



As tech moves toward shared value, what is the role for 'bridge builders'?

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As technology companies and entrepreneurs have grown more interested and engaged with global development challenges, organizations have sprung up to build bridges between the tech community and the nonprofit sector. These “bridge builders” may be working themselves out of a job.

More and more tech companies are building teams to take [shared value partnerships](#) into their own hands to make their mark in emerging markets. That was one of the themes that emerged from last week’s [Social Innovation Summit](#), where Devex asked a range of experts whether bridge builders can still play a role at the intersection of tech and development.

“For us as vendors, the next wave is to get our act together as a unit,” Bryan Breckenridge, executive director of Box.org, which connects nonprofits like [Greenpeace](#), [Oxfam](#) and [PATH](#) to cloud computing solutions, told Devex. “Let’s work together and take more mystery out of joint vendor solutions.”

As part of an effort to get more cloud computing leaders to talk about how they can work together, Box.org hosted a roundtable with Team Rubicon, which involves veterans in disaster response, and companies like DocuSign. Breckenridge explained to Devex that even as smaller organizations like his and larger companies like Microsoft start to come together as a vendor community and work together in partnership with nonprofits, there is as much a need as ever for bridge builders to help facilitate those relationships.

Microsoft, despite building huge teams to work directly with nonprofit organizations, was the launch partner for [TechSoup.Global](#), released last week and described as “the first fully global tech donation platform.” The site is designed to connect social benefit organizations in 236 countries and territories with technology from Microsoft and other donors including Symantec, Box and Bitdefender, with more to come.

Rebecca Masisak, TechSoup’s CEO, acknowledged that the platform will have to offer more than just connections between tech companies and NGOs, as more and more tech companies find ways to forge those relationships on their own.

“We’re at the intersection of tech and philanthropy, and everything is changing around us,” Masisak said.

Masisak said that while donors often see their technologies as be-all, end-all solutions for nonprofits, in most cases what NGOs need is a combination of tools.

“We try to meet the needs of both sides,” she continued. “We try to meet the donors’ needs to optimize and maximize; but on the NGO side, we recognize what they need is a suite of things, and they need help putting it all together.”

“To fully bridge the gap that hinders technology’s role in nonprofits, tech companies and funders will need to boost their knowledge of the social sector,” Breckenridge wrote in a [blog post](#) following the Social Innovation Summit. “A stated goal of many nonprofit





leaders is that tech companies spend more time getting to know them to find out what drives them and what they really need.”

“Donations of licenses are huge, but by themselves often leave nonprofits with a gap around adoption,” Erik Arnold, chief innovation officer at global health innovation organization PATH, told Devex. “The best way to use digital technology to amplify impact is to bring both services and software to areas of greatest need,” he said.

Arnold pointed to PATH’s [partnership](#) with the Tableau Foundation — an arm of the Seattle-based Tableau Software company — as an example of how a sales conversation can evolve into collaboration on solutions that can scale. The partnership aims to eliminate malaria in Zambia and beyond. “I want to see more organizations like Microsoft, Box, Salesforce, et cetera that are thinking beyond product, getting past the number of nonprofits using their product, and really thinking about impact,” he said. “Make a bet. Find a way to engage.”

Neal Myrick, head of the Tableau Foundation, said he seeks out partners looking to data as a way to take a leap in the way they address the problems they are trying to solve. Myrick described [a project](#) in West Africa where [Tableau Zen Masters](#) — super users — developed dashboards to help field workers track and monitor ebola transmissions.

When Myrick sat down for lunch at the [Ebola Innovation Summit](#) earlier this year, an adviser to the president of Guinea sat across from him. The adviser saw Myrick’s nametag and took notice. “He did mad typing on his computer, spun it around, and was like — ‘these are the visualizations your people gave to us’ — and they were just updated live right then, and it was just mindblowing,” Myrick told Devex.

Arnold, who serves on the board of directors for NetHope, said shared value partnerships are continuing to improve in part because of annual gatherings like the [NetHope Global Summit](#), [ICT4D](#) conferences, and Social Innovation Summit, as well as the growing number of companies like Salesforce convening advisory councils that include nonprofit CIOs like Arnold.

As more and more tech companies go beyond product discounts to engage with nonprofits as partners in solving global challenges, organizations like TechSoup have sought to play a role in helping to define what that engagement looks like.

“Our aim is to make it easy for both sides,” Masisak said.

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About the author

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Catherine Cheney covers the West Coast global development community for Devex. Since graduating from Yale University, where she earned bachelor's and master's degrees in political science, Catherine has worked as a reporter and editor for a range of publications including World Politics Review, POLITICO, and NationSwell, a media company and membership network she helped to build. She is also an ambassador for the Solutions Journalism Network and the Franklin Project at the Aspen Institute.

