asae foundation
Advancing Association and Nonprofit Leadership

ASAE FOUNDATION RESEARCH SERIES

Tech Success for Associations

BALANCING IT MATURITY, READINESS, AND EXPECTATIONS FOR A SATISFYING, SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:

delcor

The authors have worked diligently to ensure that all information in this report is accurate as of the time of publication and consistent with standards of good practice in the general management community. As research and practice advance, however, standards may change. For this reason, it is recommended that readers evaluate the applicability of any recommendations in light of particular situations and changing standards.

ASAE Foundation
1575 I Street, NW
Washington, DC 20005-1103
Phone: (202) 626-2893
Email: ASAEFoundation@asaecenter.org

We connect great ideas and great people to inspire leadership and achievement in the association community.

Sharon Moss, Ph.D., CAE, Chief Research Officer, ASAE Foundation

Jenny Nelson, Manager, Research Content and Knowledge Resources, ASAE Foundation

Keith C. Skillman, CAE, Vice President, Publications and Knowledge Integration, ASAE Foundation

Baron Williams, CAE, Director of Book Publishing, ASAE Foundation

A complete catalog of titles is available on the ASAE website at asaecenter.org.

ISBN: 978-0-88034-553-8

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

The Technology Success and Readiness Study was made possible through a collaboration between ASAE and DelCor Technology Solutions. Dave Coriale, of DelCor, and Reggie Henry, CAE, from ASAE, provided invaluable insight throughout the study's lifecycle and in particular during the development and review of the research questions and surveys. DelCor also contributed the concept of IT maturity to this study.

Rockbridge Associates performed the research with the support of the ASAE Foundation and brought the concept of techno-readiness to the study's framework. Rockbridge's Charles Colby led the research team and wrote the reports from which this synthesis report was developed.

Project Team

Lauren Adams, ASAE Foundation
Charles Colby, Rockbridge Associates, Inc.
Dave Coriale, MBA, DelCor Technology Solutions
Reggie Henry, CAE, ASAE
Chelsea Killam, CAE
Sharon Moss, Ph.D., CAE, ASAE Foundation
Jenny Nelson, ASAE Foundation
Keith Skillman, CAE, ASAE Foundation

asae® The Center for Association Leadership

asae foundation® Advancing Association and Nonprofit Leadership

MADE POSSIBLE BY

delcor®

RESEARCH PERFORMED BY

ROCKBRIDGE

Introduction

The evolution of technology has always been grounded in making human activity easier, better, and more effective. In the twenty-first century, technology products and services are integrated into how we live our lives—how we communicate, collaborate, learn, and remember—and developing technologies continuously invent new ways to approach work in all professions.

For associations, technology success depends on technology systems effectively serving the organizational mission. Technology systems are integrated and employed across functional areas, collected data are vital to staff across departments, and technology-enabled access points are increasingly the face of the association for members and stakeholders across the country and around the world. Given the dynamic nature of technology development, associations must keep one eye on how evolving technology can support their work more effectively while keeping the other eye on evolving member needs and expectations.

This is no easy task. To advance understanding of how the sector manages technology and how member expectations align with current association technology, the ASAE Foundation, in partnership with DelCor Technology Solutions, developed the *Technology Success and Readiness Study.* The study, which was performed by Rockbridge Associates, reveals new information about where the association sector stands with regard to technology application and provides insight into member and staff technology abilities and expectations. It sheds light not only on the current state of association technology, but offers a vision of what associations can do to prepare for the future. This report captures key findings from that research.

Research highlights

The study investigated the operational choices of association information technology (IT) departments and decision makers. It also compared how IT decision makers perceive their membership's levels of interest and comfort with technology with how members perceive themselves in relation to technology. From that research, a number of key themes emerged.

Associations are doing all right … for now. In an assessment of their organizational IT maturity, most of the participating associations were rated as effective in their technology system maintenance and deployment. This aligns with member feedback: A majority of member respondents said they were highly satisfied with the way their association uses technology. Members also find their association's technology is reliable, with most saying their association's technology works well.

However, a majority of members also say that there is room for associations to expand their technology capabilities. In particular, Millennials are most likely to be dissatisfied with their associations' technology offerings and assert that association capabilities should be expanded. Increased exposure to technology is certainly also a factor. E-commerce giants like Amazon and the offerings provided by Google and other tech companies are shaping people's expectations for transactions, search functionality, and content presentation. As members see what can be achieved through technology in other arenas, their expectations for their associations shift.

Association members are more tech-savvy than you might think they are. They rate themselves at higher levels of technology fluency and optimism than the U.S. population—and at higher levels than association technology decision makers give them credit for. More than three quarters of association members expressed comfort in using technology, and a third consider themselves early adopters.

In a series of case studies conducted as part of the research, the member self-assessment was compared to staff perceptions of member comfort with technology, or techno-readiness. This comparison revealed an alarming gap. Association technology staff and/or decision makers were much more pessimistic about member techno-readiness than members were themselves. This gap will only widen as new, more techno-ready members join associations. Organizations must consider how to balance the expectations of these members while continuing to support members who are less techno-ready.

Members want access. Specifically, they want to be able to access relevant content, online learning, professional networks, and self-service systems, and they need to be able to get that access through a variety of devices, including smartphones and tablets.

