Technology and opera hit the high notes in Philadelphia

Culture—that cornerstone of civilization—is alive and well in Philadelphia, thanks in no small part to two nonprofit organizations and the wonders of modern IT.

Tech Impact, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit whose mission is to "empower communities and nonprofits to use technology to better serve our world," teamed up with Opera Philadelphia in 2016 when the latter was looking to innovate beyond the limitations of the infrastructure it shared with some other arts organizations. The opera company was ripe and ready for a digital transformation.

"It was a great opportunity for us geeky technology people to take Opera Philadelphia from a shared network infrastructure to the cloud," explains Linda Widdop, director of client solutions and education at Tech Impact. "We showed them how they can leverage cloud technology, whether it be Office 365 or Azure or other cloud technologies, to get out of a place-based-server–type situation so they can be more mobile and agile in everything they do.

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Prior to September 2017, Opera Philadelphia had been putting on its operas *stagione* (Italian for "season") model, where each production had a brief but intensive run of performances, with several weeks or months separating each show. At that point, Opera Philadelphia had about 40 full-time employees, all working out of a suite of offices in the same building. But its visionary leaders had bigger plans.

Finding flexibility in the cloud

Almost by definition, nonprofits are mandated to do more with less than better-funded, for-profit companies. Ambitions may be grand, but budgets are slim. And Opera Philadelphia did indeed have grand ambitions.

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"We decided to move [from *stagione*] to a festival model where we'd be doing five or six operas, all at one time, throughout the city," says Jeremiah Marks, chief financial officer of Opera Philadelphia. "To do that, we need an infrastructure that lets our people be connected and communicate efficiently through any device at anytime from anywhere in the city. So we brought in Tech Impact."

The two organizations held an initial meeting, outlined the challenges that needed to be addressed, and formulated some high-level recommendations. According to Widdop, Office 365 is often "the first thing that just makes sense for 95% of the nonprofits we talk to." She notes that, because Tech Impact brings the experience from its past nonprofit projects to each new endeavor, it becomes easier and faster to home in on the right solution for each client.

"Tech Impact helped us shift to an infrastructure that lets us be much more flexible and mobile," Marks adds, "and that's where Office 365 came into it. We had to make the change because our business model was changing, and it's been a fantastic ride ever since."

IT at the pace of change
In the world of opera, each production is a business unto itself, complete with a staff of full-time temporary employees who need to communicate and collaborate constantly—with each other as well as with the central opera company staff. One production at a time is demanding enough, but five at a time?

Frank Luzi, vice president of communications for Opera Philadelphia, elaborates: "Directors and stage managers in five different locations report in to say, 'Here's what we did in rehearsal today,' or 'We installed this set and it looks like *this* when we thought it might look like *that*.' Our team needs to know what's going on in all of these places. We've got daily rehearsals going on with new works of art; things are changing fast.

"To be able to share these visuals, to be able to share notes in a centralized location where all these different people can access them easily—it was an absolute necessity. At this scale, getting everyone on the same page is a daunting job."

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Jeremiah Marks, chief financial officer, Opera Philadelphia

Marks moved the Opera Philadelphia organization to an E5 license for Office 365; now the company communicates and collaborates in real time leveraging the entire Office 365 suite, leaning heavily on Outlook, Excel, PowerPoint, SharePoint, OneDrive, Skype for Business, and Power BI.

Conserving precious nonprofit dollars

With the shift to a festival model, the Opera Philadelphia staff mushroomed from 40 employees to about 400. Costs, always a critical consideration in the nonprofit world, could have spun out of control.

"If we didn't have this new technology, we'd have had to spend a ton more money on temporary employees," Marks says. "On the old technology, we wouldn't have been able to bring them in and ramp them up as quickly and efficiently as we did. I'd have had to bring these temporary people in six months earlier to get them ramped up; the onboarding would have been slow, and my budget through the roof."

Marks says the new infrastructure has saved the company at least $100,000 per year in direct expenses, "and that's significant. And then, indirectly, it would be 5x or 6x that. And I can't even quantify the efficiency I got out of everybody by moving over to Office 365."

When the Opera Philadelphia executive staff travels—whether across the country or around the world—they can still communicate, collaborate, and access information through their computers. "That might be normal for the large organizations," Luzi points out, "but in the nonprofit world, it's not."

Spreading the gospel of opera

The Tech Impact–Opera Philadelphia relationship could be termed a win-win situation because, ultimately, it helps each organization fulfill its mission. But the real winners in this scenario may be the people of Philadelphia.

"We like to think we're helping bring art and culture to the city," Marks says, "and exposing a whole new population to opera just by making it more available."

But part of the thinking behind moving to a festival model was, by offering many facets of opera in a concentrated time period, to draw more people who love opera to Philadelphia. And it's working: The city is becoming a destination for the significant community of people who travel for opera—which has the happy ripple effect of benefiting local hotels, restaurants, and other businesses.

Some say culture is the collective manifestation of human intellectual achievement; others call it the very essence of civilization. But a growing number of people in the Philadelphia area and beyond can crystallize culture in one word: opera.

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