

White Paper: Lessons from Starting a Bridging Agency

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Introduction

As we learn more about the partners of PBDD, we've been inspired by the variety of programs these agencies offer, and the unique stories of how each came to be. Given that one of our goals is to help initiate digital inclusion programs in communities that don't currently have them, this paper will focus on getting started. In this context, we asked the partners of PBDD a set of questions that can be summed up as:

1. How did your organization get started improving digital literacy and access?
2. What contributed to your initial success?
3. What advice would you give to those starting a new organization or new digital inclusion program?

From the answers we received and the stories we heard, we discovered common themes to what makes a successful bridging agency, both in the initial phase and as a guide for ongoing improvement.

A common catalyst for many of the organizations was that after seeing a problem for an individual and solving it, they realized the problem was shared by many others. Addressing the bigger question required organization and resources.

While the primary goal of this paper is to derive the lessons of experience from our partner agencies, we found the stories of how each was started to be compelling and have included a

summary for each participating agency in Appendix A. Reading them will help to fully understand the background for the answers to the other questions.

The body of this paper provides information gleaned from our partners, grouped into categories of Volunteers, Partnering, Culture/Values, Media, Fundraising and Miscellaneous.

Volunteers

1. **Volunteer skills and passion are important to initial success and later growth.** Most organizations need the passion of someone addressing a specific need to get started, and then the ability to make that specific need more general. [Our Children LA](#)'s founding board began with a small group of volunteers who recognized a dire need for a comprehensive and centralized resource directory of services for local youth. After they developed the directory, they realized that a mobile app would have a wider audience.
2. **Look for a group of people with shared values who want to make a difference.** [Net Literacy](#) was founded by teenagers; they form 50% of the Board of Directors and all of the volunteers. Ed Tech of WNY has an [Ed Tech day](#) where teams of volunteers use equipment that has been donated or new equipment that has been purchased through the fundraising efforts of the foundation. The volunteers set up computers, labs, printers, scanners, networking equipment, servers, install wiring and other technology. [Computers4Kids](#) recruits high-school and college interns from River City High School and Los Rios Community College to work for C4K's refurbishing program. [Lutheran Social Services of Northern Florida](#) provides hands-on experience to local university students through a for-credit internship program.
3. **Understand why your volunteers are motivated to volunteer** and make the best use of that. For example, some volunteers are motivated by personal connections and training while others enjoy working behind the scenes on hardware or repairs. [People's Resource Center](#) asks all new volunteers to attend a general orientation program where they learn in detail about about the many volunteer opportunities and programs so they can choose the best match.
4. **Be able to clearly express the volunteers' impact on the organization and issue being addressed.** [Human-I-T](#) posts a [dashboard](#) on its volunteer webpage including Value of Hours, Hours Volunteered and Total Unique Volunteers. [Ed Tech](#)'s website includes a list of testimonials from schools who have benefited.
5. **Find people with complementary skill sets, especially as the organization grows.** At [Independence First](#), the volunteers who enjoy troubleshooting hardware rely on others to define efficient processes and check-lists.
6. **Seek various sources of volunteers from experienced retirees to students.** [Ed Tech](#) of New York's first line on its web page to recruit volunteers says, "We need people with all

different types of skills to help us on Ed Tech Day and prior to Ed Tech Day. You don't have to have technical skills to volunteer. There are all types of jobs.” Providing internships can also be a service by providing life skills and job skills to young people. [CompUDopt](#) offers internships to college students who hope to work in the IT field and can relate to the importance of children having access to technology.

7. **Focus on what you know best.** [TechBoomers](#)' founder was familiar with the Internet and social media. When it became clear that his parents' need for appropriate instruction wasn't unique, and that a website to answer their needs didn't exist, he started one to provide the structured learning environment where people could progress through a series of tutorials from basic skills to more advanced features.
8. **Use multiple avenues for recruitment.** [Human-I-T](#) posts all opportunities on VolunteerMatch, their website, and related volunteer posting organizations to get the most reach possible. They target keywords in their listings that are a combination of the highest volume and most expensive words to advertise for from a paid perspective.