The sector's maturity—how well associations support functionality and can be considered effective or even innovative—in these areas is decidedly mixed. The majority of associations are making at least some content available on mobile devices, but a fifth of respondents reported they offered limited mobile capability. Self-service functionality

Research methodology

The ASAE Foundation and DelCor Technology Solutions launched the Technology Success and Readiness Study in 2015 to gain a greater understanding of technology usage and opportunity in the association sector. The study gathered data in four phases:

1. *Exploratory phase:* Identified issues and opportunities associations face in IT strategy. This phase included two focus groups and 11 in-depth interviews with senior information technology decision makers.
2. *Case studies:* An in-depth analysis of critical success factors for association IT delivery based on a detailed study of seven ASAE member associations.
3. *Association member survey:* A survey of a broadly representative sample of association members across 14 organizations that shared their lists. A total of 4,831 association members began the survey, and 3,496 (72 percent) completed the bulk of the questions.
4. *Sector survey:* A national survey of association IT leaders on the IT maturity of their association, capturing responses from 277 association IT decision makers (nine percent of the 3,036 surveyed).

This report synthesizes key findings from phases two, three, and four. Phase one findings are summarized in the ASAE Foundation's research brief, *Findings from the First Phase of ASAE Foundation's Technology Success Study.*

for members is well supported across the sector, but most associations acknowledge gaps in their ability to support these actions in real-time. Digital content is generally a weakness across the sector. A minority of associations are developing content specifically for the digital environment and taking advantage of the dynamic interfaces that digital content can offer. Most either adapt existing content to add to online resources or create "flat" content for the web.

Despite these limitations, members are still largely satisfied with their associations' offerings, particularly their access to self-service transactions and their ability to update their records. Online learning functionality and support were also rated highly by members. Members were less satisfied with their ability to customize and share digital content or the functionality of their online networking and collaboration systems. Associations that are committed to making digital content and online collaboration a key component of their member benefits will want to ensure their offerings match their members' expectations.

Technology success divides around demographics. It is not surprising that associations with larger budgets are most successful in technology integration and management. These organizations not only have more to spend on technology, they are also more likely to have IT staff focused on technology success. Perhaps less obvious is the finding that professional associations tend to have more mature levels of technology integration and management than trade associations or associations that have a membership that includes both organizations and individual members.

This is not to say that trade or combination associations are less successful, or that smaller organizations or organizations without IT staff are doomed to failure. There is an advantage to having the chief executive serve as the IT decision maker—such organizations have no personnel barriers to considering technology solutions alongside strategic decisions. The key is integrating conversations about and investigations into organizational technology with conversations about strategic planning—and vice versa—rather than thinking about technology as a separate issue from other organizational matters. Whether technology systems are managed in-house or outsourced, the decisions must be made with the larger strategic vision for the organization in mind.

Technology choices cannot be made in a bubble. What is clear from this research is that association members expect technology to support and enhance all aspects of their member experience. For associations to address that effectively, technology decision-making and strategic decision-making must go hand-in-hand. Moreover, associations need to collect information from key stakeholders and technology users, including members, to understand what the needs are—not only today but also in the years ahead.

Many organizations are forward thinking in this area. The majority of associations look ahead two to three years when planning technology investments and have a process for reviewing technology projects. However, while half of associations consider their organizational culture for planning technology to be "collaborative"—where staff communicate and work together toward a common purpose—a large number of organizations either have no forum or an ineffective forum for discussing technology issues or initiatives.

The lack of effective forums for discussing technology initiatives, key for getting buy-in but also for improving concepts and addressing issues through discussion and debate, indicates that many associations might not be talking about their technology, and certainly are not talking about it in a way that feels effective to association leaders. It is a goal of this report to spark those conversations, to get executives and senior staff thinking about how their use of technology serves their mission, whether or not it meets member needs and expectations, and which areas they can target to improve their technology success.

IT maturity and technology success

At the heart of the Technology Success and Readiness Study is the idea of IT maturity. IT maturity is a concept developed by DelCor Technology Solutions and refers to the degree to which an association's technology system and environment reflect innovative practices and contribute to the association's overall success. In the least mature associations, IT deficiencies hinder organizational success; in the most mature, IT actually helps drive success.

To understand IT maturity's relationship to technology success, the study distinguished a number of metrics in four major technology management component areas—data, management and strategy, infrastructure, and digital presence—that affect an association's overall technology success. Data on how associations perform in these component areas were used to analyze the IT maturity of the association sector.

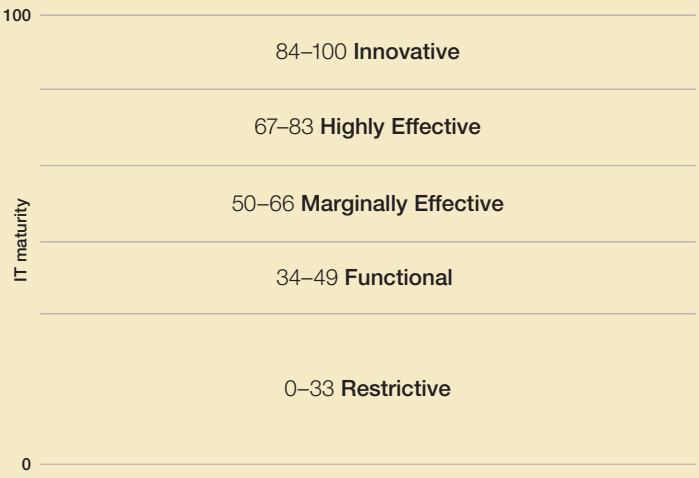
Understanding IT maturity

IT maturity can be understood as a continuum that exists across four stages, each defined by specific characteristics:

