Make the Connection That Matters, Use Technology to Build Culture

"Technology is not just about tools.
It's about how we use those tools
to change our lives." - Bill Gates

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Introduction

The personal computer, the internet, the iPhone—We made these tools. Then, they remade us. The things we use define us in ways that are unexpected and indelible.

It's easy to think of technology as running in the background. The profound impact IT systems have on our emotions, behavior, and communications isn't noticed until something goes wrong.

Digital systems quietly build engagement among audiences and foster relationships. Nowhere is that connection more evident than in the workplace.

The pandemic highlighted the inseparability of IT and culture. Although everyone experienced challenges, associations with outdated equipment felt the discomfort acutely. There were painful adjustments with systems that weren't up to the task of remote work.

Workers felt untethered from their colleagues, unable to deliver peak performance, and distanced from the organization's mission. Culture, or the behavior, intentions, and values, that characterize an organization, frayed under the stress of sub par working conditions.

Tension was magnified by the disruption resulting from human frustration and disengagement.

As the crisis subsides, we are adapting to a new environment where it is critical to keep those lessons top of mind. Remote work is here to stay. The four-day week is gaining in popularity and may prove to be another reason to embrace efficiency. And rapidly developing AI software promises to reinvent many facets of the way business operates.

There are multiple arguments for keeping technology operating ahead of the speed of business; but, the satisfaction and fulfillment efficient IT systems deliver for users is among the most compelling.

Enable Success

This fictional story illustrates a situation that's real to anyone who has tried to use yesterday's technology to meet today's demands.

> When Meghan was hired as the new membership manager, the team was thrilled. She came with solid gold credentials and the attitude to match.
>
> Six months later, Meghan's first big project, a membership campaign failed to deliver the anticipated results. Blame for the missteps spread throughout the organization. It poisoned already fragile relationships.
>
> At her performance evaluation, Meghan explained her frustration like this. She said she didn't have the right tools to be successful. No matter how many workarounds she tried, the organization's outdated systems were never going to produce the personalized materials needed for the campaign.

Most of us are like Meghan, we want to succeed. It's a simple equation. People enjoy doing what makes them feel good.

Patrick Dorsey
Senior Vice President of Marketing, Impexium

"Technology, can and should, be the enabler of professional accomplishments. Digital systems are a powerful force in creating a culture of excellence across organizations."

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Exceed Expectations

The bar has never been higher for associations. There was a time when the non-profit and for-profit worlds were different universes. Each community revolved around unique expectations.

Associations prided themselves on their separation from corporate influence. They offered members a menu of predictable benefits without fear of competition. The packaging got refreshed from year to year, but the marketing, delivery, and function didn't change over time.

Digital commerce erased the boundaries between the two sectors. Members are accustomed to the convenience of Amazon, Netflix, and the other online giants. They want comparable products and services from their association. Corporations rushed in to fill that demand.

"Competition is an unanticipated recent challenge for many associations," Sharon Rice, .orgSource Managing Director of Business Strategy advises. "Technology opened protected space. Companies, like Udemy, Online MedED, and Health Stream are encroaching on the professional development arena, and they are eager to attract your audience.

"We're even sabotaging our own. Subspecialty groups are moving into the parent association's territory. And networking, once a core association benefit, is no longer as important." Gregory Amdur, SVP, Client Success at Impexium explains the new reality like this.

"Anticipating member preferences is the only option. Providing an exceptional member journey will result in increased loyalty, affinity, and delight. One unpleasant impression can reduce member engagement, create missed opportunities that erode the customer experience, and decrease the probability of incremental investment in future member-facing initiatives."

Gregory Amdur
SVP, Client Success
Impexium

Pair Talent With Tech

In complex and uncharted territory, pairing ingenuity with top-of-the-line technology emerges as an X factor for success. Powering the human ability to empathize, theorize, and synthesize with data, automation, and customization creates the memorable experiences needed to delight both employees and consumers.

Value is the driver of member engagement. Innovative teams who can identify and deliver exactly what consumers want have never been more important. Bernadette Patton, Principal at Shields Meneley Partners described the need like this.

