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How STORYBANKING Strengthens Nonprofit CAPACITY RESILIENCE & ENGAGEMENT



RESEARCH BRIEF

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As nonprofit storytelling evolves, there is heightened interest in technology and digital tools that support fundraising. Research suggests that narrative-forward communication offers profound advantages beyond marketing, however, and benefits the entire nonprofit ecosystem. Subsequently, storybank applications offer unique opportunities to sustain storytelling cultures and community-centric communication objectives.

THIS REPORT DISCUSSES:

- **three of the biggest challenges nonprofits face** to become better storytellers,
- **how nonprofits can use storytelling across their entire organization** to build capacity and resilience,
- repositioning the idea of a **storybank (n) to storybanking (v)** to support a new understanding of narrative communication benefits,
- **envisioning new ways storybanks can support expanded nonprofit storytelling** and story sharing objectives,
- **opportunities for storybank applications** to partner with nonprofits and support cultures of storytelling,
- and initial **action items for nonprofits** interested in leveraging the benefits of storytelling and storybanking.

03

INTRODUCTION

A vibrant storytelling culture means the difference between whether your organization has a living, breathing portfolio of different stories, from different perspectives, that share its impact—or just a single, somewhat stagnant story.

Julie Dixon, research director of National Journal's Communications Council, former lead of Georgetown University's Center for Social Impact Communication

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) are no strangers to the importance of storytelling. Long before it became a branding buzzword, charities, advocacy, community, and grassroot groups have known that stories are critical to engagement and are foundational to successful fundraising (Dixon 2014).

However, despite acknowledging the importance of stories, NPOs often fail at consistently integrating compelling stories into their communications (Bublitz 2016).

The goal of this research project was to better understand their challenges, and determine if technology—specifically in the form of a storybank—could be leveraged to support better storytelling. Starting in early 2020, in addition to academic research, a diverse group of more than 50 nonprofits was contacted to learn about the obstacles they faced, as well as their successes. The majority of interviews were conducted with staff directly responsible for communications.



04

98%

Expressed the need for more time and more education to become better storytellers.

76%

Misidentified social media posts, testimonials and informational content as storytelling.

90%

Percent of organizations did not utilize stories outside of marketing, i.e. a fundraising tactic.

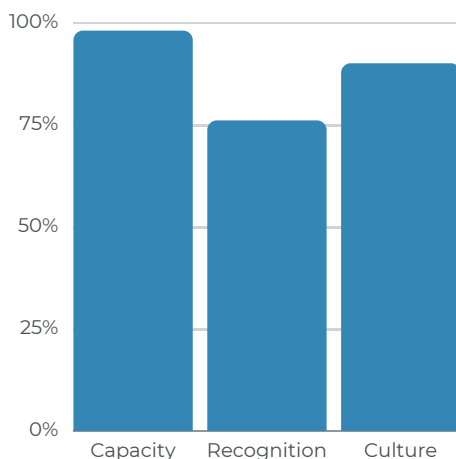
While many factors affect successful storytelling efforts, the following were the most prevalent among NPOs interviewed :

CAPACITY: Unsurprisingly, larger and better-funded organizations were more likely to have the skills, staff, and budget to support storytelling. Smaller organizations, faced with scarce resources, didn't have the same ability or opportunity. Those smaller nonprofits that were successful in storytelling generally benefited from a passionate public-facing founder or director who was a 'natural storyteller.'

No matter the communication's capacity of the organization, however, almost every nonprofit expressed the need for additional resources. Time and more education towards skill development were mentioned most frequently, followed by the need for better tools.

RECOGNITION: Whereas capacity was a recognized challenge, this research pointed to a less obvious but more concerning obstacle; a high percentage of interviewees misidentified social media posts, testimonials, images, and other informative pieces as stories. This is understandable in today's digital communications environment. Nonprofits rely heavily on social media platforms for messaging and engagement, and within this context, the word 'story' is used ubiquitously. **However, these types of communications do not harness the potential of true narrative storytelling.** Most telling, was that these NPOs also often described frustration that social media engagement did not translate into expected tangible support.

