

Report from the 2017 National AA Technology Workshop – By Alex M



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The 2017 National AA Technology Workshop occurred in Sacramento California from September 8th through the 10th. I was honored to attend as the Website Committee chair for the Washington Area Intergroup Association (WAIA) and learned a great deal about current guidelines, suggestions, traditions and best practices for the use of technology in staying sober and helping those who want to get sober.

The passion of those attending for learning, sharing and applying technology to better serve our communities was nearly limitless. AAs from all over the country have taken their region’s conscious on technology needs and found creative solutions fitting their members technological skill levels, organizational budgets and volunteer abilities. Online sites and forums exist (such as tiaa-forum.org) where these solutions are shared and questions can be asked but attending in person created an atmosphere which truly sparked innovation and there was a lot of fellowship.

The first lecture was By David N on the application of the 12 traditions with respect to technology. I was interested to find out (may not have been news to some) that AA World Services (AAWS) took on the question of amending tradition 11 as described in the [AA Guidelines on the internet](#):

“In 2013, the 63rd General Service Conference affirmed that “the Internet, social media, and all forms of public communications are implicit in the last phrase of the short form of Tradition Eleven, which reads: ‘...at the level of press, radio, and films.’”

There were varying opinions on this at the conference ranging from publishing additional guidelines restricting social media anonymity-breaking to AAWS becoming more involved in social media, providing online areas to discuss AA recovery – topics which will be debated for a very long time but it’s important to note current AAWS guidelines on social media use which include:

[Facebook, etc.] “...is a public medium where A.A. members and non- A.A.s mingle. As long as individuals do not identify themselves as A.A. members, there is no conflict of interest. However, someone identifying themselves as an A.A. member using their full name and/or a likeness, such as a full-face photograph, would be contrary to the spirit of the Eleventh Tradition...”

Discussion of 12th tradition anonymity on social media brought up good questions to ask yourself before posting: What's the motivation for posting; attraction or ego? Are you identifying yourself as an AA member? Even through a cryptic post, can it be googled and known to be AA? Do you feel "Private" groups on FB are private enough?

Other tradition discussions of note were over the 8th, regarding special workers – it's become apparent that not every group has members of sufficient skills or tenure to effectively run websites. Tradition 4, autonomy – best to share but not standardize technology as using a single platform could be seen as in conflict with tradition 6 in regards to endorsement. However, the spirit of the weekend was focused on open source platforms such as word press. (Open source indicates software which the original source code is made freely available, may be redistributed/modified and where applications are portable between platforms) Designers working with these platforms are completely independent to create custom applications and interfaces without implicitly endorsing a single platform.

The central office focused "12th stepping in the 21st Century" lecture by Robert S discussed how ultimately, it's about "picking up the phone" but the phone is no longer the primary means of communication for many newcomers. Businesses have adapted to this with many electronic channels of communication such as live-chat, texting, and online forums. Central offices should begin to open these channels to reach the widest range of people as possible, with an understanding of the demographics of their areas, volunteer skill levels and budgets. New tools such as "Slack" integrate multiple forms of electronic communication into one interface and make incoming requests available to more volunteers via smartphone app, email and text.

A presentation by Non-trustee director of the AA grapevine board, Josh E, showcased some of the new grapevine online options including an app version of the publication with audio-book like reading of the articles. Currently, memberships will need to be purchased separately for the app and the paper-publication but this may be fused in the near future.

A presentation on "AA and search engines" by Carlee H highlighted some methods by which groups can help increase their Google search ranks for area meeting lists including through their "AdWords" platform. A hot topic was whether groups should accept Google's non-profit "ad grant" which provides a large dollar amount in free ad-based search rank help – currently it's frowned upon as an outside contribution but since it is non-cash and available to all non-profit organizations equally the application for this program is not explicitly prohibited. It was noted that non-AA entities such as rehab facilities spend tens of thousands of dollars on online ads to outrank local AA organizations who have no hope of competing without help.

The bold statement was made: “The cloud is the future of all computing” meaning all information will be stored and processed on remote servers managed by companies such as Google and Amazon Web Services – but questions on cost, security and privacy remain, especially for AAs. Best practices were shared including how to investigate a provider of services for “HIPAA” level security, not using shared passwords or accounts and understanding what you get for the money – and how using the cloud for encrypted backup (like WAIA currently does) is probably best for small organizations.

Online contributions are in wide-use among AA central offices and districts across the country with WAIA’s platform standard among them. A survey of platforms for giving within groups (at the meetings) was assembled by the San Francisco/ Marin County intergroup in Northern California: [7th Tradition Digital Contribution](#) they were open to being contacted by AA groups wanting to set up their own electronic 7th tradition contribution collection systems. (See the email address at the bottom of their site)

Online literature sales were discussed as a topic where an intense cost/benefit analysis needs to be done. Competing with online stores like Amazon is generally impossible – so would providing an online store for local members to purchase and have shipped to them AA materials be a net benefit to the intergroup? The balance is in the effort it takes to set up and maintain such a system and the possibility of the system not being used by members because it isn’t convenient enough. Consensus seemed to be that basic online stores where pickup is the preferred method of delivery, inventory is limited, and the population of the area was large enough to cover the effort are worth it. WAIA is currently building an online store and will offer online literature sales hopefully by 2018.

I came away from the experience enriched spiritually as well. In a speaker meeting I heard described a story so familiar: riches to rags to sobriety but his story deepened through his devotion to service. He started as many do, making coffee for a sunrise meeting, he answered phones at his central office, represented his group as GSO, and ultimately became an AAWS Board Trustee. He discussed strife with keeping his status as “just a member” as his roles and responsibilities increased, how focusing on consensus aided his spiritual growth and how seeing newcomers make it – makes the effort of service all the more worthwhile.

I hope to bring to discussion and implement technology our committees and boards wish, to serve in the best capacity the will of my higher power provides, and if I’m lucky enough, see a couple newcomers make it along the way.

For more information on the NAATW or WAIA's technology or website please contact tech@aa-dc.org