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E-advocacy in Human Services

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E-advocacy in Human Services: The Impact of Organizational Conditions and Characteristics on Electronic Advocacy Activities among Nonprofits

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E-advocacy, or the constellation of electronic tools used for policy advocacy, offer cost-effective approaches for engaging constituents to create social change. Providers of human services may face challenges when trying to implement these tools. While many electronic tools have low barriers for entry, other factors may inhibit their use in agencies. This article explores the organizational characteristics related to the use of electronic advocacy strategies. Based on a survey of nonprofit executives, the study uses path modeling to describe the connections between organizational characteristics and the use of electronic advocacy tools. Implications of these findings are discussed.

KEYWORDS E-advocacy, electronic advocacy, organizational characteristics, policy advocacy, social change, social media

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, a sea change in electronic and social media occurred, which continues to bring sweeping transformation to advocacy practice around the world. As recently as five years ago, an organization interested in policy change might have placed a staff /volunteer canvasser on the street who would stop a possible constituent, engage him or her in conversation about an issue, and secure a signature. Now, with online petitions posted on Facebook, re-tweeted on Twitter, and remarked upon on Tumblr,

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there is the potential to collect thousands of signatures in a matter of hours. Combine these electronic strategies with the technology challenges currently faced by human service organizations (HSO) and we can imagine a scenario where nonprofit human service providers are playing catch-up in the electronic advocacy arena (Le Dantec & Edwards, 2008; Salamon, 2002). These HSOs are not only constrained by their traditional focus on direct service and reticence to be accused of lobbying, but are also hampered by a lack of technology infrastructure and the knowledge as to how to effectively mobilize their constituents and advocate electronically on their behalf.

Historically, nonprofit HSOs have been slow to adapt to technological change and innovations (Corder, 2001, Dunlop & Fawcett, 2008, Edwards & Hoefer, 2010; Merkel et al., 2007). Yet increasingly organizational survival depends on a leader's ability to adapt to changing organizational contexts, increased competition for scarce resources, and evolving technological strategies (Hackler & Saxton, 2007). In addition, advocacy and social change practice have rapidly become linked with technology tools and Internet-based outreach (McNutt, 2008; McNutt & Boland, 1999). This study explores the relationships between organizational characteristics, organizations' advocacy orientation, and their use of electronic advocacy strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Advocating for disenfranchised groups, empowering constituents, and working on behalf of social justice are considered imperitives of the human services sector (Berry, 2005, Schachter, 2011). Yet the level of policy advocacy engagement by nonprofit human service providers has been found to be relatively modest (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2013; Berry, 2005; Kimberlin, 2010; MacIndoe & Whalen, 2013; Saloman & Geller, 2008). Many factors, including limited resources and knowledge, a fear of reprisal from funders, and misconceptions of the legal limitations placed on nonprofit 501c(3) organizations, contribute to the less than robust advocacy activities of the sector (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2013; Salamon & Anheier, 1992).

Electronic, Internet-based interactive tools (e.g., social media) are facilitating the increased ease through which individuals and organizations can engage in advocacy campaigns (Guo & Saxton, 2012; Nah & Saxton, 2013). Some literature discusses the types and goals of various advocacy activities undertaken by HSOs, and there is general agreement that the nonprofit human services sector is uniquely positioned to uphold a civil society through advocacy activities. However, much remains to be understood about how and under what conditions agencies adopt the use of electronic advocacy tools (Berry & Arons, 2003; Donaldson, 2007, Hoefer, 2001).

Electronic Advocacy Practices in Nonprofit Organizations

The Internet and social media are revolutionizing the way that the non-profit sector does business. From online fundraising, to managing data in cloud-based warehouses, to using Twitter and text messaging to mobilize constituents, technology and the tools that have emerged to apply it are changing the practice landscape of human services organizations. In addition, electronic advocacy, defined as "the use of technologically intensive media as a means to influence stakeholders to effect policy change" (Fitzgerald & McNutt, 1997, p. 3), which is driven by social media tools are revolutionizing policy advocacy practices in the United States and around the world. Proliferating rapidly, these strategies and tools cannot be ignored by nonprofit leaders who wish to remain relevant in increasingly competitive climates.