"There's a change going on in business. Organizations are realizing that people are the only asset that doesn't depreciate. The differentiator now isn't only the fastest piece of equipment or technology. It's having the best talent."

There is plenty of evidence that Patton is right. The Great Resignation was an attitude adjustment for leaders who assumed that rock stars were waiting online to replace their top performers. These statistics demonstrate the new dynamics of employment.

✓ A Forbes report predicted that more people would consider new careers in 2022 than ever before, with 87% of respondents saying they were **actively considering switching jobs in 2022**. Lack of work/life balance and lack of advancement were identified as primary considerations.

✓ Gartner cites that only 29% of functional leaders **believe they have all the talent they need** to meet current performance requirements.

✓ And that -- Only 31% of human resource leaders think their employees are satisfied with their employee value proposition, and 65% of candidates say they have actually **discontinued a hiring process due to an unattractive employee** value proposition.

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Be Better Than Good

To attract and retain a diverse pool of exceptional talent, organizations must adjust to a new set of expectations. While remote work expands the search area, it also puts you in competition with employers across the country.

Good culture is good for business. It gives people a North Star and the strength to manage change. When employees explore their options, a paycheck is the cramped economy ride. An accompanying portfolio of flexible benefits offers extra legroom. But the coveted first-class ticket is a supportive environment where people achieve both personal and professional fulfillment. In other words, culture is the single factor that truly differentiates your group from the competition.

Jamie Notter, Co-Founder and Culture Strategist at Propel, explained the new reality like this. **"The Great Resignation is real.** You're either going to win and people will come to your organization, and you'll get top talent, or you'll lose and have 17 open positions.

"The bad news is, you can't rely on the things you've relied on for the last 20 years to bring people in. The good news is you can leverage culture and have that be the draw."
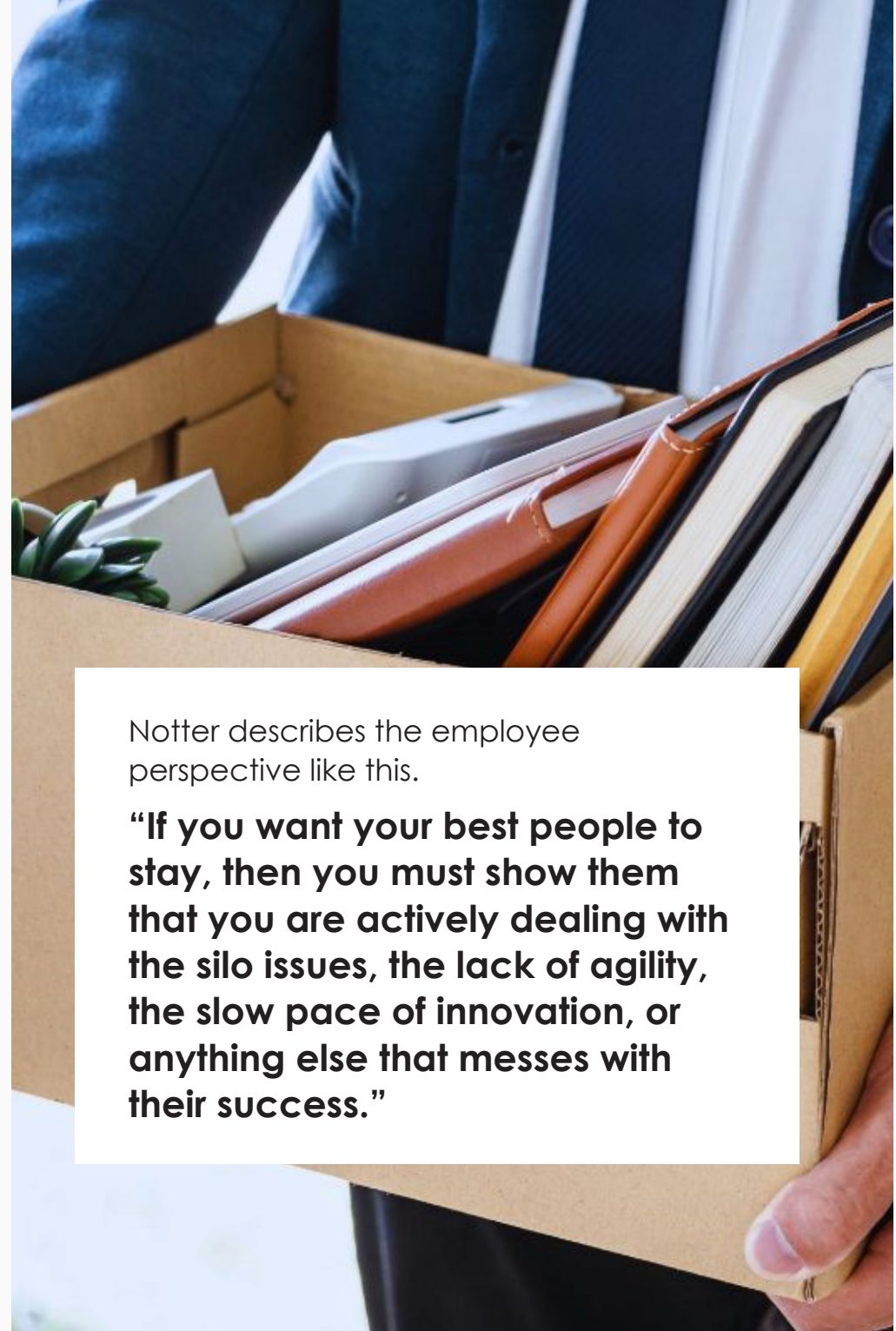
Notter describes the employee perspective like this.

