

RETHINKING OVERHEAD

THE NONPROFIT CENTERS
NETWORK

Connective Mechanisms

What are Connective Mechanisms?¹

The Nonprofit Centers Network (NCN) recognizes that more nonprofit organizations are striving to build connection and collaboration to strengthen overhead services as well as mission-related activities. Organizational leaders are eager to share and request information and resources related to overhead topics including:

- Capacity building, networking and professional development training opportunities
- Major event scheduling
- Information technology platforms and strategies
- Human resources policies
- Funding announcements and deadlines
- Meeting and office space rental
- Volunteer opportunities and needs
- Employment opportunities
- Referrals to high-quality, contracted service providers

At the same time, a lot of communities do not have formal methods to connect. This leaves many to rely on personal and local networks. As the number of connections grows and the personal and professional networks mingle, communications can become more difficult to manage.

In working with many organizations in many communities, NCN sees a growing trend. As a growing number of people and organizations seek to share information, more connective mechanisms are developed to provide structure and continuity to collect the shared knowledge.² As a more informal form of shared services, these connective mechanisms are customized to accommodate the needs of participants and the communities they serve.

¹ *Rethinking Overhead* marks the first known use of the term “connective mechanisms” to describe this kind of grouping of collaborative capacity building tools. NCN chose this term based on experience from working with our members and dozens of other organizations and their communities on topics of shared services, shared space and social purpose real estate. The concept of connective mechanisms will continue to evolve as more organizations engage in these and other collaborative solutions.

² Connective mechanisms also involve a recognized role for network weavers, defined by June Holley as “people who are aware of networks around them and explicitly work to make them healthier.” For more information see *The Network Weaver Handbook* and <https://networkweaver.com>

RETHINKING OVERHEAD

THE NONPROFIT CENTERS
NETWORK

Examples of connective mechanisms include:

- Platforms to post and respond to information and resources, such as a listserv, Google, Facebook, or Yahoo group
 - The *Share. Help. Innovate. Nourish. Engage (SHINE)* platform is sponsored by SEFCU, in partnership with the Center for Academic Community Engagement at Siena College, in service to nonprofit organizations in the Capital Region of New York.³ Participants can use SHINE to post to a listserv, submit event dates to a shared calendar and share resources through an online community exchange.
- Systems for multiple organizations to share information with the public, such as a multi-organizational e-newsletter, shared events calendar or community resource map
 - Share Omaha offers a website for local nonprofits, regardless of size, cause or budget, to list key organizational information including volunteer needs and options to donate money or goods.⁴
- A shared preferred service provider list
 - The Minnesota Council of Nonprofits offers the Nonprofit SpecialLIST. It is a free, online listing for service providers across 40 service categories including accounting, legal, insurance, information technology support, strategic planning and communications. List users can search for service providers by name, service category or region. List users can also tell others about their experience with service providers using a five-star rating.⁵
- Formal cohort models for peer support, professional development training, mentorship or networking
 - The MetroWest Nonprofit Network in Massachusetts offers monthly affinity group meetings for communications professionals and “Lone Rangers” working in the nonprofit sector. The Network also provides in person and online training opportunities.⁶

The organizations that participate in connective mechanisms contribute information, experience, resources and time to cultivate collaboration and sharing with their peers. Typically, participants share some common trait such as geographic area (state, region or county), sector (the arts, human services) or physical space (nonprofit center, co-working space).

The organizations that develop and maintain collective mechanisms seek to engage communities, nurture collaboration and sharing, raise the visibility and impact of participants and centralize access to information and resources.

³ See the SHINE Network at <https://shine.connectedcommunity.org>

⁴ See Share Omaha at www.shareomaha.org

⁵ See the Nonprofit SpecialLIST at www.minnesotanonprofits.org/nonprofitspecialist/listings

⁶ See MetroWest Nonprofit Network at <http://metrowestnonprofit.org>

RETHINKING OVERHEAD

THE NONPROFIT CENTERS
NETWORK

Where can connective mechanisms be found? It varies from community to community and some locations do not have any yet. NCN sees these strategies based at nonprofit organizations, academic institutions, state nonprofit associations, chambers of commerce, nonprofit centers or operators of co-working spaces, capacity building organizations, fiscal sponsors, management support organizations (MSOs), funders, membership organizations and other groups with visions for community impact.

Thaddeus Squire of CultureWorks Greater Philadelphia (CultureWorks), a beneficiary-supported common good corporation, nurtures an intentional community. Its members are artists and organizations with missions that foster fine arts, performing and media arts, heritage arts and humanities. Members are highly encouraged to share space, services and resources and contribute to the creation of a “management commons.”⁷

The impact of CultureWorks’ connective mechanisms is described by Homer Jackson, Executive Director of the Philadelphia Jazz Project and CultureWorks member, “How has our capacity changed? The irony is that our visibility, connection and desire from others to collaborate with us has grown even though our budget shrank. This is because of the connections we’ve made with other organizations.”