Facilitators of Advocacy Practice

Organizations and the individuals that function within them require structures and supports to meet their goals. The growth and maintenance of an organizational advocacy program, and the ability to meet advocacy objectives, is no exception. Among the factors found to facilitate the achievement of organizational advocacy goals are coalition membership and leadership support, including board support, and resources (Donaldson, 2007).

Not surprisingly, organizations with greater capacity in terms of staff, dollars, and volunteers are more likely to engage in advocacy behaviors than organizations with fewer such resources (Berry & Arons, 2003, Suarez, 2009). Gibelman and Kraft (1996) identify agency size, mission, functions and staff expertise as the characteristics that determine the nature of an agency's advocacy practice.

Organizational leadership may be one of the key factors that influence an agency's advocacy activities. Gibleman & Kraft (1996), Salamon (1995), Saidel & Harlan (1998), and DeVita, Montilla, Reid, & Fatiregun (2004) all suggest that leadership and the leaders' orientation, vision, and commitment to advocacy are critical factors in organization's advocacy engagement.

BARRIERS TO ADVOCACY PRACTICE

As mentioned previously, the nonprofit sector is thought to be uniquely situated to participate in civic engagement activities. For human services providers specifically, and especially for those with missions oriented toward empowering the disenfranchised and marginalized, advocacy would seem like a natural complement to other organizational services and activities

(Smith & Pekkanen, 2012). However, organizational barriers exist that inhibit human services providers to fully catalyze their advocacy activities.

Time, expertise, and resources are the most frequently mentioned barriers that prohibit agencies from devoting themselves to advocacy activities (Donaldson, 2007; McNutt & Boland, 1999). Given the emphasis on advocacy as a singular feature of the sector, it's noteworthy that a significant number of organizational leaders do not feel like they are competent to engage in advocacy activities. And as agencies are pressured to demonstrate effectiveness and efficiency with ever shrinking resources, advocacy and civic engagement are among those activities that appear to be considered non-essential.

A lack of resources and a lack of expertise are also noted as the most frequent barriers to the use of E-advocacy specifically (McNutt & Boland, 1999). McNutt (2008) goes further, and suggests that similar to the Digital Divide discussed in the early 2000s there is an emergent Organizational Digital divide that threatens to leave small, less capitalized organizations behind due both to a lack of access to technology tools and the human capital to deploy them.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

The purpose of this study is to explore the organizational attributes that promote the use of electronic advocacy strategies. This model uses two demographic characteristics: organizational age and budget size and two additional dimensions, organizational structures and advocacy climate to explain engagement in advocacy activities. This study is based in part on earlier work of MacIndoe and Whalen (2013), as well as Donaldson (2007) all of whom sought to explore the organizational correlates of advocacy behavior. Each of the seven hypothesis described as follows focuses on a different organizational attribute. The first two hypotheses deal with organization's age and budget size on an organization's engagement with advocacy activities. The second two hypotheses focus on structural and cultural elements of the organization, which may influence an organization's engagement with policy advocacy activities. Figure 1 depicts a path model that identifies these factors and the linkages that connect them. These linkages represent the hypotheses that this study seeks to test. Taken together, these hypotheses seek to explain the organizational characteristics that impact a human service agency's use of electronic advocacy strategies.

