations of tools and pro-

cesses for different needs. This human-centered design thinking is not only used in IT, but across the organization in diagnosing and solving business challenges. Whenever you encounter a problem, you consider the challenge and the solution holistically with the person at the center—thinking about how you can change governance, processes, and technology to meet their needs. This phase is a perfect opportunity to lean into your values and bring them to life.



Technology

In Stage 4, having built experiences including donor portals, grantee portals, and grants marketplaces, your community foundation has learned a lot about what technology can do for stakeholders. Consider whether these experiences are accessible to all audience groups, and what supplementary technologies or processes may need to be put in place to ensure that they can be fully enjoyed by all. Some experimental concepts emerging include:

- Exploring and integrating your digital experiences (including internal tools and external facing websites/portals) with assistive technologies to ensure your community foundation is accessible
 - Use AI tools that help scan your web presence (e.g., website, grants portals, donor portals) and internal tools to see if they meet accessibility standards
 - Consider how those with less access to technology can access the same amount of information and insights as those that have ample access, and how your tools can help your team support this balance
- Explore the potential of intelligent automation to handle more of different stakeholders' day-to-day workflows across multiple tools (e.g. robotic process automation)—imagine an email from a donor triggering workflows in your CRM,

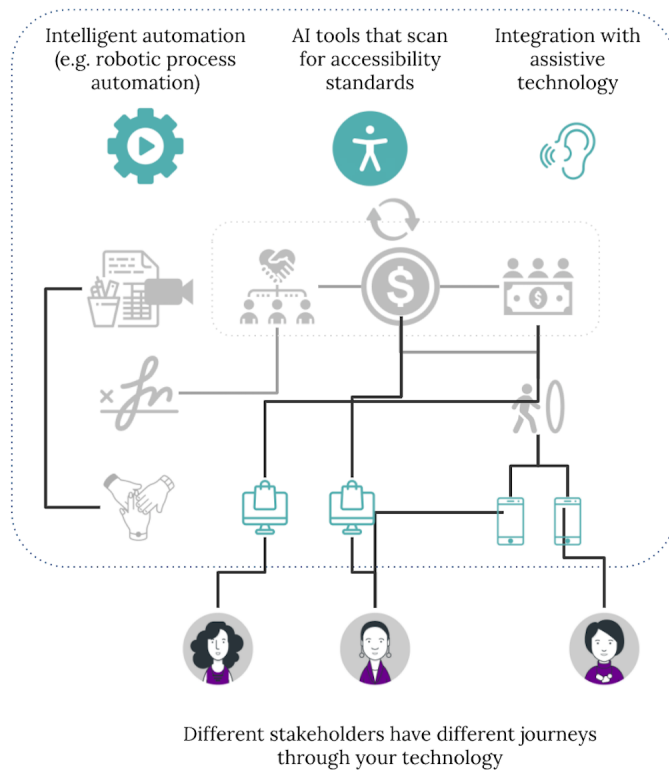
Stage 4: Transformation

grants management, and accounting systems

- Continually research and learn about technology trends and tools from outside and inside the sector, translating their value to the organization and exploring how they could be used to co-create new experiences for multiple stakeholders

STAGE 4 - TRANSFORMATION

- Various users groups will access information and services via different applications or entry points suited to their needs
- Assistive technologies and complex automation technologies are implemented across all technologies to add increased performance and usability



Technology architecture in the Transformation stage

Process

In the Transformation Stage, your community foundation considers solving challenges from multiple perspectives across governance, internal processes, technology, and cultural norms. In order to do so, we've seen community foundations really lean into their values as an organization to help guide what otherwise could be a chaotic and matrixed process. Human-centered design tools can also come into play to help translate discussions about values into actionable plans and next steps.

- Hold your community foundation’s values as the “north star” for any business solution design and decision-making—asking “does this activate our values?” can help make decisions effectively
- Use tools like service blueprints and user journey maps to understand where the tension points are in business problems (i.e. is there friction in the technology interface, is it in the process, is it across everything?)
- Understand that one problem may require multiple solutions across different stakeholder groups with different needs. You may need to consider access to technology, demographics, and physical ability when developing solutions.