- *Restrictive:* Technology sometimes causes more harm than good. Web resources lack interactivity, data are decentralized, infrastructure is unstable, technology lacks a strategic outlook, and support is reactive.
- *Functional:* Technology works but lacks integration and automation. Website integration is limited, pockets of data are not integrated, IT planning is sporadic, and IT support is limited.
- *Effective:* Technology is more than an operational tool. Technology supports the organization's mission by adding value to the member, volunteer, donor, and constituent experience. Main operations systems are integrated with the website, databases are centralized, infrastructure provides a guaranteed uptime service level agreement (SLA), planning is annual, and support is proactive. Staff will experiment with social media.
- *Innovative:* Technology is used strategically to meet members' existing needs and anticipate future needs. The association has well-defined strategies for its website, social media, and mobile engagement. Data are used for business intelligence and drive decisions, infrastructure incorporates fringe technologies, and IT is a critical partner in advancing the mission and ensuring constituent service.

Depending on their scores in the different areas of the assessment, participating associations were assigned to one of the four different stages. The result offers both good news and disappointing news for the health of the association sector.

Figure 1:
Rating scale of IT maturity stages

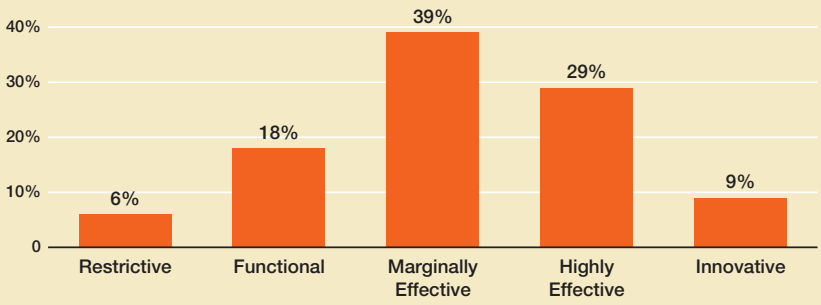


Source: Technology Success and Readiness Study

The state of the association sector

Most of the associations that participated in this study are effective, creating a sector average score of 60. This means that their technology systems are supported by and supportive of their missions. These associations do a good job managing data, have solid processes, maintain sound infrastructure, engage in constructive long-range planning, and meet constituent needs with digital resources. To get a clearer picture of this large segment, it is further divided into marginally effective and highly effective groups. Ultimately, more associations fall to the middle of the continuum, with 39 percent of participating associations rated as marginally effective and 29 percent rated as highly effective (Figure 2).

Figure 2:
Distribution of the association sector according to IT maturity



Source: Technology Success and Readiness Study

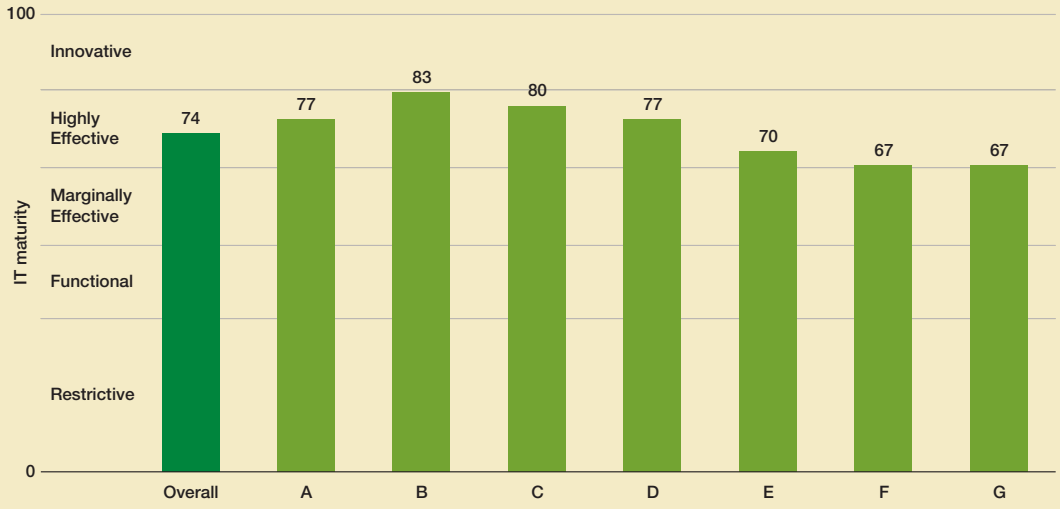
Only nine percent of associations manage technology and tech integration in ways that can be considered innovative—the highest level of IT maturity. The small share of associations operating at the innovative level signals that association models for developing and using technology to transform the constituent experience do exist, but many association leaders and members will be more familiar with models and platforms from out-of-sector competitors—potentially resulting in these models and platforms driving expectation and direction in the sector.

Professional associations tend to have slightly higher levels of IT maturity (an average score of 63) compared to trade (57) and combination trade/professional (57) associations. IT maturity also tracks with organizational budget size—the average maturity score is 54 for associations with less than $1 million in revenue, 59 for those with $1-5 million in revenue, and 66 for those with $5 million or more in revenue. On the other hand, IT maturity is unrelated to the association's geographic scope (local/state versus national versus international).

