Though hardly the first political campaign to use data and analytics to its advantage, Obama’s 2008 campaign ushered in a new era of political campaigning.

During the ‘08 cycle, Obama for America raised over $650 million in individual contributions — over three times as much as Republican candidate John McCain. The campaign also took home more than twice as many
electoral college votes as McCain, thanks in large part to a massive, data-driven effort to ensure turnout by likely Democratic voters who might otherwise have stayed home.

Michael Slaby (pictured right) served as CTO of Obama for America in 2008, and rejoined the campaign as Chief Integration and Innovation Officer in 2012. After the 2012 campaign, he started working quietly with social impact
organizations hoping to leverage technology to build social movements like the one that helped elect President Obama.

Making movement-building scalable

His Chicago-based startup, Timshel, has developed a tech platform called The Groundwork that's designed to assist with every aspect of movement building, from content delivery and stakeholder engagement to event management, fundraising, data collection, analytics and operations. The idea is to make cause-based social engagement scalable, giving small (and local) nonprofits and charities access to the same kinds of tools as those employed by massive political operations — like Obama’s 2012 campaign, which employed 300 staffers on the analytics, digital operations and data side — without the need for hundreds of dedicated team members.

Though you may not have heard of Timshel before, it’s quite possible that you’ve actually encountered The Groundwork. It is already in use “on massive scale” by the Hillary Clinton campaign, said Slaby. USA for UNHCR (the UN’s refugee agency) and Fabretto — a Nicaraguan nonprofit serving about 20,000 children — also currently use the platform.

In addition to providing software, Timshel works with organizations to build the kind of culture in which technological advances are not only welcomed but fully embraced. After all, no piece of software can change an organization on its own. To illustrate this, Slaby cites his first encounter with USA for UNHCR.
“They came to us and said, ‘We want to do what Obama did,’ and I said, ‘That’s awesome!’” said Slaby, who offered to travel to Geneva to meet the organization's digital team.

At the time, representatives from the organization replied that they didn’t have a dedicated digital team.

In many cases, retrofitting an existing organization with a technology division can entail extensive restructuring as well as a change in thinking on the part of the organization itself. But in order to ensure that an organization's new digital capabilities serve its broader mission, Timshel works hard at tying data and analytics to program growth and real-world impact.

“Helping organizations really understand and optimize around the problem they’re solving is actually pretty hard,” said Slaby. “They don’t have Dan Wagner [Obama analytics guru and founder of Civis Analytics]

Civis Analytics

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] chewing through data and trying to figure all this stuff out.”

In order to understand the digital needs of social impact organizations of different sizes, Slaby has spent much of the past few years talking with organizations — at one point he was traveling around Nicaragua in the back of a pickup truck alongside Fabretto staffers.
How The Groundwork works

The Groundwork is essentially a JS-based, customizable set of APIs and microservices built to address the needs of a social impact operation. In recognition of the fact that every organization has different needs, one of its key features is that organizations can easily build new modules on top of the service.

The reasoning behind this approach, said Slaby, is that many organizations currently find themselves having to choose between buying a complete suite of services that may not fit their needs, or build a whole new infrastructure from scratch, which they may not be equipped to do.

A Chicago resident since graduating from Brown in 2001, Slaby said the city has a unique blend of entrepreneurship and social impact-focused thinking that makes it a perfect home base for a company like Timshel. More than half of the company’s team works out of its Chicago headquarters, with other staffers spread across the world.

https://www.builtinchicago.org/2016/04/07/obama-cto-timshel-clinton-un
As nonprofits keep getting smarter about leveraging technology and an increasing number of companies start seeing social responsibility as part of their identity, Slaby believes we’ll start seeing solutions to problems once thought too large to tackle.

“The concept of an intractable, unsolvable problem feels antiquated to me,” he said.

_images via Timshel._

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