Partnering

1. **Partner with existing organizations** in your community (schools, libraries, etc.) to identify shared goals and resources they have which can help you. [Learning to Be the Light](#) has established a relationship with the local city government and school district to collect equipment and target K-12 students as recipients. The San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce has joined forces with UC San Diego and [Computers 2 SD Kids](#) to launch a campaign to encourage businesses to donate used computers for refurbishing and distribution to families that do not own a computer.
2. **Be willing to ask for help.** It can come from unexpected places. When the [People's Resource Center](#) was reviewing the computer courses after teaching for a year, the committee had the good fortune to include a woman who had worked at a professional training organization. With the help of other volunteers, she and her co-instructor rewrote the curricula in a professional manner, forming the core of the courses taught to this day.
3. **Share a program with another nonprofit.** [Lutheran Social Services of Northern Florida](#) relies on other agencies to vet clients and provide referrals, allowing them to target computers to meet the specific client needs.
4. **Use Microsoft Refurbishing Program.** They have a well-established program and refurbishing procedures. [Microsoft's Registered Refurbisher page](#) is a good place to start.
5. **Barter for space.** [Learning to Be the Light](#) has worked out an arrangement where they provide support for a computer network in exchange for space to work in.
6. **Participate in community groups, networking, education, religious organizations, libraries, etc.** As [Human-I-T](#) found, networking and getting out to meet the full circle of people is important. These include local representatives, people with the technology,

decision makers and the public. The people making decisions within an organization could be Operations, Marketing or IT.

7. **Rely on the expertise of others.** For recycling, find someone who is already doing it well. Use on-line resources like iFixit.com and the refurbishers google group. [Our Children LA](#) recognized that their clients needed mobile devices to access their app, and is working together with [Human-I-T](#) on a pilot program to provide refurbished phones.

Culture/Values

1. **Look for creative solutions.** Be willing to try things. Be willing to take on new challenges. An example of this can be found in [PBDD](#) itself. When Barry had the idea of helping to initiate a digital inclusion program in a community that didn't currently have one, he was encouraged to address not just one community, but communities in general. Be creative to get around stumbling blocks, such as using Linux to avoid license fees.
2. **Pay attention to the values of the organization** to ensure that processes and policies follow those values while meeting the needs of the clients. At the [People's Resource Center](#), the founding values are distributed and discussed at all new volunteer orientations. When a volunteer asks why volunteers load refurbished computers into cars for clients, they are referred back to the values of respect and compassion. Values ground the organization in good decision-making when looking at policies. For example, with limited parking available, food pantry clients get priority in the lot next to the building so the volunteers can load groceries and make a personal connection to clients.
3. **Don't be afraid to create unique programs that fit your environment.** One of the benefits of starting with a single problem and then generalizing it is that you can craft a solution that really fits the volunteer base you have access to and the clients you need to serve. [Our Children LA](#) developed a database of resources for homeless youth, and is focused on growing those services to better serve clients in a broader geographic region.
4. **Be aware of the stigma of accepting services, especially with children.** As [Lutheran Social Services of North Florida](#) has found, sharing the stories of recipients can be useful to get grants and equipment, but privacy issues need to be considered.
5. **Identify your core identity—what makes you unique.** The Indianapolis nonprofit [Net Literacy](#) has been run by teenagers for over ten years. They have the mantra of not letting well-intentioned adults get in the way of the students. Like their other programs, the summer [Safe Connects](#) internship program was suggested by the teen members of the board of directors. As the administrator says, "Kids have the better vision on what is engaging and effective to their fellow teens."
6. **Focus on a smaller group.** Think about offering services to a smaller group so they can achieve a long-term goal rather than offer a little something to everyone. [TechBoomers](#) focuses on older adults and other inexperienced Internet users. [Technocycle's](#) outreach

program provides every first grader at Berry Elementary school with a computer with no strings attached. They've been doing this for four years.

7. **Be tenacious. Expect problems, and don't let them derail you.** When starting the [People's Resource Center](#) computer refurbishing program, founder Frank Goetz didn't give up until he found a way to contact Microsoft and convince them to provide low cost licences to non-profits serving low income people. This became the basis for the citizenship licenses available through the Microsoft Registered Refurbisher program.

Media

1. **Free media coverage, especially when starting out, is good.** It's important to protect the privacy of clients, however, even when a story is very touching. When the Masonic Angel Foundation launched [Laptops for KidZ](#), they received their first laptop donations within a couple of days of announcing the program. As they placed their initial refurbished computers, they received media coverage from a popular local news site on Cape Cod. The publicity stimulated more laptop donations and placements which stimulated more publicity.
2. **It's important to get your organization's name out there—website, community, meeting people.** [Learning to be the Light](#) encountered a reporter on another story and talked up their program resulting in a bigger story. Media and web-site visibility is free and can be useful. Profiling the work of a volunteer can get the information out in a way that captures people's interest without endangering client confidentiality. Also, some clients are happy to be interviewed. Ask.
3. **Get good publicity early and often.** Once the organization is going, be sure to continue to get publicity. Consider having a special drive. [Lutheran Social Services of North Florida](#) had a special [100 Computers in 100 Days](#) crowdfunding campaign to raise funds in 2015. They met their goal and using local university and high school student volunteer/interns, they updated and refurbished 100 computers for distribution to low-income individuals, families in need, veterans and human service agencies. [Net Literacy](#) receives a number of computers of the same type and year, such as when a corporation is upgrading. They donate them to a location that can take advantage of having dozens of computers of the same type. There is the opportunity for publicity around such donations such as [Net Literacy's recognition of Old National Bank](#) which can lead to another corporation donating equipment.

