

2004 Redwood Technology Consortium Stakeholder Report

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Introduction

This report is targeted to Redwood Technology Consortium (RTC) members and community partners. Specifically, it is geared toward those who are interested in the current status and future direction of the organization and want to be informed about opinions and ideas of fellow stakeholders. The interviewing process began originally as an opportunity for me to learn about the organization and the people involved. It rapidly evolved into a preliminary phase of a visioning and mission development process.

There were four separate interview groups: 1. Past and Current RTC Leadership; 2. Current RTC Members; 3. RTC Community Partners; 4. Non-Member Individuals and Businesses. Each group had a unique set of questions, but some of the same questions were asked through all four types of interviews. Some interviewees were associated with more than one group and if time allowed, were asked questions from both groups. Many interview questions were developed during the interview process and others were eliminated. In total, thirty-six people were interviewed.

All comments from the interviews were compiled and organized first by group and second by question. Often, themes emerged and were summarized for each question. Original comments can be found in the source material document (if you would like to review source material please request it from the RTC board).

This is a dynamic process. There will be opportunities for further discussion and development of ideas that have been outlined in this document. Comments and suggestions are welcome. Venues for further comments include email: wiedenbeck@northcoastsbdc.org, RTC monthly meetings, and the member area on the RTC web site.

Themes

1. Current leadership structure is approaching burnout (this is apparent to all stakeholders). There is fear and uncertainty about the future of the organization when current leadership moves on.
2. There is a general positive attitude about organization among stakeholders. They recognize that much has been done with limited resources. If negativity is present, it is usually related to a specific event and does not spill over into other areas.
3. Members want opportunities to participate but don't feel able to do so. The barriers identified include: lack of formal structure, fear of over commitment, lack of options beyond Tech Expo, and lack of obvious opportunities to use special skills and talents.
4. Members want more opportunities to interact socially. These include field trips ('bus bonding'), workshops/speakers/forums, potlucks/BBQ, and special meetings at different times of day (morning, lunch or different evenings from regular meeting days).
5. Stakeholders are pretty jazzed about the success of the grassroots effort regarding the fiber impasse. They like belonging to a winning team and they believe the group is influential.
6. There was a range of perceptions about what the word 'technology' means to RTC. Some want it to be strictly computer-based, others feel that alternative energy should be included, and some feel that it should be broad and include all types of technology and all businesses that use technology.
7. There appears to be a strong core of people that have a service/social responsibility ethic. They belong to this group because it feels right and it can benefit the region.
8. Stakeholders want RTC to have a role in technology training and education in the community. Many feel that RTC could be instrumental in creating a common baseline of technology knowledge and understanding within the region.

The Interview Summaries

1. Past and Current RTC Leadership Interviews

History of RTC and VISTA position

The Redwood Technology Consortium started as a trade association in 1997. The group focused in two areas: educating community leaders about the economic benefits of technology-based industries on the North Coast and supporting one another through the obstacles of running technology-based businesses on the North Coast. The first elected board members included: Linda Villatore, Gordon Soderberg, Don Wolski, Larry Goldberg, and Carter Fleming. One of the first projects that the group initiated was a promotional CD-ROM about Humboldt County. The group also began the Tech Expo as a means to showcase businesses and educate the community about technology. Early Tech Expos were held at Bayshore Mall and then College of the Redwoods. Five years ago, the organization was in decline with few people attending meetings and strong disagreements between the members. A second wave of leadership emerged and helped to move the organization forward again. These new leaders included: Jim Nelson, Rene Agredano, Chris Crawford, John McBrearty, and Tina Nerat. Meetings became more organized and focused, exposure of the organization was expanded to include weekly newspaper articles, and the telecom issue became a rallying point. RTC membership and meetings grew. Tech Expo became larger and moved to Redwood Acres Fairgrounds. RTC also acquired non-profit status and began a scholarship fundraiser. The successful plan to increase exposure of RTC, grow the membership, and keep the telecom issue in the forefront had a downside; board members were overworked and showed signs of burnout. Board members realized that it was time to hire a staff person. The idea for the VISTA position evolved out of meetings with Kristin Roach Johnson of North Coast Small Business Development Center (SBDC) and Dave Lyons of the Workforce Investment Board. They saw it as a way for RTC to move to the next level as an organization and possibly make the transition from an all-volunteer organization to one with a paid staff.

What are the strengths of the organization?

- The group has all the key elements of format: an annual event (Tech Expo), responsible board that shares work, and regular monthly meetings with clear agendas
- The group has an entrepreneurial, business like nature with a public benefit focus
- Outreach into the general public is effective and includes the ability to translate technological ideas and concepts into laymen's terms
- The monthly meetings provide opportunities for people to network and collaborate on projects
- There are multiple venues for public education including: monthly meetings, Tech Expo, community forums, and regular articles in printed media
- The fiber optic impasse was a unifying issue to rally behind

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- The board members have relationships with other community organizations and often serve on multiple boards, thus extending the sphere of RTC throughout the North Coast
- RTC is the voice of the technology business community and draws new people (with their businesses) to the region
- RTC membership includes a diversity of people and organizations

What are the weaknesses of the organization?