"If you want your best people to stay, then you must show them that you are actively dealing with the silo issues, the lack of agility, the slow pace of innovation, or anything else that messes with their success."

Use IT to Leverage Potential

How can you use technology to strengthen your culture? Do better systems support the professional and personal satisfaction employees crave with the deeply member-centric approach your constituents are seeking?

This excerpt from the Deloitte 2023 Human Capital Trends Study neatly explains the changing relationship between people and their tools.

> *The boundary between humans and technology as separate forces continues to disappear as new technologies are entering the workplace that not only automate and augment the work done by humans, but actually enhance human and team performance. Forward-leaning organizations are exploring how to use technology in ways that encourage humans both to be their best selves and to do better work.*

Good technology will never be a substitute for bad culture. But these are some of the ways that efficient systems contribute to a first-class work experience and create an environment dedicated to providing member value.

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01
Automate to Make Room for the Mission

A job isn't just a job anymore. If you ask 10 people why they work at an association, at least half will tell you they were attracted by the mission. More than ever, employees, especially Gens X and Z, see their work as a gateway to both professional and personal fulfillment. There is a strong desire to make a positive impact on society.

That enthusiasm wilts in the reality of mind-numbing administrative details or failed initiatives. When the job that was billed as advancing cancer research actually involves combing through spreadsheets or struggling to deliver an accurate report, enthusiasm dies under the weight of repetition and frustration.

Using powerful IT systems to automate analog processes and work in new ways frees people to do the job they love. "The software shoulders the tedium, giving employees time to innovate, experiment, and return home for dinner with the family," Dorsey advises.

Powerful IT systems free people to do the job they love.

Although every business uses technology, many groups have not experienced a digital transformation. They are working with IT tools, but continuing to conduct business as usual.

Rice explains the disconnect like this. "Most associations are still working off an analog model. They may digitally deliver products, but those offerings have more in common with physical items. In contrast with the way that data platform business models like Facebook, Amazon, and Google constantly evolve based on customer feedback, they are static."

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Automated systems enable organizations to update business models and deliver on the mission in new and exciting ways. They produce fast, error-free results for these activities and many others.

Email marketing campaigns. Set the parameters and let the system sort, select, and send scheduled customized messages. Use personas to identify the groups of constituents who want to hear what you have to say.

Data entry. Auto-fill data to keep member records up-to-date and accurate and save employee time and energy.

Customer service. Provide 24/7 responses to members' questions and concerns. Offer new services based on previous responses.

