



# BREAKING NEW GROUND: USING THE INTERNET TO SCALE

**A CASE STUDY OF KaBOOM!**  
By Heather McLeod Grant and Katherine Fulton

Created by  
Monitor Institute  
[www.monitorinstitute.com](http://www.monitorinstitute.com)

### >> EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

KaBOOM! is an award-winning 14-year-old national nonprofit based in Washington, D.C., that aspires to create a “great place to play within walking distance of every child.” Best known for building playgrounds in low-income communities, the organization is now breaking new ground with an online approach to scale.

Rejecting the “local chapter” approach to growth favored by many nonprofits, KaBOOM! is instead using the internet to disseminate its model, empowering local communities to build their own playgrounds using free resources and guidelines on the KaBOOM! website. What KaBOOM! has learned while pioneering this path is informative for any organization that wants to use technology to increase its impact.

By taking an online approach, KaBOOM! has dramatically increased its outcomes while lowering its direct costs. In 2009, its online outreach efforts helped people build more than 1,600 do-it-yourself (DIY) playgrounds in communities around the U.S.—almost as many as the nonprofit has assembled directly over the past 14 years. Today, local communities build 10 KaBOOM!-influenced playgrounds for each one KaBOOM! builds itself. Clearly, online leverage is not limited to the for-profit world.

KaBOOM! is not the only nonprofit using the internet strategically. Many organizations are experimenting with new ways of engaging supporters using online tools. But most efforts focus on getting people to donate money or time, rather than on enabling them to self-organize. And while the idea of giving away an organizing model isn’t new—Alcoholics Anonymous and Mothers Against Drunk Driving both take this approach—relying on online tools is innovative and enables much faster scale.

Based on a two-month study of KaBOOM! and ongoing research in this area, Monitor Institute has identified seven lessons for nonprofits that want to use the internet to evangelize their model:

1. Keep it simple and concrete.
2. Treat your online strategy as mission-critical.
3. Build your own technical competency.
4. Nurture your online community via its leaders.
5. Create incentives for action.
6. Give up credit to increase your impact.
7. Care more about real-world outcomes than online metrics.

This approach is not without its challenges. KaBOOM! has had to forfeit some control, restructure its organization, and rethink its business model. Yet the reward has been far greater than the cost. By persevering, KaBOOM! has accelerated its growth and affected the lives of many more children and communities.

#### OUR METHODOLOGY

Monitor Institute is interested in innovative approaches to creating social impact, including the growing use of networks.<sup>1</sup> So when KaBOOM! asked us to analyze and codify the lessons it has learned in using the internet to scale its program model, we agreed. Our mutual goal is to share the experience of KaBOOM! with the social sector so that other nonprofits can understand the benefits—and challenges—of this emerging approach.

This case study is not based on a formal evaluation of KaBOOM! practices, nor has Monitor Institute worked with KaBOOM! on strategy development. Rather, we have tried to present an objective view of the KaBOOM! model, combined with our own take on the context in which this experiment is playing out. KaBOOM! paid Monitor to write this case study, but Monitor had final say over its content.

To assist with the report, KaBOOM! gave Monitor access to its senior staff and many of its internal documents. We also consulted

outside experts and drew upon our own experience in this area. The appendix contains a complete list of the documents we sourced and interviews we conducted, along with the authors’ bios and a brief description of Monitor Institute.

KaBOOM! and Monitor understand that this document is only a snapshot of a strategy that continues to evolve in a fast-changing landscape. No doubt, KaBOOM! has many lessons yet to learn. Still, we believe its story already has significant value.

Both organizations invite questions or feedback. For questions about the case study, please email [heather\\_grant@monitor.com](mailto:heather_grant@monitor.com); for questions or feedback directed to KaBOOM!, please e-mail [casestudy@kaboom.org](mailto:casestudy@kaboom.org).

1. For more information about Monitor Institute’s research into “network” approaches to social change, visit our blog at [www.workingwikiply.net](http://www.workingwikiply.net).

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/>

### >> WELCOME TO KaBOOM!

To get to the KaBOOM! headquarters, located in a nondescript building on Connecticut Avenue in outer Washington, D.C., you have to take an unassuming path: ride an elevator down to the basement, then continue along a drab gray hallway. There is no indication that you've arrived at a nationally known and award-winning nonprofit.<sup>2</sup> Instead, there's just a discreet panel on the wall.

Then you enter the office, and everything changes. You step into a playground-like space: a slide, a tire swing, and sports balls fill the lobby. Walls are purple with bright orange trim, and green IKEA canopies arch over desks. The receptionist's desk is covered in toys—Koosh balls, bobbleheads, stuffed animals—in a theme that echoes all the way to CEO Darell Hammond's office, where his own desk looks more like that of a kindergarten teacher than of a leading nonprofit executive.



*KaBOOM! lobby and reception area*

And, despite being in a basement, the entire KaBOOM! office is filled with sunlight. The building is perched on the side of a wooded ravine; its windows are a wall of glass facing onto an offshoot of D.C.'s Rock Creek Park.

Learning about KaBOOM! offers a similar revelation. Behind a deceptively modest façade lies a highly innovative and effective nonprofit.

Founded in 1996 by Hammond with \$25,000, KaBOOM! today has 81 employees and an annual budget of close to \$20 million.<sup>3</sup> Last year alone, its online outreach efforts helped people build more than 1,600 do-it-yourself (DIY) playgrounds in communities around the U.S.—almost as many as the nonprofit has assembled directly over the past 14 years. To date, KaBOOM! has helped to transform more than 6,100 neighborhoods across the U.S.

KaBOOM! has also helped to revolutionize the playground-building industry in the U.S., making it less commercial and more focused on community engagement.

