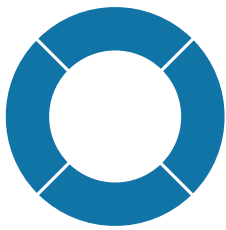




Technology Affinity Group  
PROMOTING TECHNOLOGY IN PHILANTHROPY



# Investing in Impact Infrastructure

**A CALL TO ACTION FOR PHILANTHROPY  
EXECUTIVE TEAMS**



# Executive Summary

This executive summary presents the high-level findings of TAG’s landscape analysis whitepaper, “Impact Infrastructure: Pragmatic Opportunities to Equip Your Organization for Impact,” which you can download for free at <https://tagtech.org/impactinfrastructure>.

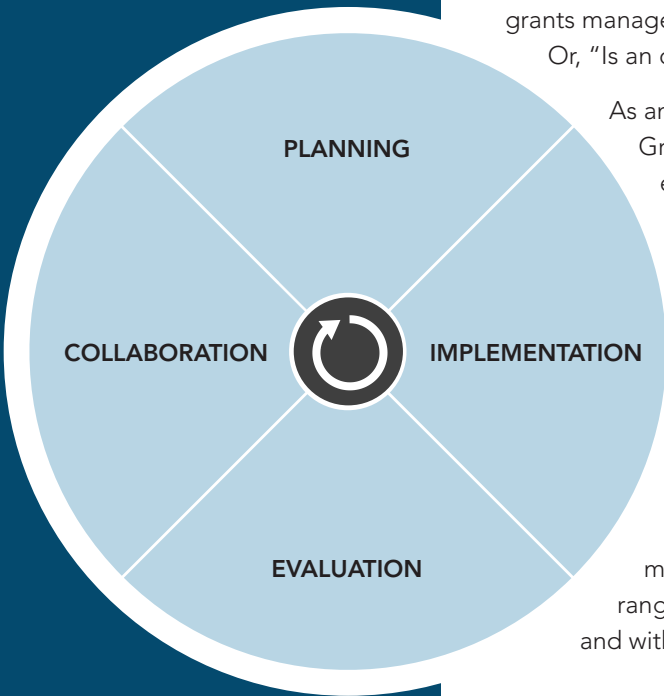


Figure 1: The Impact Lifecycle

## A CRUCIAL PERIOD FOR PHILANTHROPY

It’s undeniable that, until now, many IT departments in the philanthropic sector have been focused on the operational elements of impact and evaluation, such as streamlining the grants application process, moving to a fully paperless system, or delivering dashboards of programmatic allocation.

A common question you might hear asked is, “Which grants management system does the best job at evaluating impact?” But a better question might be, “Are grants management systems themselves sufficient infrastructure to realize impact?” Or, “Is an operational approach the best way to improve impact sector-wide?”

As an association for IT leaders in philanthropy, the Technology Affinity Group (TAG) has historically focused its research on the narrow band of effort related to traditional IT—in short, the operational effort exerted to procure, implement, and support tools and systems. This has meant that the majority of TAG’s effort has been focused on the **Program Implementation and Evaluation** phases of the impact lifecycle, neglecting other phases, such as **Sector Collaboration and Planning**.

But an increasing dependence on technology throughout the entirety of an organization’s business processes—both internally and externally—means that **the current state of philanthropy requires a more integrated, holistic approach**. That approach must invite all executives to the strategy table and consider the full range of effort, across all departments and with all partners, to realize impact.