Social media. Maintain a vigorous social presence by ensuring that messages are posted to the right platforms on schedule.

Project management. Communicate timelines, responsibilities, and progress across the entire organization.

Automating administrative drudgery makes room for employees to craft impactful messaging and give member satisfaction their full attention.

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02

Study Data to Increase Engagement

A mission-centered focus is enhanced by analytics that aggregate information across the organization. There was a time when IT departments guarded data like it was the family jewels. While data is arguably the organization's most precious resource, to be of real value it is treasure that must be shared.

Giving all staffers, no matter how junior, the ability to review data in real-time democratizes knowledge. It advances the culture of agency, innovation, and agility that younger members are seeking. **Making every employee a brand ambassador also creates the member-centric approach** that is required for success in competitive markets.

Technology gives us access to members' hearts and minds. That insight is the door to relevance. The wider we open it, the more value we allow inside.

Uncover Surprises & Build New Relationships

A [presentation](#) that Tiffany Kerns from the Country Music Association (CMA) gave at [.orgCommunity's](#) 2022 [Solutions Day](#) event, centered on that idea. CMA's story is a perfect example of how data can reveal behavior that reorients the business model. By putting people first, the organization also reshaped its culture.

[Tiffany Kerns](#)
Executive Director of the [Country Music Association](#) Foundation and CMA's Vice President of Industry Relations and Philanthropy

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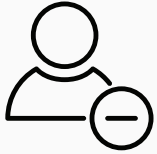
Inclusive Culture. "Country Music Association (CMA) was **experiencing weakness in some membership categories**," Kearns recalled. "We wanted everyone in our community, artists, songwriters, engineers, publishers, and bus drivers to see CMA as home. But we needed to do a better job communicating a culture of inclusivity.

Data Research. "We also discovered the answer to a mysterious phenomenon. Artists were experiencing rows of empty seats at "sold out" concerts. Research revealed that when younger people purchase their tickets months in advance, the money's been spent for so long that they don't feel obligated to attend the event. **When you dig into the data, you uncover significant surprises.**"

Purchasing Habits. "When you work with people you need to lean on data. We wanted to understand all the human behavior occurring throughout our organization. When we examined the data, we **saw patterns of activity that we would not have imagined**. We're still processing the information we learned about the purchasing habits of younger people."

Redefine Membership. "It took two years to reshape and redefine our membership. We updated criteria and added new tiers. Our statistics indicate that **40 percent of our business comes from individuals outside of country music.** So, we opened the membership to anyone in the music industry. This was a controversial move. But we gained direct sightlines to shifts in our broader environment."

To ensure that CMA continues to be equipped to innovate digital systems and platforms are being redesigned to promote flexibility and prepare for growth and change in a shifting business environment.

03
Integrate Systems for Collaboration

The full value of data isn't realized until teams use it collaboratively. Integrated systems promote a culture of information sharing and problem-solving.

The pandemic pushed organizations that were reluctant to invest in a file-sharing platform and project management software to take this necessary step. However, if the AMS, LMS, and CMS are not up to the job of communicating with each other, your team may be connected, but their data remains in silos.

A shift to one or more new systems isn't a move to be taken lightly. But when your current tech stack, or lack thereof, is sabotaging member engagement and preventing employees from working as a true team, it's time to rethink that relationship.

"Faulty technology undermines employee satisfaction," Dorsey advises. "**The struggle to meet professional expectations using limited tools can be extremely stressful.** That frustration plays out in tense relationships and negative behavior."

These signs indicate that better-integrated systems are needed:

- Disgruntled staffers who view technology as an impediment to their success

- Difficulty coordinating operations across departments

- Inability to use data for objective decision-making as a result of 1) Unreliable input, 2) Insufficient reporting capabilities, and 3) Complex user interface

- Manual activities that consume significant staff time

- Ineffective generic member communications and content

- Member attrition without new growth

- Personnel and revenue losses as a result of the challenges above

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04

Be Transparent and Build Trust

Even where there are no secrets, compartmentalized data implies hidden agendas and exclusivity.