CULTURE: For this research, a culture of storytelling was broadly defined as an organizational passion for—and valuing—stories across an organization's ecosystem.



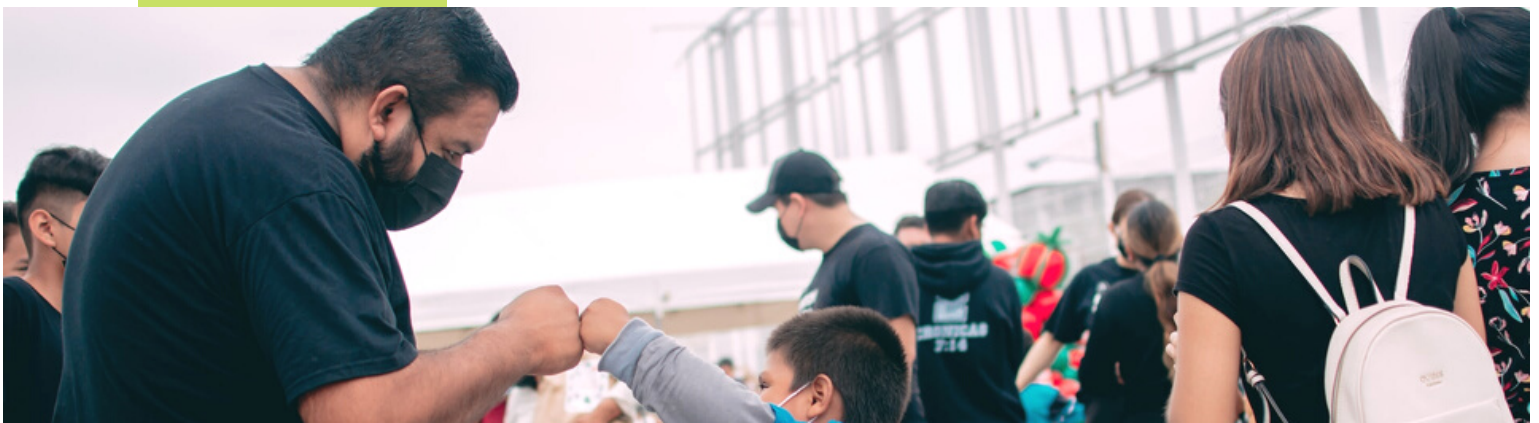
05

Resistance to telling the stories of others emerges as an appropriate response to a long history of white saviorism within philanthropic work, where privileged community-based practitioners with moralistic conceptions of poverty define constituents' problems for them and from this perspective assert needs onto communities.

(Fenton 2020)

One way to measure this was identifying if, and how, an organization used stories on their public facing websites. Were stories emphasized in a separate section? Were they kept up to date and frequently posted? These NPOs also reported enthusiastic internal story sharing among staff and volunteers; **NPOs that demonstrated a successful storytelling cultures consistently tapped into fresh and willingly-contributed stories from across their ecosystem.** When a culture of storytelling was not in evidence, however—or diminished—there was frequently an expressed frustration with the inability to motivate story sharing. Additionally, many nonprofits displayed a hesitancy to collect or share stories when their organization supported a stigmatized or vulnerable population.

The fundamental issues that NPOs face in storytelling are the same ones an effective storybank can help mitigate. This research proposes that a well-executed storybank, when understood *to be part of a process*, has the potential to address these challenges. More than an archive and management mechanism, the storybank offers enormous potential for both supporting NPO capacity, and also promoting the shift towards a more engaged organizational culture. This is critical in the movement towards more community-centric values in the nonprofit sector.



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THE STORYBANK & NONPROFIT STORYTELLING

To be effective, stories and the data that backs them up must be kept together. Imagine a place where you can keep not only finished, polished stories, but also the “stuff” the stories were gleaned from—the rough footage, notes, anecdotes and interviews. These are the artifacts that strengthen our stories and bring them to life.