As part of this study, seven associations agreed to serve as case studies and engaged with the researchers in a deeper dive into their data, their staff perceptions, and member expectations. These participants' IT maturity scores were higher than the sector average, which may be related to their willingness to participate in the case studies—they already have a certain level of commitment to examining their technology management systems (Figure 3).

There are consistencies with the national data, however. Infrastructure repeated as the area of greatest success, while the other three components had lower, but similar, average scores. These organizations show a higher commitment to digital presence than the association sector average, though, which contributed to their higher overall scores. One organization of the seven rated as innovative in this area, while four others scored in the highly effective range. The other two were aligned with the sector average.

Figure 3: Overall IT maturity of case study participants



Source: Technology Success and Readiness Study

IT maturity in the component areas

Associations' technology systems touch on all aspects of staff work and member engagement. This study defined metrics within four key component areas that capture both internal- and external-facing technology and that speak to both the requirements of maintaining a modern, functioning workplace and the specific needs of associations and their member-based missions.

Infrastructure

To maintain the highest level of infrastructure management requires that association network and IT systems are both reliable and should extend (not restrict) the organization's capabilities. IT staff, or personnel responsible for IT, should be able to handle the constant influx of anti-virus signatures and patches, ensuring security and data integrity. The organization should have a "transformative" view toward investing in infrastructure, with an interest in making investments that will drive future business.

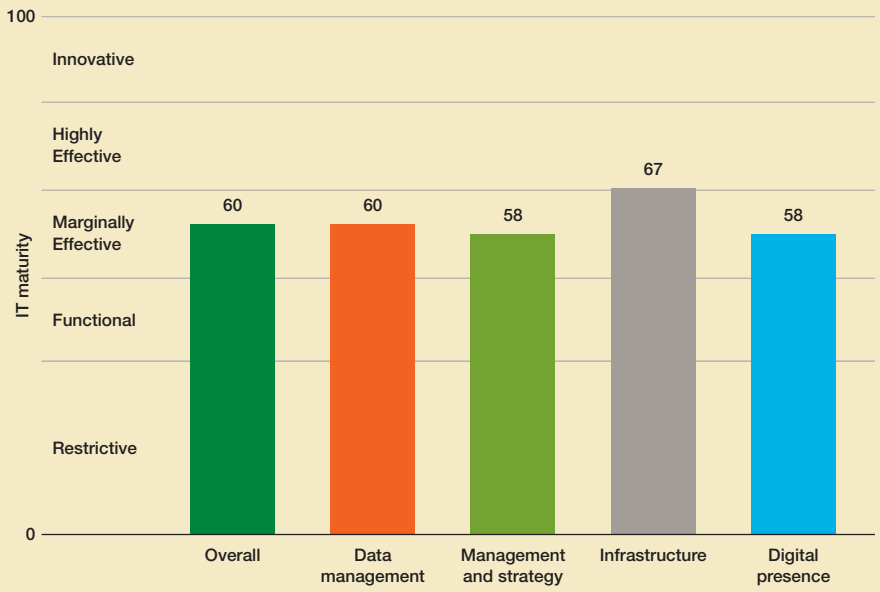
Of the four components that determine IT maturity, the greatest success is in the infrastructure area, where associations are highly effective (average score=67). Associations are largely successful in ensuring that staff can access the

necessary technology to perform their jobs remotely, managing server role configuration, and replacing infrastructure on a scheduled basis in accordance with effective practices. The least mature area is technology-investment strategy, which tends to be "reactive" in half of associations.

The highest scores in the case studies also were in relation to infrastructure, where the overall average score was 85. The highest score in any area was Organization A's 93 in infrastructure. Perhaps not coincidentally, Organization A also rated highest in staff satisfaction. Organization A and Organization B, which also scored highly in this area, are almost entirely reliant on the cloud, which frees IT staff and/or decision makers to focus on other technology issues and initiatives.

The case study participant rated lowest in infrastructure, Organization F, tends to be reactive in its approach to this area, only replacing or upgrading infrastructure as necessary. Staff of that organization do count moving to the cloud as a future goal.

Figure 4: Average IT maturity scores for the association sector



Source: Technology Success and Readiness Study

Data management

In the most successful organizations, data support business intelligence, help association decision makers understand the needs and preferences of members, and guide sound decision-making. Mature organizations collect, analyze, and use data to deliver value to their constituents. They have a commitment to ensuring a high level of data integrity, and they maintain their data in an integrated network.

Data management is an area in which associations are performing at a marginally effective level (average score=60). The most mature data area for associations is the ability to identify, use, and access data for reporting and business decision-making. The weakest areas across associations include the frequency of evaluating data for accuracy and data integration.

One of the case study associations, known in the results as Organization B, scored an 83 in data management (highly effective)—the highest score in this component area. Organization B scored highly for its maintenance plan for its enterprise systems and for its ability to produce a complete view of constituent engagement. B's leaders attribute their

success in data management to their investment in the cloud and SAS, which ensures that "all maintenance plans are up to date and current."

Three case study organizations that scored poorly in data management had distinct commonalities. Ideally, data are evaluated for accuracy at least quarterly, but these associations evaluate annually or semi-annually. They also report gaps in staff ability to access data necessary to create reports.