Organizational Demographics

Scholars of nonprofit organization's engagement in advocacy activities have found that characteristics such as agency size, age and mission influence advocacy behaviors (Gibleman & Kraft, 1996; MacIndoe & Whalen, 2013). Organizations with larger budgets and resources are more likely to engage in
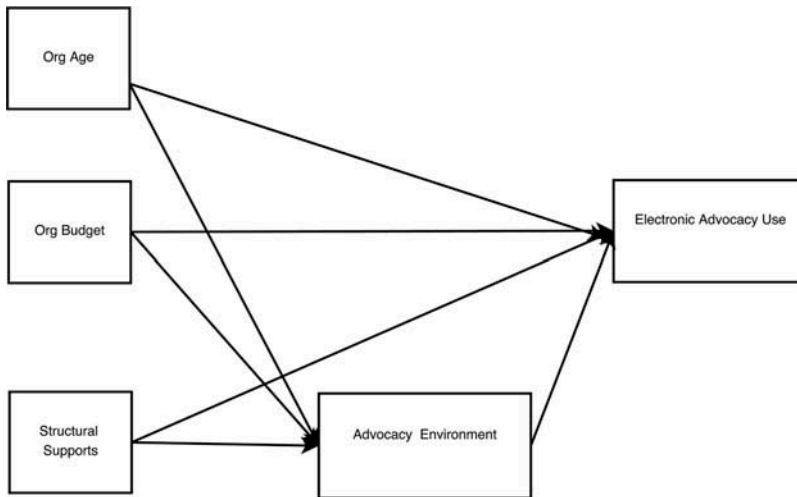
FIGURE 1 Conceptual model.

policy advocacy (Berry & Arons, 2003; Child & Grønbjerg, 2007; Donaldson, 2007). Minkoff (1998) also finds a positive correlation between the number of staff and advocacy and found that older, more established agencies had the stability and legitimacy to take on the risks inherent in engaging in policy advocacy.

Hypothesis 1: The age or "tenure" of the organization is expected to have an inverse effect on electronic advocacy use.

Hypothesis 2: The age or "tenure" of the organization is expected to have a mediated effect on electronic advocacy use through the advocacy environment.

Hypothesis 3: The size of the organization's budget is hypothesized to have a direct effect on electronic advocacy use.

Hypothesis 4: The size of the organization's budget is hypothesized to have an indirect effect on electronic advocacy use through the advocacy environment.

Organization's Structural and Cultural Dimensions

As the literature on nonprofit advocacy has evolved, so too has the notion that organizations must have institutional structures to support advocacy work (Netting, O'Connor, & Fauri, 2007; Taylor, 1991). Taylor (1991) argues that all the constituents of an organization including board members, staff and community members must be engaged in order for advocacy work to succeed. Netting et al. (2007)suggest that beyond buy-in from

board and staff, specific skills are required to carry out advocacy program goals.

Hypothesis 5: Structural supports, defined as those organizational mechanisms designed to facilitate advocacy, is hypothesized to have a direct effect on electronic advocacy use.

Hypothesis 6: Structural supports, defined as those organizational mechanisms designed to facilitate advocacy, is hypothesized to have an indirect effect on electronic advocacy use through the advocacy environment.

Advocacy climate is one area that has not been widely examined in the literature. Advocacy climate or advocacy culture speaks to how the engagement in social justice and policy advocacy work is woven into the fabric of the organization's culture and values. One example of this is organizations' participation in coalitions with other organizations (Mellinger, 2014). Bass, Arons, Guinane, and Carter (2007) found that memberships and collaborations with like-minded organizations increased advocacy involvement.

Hypothesis 7: The electronic advocacy environment, defined as those organizational characteristics which support and enhance advocacy activities, is expected to have a direct effect on electronic advocacy use.

METHODS

A mail-back survey, designed to reach a national sample of human services executives, was used to collect data for this study. A cover letter and paper survey instrument was mailed to 3,800 executive directors of category P20 human services providers as identified by the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE). The NTEE system is used by the IRS and the National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS) to classify nonprofit organizations (Blackwood, Roeger, & Pettijohn, 2012), and all organizations with an NTEE code of P (Human Services) with budgets greater than $30,000 per year were included in the study population. Following the initial mailing, four follow-up reminder postcards were sent in an attempt to increase the response rate. Anonymous surveys were returned in postage paid envelopes; agency leaders did not submit their names or the names of their organizations.