Teams

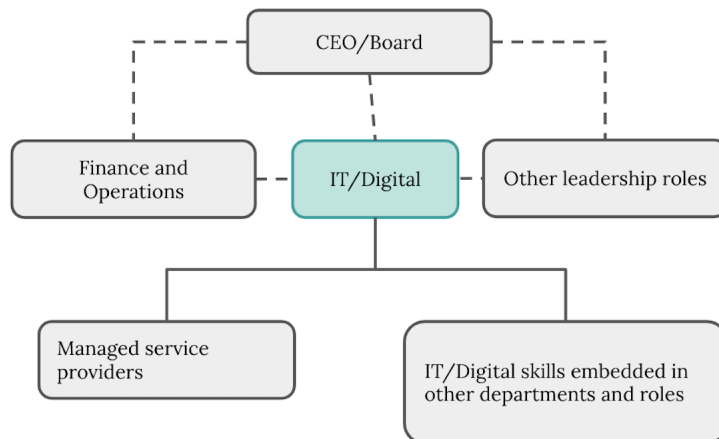
As your organization is supporting many different interactions with multiple stakeholders and looking at more emerging tools, you’ll need to continue to scale and invest in IT roles and skills across the organization, reduce silos and nurture widespread professional development. This type of change is hard, but critical for sustaining a strategic IT mindset in your organization.

- Ensure that there is a dedicated IT voice in leadership circles and engage IT in strategy planning
- Ensure that in each non-IT team there is at least one individual who is interested in building their skills to support technology in your community foundation, whether it’s learning to master a specific tool or learning more about human-centered design
- Encourage connection and conversations between leadership in your teams to reduce information silos and maintain a shared understanding of your organization’s challenges and opportunities

Stage 4: Transformation

STAGE 4 - TRANSFORMATION

IT continues to gain dedicated effort and resources, with more direct reporting paths to leadership. IT has more resources via support staff or managed service providers.



Team structure in the Transformation stage

Spotlight on Transformation: Vancouver Foundation, Kalamazoo Foundation and Grand Rapids Foundation

Across our interviews, we were heartened to hear many stories about how some community foundations are using technology and this roadmap to activate their values—leaning into technology and digital practices to really think through how their organizations can more fully embody their mission. Much of this work is exploratory in the community foundation sector, so we’ve pulled together a few examples for inspiration:

The Vancouver Foundation (VF) has invested significant budget and energy into building a cloud-based, secure and flexible digital ecosystem to support its donors, stakeholders and communities. Like other community foundations, VF is focused on improving data structures to inform business intelligence while exploring new ways to engage a diverse donor and grantee base. As its tagline suggests, VF prides itself on being “community inspired” while also designing programs in support of marginalized population segments such as racialized youth. This includes thinking about how VF can structure their very processes and tools to support advocacy and influence policy, key pillars of systems change.

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, the IT Department helped the foundation transition seamlessly to remote work operations. More importantly, VF pivoted and re-prioritized several digital transformation projects to further enable the virtual workplace. These have included replacing physical cheque payments to grantees/vendors with secure Electronic Fund Transfers, as well as the use of eSignatures for streamlined document authorizations. The technologies in play support the Foundation's overarching goals of operational efficiency and a paperless workplace. Moreover, they demonstrate a commitment to community responsiveness while reducing reliance on labor-intensive processes that would otherwise have required onsite staff resources.

The Kalamazoo Foundation (KF) is exploring how to iterate and replace current systems to enable greater flexibility and functionality. In parallel, the IT role has moved to work more broadly across the organization and to help the foundation think about how it wants to design for its values to take full advantage of upcoming technology changes. For example, to embrace Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, KF is exploring not only the demographics of individuals, but how that impacts an individual's ability to engage and interact with the foundation either in person, digitally or by other means. With this information KF is then able to explore simple and barrier-free access for all stakeholders regardless of their differences.

The Grand Rapids Community Foundation (GRCF) has recently completed another round of technology strategy development and planning. To further the organizational strategy, IT has put the value of equity at the centre of their work and plans—a prime example of IT's critical role in rolling out organization-wide priorities. For example, while Grants and Programs may be shifting policies and processes to embrace equity, IT can also work with them to further these goals through accessible, multi-lingual, easy-to-understand and inclusive tools. As this is all done in addition to regular tool maintenance, assessment and replacement projects, managed services and additional resources are leveraged to empower IT to help accelerate the community foundation's

mission and vision.

The above provides an overview of the four key stages in the community foundation's Strategic IT Roadmap and the defining features and activities to pursue as you bring IT to the strategy table in your organization. In addition—across all our conversations with IT-focused roles—we heard how important it is for leadership in community foundations to champion their teams through the digital era. Below, we suggest a key set of principles to pursue to become a tech-savvy CEO.

4

4. Leadership in the Digital-Era—Principles for Guiding Your Team

If you are a leader in your organization and are excited by the prospect of a Strategic IT roadmap, you have a pivotal role to play in championing this journey. From our conversations with community foundations, we've seen and heard key ways you can channel your energy to successfully integrate and leverage technology in your organization to activate your mission and vision. While it may take some practice, rest assured you are not alone in this process and that there is a community with you on this path.