Management and strategy

The most mature associations ensure that organizational goals and mission guide the use and management of technology. In these organizations, business processes and IT policies and procedures support the productive and wise use of technology. IT has a place at the strategic planning table to ensure that the association takes full advantage of technology to deliver value to its constituency.

Associations rated as marginally effective in their management and strategy overall (average score=58). The area of greatest success is the inclusion of senior IT staff in technology-selection processes. The areas of greatest weakness in all components fell under management and strategy: a lack of forums for discussing IT and limitations in training IT staff.

The most mature case study participant in this area, Organization B, scored highly on its IT staff's understanding of broader organizational goals as well as the use of review processes for technology projects. When asked about its technology system decisions, an Organization B stakeholder said, "It is involved throughout. IT is always involved."

Associations struggling in this area mention issues with siloed information in their organizations, with staff not always including IT staff or technology decision makers in their project's development stages. For Organization F, another issue was that strategic plan communications do not filter down to all levels of IT staff, which prevent staff from executing on the expectations of that plan.

Digital presence

The digital presence in the highest-performing associations is dynamic and allows members to engage with the association and the member community without staff mediation. Members should be able to learn, organize, and "associate" on the web without having to contact the association directly. Digital resources should be intuitive, user friendly and mobile accessible, and content should be designed to provide optimal value in a digital environment. A mature organization has a disciplined search engine optimization (SEO) and social media strategy.

Most associations are also marginally effective in their digital presence (average score=58), which was the weakest area for the sector. The areas of greatest success include website usability, social media planning, self-service capabilities, and mobile accessibility of content, although associations are on average just marginally effective in these areas. The least mature area is in SEO.

As noted earlier, case study participants largely scored better than the sector average in digital presence. Organization B, again the highest scorer, received high scores for the availability of mobile content, its dynamic content presentation through taxonomic tags, and the organization's attention to its website's SEO performance. In particular, the organization's holistic approach to its website stands out. A stakeholder said:

"Our website strategy is designed to support the needs of the organization reflected through the website; we've got evaluation tools in place to determine how effective that is or is not and we will adjust that navigation experience based on the evaluation."

Organization F's low score in this area is connected to its lack of mobile content development, and limited content design for web. The organization is more likely to tack legacy content onto the web than develop web-specific content that takes full advantage of the digital environment. Organization E's digital presence score suffers due in part to a lack of cohesion around website development. Organization E admits:

"Different individual partners are responsible for individual portions of their website I guess. So some content is, and some content isn't very… suited for digitally based environment. So, it just, it varies."

Key pain points

While numerous metrics with the component areas contribute to IT maturity scores, certain metrics constitute "pain points"—they are important to the success of IT implementation, but the sector tends to have considerable room for improvement. The importance of these metrics was derived from how well they correlated to satisfaction with the IT function. If an area has a minimal relationship to satisfaction, it was deemed to be low in importance. If there was a strong pattern of increasing satisfaction related to increased performance, the area was deemed to be important.

Six items stood out for being relatively high in importance but at a low level of maturity across the association sector. These items identify the greatest areas of opportunity for the sector:

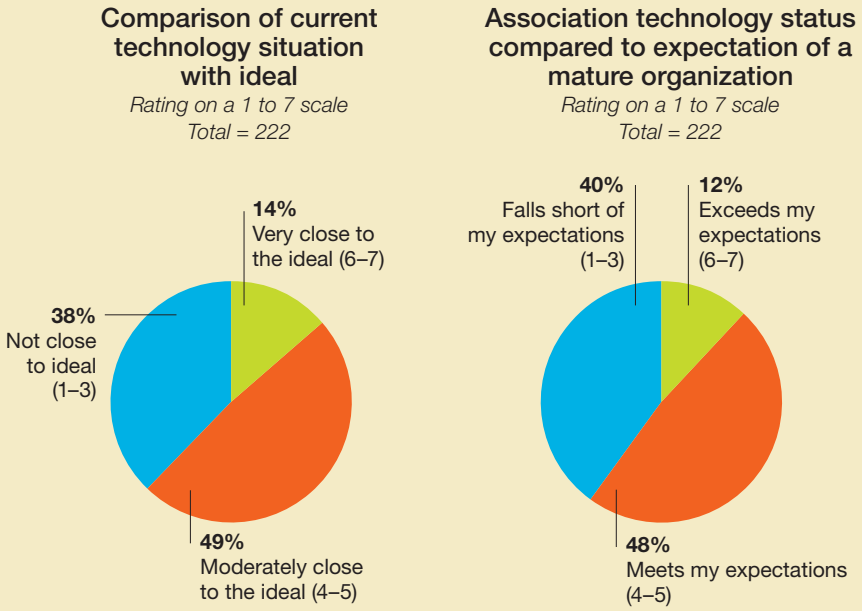
- *Ability to produce a complete view of the constituent engagement:* Associations need to be able to produce a complete view of the constituent engagement, such as renewals, transaction history, coverage of prospects as well as current constituents, and industry role. Further, they need to be able to use this information for decision-making purposes.
- *Data integrations:* Associations need to do more to automate their data integrations with third-party systems.
- *Process for understanding business objectives and requirements:* Associations need to work on instituting more evenly applied processes for decision-making about technology that ensures the outcome improves business processes and achievement of objectives.
- *Training of IT professionals:* Associations need to provide consistent training for IT professionals that not only allows them to conduct their jobs but also covers cutting-edge technology they need to know about for future planning.
- *Investment in infrastructure:* Associations need to move away from being "reactive," or merely investing as necessary to replace or upgrade outdated infrastructure, to being "transformative," which consists of making investments that drive the business in the future.
- *Digital content:* Digital content at associations needs to take full advantage of the digital environment, becoming interactive, allowing sharing, and embracing more video-based content.