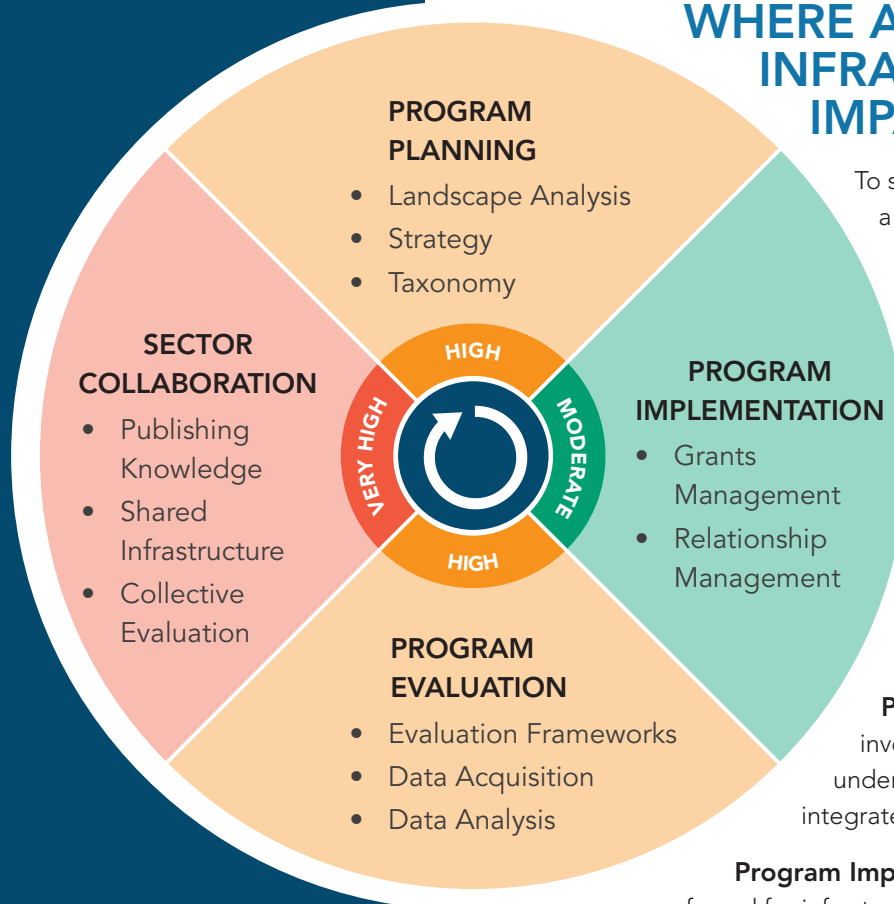
## CALL TO ACTION

Organizations must begin today in order to build the infrastructure needed for impact. TAG’s research findings offers the following principles to deepen your organization’s commitment to pragmatic investment in the infrastructure to realize outcomes:

- Begin where you are today.
- Begin in dialogue with all members of your executive team.
- Begin in partnership with grantees and nonprofits.
- Recognize that an investment in shared infrastructure is inevitable.

In the following pages, you’ll find analysis and recommendations to get started as well as discussion questions for executives.

## WHERE ARE THE GAPS IN INFRASTRUCTURE FOR IMPACT?



To support these assertions, TAG has conducted a landscape analysis of existing support for the impact lifecycle (in terms of **tools, resources, and initiatives**). We began in 2018 with a series of interviews throughout the U.S. with thought leaders in technology, programs, and evaluation, culminating in these assessments and recommendations. (Download the full whitepaper for free at <http://tagtech.org/impactinfrastructure>.) Below, we provide an overview assessment of the current state. You'll find concrete, actionable recommendations on the next page.

**Program Planning** sees a **HIGH** need for investment of time, tools, and resources due to under-utilized resources and the potential to better integrate this work with evaluation.

**Program Implementation** sees only a **MODERATE** level of need for infrastructure due to existing support, including technology systems from commercial vendors and organizations.

**Program Evaluation** also calls for a **HIGH** level of investment due to fast-moving advances and the lack of shared platforms built for, and supported by, philanthropy.

**Sector Collaboration** is an area of **VERY HIGH** opportunity due to a growing need and desire for shared data, resources, and knowledge, but very little sustained investment.

*"An economy needs roads, bridges, and train stations to thrive. A community needs schools, parks, and houses of worship to ensure the flowering of human potential. And civil society needs infrastructure to ensure that nonprofits and foundations can act with integrity and impact."*

— From "Investing in Infrastructure," a letter from 22 Philanthropy-Serving Organizations to the sector (May 13, 2016).

Figure 2: The colors illustrate the intensity of need for infrastructure and investment (Green = Low, Red = Very High).

# BEGIN TODAY: FOUR KEY OPPORTUNITIES

TAG has identified four opportunity areas where the sector is advised to address gaps or inefficiencies in impact infrastructure.

1. Build data skills and culture.
2. Make full use of existing tools and data.
3. Facilitate open knowledge exchange.
4. Invest in shared infrastructure.

**Getting started is easier than you might think.** Begin where you find your organization today by reviewing the pragmatic suggestions below with your teams. Recognize that there is significant opportunity for forward-thinking organizations to commit to sector-wide advancement. For more comprehensive recommendations, see the full whitepaper at <http://tagtech.org/impactinfrastructure>.