Wendy Levy, executive director at The Alliance for Media Arts + Culture

Also referred to as story vaults, story archives, and story libraries, **the choice of the term storybank in this research** follows Levy's lead; it uniquely expresses the value of experiential data and its collection.

A storybank organizes narrative content and supporting data so that it can be retrieved easily and quickly. In its most basic form, a storybank can be a collection of searchable folders in the NPO's cloud—with documents, images, and video searchable by whatever taxonomy is determined as necessary. Also used are spreadsheets and Trello boards. Some NPOs are also repurposing tools within their donation tracking software.

More advanced storybank applications, such as MemoryFox and Proofpact, are database and cloud-based. These SaaS platforms are fronted with collection forms, accept multimedia submissions such as video, route engagement processes, and offer publishing end points.



07

4.1%

Even as a marketing tactic, NPO use of story is underutilized. As an example, only 4.1% of donation appeals include stories or narrative writing.

-2023 statistics from [NextAfter](#) and [American Philanthropic](#) study

Developing and using storybank technology to its fullest potential, however, requires a broader understanding of how storytelling and story sharing benefit the NPO and its objectives as a whole.

What became evident through this research, was a bias throughout the nonprofit sector that the value of stories lies almost exclusively in their use as a marketing tactic.

Yet, nonprofits who are leveraging the potential of stories do so in varied ways. When storytelling is valued and encouraged across an NPO's ecosystem, benefits are far-reaching.

NPO STORYTELLING: NOT JUST FOR FUNDRAISING

In planning an effective storybank, the wider potential of how stories can be used should be considered.

- Stories are influential in outreach and raising cause awareness, being exceptionally effective for explaining complex and intersectional social problems. Stories address deeper systemic causes of social issues. *And counter-narratives can dismantle myths and stigma at a root level.*
- Volunteers and staff find fresh motivation during crises and sometimes discouraging work when they have fresh and relevant stories to lean into.
- Collecting, listening, and analyzing stories from across an NPO's ecosystem allows an organization to understand their reputation and monitor fluctuations in public perception.
- In the same way, an organization can better understand and respond to changes in attitudes around their cause.

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"Social impact organizations need to expand their focus, moving beyond simply telling good stories to curating collections of stories that depict the breadth, expertise, and uniqueness of their organizations."

(Bublitz 2016)

- Experience stories can educate a potential new beneficiary on what to expect when they accept a nonprofit's help—establishing trust and easing the process.
- Listening closely to stories shared by beneficiaries also help insulate NPOs from the trap of believing their service limitations are exclusively about scope—when beneficiary needs fluctuate over time and across social structures.
- Similarly, collecting and listening to community stories are a requisite for an engaged organization that focuses on existing to serve a need—rather than serving its own existence.
- Inviting, valuing, and respecting stories is a dialogue that supports community-centric values. In ethical storytelling, beneficiaries are no longer victims, but empowered; their effort and participation are integral to their successful story outcome. Donors are no longer saviors, but contributors and members of the community. And organizations are not the heroes of these stories, but facilitators.

Effective storytelling changes social priorities and perceptions. As cultural attitudes change, solving issues—rather than being a sole organizational challenge—deepens into a community effort. NPOs become more resilient, and are far more adaptive and relevant into the future.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR NONPROFITS

“Great storytelling is the best way to capture the attention, as well as the hearts and minds of your supporters. Using modern digital tools...is vital in the quest to get your stories in front of a critical mass of people.”

Julia Campbell, author of *Storytelling in the Digital Age: A Guide for Nonprofits*

What does investing in an effective storybank mean for the nonprofit?

To **grow capacity**, a storybank supports processes that allocate communication tasks across staff. A program director, board member, or grant writer can both submit, and then pull subsequently vetted, content that supports the organization's mission and overarching story. It empowers better communication and efficiency.

When the pandemic upended traditional ways that nonprofits provided services, it was all hands on deck to pivot to meet these challenges. Storytelling was deprioritized at a time when it was needed most. When nonprofits used a storybank, however, it offered a critical focal point for continued story sharing, which in turn supported **organizational resilience** during the ensuing crisis.