A common theme is that associations need to gain a full understanding of the data they maintain and ensure integration across their systems. To maintain a competitive edge in the future, it will be necessary to focus on ensuring rigorous decision-making processes, training IT professionals to guide the association into the future, and taking a transformative approach to investments. Finally, the customer-facing area of IT must move beyond "flat" content and mirror how users interact today with digital content.

IT decision makers are optimistic

Most association IT decision makers believe that their current technology is at least moderately close to their vision of an ideal situation and in many ways meets or exceeds their expectations for a successful organization. The decision makers were asked to imagine their ideal technology situation for their associations, taking into account data, management and strategy, infrastructure, and digital presence—and then to rate their closeness to this ideal. Only 14 percent believe they are close to the ideal, but about half (49 percent) believe they are moderately close (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Current technology situation compared to ideals



Source: Technology Success and Readiness Study

IT decision makers responded similarly when comparing their technology systems to their expectations for a "mature" organization—an organization that optimizes technology for mission and operational success. Only a small group, 12 percent, believe they exceed such expectations, while nearly half believe they are meeting those expectations. Thus, while IT influencers in the association sector believe there is room for improvement to satisfy their own standards for success, they are confident that they are moving the needle in the right direction.

Techno-readiness

While IT maturity focuses internally on resources and practices, it is also important to look at internal and external user interest in and ability to use available and potential resources. *Techno-readiness* describes the degree to which key constituents are ready to adopt and embrace innovative technology.

All people possess a combination of positive and negative beliefs about technology that shape their usage. A person may have a strong belief in the advantages of technology for work purposes but may be slow to adopt technology personally. Alternately, a person may be techno-savvy but may also believe that technology is bad for society. How these combinations affect a person's overall approach to technology indicates a certain level of techno-readiness.

Associations that understand their members' levels of techno-readiness can proactively plan support and more confidently predict the likelihood of success for new and existing technology. For example, an association member low in techno-readiness may desire more personal interaction, while a member high in techno-readiness may require less support but demand advanced functionality.

The techno-readiness of association members

There are five segments of techno-readiness, based on different combinations of technology beliefs. In Figure 6, the segments are described in order from highest to lowest in techno-readiness, including their share of the U.S. population and the share of association members in the United States.

Figure 6: Techno-readiness segments as percentages of the U.S. population and association members

Segment	Techno-readiness rank	% U.S. population	% association members	Description
Explorers	1	25%	33%	Optimistic about technology, very innovative, few inhibitions, early adopter
Pioneers	2	22%	19%	Possess a love/hate relationship with technology. They are optimistic and innovative, but also uncomfortable using tech and a little worried about its potential
Skeptics	3	22%	32%	Do not care much about technology either positively or negatively; can take it or leave it
Hesitators	4	18%	11%	They are very optimistic about technology, but unlikely to be an early adopter and a little bit uncomfortable and scared
Avoiders	5	13%	6%	True laggard; they see no benefit to technology, do not like to tinker with it, uncomfortable using it, and scared it will do bad things

Source: Technology Success and Readiness Study

Association members are more "techno-ready" than the general U.S. adult population and less likely to resist technology innovation. More important, association members constitute a larger share of explorers and skeptics compared to the U.S. adult population and a smaller share of pioneers, hesitators, and avoiders. The fact that two thirds of members are explorers and skeptics has implications for how associations should introduce technology to their members.

Explorers are innovative and optimistic about technology and have few inhibitions about trying to make it work for them. They like to learn about technology and share their learning with others. They consider themselves early adopters and are willing and ready to try new things. To tap into the knowledge and skills of this segment, associations should consider regularly testing new technologies and seeking out innovative members as beta testers. Associations may also consider developing content and programming on technologies that would benefit member jobs and employers—this explorer group would be valuable advisers for those initiatives.

Skeptics are a completely different group in that they care little about technology. They are not inherently innovative and do not possess strong optimism about what technology can accomplish, but neither do they fear using new technology or have discomfort with making it work. This segment of members may need to be convinced of the benefits of new functionality the association provides. They will evaluate and adopt new offerings based on the merits of the technology, not because of an inherent desire to innovate. Thus, if a new technology is introduced—an interactive digital learning tool, video-based content, or a new meeting app—promotion to this group should include messages on how it will affect the professional lives of members or benefit their organizations.

There are always members who have issues with technology, who need help in making it work and reassurance that it will not end in negative consequences. The third most prevalent segment among association members—the pioneers—will need this reassurance. This group strongly believes in technology's merits, but they are also distrustful of its capabilities and not entirely comfortable trying new technology. To "cross the chasm," this segment will need help with ensuring they can use and trust new functionality. For example, associations might find greater traction for new technology if they provide in-person demonstrations at conferences or other member gatherings.

Perceptions versus reality: member techno-readiness

In the survey of association IT decision makers across the United States, participants were asked to estimate the techno-readiness of their membership using indicators of a tech-ready population. IT decision makers selected the first and second most common techno-readiness segments within their association's membership. The results did not exactly align with members' own perceptions.