- RTC has done a lot with little money but it is apparent that lack of money limits what can be achieved
- Work gets top heavy; power resides in a few people, board members are overworked and nearing burnout
- Lack of willingness from the board to share and develop capacity of others
- No formal opportunities for members to participate
- There is a lack of direction and goals, lack of structure around the organization and procedures. Meetings can be full of jargon and therefore beyond understanding of participants
- There are too many businesses that should be involved with RTC but are not

Where do you see RTC going?

- Continuing path as a representative of the IT industry cluster, and helping to develop other industry clusters
- Hitting a plateau and becoming routine, status quo
- Gaining broad recognition by general public, becoming more mainstream
- Continuing with technology education for businesses and general public
- Faltering if current leaders step away
- Tech Expo will be on going

What is your vision for the organization?

- Leader in community development of the North Coast. Catalyst for a new rural economy based on a technology infrastructure
- Setting policy, respected sounding board
- Glue among all clusters; mentor for other similar organizations in other regions
- Providing a wide range of services utilizing the talents and skills of all members
- Technology incubator and business resource center
- Providing specific benefits for members
- Able to attract headliners to speak in our area; more professional development
- Inclusive of more women and under represented groups

Who are the most influential people within RTC?

- Always mentioned were Chris Crawford and Tina Nerat
- Often mentioned were John, Jim, Rene, Angie, Kristin

Who would you like to see involved/included?

- More local business including mid range and larger employers; also governmental, agency, and local schools; other clusters
- Other technology besides computer-based technology (i.e. alternative energy)
- Research and development
- More active involvement by current members through a committee structure
- Representatives from industry giants (Apple, Microsoft, HP)
- Specific people: Nancy Streufert, Bob Morse, someone from HSU
- More students (HSU, CR, K-12)

Who is left out?

- Seniors
- Students
- Natural resource cluster (dairy, forestry, fisheries)
- Tribes
- Government (city, county)
- Alternative energy

What are the most pressing concerns in the current organization?

1. Within the North Coast community:
 - Sounding in on general plans (county and city)
 - More competition among service providers
 - Economic development through stimulation of the technology sector
2. Within the organization:
 - Distribution of leadership tasks; identify and develop new leaders
 - Clear sense of purpose; mission statement, strategic plan and action plan
 - Increase the RTC identity in community (marketing)
 - Committee structure for more member participation

How did you first become involved?

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- Read about it in the newspaper (Tech Beat articles); heard advertisement for Tech Expo on radio; found web page when researching region prior to relocating
- From Larry Goldberg; Chris Crawford; Kristin Roach Johnson; other co-worker
- Ran for political office on a technology platform

What motivates you to stay involved?

- Regional economic benefits are important
- Exciting, vibrant, and passionate organization
- Networking, social opportunities, being active in community
- Growth potential of organization
- Getting results
- Importance of education and learning

What changes would you like to see in RTC?

- Organizational development
 - more structure
 - maturity
 - transparency
 - defined roles
- Privacy policy
- Larger membership
- Paid staff

What are the gaps?

- Within the organization
 - No documentation
 - Lack of home base for RTC stuff (files, Tech Expo banners, etc.)
 - Cultivation and development of board members
 - Committee structure
 - Volunteers
 - Funding
- Within the Community
 - More pro-active role in prosperity movement with other clusters
 - Larger industries are not represented

What concrete steps need to be taken to move forward as an organization?

- Organizational development

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- Develop board policies
- Create staff job descriptions
- Hire Executive Director
- Create Action plan
- Hire VISTA
- Create committee Structure
- Identify funding streams
- Diversify the base of membership
- Spread to other regions and find leaders
- Consider partnering possibilities with another organization
- Start Tech Expo planning by end of summer

Who else should I be talking too?

- From Community Partners and Education: Jacqueline Debets, Libby Maynard, J Hockaday, Maggie Gainer, John Sapper or Cathy Dickerson, Roland Richmond, Casey Crabill, Ray Geary, Larry Hansen (Eureka High teacher), students (K-12 & college)
- Folks with a finger on the pulse of the community: Jamie Flowers (KHSU), Kevin Hoover, Jennifer Morey
- Members: Larry Goldberg, Carl Birks, Angie Schwab, Don Wolski, Bob Morse, Fred Shinnick, Sean Ennis, Laine Strobe, Tony Williams, and rank and file of membership
- Business: Sun Valley, Radio Shack, hospital administration, Hilyard lamps, Amulet Manufacturing, Six Rivers Solar, American Hydroponics, Rick Littlefield of Eureka Natural Foods, SHN Engineering, Joan Rainwater-Gish, new businesses and other businesses that are not members

What other questions should I be asking?