The cover letter to agency executives invited them to participate in a study exploring the use of social media for meeting advocacy goals. The letter also introduced the principal investigator as a current faculty member with a personal interest in this subject matter, and laid out the objectives of

the study for the prospective participants. This research was conducted with Institutional Review Board approval from the authors' university.

Sample

A total of 264 completed surveys were returned. Despite employing tactics to increase response rate suggested by Dillman (2000) and others the response rate was 7%. Hager, Wilson, Pollak, and Rooney (2003) suggest that surveys of organizations frequently receive lower return rates than surveys of individuals, with 15% return rates sometimes reaching a level of acceptability for organizational surveys.

Instrument

Organizational Age and Budget. The survey instrument included eight questions describing organizational demographic characteristics including questions about agency age and agency budget size.

Barriers and Facilitators of Electronic Advocacy. The survey instrument included 11 items that requested the respondents to characterize the degree to which various structural characteristics of the organization served as a barrier to or a facilitator of the use of electronic advocacy. For example, "structural characteristics" included board support, financial support, technology infrastructure, and senior leadership support among others (see Table 1).

Electronic Advocacy Use. This study adapted the McNutt's Child Welfare Electronic Advocacy Survey instrument, in order to capture agency's adoption of e-advocacy strategies and engagement with electronic policy advocacy activities. The survey focuses on the broad range of social media and Internet tools that organizations can use for pursuing advocacy goals.

The participants in the study were asked to describe their "level" of use of an array of 27 electronic advocacy strategies including social media tools

TABLE 1 Barriers and Facilitators of Electronic Advocacy

	n	$\bar{x}$	SD
Board Support	202	2.37	2.31
Fiscal Support	202	1.32	2.86
Technology Infrastructure	202	1.20	2.48
Senior Executive Support	202	2.88	2.16
Technology Champions	202	0.99	2.52
Coalition Membership	202	2.08	2.22
Advocacy Core Activity	202	1.36	2.73
Universal Access	202	0.84	2.44
Space	202	0.72	2.53
Resistance	202	0.07	2.03
Expertise	202	2.00	2.52

(e.g., Facebook, blogs, and podcasting) as well as direct electronic communication tools such as e-mail, chat rooms, and listservs. Specifically, the participants were asked to indicate whether they did not use each strategy at all, sometimes, or regularly.

Data Reduction

The 11 items measuring the Barriers and Facilitators of Electronic Advocacy use were submitted to a principal axis factor analysis using a promax rotation. Included as part of the output from the factor analysis are two indices of the "factorability" of the 11 "barriers/facilitators" items, i.e., the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and the Bartlett's test of sphericity. These criteria exceed the commonly recommended criterion that a set of items to be factored have a KMO value of at least .60, i.e., for these 11 items the KMO value is .85, indicating a substantial amount of shared variance in them. In addition, Bartlett's test of sphericity, which tests the null hypothesis that the correlation matrix is an "identity matrix," meaning that the correlations among these items are zero, is also rejected ($\chi^2 = 750.64$ (55), $p < .001$). Taken together, these two findings indicate that the 11 barriers and facilities items are, in fact, factorable.

Visual inspection of the scree plot from the factor analysis indicated that a two-factor solution adequately summarized the "structure" in this set of 11 items. The associated "pattern matrix" from this two-factor solution is presented in Table 2. As seen in this table, the seven items loading on the first factor, taken together, appear to measure the sources of "structural support" for electronic advocacy activities in these organizations. The second factor, comprised of four items, measures the "advocacy orientation" of these organizations.

Internal consistency reliability analyses of the items comprising each factor finds that both measure are, in fact, reliable, i.e., the "Structural Support"

TABLE 2 Factor Loadings

	Structural Support	Advocacy Environment
Board Support	.77	
Fiscal Support	.71	
Technology Infrastructure	.54	
Senior Executive Support	.52	
Expertise	.49	
Technology Champions	.46	.27
Resistance	.32	
Universal Access		.90
Advocacy Core Activity		.71
Coalition Membership		.51
Space		.43

factor's reliability coefficient is (Cronbach's α =) .80 and the "Advocacy Orientation" factor's reliability is (Cronbach's α =) .78.