“While some readers may want to know the determinants of leadership, our report doesn't and can't test causal relationships. Instead, we describe community leadership not as a destination, but as journey, a journey that involves ongoing change and organizational and systems development in response to the unique community context.”

Laurie Paarlberg and Marlene Walk, *The Path to Community Leadership*, Indiana University, Lilly Family School of Philanthropy

Engage With Technology

While asking IT for advice and solutions can solve tactical challenges, working alongside IT to explore the full potential of technology and learn about trends will equip you to be better informed as you make the crucial strategic decisions that help maintain the mission and values of your community foundation. Leaders well versed in technology can understand not only what will fuel their foundation now, but can also look around the corner to take advantage of what future donor preferences and competitive landscapes may bring.

As expressed so fully in [The Path to Community Leadership Report](#), community foundations see a role for themselves as knowledge hubs and connectors. While some less tech-savvy leaders may shy away from this opportunity due to privacy challenges around collecting and keeping grantee data, a leader who is informed about the emergence of data trusts and system integrations may understand that this risk can be mitigated through legal agreements, tools and governance structures that are already being used in government and private sectors. This is a key example of how being informed can open the options and possibilities in front you in your next round of strategic planning.

“Technology should never be a barrier. [Technology] should help teams do what they need to do effectively, build their stories and get alignment.”


Shelly Espich, Director, Technology, Greater Cincinnati Foundation

Invite IT to the Strategy Table

In many foundations, inviting IT into conversations about donor development or grants strategies may seem novel, but a technology lens can be very useful in mov-

ing conversations and plans along. Often, when team members are planning, they'll ask "Wouldn't it be great if..." or "If this were possible, we could...". With a technology perspective at the table, your team could be armed with answers to these questions, or offered tool solutions for bringing these ideas to life.

For example, some foundations may be limited in their ability to see live statistics or dashboards about development performance. Having technology at the table may reveal recent technology options that allow teams to easily and automatically pull data into a business intelli-



"Teams have to be protected. Don't choke them. Don't let them be moved. Let them create their own success formula."

Leon Wilson, Chief of Digital Innovation & Chief Information Officer, Cleveland Foundation

gence tool to create custom charts and dashboards. The next time your Board asks a question about performance, wouldn't it be great to pull up a dashboard to show them an answer, instead of saying, "Give me a few weeks to get back to you?"

Advocate for the Importance of IT

Leading by doing is also key in helping your foundation move along this strategy roadmap. Encouraging an organization-wide championing of IT involves introducing the IT perspective across decision-making and planning. It also includes encouraging team members to learn more about the technology they use and to be curious about its full potential. Encourage your teams to involve IT in more varied projects to help shift perceptions of these roles as only being there to help when someone forgets their password or needs a new monitor.

This means that you'll also need to advocate for more resources for IT-related projects and roles in your organization. Your teams are great partners in helping define the business case for these investments, but ultimately, your supportive and blue-

sky voice will be key in convincing other decision-makers to boldly invest.

Champion a Learning Mindset

Across roles in community foundations, we learned that when individuals in the organization are invited to make recommendations, they must be able to justify the risks and clearly articulate the benefits. Whether it is a CTO explaining a decision to a Board, or an IT Manager defending the need for a project to a CEO, everyone needs to feel comfortable and informed when making a decision about technology investments. Placing a bet by investing in technology maturity is difficult, but regardless of role or position, everyone is in the same sea trying to navigate to success. So be kind to yourself and to your team in this pursuit of strategic IT. It will be a learning journey undoubtedly. But, if you are able to balance an open mindset with dedicated fostering of a learning culture, you will be able to make gains.

While the earlier phases of this roadmap have more obvious benefits with reduced risk—moving from local office productivity tools to GSuite or Office365 is a limited time and cost investment with immediate benefits—the later stages, however, are more difficult to navigate. A grantmaking marketplace or redesigned donor portal may not reveal benefits until a year or two down the road, and while making your web presence more accessible may result in anecdotal benefits, it's difficult to connect to fund growth.

As a leader, if you feel your organization is shy about strategic IT, focus first on some low risk and high reward projects. As your community foundation moves along, be sure to remind your team of these wins and use them as grounding examples of why bigger bets aren't as scary and are worth the investment. Also, your team will inevitably make mistakes and bad bets along the way—learn to protect your teams in their exploration of technology to nurture a culture of experimentation and exploration. Some of the most mature organizations have leaned into this, shrinking risk by launching pilot projects to gauge success, rather than overly investing in lengthy business case analysis and cost justifications. This roadmap is a

process of constantly learning, and looking for absolute certainty is not possible.