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**EXAMPLES OF HOW NONPROFITS CAN LEVERAGE
STORYBANKS BEYOND A MARKETING
REPOSITORY**

Allocate Tasks. To be effective, storybanks are *shared across an organization*. As noted above, information can be 'deposited' and 'withdrawn', and managed, across all departments leveraging workloads. Skilled communication staff can focus more of their time on story crafting and development. For example:

- Instant retrieval at point of need
- Identify narratives that have been published and where, allowing for effective repurposing
- Embedded approval process for content ensuring it is relevant to mission narrative

12%

Only a small number organizations for this project used a standardized process to collect and organize stories. Of those, almost all relied on system utilizing tools at hand—cloud file sharing, word documents, and spreadsheets, rather than tools designed specific to this need.

Develop Communication Consistency. Successful organizations are identified by messaging that is clear, consistent, and mission-relevant. Gathering narrative data in one place, and in collections, allows for better review, identification, and purposeful development of published material.

Saving an Organization's Historical Narrative. Research revealed that many organizations lose their rich history (and source of a continuity of messaging) through the attrition of staff and the

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Stories
make us
human

[Ethical
Storytelling](#)

dependency on publications as archives. This loss was especially poignant when it was the organization's 'natural storyteller.' Additionally, collections of stories, when presented together, create more powerful social proof than single story instances buried in social media feeds. **MemoryFox** and **Proofpact**, recognizing this need, offer collection publishing options.

Integrate community-centric and ethical values into tangible practices. A storybank can support cultural and communication objectives and trust-building, i.e.,

- Giving story submitters the opportunity to choose how their story is published (or not at all, as in the case of advocacy group whistleblowers wishing to remain anonymous), and for what length of time.
- Public-facing forms and automated routing to personalized follow-ups supports relationship building, demonstrating the NPO values its community and their experiences.
- Turning ethical values into practice both reinforces respect for storytellers and supports staff confidence in sharing those stories.

Repository for issue and reputation monitoring. In a storybank, collected narratives can be viewed together, analyzed for patterns, and statistically measured—allowing for more responsive messaging.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR STORYBANK DEVELOPMENT

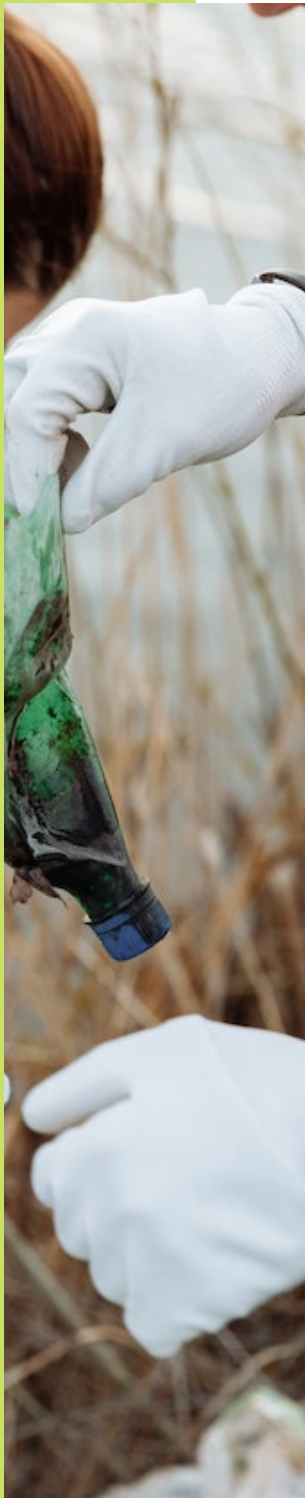
“A story bank is the heart and soul of a nonprofit’s communications strategy. It’s a powerful tool that can be used to connect donors and supporters to the real-world impact of an organization’s work, and help build emotional connection and engagement.”