RESULTS

Organizational Age and Budget

Participating organizations ranged in age from 4 to 155 years old with a mean of 36 years and a median of 25 years. On average, organizations budgets were $500,000, with a range of less than $50,000 (9%) to over $5,000,000 (27%). Sixty three percent of respondents report having an individual who is responsible for coordinating technology on their staff. In addition, 66% reported having memberships in coalitions or other affinity group organizations. A majority of the respondents (87%) report spending 25% or less of their organization's time engaged in advocacy activities.

Structural Supports

Structural supports is comprised of seven variables. These supports included board support, fiscal support, technology infrastructure, expertise as well as a technology champion. Factor loadings may be found in Table 2.

Advocacy Environment

Advocacy environment is comprised of four variables. These variables included advocacy activities and coalition members. Factor loadings for these variables may be found in Table 2.

Electronic Advocacy Use

The descriptive statistics for these variables are presented in Table 3. Note that in this table, the percentage of the organization sample using each strategy at least "sometimes" is reported as the percent of organizations using this strategy (in the column labeled, %). As seen in this table, the most widely used electronic strategies are e-mails to decision-makers (56%) and using e-mail internally to coordinate policy advocacy efforts (52%). With respect to the social media advocacy strategies, the most prevalent was the use of social networking (e.g., LinkedIn and Facebook; 49%). All of the remaining social media advocacy strategies are much less utilized. Finally, with regard to "other" electronic strategies, the most widely used are online fundraising (30%) and instant messaging (30%), followed by online volunteer recruiting (26%) and online mapping (22%).

TABLE 3 Percent of Agencies Using Electronic Advocacy Tools and Techniques at Least Sometimes

Strategy Type	*n*	%
Electronic Advocacy Strategy		
E-mail to Coordinate Policy Influence Efforts within organization	258	.52
E-mail to Coordinate Policy Influence Efforts outside of organization	258	.43
Electronic Mail Discussion List About Policy Issues (List serve)	256	.27
Electronic Mail [E-Mail] to Decision Makers	259	.56
Newsgroups	258	.16
Distribution Lists [Mass E-Mail Distribution]	258	.45
Chat Rooms	257	.00
Social Media Advocacy Strategy		
Blogs	258	.11
RSS Feeds (Really Simple Syndication)	252	.03
Wikis (Wikipedia)	257	.07
Photo Sharing (Picassa, Flicker)	255	.11
Podcasting	255	.02
Video Sharing (YouTube)	259	.14
Micro blogging (Twitter)	257	.15
Social Networking (LinkedIn, Facebook, etc.)	259	.49
Social Bookmarking (Delicious, Digg, StumbleUpon, etc.)	255	.01
Other Electronic Strategy		
Online Fund Raising (secure donation sites or shop for a cause sites)	259	.30
Video-Teleconferencing	259	.12
Online Survey Research	259	.19
Online Volunteer Recruiting	260	.26
Online Mapping (like Google Earth or Google Maps)	257	.22
Secure Intranet for Coordinating Activities private communication	259	.22
Meet ups [a tool that helps to organize face-to-face meetings]	256	.09
Instant Messaging, Texting and Short Message Systems	260	.30
Virtual Reality Simulation [like Second Life]	256	.08
Online Petitions	257	.04
Web-based Conferencing	260	.17

Understanding Electronic Advocacy Use

The inter-correlations between the independent, mediating, and dependent variables presented in this article are reported in Table 4. As can be seen in the table, organizational age and organization's budget was found to be significantly correlated ($r = .56$; $p. > .00$). Similarly Advocacy Orientation and Electronic Advocacy Use were found to be positively and significantly correlated ($r = .43$; p. $> .00$).