Fundraising

1. **Corporate donations are helpful.** [Masonic Angel Foundation's Laptops for Kidz](#) found the first corporate donations of laptops from local community banks useful to getting started.
2. **Trying to get grants takes time and energy, and may not be productive.** Identify grants that fit with your mission and values. It can be tempting to change a program to meet the requirements of a specific grant, but that hurts morale, distracts from the core mission and often doesn't work anyway.
3. **Diversify your revenue sources.** Some funders won't fund you if you don't have diverse funding.

Miscellaneous

1. **Pay attention to the quality of the content being offered.** Each of the partners works to ensure that the computers provided to their clients meet the needs of those clients. For example, [Computers 4 Kids](#), targeting fourth to eighth graders, makes sure that each computer is a Pentium 4 or better and has multiple USB ports for transferring files between home and school. All computers are loaded with a Windows operating system and productivity applications, have virus protection and are ready to connect to the Internet.
2. **Grow slowly.** Starting with a narrow focus gives an organization the chance to develop a system which works well. [Compudopt](#) gave out one hundred computers to school children aged 5-14 in 2007. Over time, it has grown in size, having now partnered with over 65 schools and giving out over 1300 computers per year, as well as in scope, offering new programs such as Learn to Earn, giving high school students the knowledge and experience of refurbishing a computer for their own use. The [People's Resource Center](#) started by providing training for a group of people at a senior center. Last year over a thousand adults received computer literacy training. They evolved from a few classes to a full slate and continue to trial new things such as monthly workshops called [Tech Tuesdays](#).
3. **Understand your clients.** Involve clients to ensure you offer what they need. Offer ways for clients to give feedback through surveys and phone calls. [Our Children LA](#) engaged homeless youth in [helping to design](#) the What I Need (WIN) app for identifying services available in their area.
4. **Restrict your donations.** It can be a challenge to avoid becoming a dumping ground for computer equipment. While some organizations accept everything ([Lutheran Social Services of North Florida](#) is the third largest recycler in their region), others have found it is best to place restrictions on what they will accept, in order to focus efforts on getting computers working and in the hands of clients. For example, as their name implies,

[Laptops for Kidz](#) does not accept desktop computers. Be clear about what you can accept and what you can't. Refer people with donations that you can not accept to other organizations.

5. **Don't expect recipients to thank you.** While many clients are openly appreciative of what they receive, there can be a stigma to accepting help. [Learning to Be the Light](#), which addresses the need for school-age children, has learned that the students simply want to fit in, and that while there is significant need, few recipients want their situation to be known or publicized.

Summary

Our partner agencies have helped tens of thousands of clients over the years. Tapping on their tremendous experience base, this paper provides an analysis of common themes with the hope that we can learn from each other and help other organizations bridge the digital divide.

Appendix A – Origin Stories (Alphabetical)

[CompUDopt](#)

CompUDopt was founded in 2007 by John Osha, a Houston patent attorney, based on the belief that every child deserves equal access to education and opportunity. Computers are awarded to children who submit essays explaining how a computer will benefit their education. Each refurbished computer comes with Linux-based educational tools such as word processing, spreadsheet and other programs, and Internet capabilities. Children who receive computers attend a two-hour "adoption" session with parents or guardians to learn software use and computer care. CompuUDopt has provided over five thousand students and families in the Houston area with home computers.

References:

http://compudopt.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&layout=item&id=1&Itemid=8

and

<http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/comp-u-dopt-5000th-houston-area-child-receives-a-donated-computer-300007036.html>

[Ed Tech of Western NY](#)

Ed Tech of WNY was started in 2003 by Doug Torre, a parent who was an IT manager at a local healthcare facility with a child in a school that needed tech support and equipment. In asking around to see who could help, he saw there was a need and began soliciting volunteers to help updating and repairing computers in schools in Western NY. Ed Tech is now helping install, configure, and setting up reliable networks, computers, smartboards, servers and other types of technology at schools, community centers, and non-profits. They have helped make technology available for young people at over 100 organizations.

[Human-I-T](#)

Founders Gabe Middleton and James Jack met while managers at Best Buy. They started Computers for a Cause in 2012 and changed the name when another organization with a similar name contacted them. Technology is distributed to low-income families, veterans, disabled people, schools and non-profit organizations. They aim for a world where there is a working computer in every family's home since

computers are an essential, household item. Households without this necessity are at a huge social and economic disadvantage. They repurpose unwanted electronic devices, also cutting down on e-waste shipped overseas every year.

