

Arlington County Civic Federation Study on Supporting Residential Civic Associations Build Digital Capacity

Executive Summary

The Arlington County Civic Federation and Wimbush Consulting studied improving civic associations' digital capabilities in Arlington, Virginia. Digital capacity refers to using technology and digital tools to communicate, collaborate, and engage with communities. Building digital capacity is critical for civic associations to effectively engage and mobilize their members. The study recommends how the Arlington County Civic Federation can support its members in building their digital capabilities, including providing resources, training, and partnerships. The study also suggests that civic associations develop a communications plan, assess their current resources, identify and prioritize digital tools, seek sustainable technical support, and build capacity through training and education.

Overview

The Arlington County Civic Federation (the "Federation") and Wimbush Consulting are pleased to present the findings of a study focused on how the Federation can support civic associations in Arlington to build their digital capacity for civic engagement. The study aimed to identify effective strategies and best practices for improving the digital capabilities of civic associations in the area and to develop recommendations for how the Arlington County Civic Federation and other organizations can support these efforts. The study involved reviewing existing research and best practices and interviews with leaders of civic associations in Arlington, Virginia. The study endeavors to provide valuable insights into how organizations can leverage digital technologies and platforms to increase civic engagement and promote community development in the 21st century.

This study is partially the product of stakeholder interviews with community members, including Mary Glass, Ron Haddox, Scott Sklar, Elizabeth (Betsey) Tober Lyon, and members of the Federation's officers and Board of Directors, including John Ford and Board Chair Jacqueline Snelling. We are grateful for the contributions of these individuals.

The **Arlington County Civic Federation** is a non-profit organization that serves as a forum for residents and community organizations in Arlington, Virginia, to come together and discuss issues affecting the county. The Civic Federation seeks to promote the county's welfare by informing citizens about local issues, advocating for changes to policies and regulations, and facilitating communication and collaboration among civic associations. The organization also plays a vital role in building community and fostering civic engagement in Arlington. **Wimbush Consulting** is a strategic consulting firm helping organizations with organizational effectiveness and planning. The company provides various services, including strategic planning, process improvement, change management, and performance management. With a focus on data-driven solutions and a collaborative approach, Wimbush Consulting helps organizations of all sizes and industries to improve their operations and achieve their goals.

What Is Digital Capacity?

Digital capacity refers to the ability of individuals and organizations to effectively use technology and digital tools to communicate, collaborate, and engage with their communities. In today's increasingly digital world, having a robust digital capacity is crucial for civic associations to connect with their members and effectively advocate for their interests. Several tools and platforms support civic digital capacity and enable civic associations to engage with their communities more effectively. Website builders like WordPress and Squarespace are powerful tools that allow civic associations to create and maintain a professional-looking website without requiring technical expertise. WordPress is a highly customizable platform that requires some technical knowledge to use but allows for a great deal of flexibility and control over the design and functionality of the site. On the other hand, Squarespace is a more user-friendly platform that requires less technical knowledge but provides fewer customization options. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram can also be powerful tools for engaging with community members and promoting events or initiatives. Online survey tools like SurveyMonkey or Google Forms can gather feedback and input from community members on various issues or initiatives. Finally, digital storytelling tools like Canva or Adobe Spark can create compelling visual content to help civic associations convey their message and engage with their audience more effectively.

Why Does Digital Capacity Matter?

Building digital capacity is critical for civic associations to effectively engage and mobilize their members. Digital tools can help civic associations streamline communication, facilitate collaboration, and increase participation. Research has shown that increased digital engagement leads to higher civic and community involvement. Additionally, digital tools can help civic associations overcome barriers to participation, such as time constraints and physical distance.

In addition, digital capacity allows for more diverse civic participation. With the COVID-19 pandemic, many have experienced the challenges of engaging in traditional in-person meetings and events. The shift to virtual engagement has allowed for greater accessibility and inclusivity, particularly for individuals with disabilities, caregivers, and those who face transportation or scheduling barriers. Additionally, with more and more people accessing information and engaging online, digital capacity allows for greater reach and engagement among diverse communities, including those from different racial, economic, and social backgrounds. Digital capacity is also essential for engaging a diverse range of residents in Arlington, including those living in apartments and multi-family homes, who may have a different level of physical community space than those in single-family homes.

Therefore, civic associations must build digital capabilities to effectively engage and mobilize their members in today's increasingly digital world.

Why is Building Digital Capacity Hard?

Building digital capacity for civic associations can be a challenging task for a variety of reasons. First, many civic associations may need more resources, such as funding and technical expertise, to implement digital tools and technologies effectively. Additionally, some members of these

associations may need access to reliable internet or technology, making it difficult to engage with digital platforms fully. Another challenge is the need to balance traditional methods of communication, such as in-person meetings and printed newsletters, with digital channels to ensure that all members can be reached. Finally, there may be resistance to change or reluctance to adopt new technologies among some members, which can hinder progress in building digital capacity. Despite these challenges, civic associations must overcome these barriers and develop their digital capabilities to engage with their communities in today's digital age effectively.

