

Hi, my name is SJ, and I'm an alcoholic. I don't currently have a service position but I most recently served as Secretary for Oregon Area 58. The title of this presentation is "In the world of endless technology, why is it so difficult to find AA meetings?"

I think that's actually an easy question to answer, at least at a high level. As a fellowship, we kinda suck at technology. The good news for the *specific* issue of finding meetings is that there is a great mobile app called Meeting Guide that has up-to-date lists of meetings near your current location. It's an excellent tool to help you find a meeting. And in further potentially good news, GSO is actually taking over the app, which means the meeting guide will be official.

I'll talk some more about how the Meeting Guide works in a bit, but before I do that I want to dive into the general issue of why AA struggles with technology, because I think our historical lack of a national meeting database is a symptom of this larger struggle. Reframing the title of the talk a little, I would ask "Why didn't we make an app years ago?" We consider one alcoholic talking to another the cornerstone of our recovery program and AA meetings are usually how we make that happen. We've had geolocating computers in our pockets for a decade now, why wasn't this seen as an opportunity rather than a challenge? Why did someone outside of our service structure end up building the mobile app we have today? I'd like to go through a few things that may help answer some of these questions.

The first few things I'll talk about are all principles that serve us very well in many ways. But they can also present challenges to adopting technology.

First is rotation of service. Skills naturally vary from person to person, but this seems particularly true about technology skills. I've seen technology get adopted, only to be abandoned a short time later when nobody can be found to maintain it. This lack of consistency can lead to a cautious approach when it comes to technology.

The second principal is our extremely decentralized service structure, which has a bunch of effects on how we approach technology. The obvious one is that group and district autonomy means that they can simply opt out of whatever technology others have adopted. This will always lead to spotty coverage of things like meeting lists. But decentralization also has a few other impacts.

One is that technology tends to run across hierarchies, which is unusual for us. Let's say we come up with a great solution for building District websites that plug into the Meeting Guide. This could work just as well for a district in Wisconsin as for a district here. But who is going to maintain it across these different service structures? How will Wisconsinites find out about it? Our service structure tends to be a bit siloed, which can impede communications and sharing of tools.

Our decentralization also contributes to our legendarily slow decision-making process, but this is in a context of fast moving technology. By the time we're finished evaluating a tool, it may no longer be worth using (cough, LinkedIn).

And one final point about decentralization. Some problems lend themselves to large-scale solutions. For instance, it's way better to have a single meeting finder mobile app than to have to download a different one for each Area. But our decentralization leads us to think of small solutions that fit our relatively small needs. Developing tools for the fellowship *as a whole* has not been GSOs traditional role. In fact, *nobody has that role*.

The third principle I'll mention is our tradition of self-support, which can also be seen as an obstacle, especially at GSO. Technology and its practitioners are expensive and GSO is always underfunded. [*I know, different topic entirely*]. While many Areas are more than happy to accept what are essentially in-kind donations from people who make a living with technology, I *think* the only volunteers at GSO are board and appointed committee members. GSO buys all of its technology and services. To hit my 12 minutes, I had to cut out my wild speculation about why this is the case. But the net result is that GSO can't afford to buy a lot of technology, they're not really set up to use volunteers to supplement their spending, and, increasingly, the natural place where certain technology would be developed is at GSO, since it would apply to the whole fellowship. It's a bit of a pickle.

Before moving on, just in case this was not clear, I'm *not* saying we should abandon these core principles. I think they serve us very well in many ways. I *am* saying that the barriers they can create should be recognized and adjusted for.

Ok, that's that for the big-T traditions. There are other characteristics of AA that are sort of small-T traditions, or more part of AA culture, that can also be a challenge.

Two things that I'll just mention are resistance to change and risk aversion. I don't have time to cover these in detail, but I think both can lead to an unwillingness to try new technologies. I would argue that the willingness to take risks and learn from our mistakes is necessary to make progress.

Another issue is best embodied by the phrase "If one alcoholic is helped, it's worth it". This has always seemed like an admission of failure to me. Like the full sentence would be "If one alcoholic is helped, it's worth it, even if we did spend way too much time on money it." Time and money are both scarce resources in AA and it's easy to forget that sometimes technology can make them go further.

The last thing I'll mention is that technology can be confusing and complicated. Hell, I develop software for a living and I get confused and intimidated by tech, so it's not surprising that others do too. Our membership is diverse and the difficulty that some face in learning new technologies is real and should not be discounted.