Systems that are a lens into initiatives across departments make equity, integrated strategy, and shared goals possible. It's the difference between an office defined by the number of doors that are closed and an environment where people network and grow relationships.

Collaboration builds collegiality and supports accountability. When people solve problems together they develop confidence in each other's judgment and intentions. That trust is the foundation of a positive culture.

Trust is the foundation of a positive culture.

Nancy MacRae, CEO at the Emergency Nurses Association, is a leader who has made culture an organizational priority. Nancy offered this observation. "As you create a strong culture, you also gain trust."

ENA developed its culture statements based on— People, Purpose, and Partnerships, the organization's 3Ps. All of the association's activities and initiatives are grounded in these ideals.

Nancy MacRae
Chief Executive Officer at the
Emergency Nurses Association
(ENA)

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Measure the costs in human factors—think about trust, transparency, accountability, and excellence. Ask whether you can afford not to make the critical connection and use technology to build a stronger culture.

The Emergency Nurses Association (ENA) Culture Statements

Staff. The Emergency Nurses Association will seek at all times to foster and maintain a culture of excellence, commitment, empowerment, collaboration, inclusivity, and accountability.

Board. We, the ENA Board of Directors, will seek at all times to demonstrate:

- Excellence through collaboration, engagement, and accountability
- Integrity through respect, compassion, and mindfulness
- A culture of inquiry while being inclusive, strategic, and visionary.

Living the culture that ENA prizes is possible without technology. But digital systems fast-track each of the qualities the organization defines as valuable. A good example of this idea is in front of you. This article could be produced without a word processing program and the internet, but those tools have made it possible to complete the project in half the time. The same concept applies to less tangible activities.

Keep this idea in mind when you are considering whether or not to upgrade platforms. Don't just weigh the expense or the effort.

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Impexium's Smarter, Simpler Membership Management

Impexium's cloud-based membership management platform supports the full range of association business and administrative activities. By combining enterprise level functionality with the benefits of a software-as-a-service model, we help associations of all sizes transform their business by:

- Serving members more intelligently and profitably
- Strengthening alignment between strategies and operations
- Reducing costs through increased flexibility and gaining ROI faster
- Creating value for key relationships — members, customers, partners, prospects, and staff

Impexium empowers associations to achieve more by creating amazing software power. We eliminate the need to use big, expensive SaaS platform solutions to deal with everyday problems by delivering low-code/no-code development, workflow automation, and business intelligence tools that streamline operations, reduce development costs and reliance on corporate IT, and improve business outcomes.

We can help you reach your goals! Let us change your mind about what's possible with your next AMS implementation.

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Meet .orgCompanies

.orgCompanies is dedicated to supporting associations as they undertake transformational change. We offer strategic guidance, practical solutions, and access to a vibrant network of executives and education to strengthen associations and the value they provide. Three related organizations form the .orgCompanies brand:

.orgSource

.orgSource provides association leadership teams with strategies and data-driven solutions that reflect our deep understanding of the challenges that associations face and our knowledge about approaches to overcoming them. Our success spans fifteen years and represents more than 200 client engagements. From developing an integrated strategic plan to preparing your association for a digital future and supporting the implementation of your important projects and initiatives, .orgSource's experienced advisors are ready to serve your needs.

.orgCommunity

.orgCommunity connects members to a vibrant network of executives, entrepreneurs, and strategic partners dedicated to shaping the future of associations. Members have access to collaborative events, small group learning opportunities, and peer-to-peer counsel with trusted allies, mentors, and friends who share a passion for excellence.

.orgWorx

.orgWorx quickly connects organizations with vetted talent to help build diversity and capacity. With a deep understanding of the nonprofit sector and access to the resources from our .orgSource brand of companies, we match association experts with employment vacancies including: interim staffing and consultancy positions, temporary leadership gaps, transitional staffing, interim management/senior level positions, special projects, and, through our new recruitment service, standard association career positions.

Discover our philosophy of Association 4.0 leadership in our books: *Positioning for Success in an Era of Disruption and An Entrepreneurial Approach to Risk, Courage, and Transformation.* Let us share .orgCompanies' passion for designing premium solutions for associations with you.

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