Joe Waters, nonprofit marketing expert

Water’s statement demonstrates the understanding of what an effective story bank offers to the nonprofit organization now—a critical component of its communication strategy. But it also points to an untapped potential. Specifically, *how storybanks can “help build emotional connection and engagement.”*

This research suggests that the understanding of a **storybank tool** should be expanded to a wider understanding of **storybanking as a process**, in which an effective storybank application is vital. Critically, this process requires engagement throughout the full nonprofit ecosystem.

One challenge of using a storybank, for example, is the myth of “if we build it, they will come.” Without a culture of storytelling and story sharing, these tools can suffer from lack of use, becoming just another burden on NPO staff.



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STORYBANK (n.) A tool to collect, organize, store, and easily retrieve a nonprofit's impact stories used in fundraising, grant writing, education and outreach.

VS.

STORYBANKING (v.) The comprehensive process of identifying, gathering, curating collections and understanding the entirety of an organization's narratives for the purposes of increasing all organizational capacities, not those limited to marketing and fundraising.

Lacking an enthusiastic culture of storytelling, story submission must be aggressively and constantly encouraged, straining staff resources. To achieve unprompted engagement, organizations must instead prove to their members not only that stories have value, but that *their* experiences *specifically* are necessary to the organization's mission.

As NPOs come to understand the full range of benefits that a storytelling culture offers their organization, they require effective tools to guide this shift. Storybanks are uniquely positioned for this purpose.

Applications like **MemoryFox** and **Proofpact** are already considering how their tech, which automates marketing communication processes, can support and grow organizational capacity. These include offering ways for their clients to use stories for reputation management and to support internal communications and morale.

Other ways storybanks might support capacity building:

- Community-centric story sharing, routing, and follow-up with a focus on *dialogue*, *listening*, and *relationship building*. Storytelling becomes a two-way process.
- More varied and granular customization options to meet client's narrative use outside of fundraising and marketing silos.
- Focusing on tech and behavioral science to innovate trust-building and engagement at the point of collection, and building in processes that automate privacy checks and expiration of permission follow-ups.

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AI can play a crucial role in these potential features, such as **Proofpact's** use of sentiment analysis for reputation management. AI can also support editing, checking stories for consistency, relevance and clarity.

Commercial storybank applications are also in the unique position of encouraging and educating NPOs to adopt this wider perspective of storytelling benefits. **MemoryFox** uses its platform to offer a robust library of articles, webinars, and podcasts around storytelling and marketing.

Additional ways storybank applications can support NPO potential through education:

- Advocating for and integrating methods that build story crafting skills. Testimonials offer social proof while video and images capture attention—but as critical as these are in social media, *when left as the sole expression of story*, the opportunity for creating memorable content that cements long-term support and loyalty is left on the cutting room floor. One digital space, for example, that is both accessible and suited for narrative skills building, is interactive long-form or what recently has been called 'scrollytelling'.
- Following that, storybanks might provide an opportunity for more diverse narrative type collection and publishing. Stories are written, read, told orally, and in the future will be engaged through in an interactive metaverse. And not all ages, genders, or diverse communities wish to share experiences and receive information the same way.
- Advocate for ethical storytelling practices—integrating this instruction into their critical process points.

