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Knowledge Infrastructure for the Nonprofit Sector: Building a New Field of Practice

THE NONPROFIT SECTOR NEEDS TO COLLECTIVELY ADDRESS ITS COMMON NEEDS FOR SHARING AND ACCESSING KNOWLEDGE

Many Nonprofits and Foundations Have Capacity Problems With How They Share and Use Knowledge:

→ **A lack of standards** and common practices and approaches to share evaluations, results, and other information between organizations and across sectors

→ **An incomplete picture** of the *who, what,* and *why* of past approaches—who tried it, what happened, why did it fail or succeed?

→ **A failure to manage** information, people, and financial resources responsibly

→ **Confusion and redundancy** caused by information silos and limited capacity to self-correct

Organizations Need Collectively Governed Knowledge Infrastructure That Enables Information Sharing:

→ **A collaborative effort**—a single, jointly-undertaken, flexible solution versus a patchwork of many individually-built ones

→ **An open and efficient process** to learn about nonprofits, funders, projects, and outcomes

→ **A connected body** of networks, standards, and governance systems informed by users

→ **A flexible and adaptive system** that meets needs and opportunities as they arise

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY KNOWLEDGE INFRASTRUCTURE?

The term *infrastructure* is often reserved for physical systems—the roads, electric grids, and telecommunications networks that support societies and enable economies. **For organizations, knowledge infrastructure** is the shared assets, systems, and practices that enable and support the creation of and access to knowledge in order to solve complex problems. Components include:

→ Standards and Technologies
→ Guidance and Policies
→ Supporting Data Assets

→ Organizations That Govern
→ Capacities To Extract Value and Knowledge
→ Engaged Communities

The concept of shared knowledge infrastructure is far from new: The WHO Family of International Classifications provides a common language for health information for governments, researchers, laboratories, and other institutions across the world; and the National Transportation Knowledge Network supports a collective effort to organize, share, and preserve information, data, and knowledge for stakeholders in the transportation community.

THE FIELD OF SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATION: A MODEL TO FOLLOW

While these initiatives clearly demonstrate the promise of information-sharing across disciplines and domains, **we're inspired by what we see in the field of scholarly communication.** Invest in Open Infrastructure (IOI) is an example of how a group of organizations are collectively addressing the issue of shared knowledge infrastructure. This sustained, collective effort by a global community of practitioners has enabled an organically evolving ecosystem of approaches, tools, and systems that encourage data sharing and reuse. Dozens of innovative components are already part of the research information infrastructure, and we believe **these innovations could be adapted by the nonprofit sector as it develops its own collective approach** to using and sharing knowledge:

➔ **A global community of 'open access' practitioners** that develops norms, standards, and practices toward realizing an unrestricted and free online system for scholarly research

➔ **A sustained, collective effort** by many types of organizations committed to sharing information and working together

➔ **A system that enables data sharing and reuse**, tracks research using unique digital identifiers, standardizes how research methods are documented, and optimizes the peer review process

➔ **A shared ownership of standards and practices** that enables a diverse and organically evolving ecosystem of approaches, tools, and systems

WE'RE BUILDING A NEW FIELD OF PRACTICE

The nonprofit sector needs to collectively address its common needs for sharing and accessing knowledge. We're currently exploring avenues with others who see the potential benefits of sector-wide information-sharing and want to put that vision to use in creating a roadmap for next steps. If you also think we should take a collective approach to learning as a sector, then **email us at infrastructure@ajah.ca to learn how you can join this field-building work.**

View the full concept note, *Knowledge Sharing Infrastructure for the Nonprofit Sector*, at ajah.ca/infrastructure.