

ATHE Technology Plan

Adopted by the ATHE Governing Council 1/13/14

I. Executive summary

The Association for Theatre in Higher Education faces a number of challenges that can be addressed through the effective use of technology. We function as a dynamic organization that experiences ongoing changes in leadership and, to some degree, turnover in membership. In addition, the focus group structure of the association creates the potential for further disconnectedness and fragmentation. Technology creates opportunities for more effective communication, increased connectedness, and more efficient delivery of services on a year-round basis.

Results of an unscientific survey on ATHE technology demonstrate that a sampling of the members are relatively satisfied with the organization's technology resources. At the same time, the survey provides insight on improvements we may pursue in order to better serve the membership.

There are a number of recommendations that come out of this plan that should help ensure that ATHE is utilizing technology in ways that proficiently manage the fluid nature of both the organization and technology itself. The Electronic Technology Committee should have more specific charges that produce a consistent review of website functionality, usefulness, and accuracy. ATHE staff and leadership should continue to seek ways to expand services that we are able to offer through existing technological capabilities. At the same time, leadership should be prepared to invest in technological resources that can provide more benefits and value to membership and support the efficiency of staff.

At the present time, there are no significant investments that need to be pursued, nor does this plan argue for specific financial allocations. Rather, the plan provides an overview of our current technology resources and systems and then calls for more intentional processes and consciousness about the use of technology within the association.

II. Introduction

The mission of ATHE is to support and advance the study and practice of theatre and performance in higher education. This plan is aimed at advancing that mission. The plan is intended to evaluate our current technology resources and provide a guide for the strategic use of technology and technology-related programming within ATHE. This should be viewed as a document that puts wheels into motion rather than creating extensive policies.

The principle activity of ATHE is the annual conference, yet the organization functions year round in many capacities. Almost all of ATHE's activities depend, at least in part, on technology. In order to better assess membership needs, an electronic survey was conducted in the fall of 2013. There were 166 responses, a 13.6% response rate (1,224 survey invitations were e-mailed). The results of the survey (which are appended to this

document) provide a number of insights into member wants and needs that help guide recommendations found in this plan.

In regards to communication, 95.8% of respondents prefer that important information be e-mailed to them as opposed to having to visit an online site. That said, a majority (55.6%) prefer to utilize web-based forum groups as opposed to list servs. (The functionality of forums is described in III.B. below). Also of particular note for communications, 87.2% of respondents utilize at least one social networking site.

The vast majority of respondents (79.4%) reported owning at least one mobile device that is used for professional purposes. Those who have mobile devices use them for a range of communication methods, with phone calls, text messaging, e-mails, and internet access all reported at usage levels of 84.7% or higher.

ATHE's current technology services are rated adequately if not exceptionally. With ratings of 1 through 5 with 5 being highest as "extremely useful and 1 being lowest as "not useful at all," most services were rated at an average of 3 ("useful") or better. The Job Bank was highest rated (3.5), whereas our online web videos were lowest (2.58). With no benchmark with which to compare, it is difficult to gauge the overall quality of our services, yet the results suggest that in certain areas there is room for improvement.

One question that is commonly raised from year to year is the issue of internet access for conference participants. Attendees are usually able to purchase access in their hotel rooms but are not granted access in meeting areas of the conference. This limits the potential use of internet-based technology within sessions (for both presenters and participants) and requires attendees to locate adequate cell signals to retain the capability for electronic communication. Survey respondents were asked if they were willing to pay an extra fee, of between \$20 and \$50, within their conference registration to ensure that everyone could have wifi access during the conference. A small majority, 55.2%, answered "no." Perhaps this reflects the increasing use of mobile devices that are able to utilize cellular signals (at speeds that continue to improve) and do not require wifi access. ATHE leadership, as well as annual conference committees, should continue to consider the issue of conference internet access and the best ways to meet member needs.

Members think it is important for ATHE to address and provide resources for various current and emerging technology challenges and opportunities in the field. Online learning and virtual classrooms were the topics most often cited as being very important. There were a significant number of suggestions for technology-related professional development opportunities as well. This is an area that requires more analysis to determine the best ways that we could provide such services as well as the resources that might be necessary for implementation.

Future technology initiatives and improvements will be driven by the needs of our members, as expressed through the Electronic Technology Committee or through member surveys. The costs of technology improvements should always be weighed in comparison to the additional benefits they provide to a maximum number of members.

