

## Who Do You Need: Volunteers, Consultants or Staff?

Community based organizations use volunteers, consultants and staff for different needs. Before identifying who you may need to complete technology tasks take a couple of steps back –

- What is your overall technology support strategy?
- What needs did you identify when you carried out your technology assessment?
- What needs are described in you technology planning document?

### **The bottom line is that consultants and volunteers are not magic.**

If you don't make coherent decisions about your overall technological systems, a consultant or volunteer will be a band-aid. A consultant will not fix your database, provide training, upgrade your hardware and install a network at once. S/he will only be able to perform a small subset of those tasks. If you haven't built the systems and structures to support healthy technology use at your organization, no volunteer will make your issues go away. In fact, hiring a consultant or recruiting a volunteer under those circumstances will only allow you to ignore your technology needs for another season or two, while using up funds that you might otherwise have used to begin solving your technology problems. Develop a vision and overall timeline of tasks through a technology planning process. Then, the consultant's work can be one aspect of your overall vision for technology support.

### **What sources of support do you have already?**

You may already have a warranty that covers your problem. For instance, if a monitor is flickering, try calling the hardware vendor to see if they will fix the problem for free. When you call a technical support number, be assertive about getting explanations you understand. Organizations have hired consultants only to realize that a vendor could easily fix their problem. *Techsoup.org* provides support numbers and web addresses for common hardware vendors.

### **Could you use a volunteer?**

Technical volunteers can be a source of substantial help for community based organizations. Consider if all or part of your projects could be accomplished by a volunteer, especially if you don't have the budget for a consultant. Can you limit the scope of work to one or more definable, short-term projects? This may also be an opportunity to do leadership development in your organization.

### **Can a consultant meet your needs?**

A consultant is the natural choice for many common projects, such as installing a network, creating a website or building a database. These require more specialized knowledge and resources. In some cases, a contract with a consultant can be appropriate for ongoing maintenance needs. A disadvantage of using a consultant for ongoing maintenance is that they will often ask you to fit your system to certain specifications so that it is easier to maintain. This can be challenging for an agency where each staff member has a totally different setup.

### **Do you need a dedicated staff member?**

In a majority of organizations with more than ten or fifteen computers, having a dedicated staff member is the most cost-effective long-term solution for regular maintenance needs. As you upgrade in order to access the Internet and share files and data efficiently, your systems will become more complex. The more complex your systems, the more you need to have someone on staff who understands. The size of your organization will affect your decision as well. It may be difficult to think about hiring a new staff position for this purpose, but the amount of money spent on several consultant trips, computer breakdowns and interrupted workdays may be well worth it.