Those interested in developing connective mechanisms can face several challenges including:

- Identifying an intentional community of participants seeking to connect and collaborate
- Gaining consensus about the information and resources to be shared and the supportive structures for sharing
- Developing a funding or allocation strategy to cover the startup and operations costs
- Identifying a champion for the effort (i.e. a staff member, contractor or volunteer with the time, energy, knowledge, resources and funding to startup, maintain and nurture the community)
- Finding a long-term home for the effort (i.e. an entity or fiscal sponsor that is willing to commit to the vision and provide support)
- Conducting effective outreach to communicate with and engage participants
- Setting and enforcing appropriate guidelines, moderation and oversight to ensure that participants build trust and community impact.⁸

When these challenges are met, connective mechanisms generate immediate benefits for participants and their communities.

⁷ Read more about CultureWorks Greater Philadelphia in the Rethinking Overhead case study and watch Homer Jackson’s video interview for more information about his experiences as a CultureWorks member, available at <https://youtu.be/RRDKTsflIWY>. Also read more of Thaddeus Squires’ framework for describing CultureWorks in his blog, “What’s in a Name,” available at <https://www.nonprofitcenters.org/whats-in-a-name/>

⁸ See the Rethinking Overhead Discussion Questions to facilitate discussions related to these challenges.

RETHINKING OVERHEAD

THE NONPROFIT CENTERS
NETWORK

Because connective mechanisms build knowledge, trust and relationships among participants, these strategies often serve as the first steps towards more time and resource-intensive forms of shared services including fiscal sponsorship or joint contracting.

An example of this progression can be seen at CultureWorks. Its Track 1 members receive access to shared workspace, meeting and conference rooms; a 360-degree assessment by CultureWorks' administrative team; discounts and preferred rates with a variety of service partners; and the option to add access to space or consulting services as needed. Trusted members who wish to receive shared management support may apply to participate in Track 2, comprehensive fiscal sponsorship.

Connective Mechanisms are Shared Services

NCN considers connective mechanisms to be a shared service option for nonprofit organizations because:

1. Connective mechanisms are only valuable if they facilitate the sharing of information and resources among an intentional community of participants who seek to achieve a social purpose or vision for community impact.
 - TSNE MissionWorks (TSNE) offers a new platform for fiscally sponsored projects to interact and learn. As described by Risa Wilkerson, Executive Director of Healthy Places by Design and project of TSNEs, "TSNE MissionWorks has just started... conferences and convenings of their [fiscally sponsored projects]. That holds a lot of promise for continued growth for the [projects] to be meeting... to get to know each other and to learn together."⁹
2. Connective mechanisms rely on trust, sharing and collaboration.¹⁰ Participants willingly share information and resources while sometimes not knowing which specific organizations will benefit from that act.
 - CultureWorks encourages members to invest their time and expertise and fully engage in the management commons culture, participate in collective problem solving and accept the concept of co-management. Some members are more comfortable with a simple transaction and request services that are available a la carte. Difficulties arise in getting members to invest their time and expertise and fully engage in the management commons culture. Trust and familiarity among members and staff are critical to collective success.

⁹ Watch Risa Wilkerson's video interview for more information about her experiences as project of TSNE MissionWorks, available at https://youtu.be/Gr6_idgW2oE.

¹⁰ "Hacking Collaboration," by Art Taylor discusses nine considerations about nonprofit collaboration led by number one, "Build Trust." The article is available at https://ssir.org/articles/entry/hacking_nonprofit_collaboration#

RETHINKING OVERHEAD

THE NONPROFIT CENTERS
NETWORK

3. Organizations providing connective mechanisms often develop these strategies to build the capacity of participants and create more holistic support. Connective mechanisms often include organizational assessments, training and leadership activities. Connective mechanisms also strengthen organizations by increasing awareness about emerging best practices, peer learning opportunities and more.
 - Metropolitan Alliance of Connected Communities (MACC) serves as a convener by bringing organizations together to solve common challenges through facilitated dialogue. MACC supports the idea-generation, incubation and implementation of potential solutions, including the back-office collaborative model.¹¹
4. Connective mechanisms may reduce risks to participants particularly for those who are seeking resources or feedback related to new operating practices. Participants outsourcing for the first time will reduce risk by utilizing a list of preferred service providers that was vetted by trusted peer organizations.

The Latest from the Field

Communities have been launching in-person and online connective mechanisms without established language for this practice. Only recently has the value of these services been recognized for creating stronger opportunities for collaboration and back office services. These platforms are highly valued by participants, but information and resources must stay current and relevant. This requires the facilitator or moderator of the connective mechanism to plan for a regular injection of new information, so participants remain engaged and involved.

NCN has worked with multiple organizations and communities to conduct research and define a set of connective mechanisms that are necessary to support future shared services. We see many hopeful participants who are more than willing to share ideas, information and resources to help their peers. There is also a hope that in sharing information and resources, organizations can achieve greater impact by reducing the duplication of research, avoiding scheduling conflicts and retaining more leaders, staff members, board and volunteers in the nonprofit sector.

At the same time, connective mechanisms live and die by on-going facilitation and maintenance. The technological platforms are part of the service, but without a regular update and continual maintenance, these tools quickly become outdated and are less useful. As a result, communities exploring new connective mechanisms recognize that any technological strategy must have at least a part-time champion who is dedicated to keeping content fresh, moderating discussions and ensuring that guidelines are followed.

¹¹ Read more about Metropolitan Alliance of Connected Communities in the Rethinking Overhead case study available at [WEBSITE].