- Strategic planning 101
 - Who are we?
 - What are we?
 - Where are we going?
 - Who are our customers?
- What will you do for RTC? What skills do you bring?
- What kind of benefits would you expect as a member?
- Who are the opinion leaders and what do they think?
- What are other regions doing?
 - What other communities should we look to as role models?

Other comments?

- Sustainability, how do we do it?
 - How are we going to fund this new step?

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- RTC could become a brokerage service
 - The RTC formula is shifting and changing; it could get bumpy
 - Leadership burnout and board succession is a concern
- Education
 - RTC could take the lead on technology education in region
 - Is this community becoming computer literate?
 - What educational roles will RTC play in community; literacy or skill development?
- Local businesses are behind the rest of the world in Technology use
- How do we align members that have technology support skills with business and school that need the help?
- An issue is important to unite and engage members
- It could be a mistake to define RTC as just Information Technology. Keep the definition of technology broad
- There isn't a common calendar that lists all of the local computer classes
- RTC is win-win for everyone

2. RTC Membership Interviews

How long have you been a member of RTC?

- 2 months, since the beginning, and one person was not a member yet (but attending meetings since February)

How did you find out about RTC?

- Larry Goldberg
- Chris Crawford
- Word of mouth
- Teach Beat articles

What is the greatest appeal or potential appeal of the organization?

- Education
- Advocacy
- Networking
- Community and economic development
- Collaboration

What benefits should RTC provide for a membership?

- None – networking and speakers enough
- Business consulting/services/incubator
- Resources/directory
- Group health insurance
- Advertising
- Opportunities for participation

What are the benefits of RTC membership?

- Monthly meetings
 - Networking
 - Education
 - Information exchange
 - Trends/What's new
 - Advertising
 - Small business development opportunities
- Outreach

- Tech Expo
- Tech Beat Articles
- Wired Scholarship
- Website/Directory/Tech Expo
 - Advertising
 - Resources
- Sense of goodwill associated with RTC in community

What should RTC pay more attention to?

- Economic Development
 - Business education and development
 - Job development
- Education
 - Computer literacy
 - Maximizing use of technology in businesses
 - Using Technology better
 - Community leaders and policy makers (tend to be generalists)
- Community Development
 - Drawing people away from their computer screens and talking to one another
 - Collaborations within local region and outside of region
- Organizational Development
 - Creating a broad mission
 - Creating a community minded vision
 - Having a socially responsible charter

Do you have any negative impressions about RTC?

- Organization/Structure
 - Not sure what the purpose of RTC is (a shell looking for a core)
 - RTC is blurring into a chamber of commerce look alike
 - Introductions at well attended meetings take too long and tired of hearing about same people (suggests quarterly introductions)
 - Not enough roles for members
- Image
 - Website not spiffy enough for a technology group and lacking dynamic content
 - Tech Expo at Redwood Acres is bad idea, don't do it again
 - Group is too mediocre, there has to be a sense of excellence and pride
 - Negative impression within the community: techies pitted against 'good ol' boys' and industry
- Board members
 - Leadership burnout

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- Concern that RTC is a personal project of certain board members
- Some board members aren't pulling their weight
- Have seen and heard about infighting between board members
- None
- Spouse felt unwelcome at social gatherings
- Concerned that RTC will attract large technology companies to the North Coast

What do you think could be improved about the organization?

- Get out the RTC message
 - Outreach and Education
 - Recruitment (including youth)
 - Website
- Utilize the members
 - What are the skills and talents?
 - How can they participate?
 - Development of future board members
- On track, continue as you are doing

What stands between you and greater participation in RTC?

- Time of meetings (suggests occasional meetings at lunch or other days)
- Other commitments (family, school, work, volunteer)
- No defined structure to volunteer, don't know what to do
- Don't really know what group is doing
- Fear of being consumed
- Participation is not a requirement of membership

Do you have other comments or suggestions?

- Want to have economic development while maintaining small town feel and beauty of area
- Promote Humboldt Co.
- It is difficult to conduct business in Humboldt Co.
- Work with other clusters
- Keep awareness of RTC and local technology issues ramped-up. Feels like it is fading
- What does it mean to be a member of RTC? What is the incentive?
- Educate youth
- General positive vibes about RTC; same vibes for Chris Crawford
- Who are the next board members?
- Infrastructure is needed so that members can participate

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- Have follow-up interviews; make it a dialog; keep feedback moving and put this report on the website
- Appreciates that members are being asked their opinions
- RTC could lose its appeal if it tries to be all things to all people.