The recursive path model derived from these inter-correlations and presented in Figure 2 was estimated in MPLUS 7.0 using maximum likelihood estimation. Because the model is recursive, it will fit the data exactly by

TABLE 4 Variables Inter-correlations and Means (Standard Deviations)

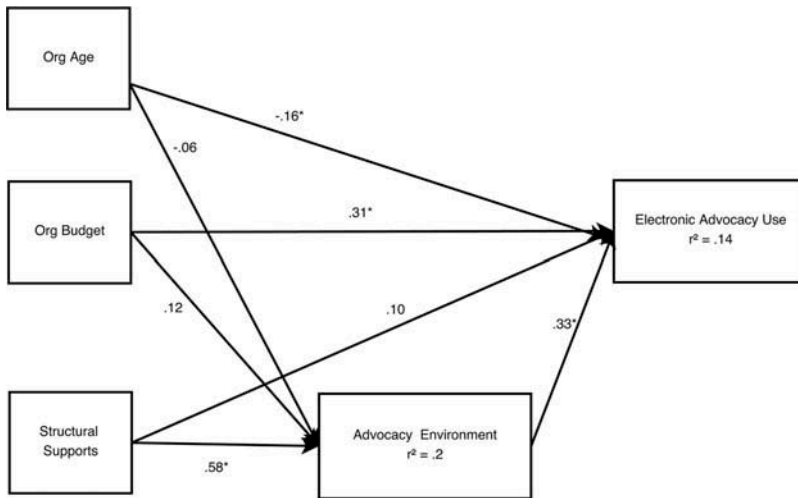| Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Org Age	—				
2. Budget	.56*	—			
3. Structural Support	.15	.18	—		
4. Advocacy Orientation	.10	.19	.59*	–	
5. Electronic Advocacy Use	.07	.31*	.33*	.43*	–

FIGURE 2 Path model.

mathematical construction. That is to say, conventional model fit indices such as the model chi-square statistic, the Comparative Fit Index, and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation are not germane to this type of model.

As seen in Figure 2, and consistent with Hypothesis 1, the age or tenure of the organization does have a statistically significant, modest negative effect on electronic advocacy use; the age of the organization is inversely, albeit significantly, related to the use of electronic advocacy strategies. ($\beta = -.16, p < .05$). However, Hypothesis 2, regarding the indirect effect via the endogenous mediator, the advocacy environment, is not statistically significant (standardized indirect effect (i.e.) $= -.02, p > .05$).

With respect to Hypothesis 3, and consistent with expectation, the size of the budget is positively and significantly related to the use of electronic advocacy strategies; organizations with more financial resources or capacity are the ones with greater levels of engagement in electronic advocacy strategies. ($\beta = .31, p < .05$). However, hypothesis 4, testing the indirect effect via the endogenous mediator, i.e., the advocacy environment, is not statistically significant (standardized indirect effect (i.e.) $= .04, p > .05$).

Hypothesis 5 presents a different pattern of statistically significant findings. Contrary to expectations, the direct effect of organizational structure on the use of electronic advocacy strategies is not statistically significant (β = .10, $p > .05$). Yet, as expected hypothesis 6, testing the indirect effect via the advocacy environment is significant (standardized indirect effect = .19, $p < .05$)

Finally, with respect to Hypothesis 7, the direct effect of the advocacy environment on electronic advocacy strategies is, as hypothesized, positive, moderately strong, and statistically significant (β = .33, $p < .05$).

DISCUSSION

With respect to the first two hypothesis, the findings support the claim that older organizations are somewhat less involved in adopting electronic advocacy strategies. More than likely this is a reflection of the fact that these organizations have been in existence for a long time and probably have systems in place that serve the same objectives as would the newer electronic advocacy strategies. Since these systems are currently functional they aren't easily or quickly replaced, and thus, the opportunity to embrace electronic advocacy strategies are hampered. Only when these new strategies are understood and their efficiency becomes evident will they be likely to be embraced by the oldest agencies. Hopefully, as more modern systems of advocacy infuse themselves into the workplace even organizations of longstanding will begin to embrace electronic advocacy.