Conclusion

This report is the culmination of our work collecting the vital stories, lessons learned and experiences of community foundations in their inspiring efforts to bring IT to the strategy table. We heard that even though the investments in this shift sometimes feel risky, they can nonetheless open up many opportunities for community foundations to face competition head on and, more importantly, activate more fully on mission and values. Common to our conversations were courageous individuals and teams confident in their organization's ability to stay creative, develop solutions and meet emerging challenges—the raw materials are all there. The hard work remains in connecting people, skills and vision in a way that continues to create momentum towards more strategic IT. We hope the roadmap and action items captured here serve as signposts for your foundation's own journey and provide ways for your team to move forward.

To help you on your journey, we've created a Strategic IT Roadmap Template that you can use to gain alignment, identify and prioritize projects, and create a roadmap that accounts for dependencies, risk factors, and timelines. View our [example roadmap](#), or [download a blank template](#) to fill out with your team.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

The Strategic Role of IT in Philanthropy series is provided by the Technology Association of Grantmakers (TAG) in consultation with member organizations and private sector advisors. View the full series at: tagtech.org/strategicphilanthropy

This is an educational publication and is not intended as legal advice. You should contact your attorney for legal advice. The opinions expressed here are the opinions of the individual authors and may not represent the opinions of their employers or of TAG.

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- [The Greater Cincinnati Foundation](#)
- [The Columbus Foundation](#)

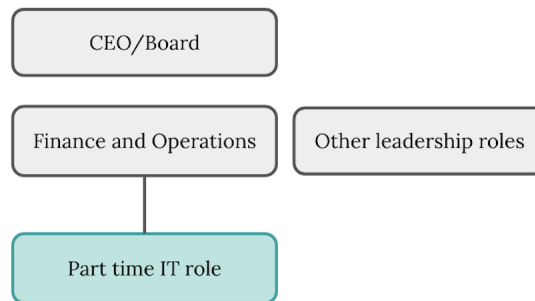
Team Structure Evolution

Direct reporting —————

Informal reporting - - - - -

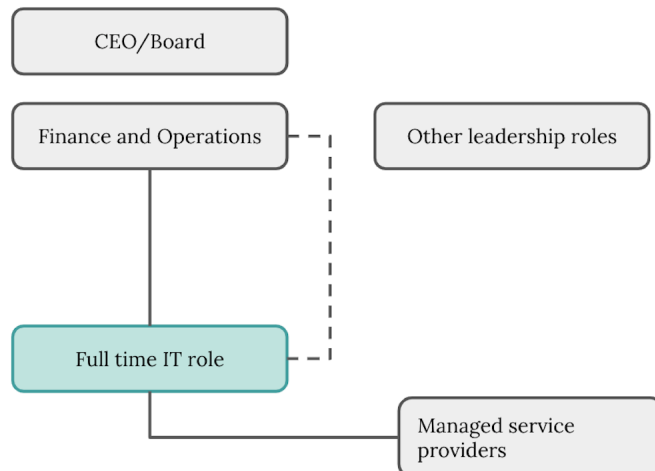
STAGE 1 - ESSENTIALS

IT is a shared role and sits under finance and operations.



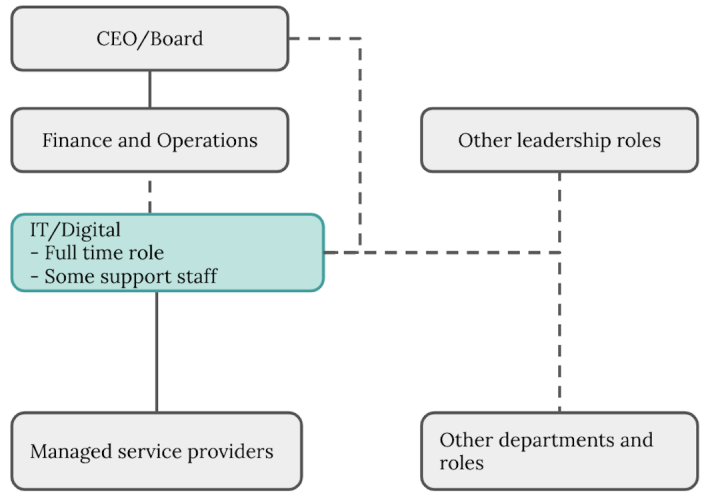
STAGE 2 - ENHANCEMENTS

IT is a full time role and sits under finance and operations—IT may also have more autonomy in this role.