Sixty-nine percent of association IT decision makers identified pioneers as the most common or second most common type of member. They selected hesitators as the next most common segment (51 percent), identifying a large portion of their members as optimistic but reluctant to adopt technology. In identifying their members as pioneers and hesitators, the IT decision makers suggest their associations have to—or ought to—do a lot to help members overcome discomfort and insecurity with technology by offering a high level of tech support and through other support mechanisms.

Associations almost evenly group their members as explorers or skeptics (33 percent and 34 percent, respectively). Few associations describe their members as typically being resistors (10 percent), who see no benefit to technology, are not comfortable using it, and are afraid it will do bad things.

Clearly, there is a major gap between how members identify themselves and how associations understand their members' inclinations toward technology. IT decision makers underestimate their members' receptiveness to technology and therefore may misunderstand the opportunities and challenges before them. This misunderstanding could be grounded in interactions with the members who are most likely to engage with association staff. Members of 10 years or more, who are typically the most engaged members, are more likely to be hesitators and avoiders. Members of two years or less are more likely to be explorers, but they are less likely to be vocal members of the association.

Association staff and members who participated in the case study portion of this research produced a similar gap (Figure 7). Most members identified as explorers and skeptics, while most IT staff participants identified their association members as pioneers and hesitators.

Figure 7: Case study perceptions of member techno-readiness

	Member techno-readiness segments	IT staff perception of member techno-readiness segments	
		Chose as top	Chose as top 2
Explorer	36%	9%	9%
Skeptic	30%	14%	30%
Pioneer	16%	29%	59%
Hesitator	13%	32%	64%
Avoider	7%	4%	11%

Source: Technology Success and Readiness Study

In reality, many association members, who are often college-educated professionals, are ready and willing to adopt the latest technology. Many association members are merely skeptical, meaning that they just need to be convinced of technology benefits. The implication of this perception gap is that decision makers might be more hesitant to introduce cutting-edge technology believing there is a dearth of early adopters. They may not spend enough time making a case to members as to why technology will benefit them. That buy-in likely could be accomplished easily, by offering opportunities to sample videos and interactive learning tools or through a marketing campaign that showcases the simplicity of completing transactions online using mobile devices.

Association technology and member satisfaction

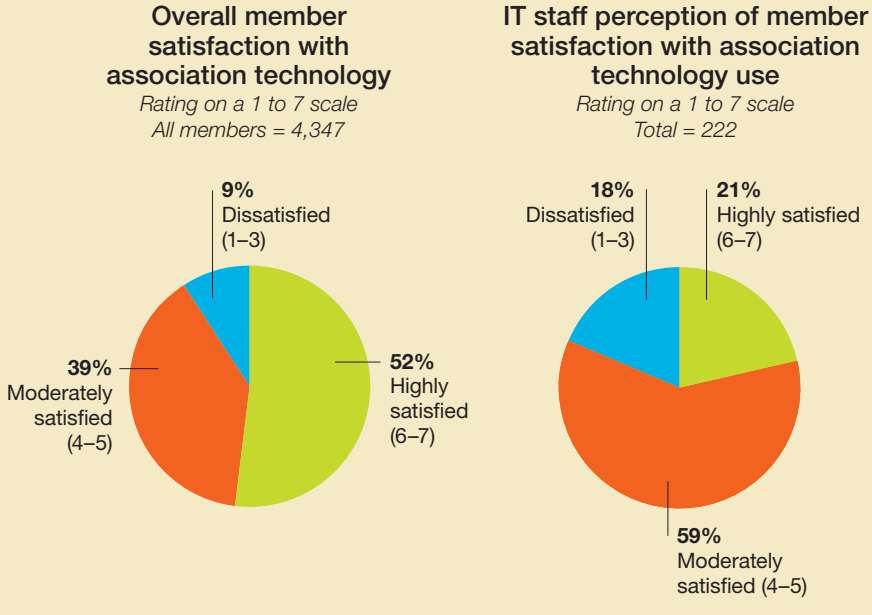
Member satisfaction is perhaps the most important metric for associations. This research found that member satisfaction with association technology is directly related to overall member satisfaction. The good news for associations is that they typically underestimate how satisfied members are with their association's technology.

Perception versus reality: member satisfaction with association technology

To provide an overall indication of the degree of success of IT at associations, the study queried IT decision makers on their perceptions of constituent satisfaction and the success of IT in general. It found that the professionals responsible for IT hold a dim view of how well they are meeting needs—only about a fifth (21 percent) feel members are highly satisfied, and almost the same proportion (18 percent) feel members are dissatisfied with technology.

As shown in Figure 8, these decision makers underestimate the satisfaction levels of their members. Fifty-two percent of members nationwide are highly satisfied, more than double the level perceived by IT decision makers. Furthermore, only nine percent—compared to a perceived 18 percent—are dissatisfied with association technology.

Figure 8: Member satisfaction with association technology compared to IT staff perception of same



Source: Technology Success and Readiness Study

Member satisfaction with technology is not just an interesting metric. The level of satisfaction of members with how their association uses technology to meet their needs is directly related to member loyalty. In addition to the technology satisfaction metrics, member participants were questioned related to loyalty metrics, including overall satisfaction with membership, intention to renew, and willingness to recommend their association to their peers. The importance of technology is apparent when examining the differences in loyalty metrics between members who are "highly satisfied" with their association technology (rated technology a 6 or 7) and those who are not.