While the direct effect of organizational age (Hypothesis 1) on the use of electronic strategies was supported in this investigation, the hypothesized indirect effect (Hypothesis 2) through the advocacy environment was not supported. The rationale for expecting a significant indirect effect via the advocacy environment is that organizations of longer standing have had more opportunity to develop the intra-organizational "infrastructure" (i.e., Internet capability, sufficient physical space) through which they could conduct their advocacy activities. These organizations are also more likely to have a web of organizational partners sharing a like-minded commitment to advocacy, which, in turn, could foster a greater commitment to electronic advocacy as mechanism for furthering those activities. Yet those organizations, because they are long-standing, may suffer from bureaucratization and territoriality both of which can thwart the adoption of new ways of conducting business like the use of electronic advocacy strategies. Taken together, these countervailing forces might render older organizations unable to integrate the opportunities that electronic advocacy strategies present since they pose a threat to long-standing, existing organizational arrangements; the benefits of electronic advocacy are offset, at least to some extent, by the threats to preexisting organizational arrangements. To the extent that this is true, the

absence of a significant indirect effect between organizational tenure and the adoption of electronic advocacy strategies is, perhaps, less surprising.

With regard to the hypothesis three and four, human service organizations with greater financial resources are more likely to have the capacity to embrace change given that it confers exposure and efficiency to their advocacy activities. However, as stated above, greater resources don't necessarily imply the deployment of those resources in ways that would seem to advantage these organizations. The seeming benefits of change, to say nothing of financially underwriting of that change, is an expensive and difficult undertaking even when the advocacy environment for it exists.

As found in the results, hypothesis five, structural support did not have the expected direct effect on electronic advocacy use. Yet there was a strong indirect effect of structural support on electronic advocacy use through the advocacy environment. This finding indicates the "mechanism" by which greater structural support "pays off" in the use of electronic advocacy. More specifically, organizations with greater structural support for electronic advocacy use (e.g., the board's investment in these technologies, the presence of a technology "champion," financial resources) are typified by an "environment" or "culture" conducive to electronic advocacy which, in turn, "expresses" itself in a greater embrace of these newer technologies. The fact that the direct effect of structural support on the use of these newer technologies is statistically insignificant may simply reflect the fact the relationship between these two constructs is entirely indirect through the organization's "attitude" toward these newer technologies.

Finally, and as a logical corollary of the explanation for the indirect effect just outlined, it is the case that organizations' whose "cultures" are conducive to the adoption of these newer technologies are the ones that embrace them. Stated somewhat differently, organizations use electronic technologies in no small measure because their organizational cultures are, in fact, conducive to them.

LIMITATIONS

As a rapidly evolving area of inquiry, little is formally understood about how agencies are engaging electronic advocacy and social media strategies or how internal agency structures may be viewed as barriers or facilitators to such work. Part of what has made it difficult to learn about this topic is that it has only recently emerged. Because of this little exists in the way of survey instruments suitable for investigating this topic. While the survey instrument used in this study is not entirely new (several of the constructs operationalized in this study are derived from a survey instrument developed by other investigators of organizational "culture" and its role in understanding how organizations work) much of the instrument used in this study is new. As such, it's a beginning, but only a beginning in capturing the needed

constructs to more fully explore the topic at hand. Other investigators may be able to enhance or otherwise improve upon this initial effort.

CONCLUSIONS

Certainly, e-advocacy is an area of interest for nonprofit leaders and scholars of the nonprofit world. More than ever, organizational success relies on organizations' capacities to engage their constituents and to communicate with them using social media tools. Most executive directors would agree that employing electronic technology strategies for policy advocacy and organizational sustainability campaigns are essential in today's world. However, little guidance exists to guide today's leaders about which strategies might be effective or how to implement and manage the use of electronic tools effectively. As the digital age advances these issues will become even more pressing as organizations strive to advance their agendas, maintain their organizations, and better serve their constituents.

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