Now that I've used most of this talk as my own personal soapbox, I'll talk a bit about finding meetings. As I mentioned, there's this great mobile app called Meeting Guide that, among other things, will tell you where the next, closest, meetings are to your current location. Depending on

where you are, it can even help you locate the nearest district or intergroup, so you can contact a hotline if you need to. One really really important feature of this app is that the source of the data is usually the service entity that controls the listing. That means Intergroups, Districts, and Areas have made the meeting data available through their own websites. Because these service groups are using the same meeting data for their own listings, the data is less likely to get stale and outdated, which has been a big problem with the 3rd party listings that currently exist. The Meeting Guide app has been so successful that GSO has now licensed it and is essentially taking it over. They're redeveloping the app and will be getting an outside agency to manage it. Sometime in the near future, the Meeting Guide app will be discontinued in favor of the new AAWS app.

This is all great, right? Are there any issues? The one that I can see is that it doesn't work so well in districts that don't have a website. In Idaho Area 18, where adoption of the meeting guide has been very high, districts submit their meeting changes directly to the Area, who lists them on the Area website. This is feasible in Idaho, which has a dozen or so districts, but less so in Oregon, which has around 35. The result is that some districts are left out. We run the risk that it will be harder for people in more rural areas to find meetings than people in urban areas. In spite of this, I'll just say that having a nationwide database of meetings is really exciting and I'm really glad that GSO saw the value of the Meeting Guide.

So there are some good things happening but also some ongoing barriers to the fellowship's use of technology. I'd like to talk about a few more signs of progress I've seen.

One really good thing thing happening is the National AA Technology Workshop, which is a conference that meets once a year to discuss anything technology related in AA. If the Areas here are not already sending a representative to this conference, I would encourage them to do so. In a similar vein, there's also an online bulletin board called Technology in AA. You can find it at tiaa-forum.org and it has all sorts of useful information about using technology in AA.

I also wanted to highlight Western Washington Area 72's website committee, which meets quarterly to discuss tech topics that face Area 72 and its districts. I was able to attend one of these meetings a few years ago and I thought it was a great forum to talk about local technology issues.

In addition to these ongoing ventures, I'd like to make two proposals. One thing that I think would be really great is tech training at the service level. Given that some of the fellowship has difficulty with, or lack of exposure to, some aspects of technology in use today, identifying training resources that can help narrow this gap, or even providing workshop-style training, would help people feel more comfortable using technology. It might also help smooth out some of the ups and downs caused by rotation of service.

My other proposal is a little out there, but what the heck. I'd like to try to walk the talk I just gave and do something that carries a substantial risk of failure. I'd like to form a group of technologically interested and skilled people to identify or even *create* tools that help Districts

and Areas with their technology challenges. My theory is that there is a service level at which it's possible to gather a critical mass of people that can serve this purpose. Maybe that level is at the Intergroup or the Area, but I'd like to see what happens if we try something at *this* regional level. So I'd like to ask anyone who is interested in participating in this little experiment, who has some experience or interest in technology, to introduce yourself to me sometime during this conference. I'd like to see if we can form that critical mass. I'm thinking of it as an Intergroup - but specifically focused on technology that can be broadly applied across our service structures. I expect the first task would be helping those orphan districts get connected to the Meeting Guide database. I've already got a couple of people in Oregon who are interested, but I'm hoping to see if there are others. I have no idea if it will work, but I think it's worth trying, so please do let me know if you're interested.

Just one last word about why I think it's important to address some of these issues around technology. Early in the formation of our fellowship, we learned lessons about singleness of purpose from the Washingtonians, and on inclusivity from the Oxford Groups. We have benefited from other organizations' successes and failures. There's a lesson all around us that we may not have absorbed yet, which is appropriately summed up by the techie term "Change or die". Technology is just one of the most obvious ways in which the world today is different than the world of AA's early days. If we don't learn how to absorb these changes in a way that is consistent with our core principles, we may reduce the attractiveness of both our recovery and service programs. We risk reaching out only to the alcoholics we *were* when we got sober, or the alcoholics our sponsors were when they got sober, rather than the alcoholics walking in the door today.

Thank you all for not snoring while napping and thanks to the host committee for asking me to speak.

*****Extras*****

I think a combination of factors has led to this. For one, until the internet revolution, it wasn't really technically feasible for someone in Wyoming to volunteer at GSO. Modern communications technology makes this possible. The communications audit pointed out GSO's missed opportunities of communicating directly with the membership and I think it's true that GSO has always considered the Delegates and the Conference as the main communications vehicle to the rest of the fellowship. Because GSO doesn't have a direct relationship to the membership, they're less likely to see the fellowship as a potential resource.