Recommendations on the Role of the Arlington County Civic Federation in Supporting Digital Capacity Building

As detailed below, the Federation can be crucial in supporting its members' efforts to build their digital capabilities by providing resources, training, and guidance on best practices for using digital tools and technologies. However, before addressing those roles, it's worth discussing how the Federation itself can become a model for how to build civic digital capacity.

The Federation as a Model for Digital Engagement

As the umbrella organization for Arlington County's residential civic associations, the Federation should transform itself into a laboratory for digital capacity. By embracing new technologies and digital tools, the Federation can serve as a model for its member associations and demonstrate best practices for engaging with residents online.

The Federation can start by assessing its digital capacity needs and developing its communications plan. This will enable the Federation to better understand its strengths and weaknesses in digital engagement and identify areas where it can improve its online presence and better serve its members.

A critical component of this assessment should be a review of the Federation's current website and social media channels. This might involve analyzing website traffic data to identify areas for improvement or surveying members to gather feedback on how they currently use the website and what improvements they would like to see.

Once the Federation has a better understanding of its digital needs and goals, it can develop a comprehensive communications plan that outlines the specific strategies and tactics it will use to engage with members and residents online. This plan should include clear goals and metrics for success, as well as a detailed timeline for implementation. By assessing its digital capacity needs and developing a communications plan, the Arlington County Civic Federation can serve as a model for its member associations and demonstrate best practices for engaging with residents online. This will help to strengthen the Federation's organizational capacity and enhance its ability to advocate for the needs and interests of Arlington County residents.

Another way the Federation can serve as a model for its members is by *experimenting with new digital tools and technologies*. This might involve testing new communication platforms or exploring new ways to collect feedback and engage with residents online. By being open to new ideas and technologies, the Federation can help its members stay on the cutting edge of digital

engagement.

The Federation as a Digital Capacity Convener and Learning Hub

The Federation should play a key role in *bringing together residential civic associations in Arlington to share best practices, technical support, and knowledge exchange related to building digital capacity for civic engagement.*

As a well-established organization with a long history of serving as a forum for civic discussion and collaboration, the Federation is well-positioned to convene regular meetings and facilitate discussions on digital capacity building. These meetings could feature presentations from experts in the field, including representatives from local universities and technology companies and representatives from successful civic associations in Arlington and beyond. The Federation could also create online forums and resource centers where civic associations can exchange information and share best practices related to digital capacity building. By serving as a convening authority for these efforts, the Federation can help ensure that all residential civic associations in Arlington have access to the tools and knowledge they need to effectively engage with their communities in the digital age.

The Federation as a Supporter of Residential Civic Associations

Once the Federation has improved its digital capacity, it can take the lead in supporting its member associations in building their digital capabilities. This support could come in three areas – Providing resources: training and guidance, and partnerships.

Providing direct resources: The Federation can provide its members with website design and hosting resources directly to help members communicate more effectively with their communities. This might be particularly important for new residential civic associations.

The Federation could also purchase and then offer access to digital tools such as project management software, online event registration platforms, or video conferencing tools that might not be obtainable on their own.

Training and guidance: The Federation could provide training sessions or webinars on best practices for using digital channels to engage with community members. This might involve hosting workshops or webinars on website design or social media strategy or providing one-on-one assistance to associations needing help with specific issues. The Federation could also offer seminars on integrating digital platforms with more traditional methods of communication, such as newsletters and community meetings, to ensure that all members can be reached.

The Federation can also provide educational materials. These materials might include step-by-step guides for setting up a website, tips for crafting engaging social media posts, or sample communications plans that other associations can adapt to their needs. By providing these resources, the Federation can help to level the playing field and ensure that all associations have access to the knowledge they need to engage with residents online effectively.

Partnerships: The Arlington County Civic Federation can also connect residential civic associations with partners in the Arlington area to help improve their digital capacity. One option might be to form partnerships with local universities, community colleges, and even Arlington high schools that offer web design courses, social media strategy, and other relevant topics.

On the university front, the following universities have relevant degree programs that could be beneficial to the Federation and its members:

- Georgetown University: Georgetown offers a Master of Professional Studies in Public Relations and Corporate Communications that includes coursework in social media and digital communications.
- American University: American University's School of Communication offers a Master of Arts in Strategic Communication with a concentration in Digital Communications Strategies.
- George Washington University: GW's Graduate School of Political Management offers a Digital Political Communications Certificate program covering social media, online advertising, and email marketing.
- University of Maryland: The University of Maryland's College of Journalism offers a Master of Journalism degree with a concentration in Multiplatform Journalism, which includes coursework in digital media and social media.
- Howard University: Howard's School of Communications offers a Bachelor of Arts in Communications with a concentration in Digital Media, which includes courses in web design, social media, and multimedia storytelling.