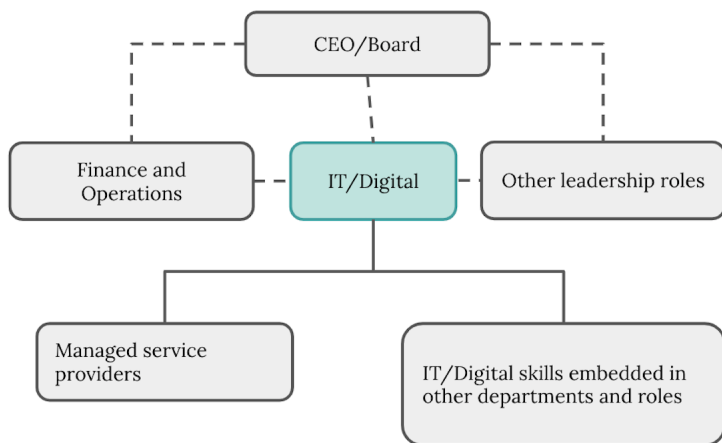
STAGE 3 - ELEVATION

IT continues to gain dedicated effort and resources, with more direct reporting paths to leadership. IT has more resources via support staff or managed service providers.



STAGE 4 - TRANSFORMATION

IT continues to gain dedicated effort and resources, with more direct reporting paths to leadership. IT has more resources via support staff or managed service providers.



Technology Architecture Pathways

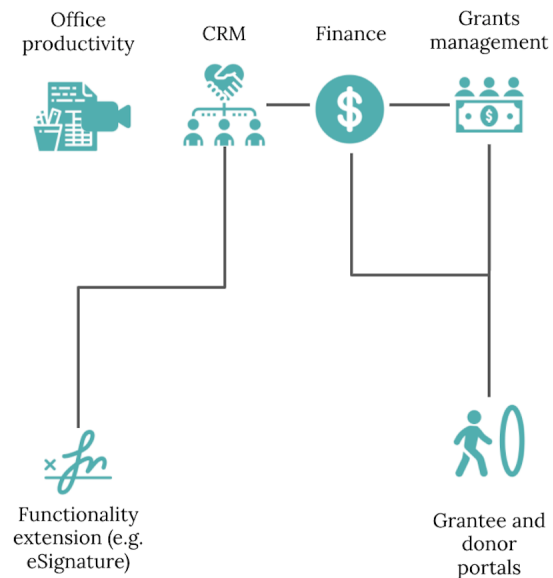
STAGE 1 - ESSENTIALS

- Online office productivity and web conference tools to ensure smooth interactions
- There is a tool that meets key/core functions (grants, finance, CRM) individually or together
- Sometimes donor portal is present



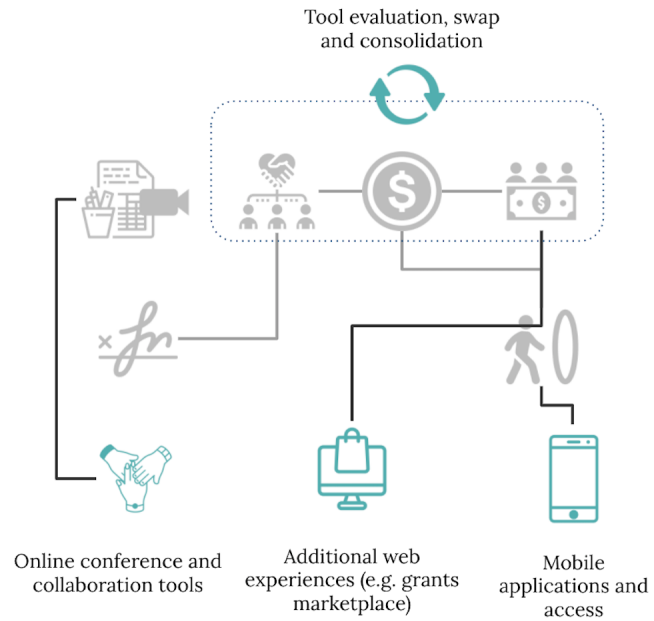
STAGE 2 - ENHANCEMENTS

- Integration pathways between CRM, Finance and Grants management are developed to increase workflow automation
- Donor portals and Grantee portals become standard
- Procurement and integration of tools to supplement digital experience (e.g. e-signature tools)