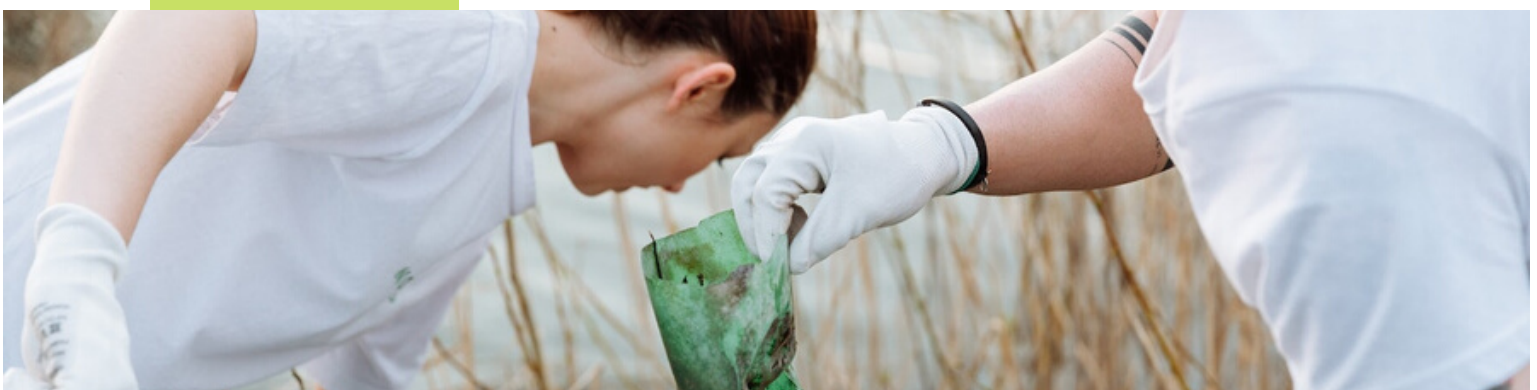
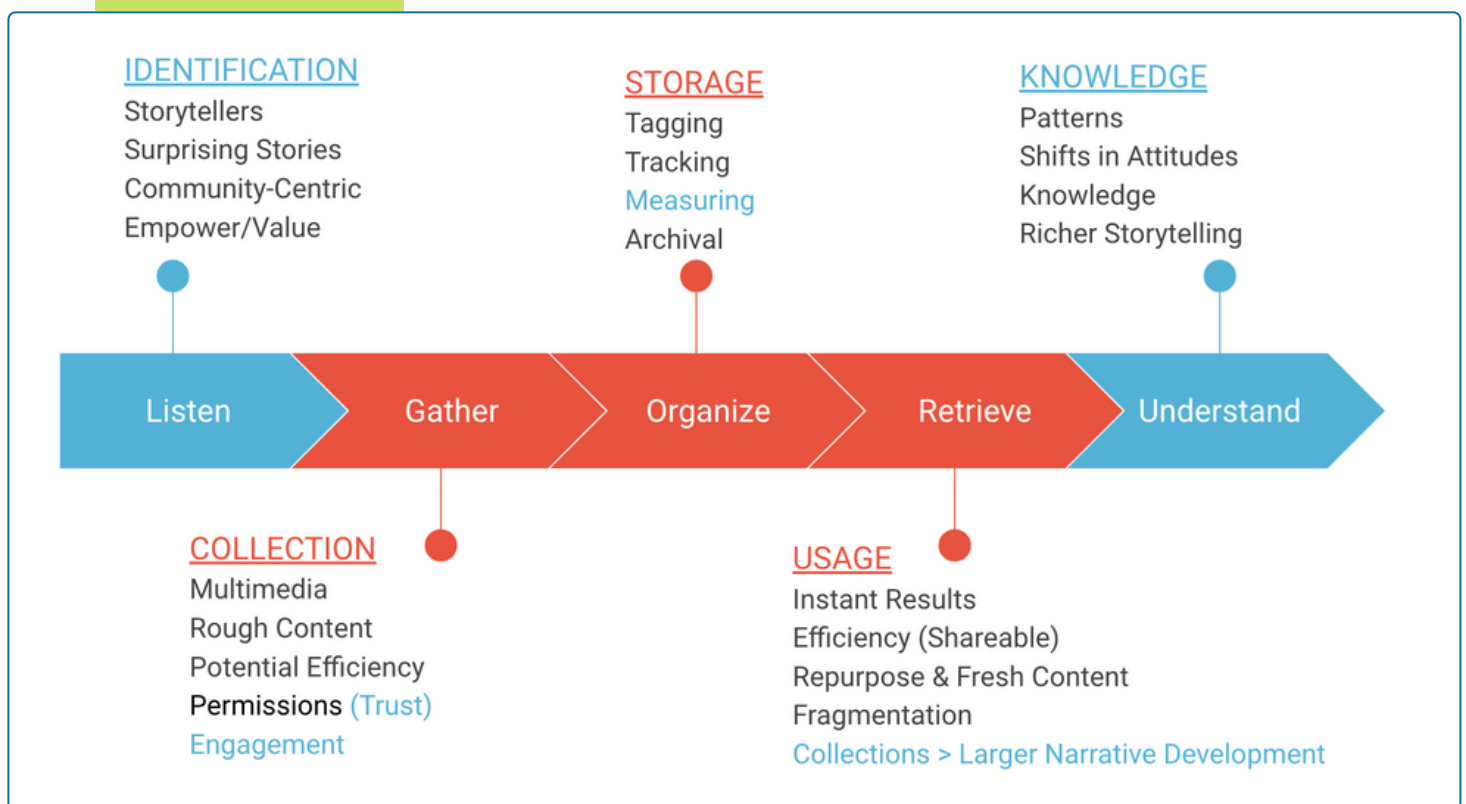
Used well, smart tech can help promote a sense of community at work, unburden workers of part of their workloads and give them more chances to explore, analyze and innovate, fostering a greater sense of purpose.