Reference: <http://human-i-t.org/our-story/>

Learning to Be the Light

Robin Schultz was teaching Sunday School to high school juniors at his church when he found out that one of his students did not have a computer at her home. Schultz owned a computer consulting business and had access to used computers. He put one in his student's home where she lived with her grandmother. Schultz realized that other students were also without computers, and that's when he started Learning To Be The Light in 2011. Its mission is to refurbish computers and install them in the homes of Hoover City School students who need them for schoolwork but don't currently have home access.

Reference: <http://hooversun.com/peopleplaces/making-connections-happen/>

Lutheran Social Services of North Florida

The Computer Refurbishing and Technical Assistance program was started as a service of an existing agency in 2007 when a teacher at Florida State University wanted to start a computer refurbishing program and contacted Lutheran Social Services of Northern Florida. The program refurbishes computers donated by the community and distributes them in North Florida. Potential clients come through partner referral agencies which does the recipient vetting, and makes the actual request on the CRTA website. Since each request is on behalf of a specific person or family, the computer can be adapted for special use when needed. Clients must pay \$50 for the computer, mainly to ensure that the computer is seen as being of value. The program provides hands-on experience to local university students through a for-credit internship program. The students not only learn how to refurbish computers, they also do a project of their choice such as setting up a network or server.

Masonic Angel Foundation Laptops for KidZ

A business colleague of the Masons mentioned in 2010 that his first grader was being assigned homework that had to be completed online. He wondered what happened to the kids without computer access. If someone can't buy food, how could they afford a computer? The founders intended to work with middle schools, but the first one they contacted didn't get back to them. When they talked with elementary schools, they saw

that a bigger impact could be made by starting earlier. Early publicity from a popular local news site in Cape Cod helped them receive more laptop donations.

Reference:

<http://www.capecodtoday.com/article/2014/10/21/27464-Masonic-Angels-donate-1000th-laptop>

NetLiteracy

In 2003, a senior citizen asked a middle school student who was teaching computer classes at a local library for help. The mobility-impaired neighbors living at his independent living facility could not leave their apartments to learn how to access the Internet and wanted to learn to send emails to their grandchildren. Thus Net Literacy was born with Daniel Kent researching local resources, and starting a computer drive. They started refurbishing the computers, used the library curriculum as a base and taught the first class at Forum of the Crossing independent living center. They revised the material, contacted other senior housing and independent living centers about setting up computer labs and they were off. When they discovered that most foundations and corporations wouldn't provide grants without adults legally positioned to sign contracts, they expanded the board to include 50% adults. Eleven years later, 3500 student volunteers have spent 100,000s of hours to increase digital inclusion and digital literacy to 250,000 individuals.

Reference:

<http://www.netliteracy.org/blog/news/do-something-spotlight-daniel-kent-and-senior-connects/>

Our Children LA

OCLA started from a small group of volunteers who developed the 2012 Directory of Services for Homeless Youth, a resource guide created in response to a request from the LA City library. In 2015 they expanded the Directory to include countywide services, and launched a website as well as a mobile application, WIN (What I Need), designed for homeless youth to access needed support. In 2016, OCLA and Human-I-T initiated a pilot effort to provide mobile phones to homeless youth, with the goal of improving their ability to access and use the app and website.

Reference: <https://www.ourchildrenla.org>

People's Resource Center

Frank Goetz started the Computer Training Program through People's Resource Center in 1997 when a low-income housing complex asked for help learning to use computers. Frank taught the classes by the seat of his pants, and started collecting computers to

use in classes. Computers started showing up, and the refurbishing program started so they could be fixed up and given away. PRC was involved in getting the Microsoft Authorized Refurbisher program started so that computers could be given away that had Microsoft products on them. The training has continued to be an important component with classes offered in a variety of subjects at 10 - 15 locations in Du Page county. PRC has refurbished and given away 12,000 computers.

Reference: Miracles Relied On by Margaret and Warren Roth (see pages 83 – 93)

TechBoomers

After spending time teaching older relatives who wanted to learn about 21st century technology, Steve Black sought a website that would show them how to use websites like Facebook, Skype and Netflix. But relevant content available online was out-of-date, missing steps, confusing, or all of the above. It also wasn't organized into the type of structured learning environment to allow older adults to progress through a series of tutorials from basic skills to more advanced features. Thus, in 2015, TechBoomers was born.

Reference:

<https://www.fosi.org/good-digital-parenting/techboomers-helps-seniors-get-connected/>