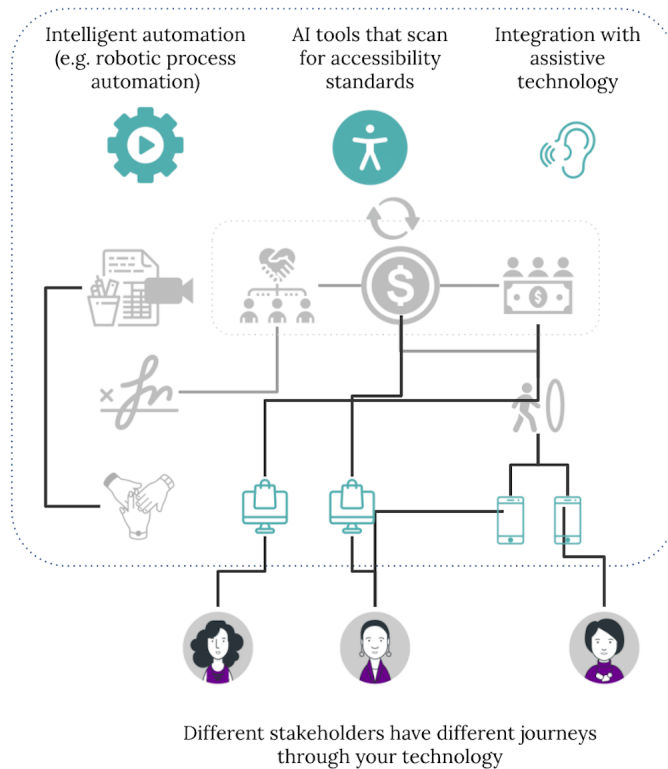
STAGE 3 - ELEVATION

- Additional layers of digital interaction are added to the overall experience (e.g. more sophisticated donor portals, grants marketing places, online convening events)
- Core tools are replaced as they restrict the needs and aspirations of these newer digital experiences



STAGE 4 - TRANSFORMATION

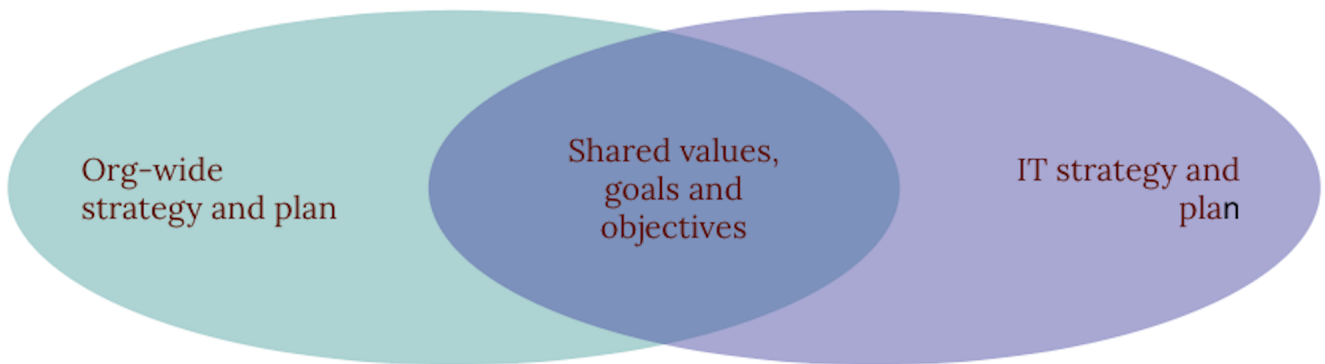
- Various users groups will access information and services via different applications or entry points suited to their needs
- Assistive technologies and complex automation technologies are implemented across all technologies to add increased performance and usability



Strategic IT Roadmap Template

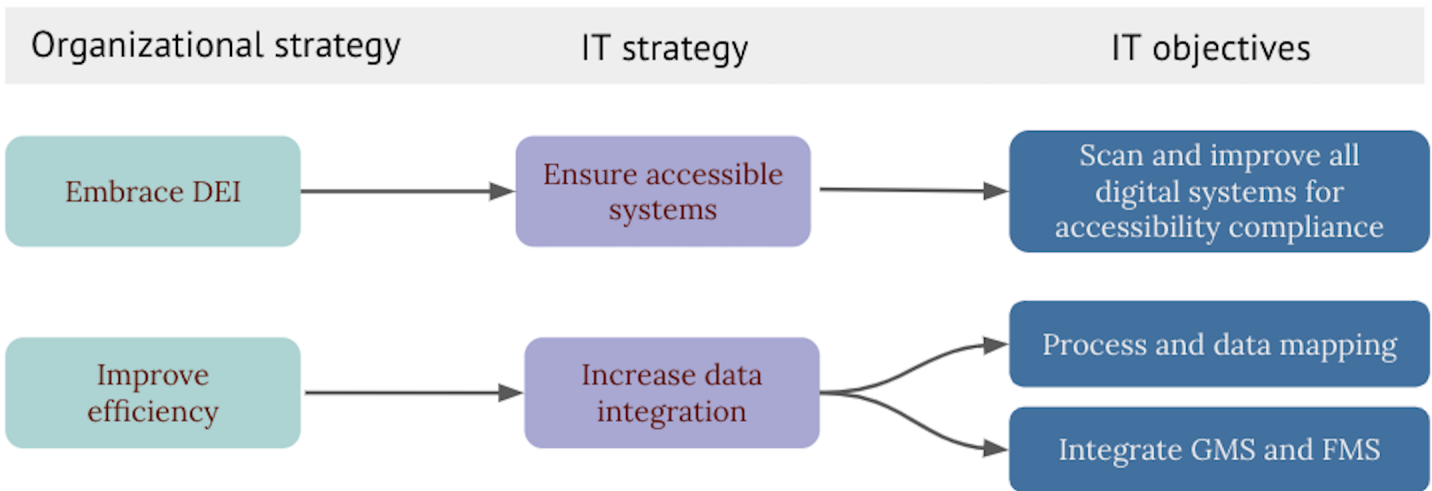
To help you activate on this whitepaper, we've developed a Strategic IT Roadmap template and guide. This template is a combination of plans and best practices from outside and inside the community foundation sector. With this, you'll be able to help your team gain clarity on how strategic IT will elevate your work.