These are just a few examples of universities in the DC area with programs focused on digital communications and engagement. The Federation could also create partnerships with Northern Virginia Community College to offer training programs for members of the Federation. Even high schools in Arlington might also be a valuable resource, as many offer web design and digital media courses that could be leveraged to help the Federation improve its online presence.

In addition to partnering with educational institutions, the Federation might explore partnerships with local businesses or non-profit organizations specializing in digital marketing or web development. These partnerships could provide the Federation access to valuable expertise and resources that might be difficult to obtain.

In addition to local resources in the DC area, there are also many national organizations and resources focused on civic digital engagement that the Federation can tap into. For example:

- National Civic League: The National Civic League is a non-profit organization that provides resources and training to help communities build strong, inclusive, and equitable civic engagement practices. They offer resources on digital engagement, including webinars and publications.
- National Conference on Citizenship: The National Conference on Citizenship is a non-profit organization that aims to strengthen civic life in the United States. They provide

research, training, and resources on civic engagement, including digital engagement.

- **TechSoup:** TechSoup is a non-profit organization that provides technology products and services to non-profit organizations. They offer discounted and donated software, hardware, and services to help civic associations build their digital capacity.

By providing these types of resources, training, and partnerships, the Arlington County Civic Federation can help its members build their digital capacity and engage more effectively with their communities.

Recommendations for Residential Civic Associations

This selection provides recommendations for residential civic associations to build their digital capacity for civic engagement. By following these recommendations, residential civic associations can improve their ability to engage their communities in the digital age and promote community development.

- **Develop a communications plan:** Before beginning any digital capacity-building efforts, residential civic associations should develop a communications plan that defines their goals and what they hope to achieve with their digital capacity. This plan should include a clear understanding of the association's target audience and the channels that are most effective in reaching them. The plan should also define the association's key messaging and the content that will be shared on digital channels.
- **Assess current resources:** Residential civic associations should assess their existing resources, including technology infrastructure and technical expertise. This assessment will help to identify the gaps in current capacity and the areas where additional resources or support may be needed.
- **Identify and prioritize digital tools:** Residential civic associations should prioritize the digital tools that will most effectively achieve their goals. This may include social media platforms, email marketing tools, project management software, or other digital platforms. Associations should also consider how these tools will integrate with more traditional methods of communication, such as newsletters and community meetings.
- **Seek sustainable technical support:** While free or low-cost technical advice and support may be attractive, associations should carefully consider whether this support is sustainable in the long term. For example, it may be better to seek help from a reputable consulting firm or technology organization that can provide ongoing support and guidance rather than support from a single volunteer.
- **Build capacity through training and education:** Associations should invest in training and education for their members to build digital capacity. This may include hosting workshops or webinars on using specific digital tools or offering training on best practices for digital communication.

During stakeholder interviews, the debate often centered around whether civic association websites should be built from scratch using a platform like WordPress or a website builder like Squarespace. Of course, the decision ultimately depends on the resources and technical expertise of the association, but there are a few factors to keep in mind.

WordPress, a free and open-source platform, offers extensive customization options with thousands of themes, allowing for a unique and professional-looking website. It also has a large community of developers who create plugins and other tools to enhance a website's functionality. However, WordPress is more complex and requires more technical expertise to set up and maintain. In addition, as open-source software, it may also be more vulnerable to security breaches or technical issues.

Squarespace, on the other hand, offers a user-friendly interface with various templates and design options. It also provides built-in e-commerce functionality and mobile-responsive templates, making it easy for associations to sell merchandise or collect donations. Squarespace also offers 24/7 customer support via email and live chat, which can be helpful for associations with turnover in leadership. However, Squarespace may not provide as much flexibility and customization options as WordPress. Despite offering a free trial, it also tends to be more expensive in the long term.

Ultimately, the decision between WordPress and Squarespace should be based on the specific needs and goals of the civic association. Therefore, it's essential to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of each platform carefully and choose the one that best aligns with the association's needs and goals.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study conducted by the Arlington County Civic Federation and Wimbush Consulting highlights the importance of building digital capacity for civic associations to engage with their communities in Arlington, Virginia, effectively. The recommendations provided in the study, such as developing a communications plan, assessing current resources, and seeking sustainable technical support, can assist civic associations in building their digital capabilities. The Arlington County Civic Federation can be crucial in supporting its members by providing resources, training, and partnerships to improve their digital capacity. By embracing digital tools and technology, civic associations can enhance communication, collaboration, and engagement with their members and communities.