- *Overall satisfaction:* Among members highly satisfied with technology, 88 percent are highly satisfied with their membership overall. Those who are not highly satisfied with technology have an overall satisfaction level of 47 percent.
- *Renewal likelihood:* Among those highly satisfied with technology, 95 percent indicate a high likelihood of renewing membership. Among members less satisfied with technology, 78 percent are highly likely to renew.
- *Net Promoter® Score (NPS):* The NPS is a loyalty metric developed by developed by Fred Reichheld, Bain & Company, and Satmetrix Systems. It calculates the difference between the percentage of "promoters" and percentage of "detractors," based on a question about willingness to recommend. Willingness to recommend was measured on a seven-point scale. Promoters were defined as the percentage indicating a 6 or 7, and detractors were defined as those rating a 1, 2 or 3. The NPS among members highly satisfied with technology is 89, compared to only 52 among those not highly satisfied.

Trends in member satisfaction with association technology

Perhaps even more key than offering new and innovative technologies is ensuring that offered technology works as expected. In this area, associations are succeeding—members largely find their association's technology reliable. More than half (56 percent) feel that the technology "works well, with no problems," and another 40 percent believe that it works sufficiently. Just five percent of members believe that their association's technology works poorly.

Association members indicated the greatest overall satisfaction with data security (78 percent reported themselves satisfied), indicating their confidence in their association's ability to keep their information secure. Members also reported high levels of satisfaction in their association's use of technology to meet relationship management needs in the commerce/relationships areas (75 percent satisfied). This area includes effective digital communication, the ease of online transactions, and the ability to update records online.

Collaboration and networking support received the lowest score from association members (68 percent satisfied). The ability to communicate with peers online and technology that enables members to support important causes were key metrics in that area. Seventy percent of members reported they were satisfied with information content, but members rated their satisfaction with their ability to tailor digital content to their needs the lowest of any metric. However, the most urgent pain point for members is their ability to find what they need on their association's website, which is closely correlated with member satisfaction and only earned the satisfaction of 70 percent of responding members.

Members have high expectations for their ability to access self-service applications. Sixty-six percent believe the ability to register for conferences and events online is critical to their satisfaction, and 62 percent believe that the ability to access and update their membership information and to renew membership online is critical. Sixty percent declare access to digital documents through the association website to be critical. Women and Millennials are more likely to share strong feelings about the importance of these kinds of access.

When breaking down member responses by age, Millennials are most likely to feel that association technology works

poorly, and Boomers are most likely to feel that it works well. Thus, while associations can feel assured they are meeting most member needs and expectations now, as their member demographics shift, that member satisfaction rating may also shift without some adjustments in how they employ technology.

While members are mostly satisfied with association technology and find it reliable, a majority of members think their associations have room to improve their technology capabilities. Fifty-one percent feel that their association needs to "slightly expand their technology capabilities," and 11 percent feel that their association needs to "substantially expand" their technology capabilities for members. Millennials are most likely to feel that associations need to expand their technology capabilities.

No matter how optimistic IT decision makers may feel about the direction of their association's technology systems, it is clear that they will need to seek out data on member satisfaction trends, particularly in relation to user needs and expectations, when developing their plans. Millennials have markedly different expectations than Boomers and, as they supplant older generations as the core of association membership, they will drive association standards for technology in new directions.

The future of association technology

The association sector has an exciting future. Association leaders are putting into place technologies that allow community members across the country and around the world to exchange information and share experiences. The next generations will expand these connections and drive the sector in new directions for operations and engagement. But, to ensure this future, association leaders must rise to the challenges ahead and support their IT functions.

Associations are starting from a solid base, with many organizations in the sector falling into the highly effective or marginally effective stages of IT maturity. Association members are happy with the technology they use to engage with their associations, and they typically find it reliable. Furthermore, members are savvy enough to handle new technology that will enhance their member experience, especially if the association rolls out the technology effectively.

The challenge for the sector is to become truly innovative, allowing technology to drive associations to new levels of success and to become strong competitors in a bold new world of disruptive competition. They will need to offer a strong front that supports innovation to create services and functionality that competes with—or figures out how to cohabitate with—the best private sector e-commerce, social media, and educational players.

The development of dynamic, innovative content and expanding options for engagement will be important for associations. The demand for digital content, online learning, and collaboration tools will only increase, and now that also means support for mobile access. What will it mean in 10 years?

Becoming innovative requires paying more attention to how data are leveraged, improving decision-making processes, and investing in the technologies that will move associations forward. As more resources are strategically outsourced and the cloud frees IT staff from the burdens of watching infrastructure, the association IT professionals and decision makers of the future will need to be trained and empowered to guide their associations on the path to becoming innovative. IT professionals and decision makers should not underestimate the willingness of members and staff to follow their lead as they move their organizations into the future.

The future of the Technology Success and Readiness Study

A primary objective of the *Technology Success and Readiness Study* was to develop a rigorous tool for measuring and assessing IT maturity in associations. To that end, the survey developed during the course of this study will be offered to the association community as the IT Maturity Assessment Tool. The instrument includes a series of 31 diagnostic indicators organized around the four maturity component areas: association data, management and strategy, infrastructure, and digital presence. The ASAE Foundation anticipates releasing the tool to the association community in August 2017.

asaefoundation.org

asae foundation®

Advancing Association and Nonprofit Leadership

ISBN 978-0-88034-553-8