1. Align with Organizational Strategy



To get buy-in, it's important to identify where your IT strategy will overlap with organizational strategy. Which organizational values, goals, and objectives can IT specifically help to activate? Involving IT at the strategy level makes this process easier, as it can help manage expectations and open-up possibilities for achieving organizational strategy.

This can be represented in a plan in a table or flowchart:



2. Establish IT Vision

Based on an alignment exercise, IT should establish a Vision statement for itself. How will IT and technology help an organization activate on these values, goals, and objectives? What type of support does IT want to provide? Vision statements do not have to be rigid, and can range from traditional vision statements to a series of important values and attributes.



Sample IT vision word cloud from Grand Rapids Community Foundation.

“[Technology] should help teams do what they need to do effectively, build their stories, and get alignment.”

Sample IT vision statement from Greater Cincinnati Foundation

3. Identify priorities and projects

With alignment and vision in place, it's time to get into the details of your planned IT projects. List and identify the IT projects and priorities that will occur over the next 1-3 years, acknowledging that certainty decreases as time moves out. IT projects can typically be prioritized by how much they help achieve organization strategy/IT vision, how much pain they ease in an organization, and how much expense/resources they'll take to complete. Balancing these factors in an IT plan is key.

Each project should have a clean purpose, objective, and process description, including who you will likely involve in the project, who will be affected, estimated timeline, and projected costs.

Sample IT project description

Project: ERP replacement project
Objective: Update our ERP systems to match emerging fund flexibility and reporting demands
Process: ERP replacement project

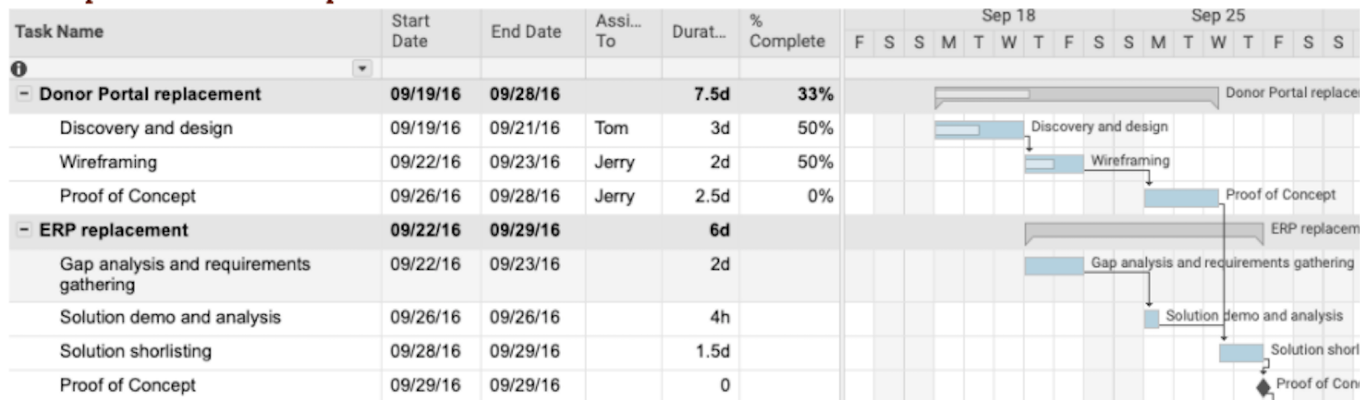
Timeline: Q3-Q4 CY
Costs: \$\$\$
Stakeholders involved: ERP replacement project

Strategic priority: High
Quality of life improvement to org: Medium
Level of effort: Medium