Getting Started	Maturing Your Practice	Advancing the Sector
<b>BUILD DATA SKILLS &amp; CULTURE</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make data literacy a priority.</li> <li>• Prioritize data coding.</li> <li>• Begin implementing some form of taxonomy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commit to collecting outcomes data with your grantees.</li> <li>• Make data collection more purposeful through community engagement and outcomes sharing.</li> <li>• Evolve and future-proof data coding.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordinate with other funders to develop shared programs for data literacy.</li> <li>• Influence software and service providers to prioritize taxonomy coding, user testing, and auto-coding tools.</li> </ul>
<b>FULLY LEVERAGE EXISTING TOOLS AND DATA</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Become familiar with shared indicators such as the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and the Impact Genome Project.</li> <li>• Enable reuse from existing applications, reports, and GuideStar's Platinum Profiles.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make full use of existing planning tools, such as those by Community Commons.</li> <li>• Adopt standardized frameworks if they exist for your program work.</li> <li>• Consider using systems such as the Common Grant Application.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with funders in similar program areas to define and utilize common framework elements for taxonomies, logic models, indicators, data collection, and reporting frameworks.</li> </ul>
<b>FACILITATE OPEN KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure program framework and elements are publicly available on your website.</li> <li>• Publish data and/or synthesized findings to shared repositories such as <a href="http://IssueLab.org">IssueLab.org</a>, <a href="http://datahub.io">datahub.io</a>, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share your strategy and outcome frameworks (e.g., theories of change, logic models, etc.) on <a href="http://Issuelab.org">Issuelab.org</a> or similar resource libraries.</li> <li>• Request source datasets as part for grantee or evaluator reports (addressing any privacy issue, of course).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fund or utilize existing shared platforms for assessing overall grantee effectiveness such as Mission Measurement's Impact Scorecards.</li> <li>• Collaborate with other funders to design and fund the creation of shared platforms for data collection, analysis, and collaboration.</li> </ul>
<b>INVEST IN SHARED INFRASTRUCTURE</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resist the temptation to build custom tools. Instead, adjust your business processes.</li> <li>• Reach out to TAG to learn more about the long-term costs of a custom approach.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use shared infrastructure platforms such as GuideStar's G4G/Premier API, Foundation Center's Maps tool, NGO Source, and Data Arts.</li> <li>• Participate in the Foundation Center's Get On the Map campaign.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partner and prioritize funding for impact infrastructure projects that will benefit the entire sector. For a full list of suggestions, see the whitepaper at <a href="https://tagtech.org/impactinfrastructure">https://tagtech.org/impactinfrastructure</a>.</li> </ul>

## DISCUSSION STARTERS FOR EXECUTIVES

Now is the time for new conversations with your executive team. How can you open and sustain meaningful dialogue within your organization on the findings presented here?

Within an organization, exploring new ways of working together to realize outcomes:

- Have we articulated what “realizing impact” means for all departments within our organization? Do we all agree on what we mean by “impact”?
- Is evidence-based decision-making a priority for our organization? What cultural shifts and skills gaps would need to occur for us to become a data-driven organization?
- What data do we currently have, and is it useful? What kinds of data could be most helpful and not too complicated or expensive to extract and refresh over time?
- Where does information live, and who has access to it?
- How can **all** staff own and support this work rather than a single department focused on evaluation, data, or IT?
- What support, including financial and capacity building, are we providing in order to develop data literacy skills for nonprofit partners?
- What would each organization gain by working together on shared initiatives or platforms for knowledge, data, and collaboration?
- What might challenge our particular organization in committing to shared efforts benefiting the sector as a whole?
- How might we incentivize shared investment in sector-wide infrastructure?
- How might we build cross-functional teams to solve the challenges of our sector rather than working in isolation as IT, Programs, or Communications?
- How might we involve nonprofit partners and grantees?
- What would a commitment to social sector infrastructure look like for my organization?

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The analysis presented here and at <http://tagtech.org/impactinfrastructure> is intended as a culmination of The Simplify Initiative.



# Technology Affinity Group

Promoting technology in philanthropy

1 North State Street, Suite 1500, Chicago, IL 60602 | [tagtech.org](http://tagtech.org)