[The Charity Report](#)

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Successful nonprofits will be supported by tools that position them to leverage all opportunities for receiving and sharing experiential and narrative content.

*Understanding **storybanks** (noted as RED elements and text) as inseparable from the more dynamic and challenging process of **storybanking** (BLUE) offers opportunities for storybank applications to innovate and lead in the NPO space.*



CONCLUSION

“*A nonprofit will never reach its highest capacity and serve its mission to its fullest until it embraces and values storytelling and story sharing throughout its entire ecosystem.*

Dawn Robuck, project researcher and founder of The Communicated Story

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This research project clarified that as essential as a storybank tool is to NPOs, success is limited by organizational perceptions—not just of what the tool does, but what storytelling can offer the nonprofit as a whole.

This is not fully a surprise. A hammer doesn't, by itself, build a chicken coop. As tech, AI, and opportunities such as ChatGPT emerge and develop, however, it is an important reminder. Tools require skills and knowledge—but they also need vision.

One way to promote a cultural shift into more effective storytelling, is by shifting the understanding of storybank to storybanking. As an active process, storybanking offers far-reaching benefits to the organization that values narrative content. And not just embracing a focus on telling stories, but listening to them with open hearts and minds.

When NPOs and storybank application developers both invest in this vision, each has the opportunity to grow stronger. And the impact of each is magnified.



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ACTION ITEMS

Ways nonprofits can begin storybanking:

- ☐ **Identify your NPO's storytellers.** Surprisingly, many nonprofits interviewed didn't fully recognize stories from their staff, volunteers, board, or donors as valuable to their objectives.
- ☐ **List *all* the ways stories might benefit your organization and create a taxonomy.** Efficiently tagging stories, organizing them into collected narratives is key to effective storybanking—i.e., a state advocacy organization might gather zip codes to later pinpoint issue impact by location.
- ☐ **Create an organization guide to ethical story collecting and sharing.** Remove obstacles by addressing vulnerability, fear, and trust concerns. One resource that includes a pledge is [Ethical Storytelling](#).
- ☐ **Don't postpone developing a storybank.** For the budget-strapped, a storybank can start as a cloud-shared spreadsheet. Storybanks are tools that will evolve over time as an organization's needs change and grow. No matter an NPO's size or budget, starting a storybank—one that is contributed to and is accessible throughout the organization—commits to a mindset of valuing stories and storytellers across its full community.



RESOURCES

Deepest appreciation goes to all of the interviewees who supported this research by generously giving their time and thoughtful input. Thanks also goes to Dr. David Wyrick and Jan Szelkowski of the UNCG I-Corps program, Dr. Benscoter of UNCG's Applied Arts and Sciences Master's Program, and Ashley McFarland of the Small Business & Technology Development Center for their unending support and enthusiasm. Without them, this project would not have been possible.

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PHOTOS

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Photo by Antoni Shkraba: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/man-and-woman-sitting-on-the-couch-7345455/>

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