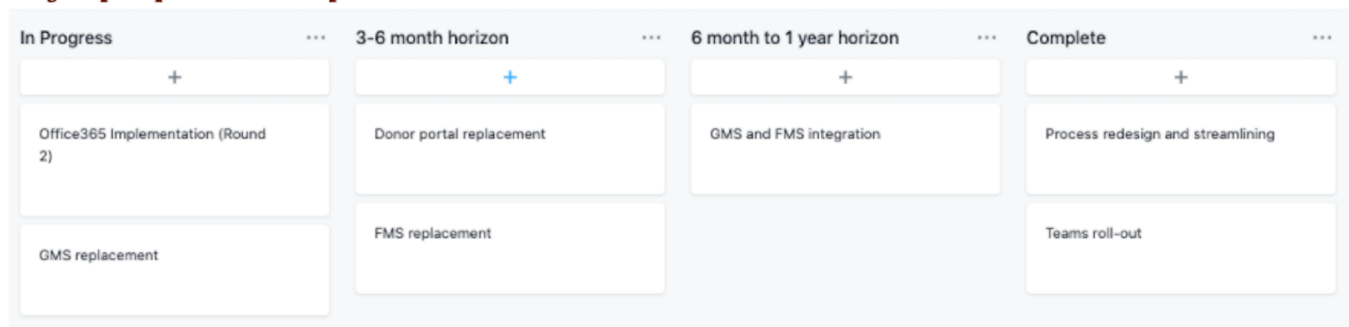
4. Tech roadmap and timelines

Laying out your projects in a timeline can be helpful for visualization, and for managing expectations. This can be done in a number of ways: some organizations prefer Gantt charts while some organizations may also use more general timelines to categorize projects (e.g. Now (1-3 months); Soon (3-9 months); Later (1 year and beyond), etc.).

Sample Gantt chart IT plan

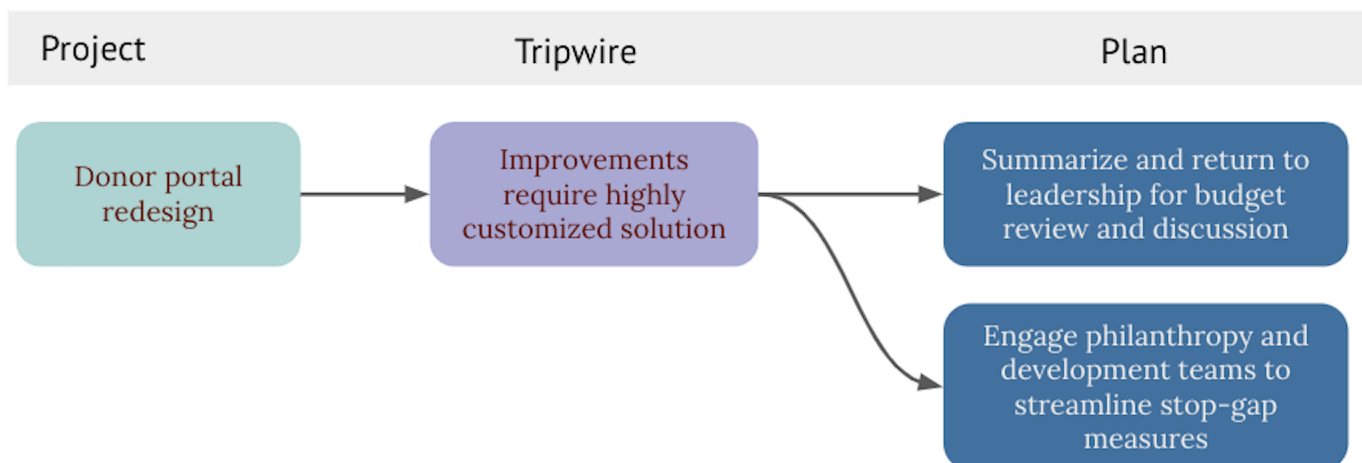


Agile perspective on IT plan



5. Dependencies and risk factors

Clearly outline any risks or dependencies to the IT plan, trip wires that will result in changes to the plan, and how you will respond if the trip wires are crossed.



6. Project governance and check-ins

It is also important to outline how often IT initiatives/project teams will meet, and how updates and feedback from leadership and the broader organization will be included. It's important you set these expectations so other team members know how and when they can provide feedback.

Sample project check-in schedule

Check-in type	Frequency	Stakeholders involved
Roadmap check-in	Quarterly	Core leadership and department reps
Roadmap review	Semi-annual	Core leadership
Project check-ins	Bi-weekly	Project team members

7. Emerging IT map

Providing a map of the emerging future state of tools is helpful to many readers. It may also be helpful to show this map from an end-user perspective, highlighting the future systems and tools different roles in your organization will be using in the future.

Sample IT map



User journey lens

Philanthropy officer



"I need to quickly recommend grants to donors and meet their expectations"

User journey and tools

