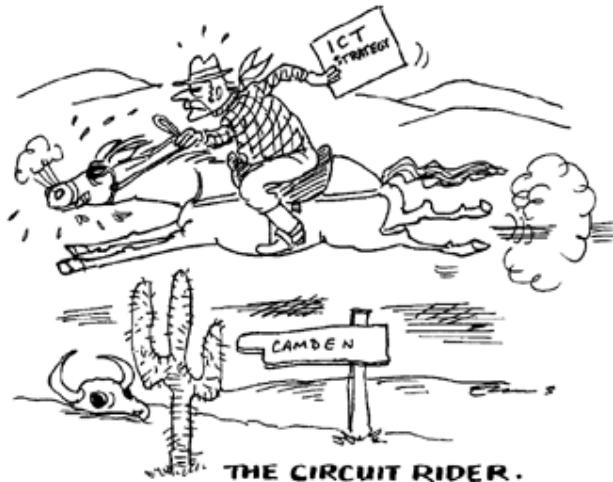


## Circuit Riders: A technology support solution for the voluntary sector

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Every successful voluntary sector organisation today uses technology. Computers help agencies to carry out existing admin tasks more effectively, but are also allowing some agencies to do things which were not possible before. The Internet is accelerating the pace of change – organisations which don't adapt to it will not be effective in delivering services or promoting social change. A few agencies show that this potential can be met, but research consistently shows that most organisations find it difficult both to acquire technology and to use it effectively.



Two (then) recent reports (*e-Enabling the Voluntary Sector*, written by Hall Aitken for the Office of the e-Envoy. *Leading the Way to ICT Success* by Paul Ticher et al. from The Baring Foundation and the Worshipful Company of Information Technologists.) both demonstrate the problems. No-one knows what's best to buy; equipment doesn't work as it should; money is spent on developments that don't live up to expectation; and when things go wrong there is no-one to turn to for help.

Many agencies cannot afford professional technology support, but those that can often find it unsatisfactory, since vendors are unfamiliar with the unique needs that voluntary agencies have. Organisations also need support beyond simply fixing problems in an emergency – they need technical specialists who will take the extra time to train staff, suggest changes or improvements to current capabilities, and work with an agency's management in a long-term, strategic manner.

In response to these needs a movement has developed in the United States known as "Circuit Riding", from a 19th Century term for mobile medical workers, librarians and others who used to serve the western frontiers. It is a unique grass roots development that offers some compelling lessons and models for similar initiatives in the UK.

The goals of circuit riding are to help voluntary sector organizations that are not using technology successfully to learn about and make effective use of technology, and to help technologically aware agencies make the best use of their resources. The methods employed to accomplish these goals include providing hands-on technical assistance, staff training, and consultation with agency management on ICT strategies that support the organisation's mission.

A "rider" can be an individual working independently or as part of a loose-knit team of peers, or can be one of several individuals employed by a voluntary organisation for the purposes of offering technology assistance to other agencies. Typically it implies a person with a broad set of technology skills, an independent and creative spirit, and a desire to share their technology knowledge with others.

Riders may be motivated by a particular cause and work in an “activist” capacity with agencies in a specific sector, or may have more general, charitable motivations to simply help mission-driven agencies.

## **History**

Although many people have been “circuit riding” for a number of years, the concept and term as currently used originated with an “experiment” conducted by the W. Alton Jones Foundation in collaboration with TCN (Technology Solutions for Nonprofits) in the mid-1990s. The focus of this early initiative was the technology support provided by circuit riders to a diverse group of voluntary agencies with no particular geographical or service sector orientation. Linkages began to develop between this effort and techies involved in similar work elsewhere, a “list-serv” mailing list was set up to maintain these linkages and share advice, and small, informal gatherings began to take place. As word spread, the movement quickly attracted hundreds of active practitioners needing to network with others sharing similar commitments to the deployment of technology in the voluntary sector. Recognizing its potential to provide necessary, low-cost technology assistance, a number of leading corporate and private philanthropies entered the movement, either funding specific circuit rider efforts, lending advice, or supporting the annual gatherings.

On a daily basis the heart of the movement began to revolve around the “list-serv” – an automated mailing list functioning as a discussion forum – where over 500 of the movement’s organisations and practitioners posed questions or responded to the questions and needs of others, shared and debated best practices and organized local initiatives. Larger cities, such as New York, developed informal groupings of riders who collaborated frequently on specific projects or met for their own professional development.

In the mid-1990’s, annual Circuit Riders’ “Roundups” were organized, offering an opportunity to the riders to meet, for leaders to emerge, and for the individuals and organizations involved to formalise and solidify their ties. Now, the roundups attract several hundred participants annually – including a handful from the UK – and the conference’s panel sessions and workshops have become increasingly varied and specialised. It is important to note that the Foundation and corporate funders, in keeping with their integral role in the movement, are regular participants in the annual roundups.

## **Current Status**

As the Circuit Rider movement has matured, several different models of operating have emerged. Some Circuit Riders are wholly supported by a foundation to serve a specific part of the voluntary sector, such as those agencies working on environmental issues. Others Riders work with a specific group of agencies that share the costs associated with the Rider. A membership model has emerged, in which agencies subscribe to the organisation providing the technology support, in exchange for periodic visits to fix hardware or software problems, train staff, speak with the management, etc.

The evolution of the movement also led to a small number of well-developed standardized tools to guide agencies in their use of technology. Examples include ebase, a free contact and fundraising management database for non-profit agencies ([www.ebase.org](http://www.ebase.org)); TechSoup, providing a wide range of technology advice and resources for agencies ([www.techsoup.org](http://www.techsoup.org)) and Tech Surveyor, an online tool for tracking the technology assets of an agency and assessing staff technology skills ([www.npower.org](http://www.npower.org)).

In 2001 the next logical step in the movement was taken, with the incorporation of a nationally based membership organization to lead the movement: the *National Technology Enterprise Network* (NTEN). With a single paid staff person, and a Board of Directors made up of key individuals in the movement, as well as foundation and corporate representatives, NTEN has assumed responsibility for organizing the annual conferences, compiling a registry of circuit riders, and performing other tasks associated with solidifying the movement.

Circuit Rider movements are being developed in other countries – including Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia – based on the successful US model, with appropriate local variations. In most instances, the core characteristics of these international initiatives are quite similar. The Riders possess a wide range of technology, assessment and communication skills; they work closely with the staff of the agencies to ensure that the proper technology tools and methods are applied, and they share their advice freely and widely with their peers. We are very glad to be working with Lasa and the British voluntary sector to help develop such a movement in the UK.

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