II. Current status of technology and strategic initiatives or improvements for each area

A. Infrastructure

Hardware/Software:

As a member association, much of ATHE's technological infrastructure resides in the offices of each of its volunteers, the Executive Director, and paid staff members. The security of that infrastructure rests with each individual. Generally, ATHE has not invested in either software or hardware infrastructure improvements for these individuals.

There are no discernible needs for hardware or software improvements at present. ATHE leadership and staff should continue to assess the effectiveness of existing systems. As new hardware or software emerges that can make the work of staff or the organization as a whole more efficient and of better service to the membership, consideration should be given to budgeting for essential purchases.

Internet:

Since 2005, ATHE has been responsible for the management and hosting of its own internet space, first with internet firm Bolderwomen, and then, starting in June 2011, with Affiniscap. Affiniscap, an SaaS (Software as a Service) company, provides a much broad range of technological capabilities, including housing ATHE member data in a space accessible by staff. We currently host mini-sites within the larger ATHE internet infrastructure for 4 focus groups.

We currently process multiple transactions via the online shopping experience provided by Affiniscap including job bank postings and subscriptions, exhibitor booth and conference program advertising purchases, and Leadership Institute sponsorship payments.

At the present time, our internet infrastructure is changing. Affiniscap has merged with YourMembership.com, and our back end and front end will migrate in late January 2014.

Our online conference schedule, implemented in 2010, is hosted and implemented through Sched.org.

The non-static and fluid nature of the internet, coupled with the nature of ATHE as a volunteer-driven organization with ongoing turnover in leadership throughout the association, make it essential that our website receive on-going review. Content updates and assessment of the structure of the site must occur in a timely and consistent fashion. The Electronic Technology Committee will begin a process of a full review of the website once every six months, checking for accuracy and seeking to drive on-going engagement from the membership in order to update and/or remove content as needed.

Mobile:

Our website is currently mobile-friendly, but not in an application-style format. With the continuing growth in the number of mobile device users, ATHE will need to put more focus on the look and functionality of the website when accessed through smart phones and tablets. The Electronic Technology Committee will evaluate the website from multiple devices in its biannual review.

B. Communications

The ATHE electronic communications profile is, in a word, vast. The association manages 25 Google Groups (mostly used as list serves), including a group for official announcements (ATHEMemberList), a general-purpose group (ATHECast), leadership groups, groups for 17 focus groups, a group for Advocacy, and a group for graduate students. These groups and association e-mail addresses are operated through Google's Apps for Nonprofits, free to the organization.

Our new website with YourMembership.com gives us the capability to migrate from the use of list serves to "forums." Forums allow members post information in a location on our website where other members can log on and see the posts. Members have the choice to set up their own preferences as to whether they want an e-mail sent to them every time there is a new post (essentially in the same manner as a list serv) or simply log in at their convenience to read posts. Forums appear to be the preference of the membership (as expressed in the survey results), and making this change allows for more efficient use of the time of the ATHE communications manager.

We maintain a nearly 4,000 subscriber e-mail list for ATHENews delivery. E-mails can be sent directly from our member database to any member group; for instance, e-mails were recently sent to members who registered for the conference inviting them to participate in the member research groups.

Christin Essin set up a Facebook group for ATHE members and friends in 2010; over 700 people subscribe to that group. The communications manager created an official Facebook page (more than 150 "likes," which means they are following items posted on that page). ATHE also uses Twitter as a communications tool; we are currently followed by more than 150 people. The effectiveness of the organization's use of social media can be improved. Membership and Marketing, in particular, should continue to consider ways that social media can promote the activities of ATHE and demonstrate the value of membership.

The call for improved communication is consistently heard from the membership. Certainly, the focus group-driven structure of the organization, as well as the regular turnover of volunteer leadership throughout ATHE, makes communication a challenge. The proliferation of communication methods complicates matters further. Organizational leadership should continue to consider ways that ATHE might utilize emerging technologies in order to better serve the communication needs of the membership.

C. Data management

Because the Executive Director and staff manage our hardware infrastructure independently, data also tends to be managed independently. ATHE's financial data is housed and secured in the office of the Executive Director.

ATHE's member database is housed and secured in two locations: Affiniscape servers and at Johns Hopkins University Press (which serves as the conference registration and membership processor for the association). Staff and the Executive Director have password-protected access to all data housed with Affiniscape, and the communications manager updates the internal database with information provided weekly by Johns Hopkins University Press.