3. RTC Community Partners

What is the greatest appeal or potential appeal of RTC?

- RTC brings together different segments of the community
 - To educate
 - To provide organization for advocacy
 - To provide opportunities for networking
 - To facilitate creative use of technology in region

What are the strengths of RTC?

- Advocacy and keeping issues at the forefront
- Education
- Energized membership
- Independent
- Focused on organizational goals and not self promotion

What are the weaknesses?

- Same small group of people doing most of the work
- Some of the leadership is experiencing burnout
- Not enough energy on infrastructure development

What is the role of RTC in the community?

- Technology-based economic development
 - As Information and Technology (IT) cluster representative
 - As an advocate for technology on the North Coast
 - Through community education
 - By cultivating creativity and innovation
 - Through networking and collaboration

How can RTC and the local university and college work together?

- Humboldt State University
 - Create more opportunities for HSU staff to interact with RTC membership in a non-threatening way (volleyball game at picnic)
 - Identify key HSU people that RTC could form mutually beneficial relationships with (Industrial Technology Chair at HSU)
 - Consider HSU as a future site for Tech Expo

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- College of the Redwoods
 - RTC should be the voice that drives the local community college to meet the educational needs of community
 - RTC and CR are already connected at the hip!
 - Distance education is a big black hole, how can RTC help?
- Both
 - Create mentoring opportunities between local businesses and students
 - Continued collaborative advocacy for technology education in region and for technology infrastructure
 - Connecting RTC members with services offered by higher education
 - Publicly acknowledge locally developed talent (graduates from HSU and CR)
 - RTC could provide workforce for higher education and community businesses

What could RTC be doing in this community?

- Education
 - Computer literacy
 - Skills development and enhancement
 - Maximize use of technology by business
 - Community interest workshops and education (PhotoShop)
 - Helping to create opportunities for successful lives
- RTC should be asking itself what it wants to be when it grows up. Is RTC a technology club with an agenda or a service provider?

Who is left out?

- No one
- The people who don't know about us
- The people who know about us but don't know what we do or how we could benefit them
- The name keeps people out. For many people, technology and computer are synonymous
- Politicians, from the Board of Supervisors and city councils to state legislators

Who would you like to see involved?

- SBC and CalTrans (they should have their "ear-to-the-track")
- Business people are important, they are the "canary-in-the-mine". If they can't see the benefit, they won't be there. (Is RTC providing enough benefit for businesses?)

What motivates people to become involved?

- Engaging topics/issues

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- Kinship
- Personal interests
- Belief in what it stands for

Other comments?

- Need to spend time creating a vision and strategic plan
 - What are we?
 - What is our product/service?
 - How do we do this?
- Consider alternative organizational models. (If what you are looking at is a profitable business, someone else would be doing it. RTC needs to figure out a new way to make it work.)
 - Partnering up with another mission stressed organization?
 - Rotating host model?
 - Cooperative?
 - Fee for service?
- Spread the wealth of work to membership
- Education should have defined outcomes
- Serious concern about future of organization when current board members move on
 - Need to ask if RTC is successful because of the idea or because of the leadership?
 - Current leaders need to mentor future leaders

4. Non-Member Individuals and Businesses Interviews

There were not enough non-member interviews (only four) to get a strong indication of themes. Interesting and useful feedback included disappointment regarding web page, resource directory, and inability to find RTC events (wrong times listed for Tech Expo, couldn't find HCOE). Although a sample of 4 is hardly enough to reveal actual themes, it appears that people have heard of RTC and don't have negative impressions. More random non-member interviews could reveal specific problems with product recognition and specific services desired by businesses for technological information and education.

Are you familiar with RTC?

- Yes (at least some familiarity)

Have you had an opportunity to join in the past?

- None of the people interviewed have attempted to join

What have you heard about RTC?

- RTC is a collection of groups and individuals in technology field that are supporting and promoting a technology-based economy
- Teacher at school tells class about RTC events
- Knowledge of RTC has been through the website. The website has been disappointing.

What is your impression about RTC?

- Meetings have boring parts and interesting parts
- Don't have an impression

How could a local technology group assist your business?

- Fundraising
- More technology jobs/contracts
- Change in ordinances/laws
- Haven't found a practical reason

What benefits would RTC have to offer for you to join and stay?

- Wants opportunity to discuss issues off the beaten path
- Specific information about doing business in this region

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- Opportunities for collaborative work
- Mentoring

Do you have any comments or questions?

- Some feel intimidated by esoteric, insider feel of group
- Get correct times printed in paper for Tech Expo; also signs and maps for monthly meetings
- Create off-shoots to cover specific issues of interest
- We want to contribute to the community. We are current members of Eureka Chamber and will be joining Arcata Chamber next.