As the organization expands the initiative to make ATHE a more data-driven association, the hosting of databases will be an ongoing question. Organizational leadership should seek solutions that allow for data to be centralized for ease of collaboration in data collection efforts and to promote the simplicity of access for members in the midst of turnovers in leadership.

D. Technical support – Staff

Primarily, the ATHE communications manager serves as the main contact for technical support across the range of technologies which ATHE members and leadership utilize. Other staff members provide technical support for specific needs, such as the conference registration or session proposal forms.

At the present time, the ATHE communications manager is capable of handling the required workload, but the heavy reliance on one staff member is reaching its limit. As the organization grows in membership and technology-related activities, shifts in staff responsibilities should be considered in order to meet growing membership needs.

E. Staff training/development

Since the spring of 2012, ATHE has had access to the suite of online meeting tools provided by Citrix, including GoToMeeting and GoToWebinar. Staff have used this tool for phone conferencing when training on administrative functions has been required. In 2013, the Executive Director launched a volunteer training initiative using GoToWebinar. Both Affiniscape and YourMembership.com offer online training in the use of the administrative tools within their SaaS platform.

The rate of change in hardware and software technology entails that investments be made in staff training as necessary. Professional development opportunities should be made available if specialized training will allow ATHE to pursue new technology initiatives that will better serve the membership.

F. Membership technology training and education

The association has not offered training for members in the use of technology. We are currently expanding our professional development offerings through the use of GoToWebinar. We have offered one training session to members on how to successfully prepare and submit a session proposal.

Survey results make it clear that there is some desire among members for ATHE to provide resources and training, particularly in the area of pedagogy. The Electronic Technology Committee will seek to coordinate sessions at the annual conference and/or online trainings on various technology-related challenges and opportunities. Examples include workshops or sessions addressing pedagogy for teaching theatre courses in online formats, or the use of instructional technology in the classroom or studio. Other resources that the ETC could consider developing would be an interactive document that will replace the report of the “Teaching and Technology Task Force,” written in 1996, that is still found on the ATHE website.

Additionally, organizational leadership should give some consideration to a white paper on distance and online learning that can help guide theatre departments in their responses to the push for expanded online offerings at many institutions. This resource can help faculty articulate the unique challenges of teaching a live art form through technological media.

G. Responsiveness to membership needs

Generally, the response time for a support request from any ATHE staff member is within 72 hours. Typically the response time is much faster than this. Since 2005, our web presence has been developed by committees and changed to meet the needs of the membership if and when necessary.

The current size and scope of the activities of ATHE allow for this level of responsiveness. As more members utilize the full technological capabilities of the ATHE website and other resources, more staff support will be required in order to maintain our ability to respond in a timely manner to member needs. Since responsiveness is an issue related to on-going member concerns about communication, timeliness and follow-through should be priorities. Shifts in staff responsibilities and investments in staff training should be considered as necessary to maintain excellent responsiveness.

H. Responsiveness to emerging technologies

ATHE members are most likely in the range of Early to Late Majority Users. Early Majority users adopt technology after innovators and early adopters and are slower in the adoption process. Late Majority users adopt technology only after it has been widely accepted are skeptical about the innovation offered by the technology.

The Electronic Technology Committee should continue to examine emerging technologies and identify the opportunities that new technologies offer both the

organization as a whole and the work of our members in their classrooms and studios. The ETC can provide a valuable service to members through the coordination of conference sessions and internet-based training on emerging technologies.

IV. Budget implications – overall costs and plans

At the present time, there are no major budget implications, but rather a call for the consideration of financial support as needs are identified. Since technological capabilities are essential in order for ATHE to provide the best service for the membership, the organization must be nimble enough financially to be able to invest in new technology initiatives that can improve the effectiveness of the association.

V. Timeline for implementation

January 2014	Migration to new website at YourMembership.com
February 2014	New website launches (February 1 target date) ETC begins initial review of website content. Following completion, repeat every six months.
March 2014	Begin shift from list servs to forums
June 2014	ETC completes website changes stemming from review
July 2014	Complete shift from list servs to forums. ATHE-supported list servs are shut down, with the exception of ATHECast. At the 2014 annual conference: Solution determined for data storage; budget implications are addressed. ETC begins coordination of technology-related training for 2015 and considers the development of other pedagogical resources on the use of technology. Organizational leadership considers the creation of a white paper that addresses online and distance learning. Review documentation and determine necessity for creation of an app designed specifically for ATHE (YourMembership offers this as an add-on service, ad-free, for a \$295 initial set-up and \$595 addition to the annual fee).