**“The best social entrepreneurs change the equilibrium.”**

“The best social entrepreneurs change the equilibrium,” says board member Jonathan Greenblatt, who founded Ethos Water and now teaches a class on social entrepreneurship at UCLA's Anderson School of Management.<sup>4</sup> “KaBOOM! epitomizes that. Fifteen years ago, before they got started, playground building was

directed almost entirely by contractors. Today, community direction is a norm and community builds are very common.”<sup>5</sup>

The origins of KaBOOM! are humble. As a young boy, founder Hammond was himself the recipient of nonprofit services—an experience that has shaped his personal commitment to this cause. Raised in

2. KaBOOM! and Hammond have been recognized for excellence by Amazon.com, the Peter F. Drucker Foundation, and Harvard Business School. The nonprofit has also received the Children's Mental Health Award, a Chairman's Commendation from the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, the Golden Halo Award of the Cause Marketing Forum, and the Director's Award from the Committee to Encourage Corporate Philanthropy Excellence.

3. KaBOOM! annual report, 2009.

4. Greenblatt referenced the article written by Roger L. Martin and Sally Osberg of the Skoll Foundation, “Social Entrepreneurship: The Case for Definition,” published in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Spring '07.

5. Based on reports from equipment manufacturers, KaBOOM! estimates that one in five playgrounds in the U.S. are now built using a community volunteer model.

a children's home with his seven siblings in Mooseheart, IL, Hammond went on to attend college but dropped out after learning he was dyslexic. He began working with community service organizations around the country, eventually moving to Washington, D.C., where he led local service projects, including a few early experiments with building playgrounds.<sup>6</sup>

Not long after his arrival, *The Washington Post* ran a story about two kids who had been playing inside an abandoned car on a hot summer day, became trapped, and died—all because they lacked a safe place to play. Hammond was moved and decided to act. Along with a friend, Dawn Hutchison, he founded KaBOOM!. Among their first projects was a playground in the low-income neighborhood where the children died. They rallied community members to help out.

From the outset, KaBOOM! focused on mobilizing people. As with Habitat for Humanity, volunteers did much of the work and were inspired by the tangible results. A house takes weeks to build, however, while a playground takes as little as a day—a process KaBOOM! has molded into its signature high-energy experience.<sup>7</sup> Volunteers converge on an empty lot in the morning, and by sunset there is a new, safe playspace. Over the preceding months of planning, the community has come together around a common goal; seeing their dream fulfilled sparks new, grander visions.

“It’s very emotional at the end of a build day,” says Kate Becker, a vice president who oversees playground building. “There are tears and disbelief among the people who planned this. They recognize that they are part of the change that can happen in their community.”

This idea is central to the KaBOOM! “theory of change.” The organization seeks to build connections and social capital in the neighborhoods it touches, so that newly empowered groups will go on to solve other local problems. The philosophy is heavily influenced by the Asset-Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University—and the ABCD staff, in turn, has helped to document the positive impact of a KaBOOM! playground project on the surrounding community.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, KaBOOM! aspires to catalyze a national movement for children’s right to play and to reinvigorate low-income communities in the process. It has won many high-profile supporters. “Organizations like KaBOOM! are necessary not just to the health of our children, but to the health of the entire nation,” said First Lady Michelle Obama in a speech at a KaBOOM! playground build last year.<sup>9</sup>



*Michelle Obama at a KaBOOM!-led playground build*

**“Organizations like KaBOOM! are necessary not just to the health of our children, but to the health of the entire nation.”**

6. Hammond’s personal narrative is part of the KaBOOM! founding story; it has been documented in several Harvard Business School case studies and is described in more detail in his forthcoming book, *Cascading Steps of Courage: An Entrepreneur’s Journey to Save Play*.  
7. Initially the playground builds took more than one day to execute, but the process has been honed over time. The excitement of a KaBOOM! Build Day was featured in a recent episode of the NBC comedy *Parks and Recreation* with only slight exaggeration—an example of the organization’s knack for publicity.  
8. In a 2008 survey, the ABCD found that 94 percent of participants in KaBOOM! projects—and 90 percent of participants in do-it-yourself projects—“believe that their playground project helped strengthen relationships among neighborhood residents and among community partners.” More than half of each group responded that the “project expanded their capacity to address other community issues.” Deborah Puntteney, *KaBOOM! Building Communities One Playground at a Time*, final evaluation report.  
9. Obama was the third First Lady to attend KaBOOM! playground builds, after Hillary Clinton and Laura Bush. She has also endorsed the tools on the KaBOOM! website, and KaBOOM! has consulted on her Let’s Move campaign against childhood obesity.

### >> SCALING UP: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH

The current success at KaBOOM! was hard-won. The organization's early years were typical of many nonprofit startups: a small staff struggled to deliver programs while developing a sustainable revenue base.

At first, the nonprofit imagined it would rely on private foundations—only to find that funders felt play was a luxury compared to other social causes.<sup>10</sup> So the organization modeled itself on groups such as Habitat for Humanity and Dan Palotta's Teamworks, a producer of fundraising events such as the AIDS Rides.



Discover Card employees at a KaBOOM!-led playground build

Under a model KaBOOM! calls “fee for service,” the nonprofit looked to provide value to corporations. Businesses would underwrite most costs of a local playground build and KaBOOM! would perform all the project management: organizing corporate and community volunteers, engaging neighborhood nonprofits, and securing other resources.<sup>11</sup>

Overall, this model worked well. KaBOOM! had steady double-digit growth for the first decade, engaging such high-profile corporate funders as The Home Depot, Target, Sprint, JetBlue, and Ben & Jerry's.<sup>12</sup> But around 2004, KaBOOM! hit an inflection point that is typical for many nonprofits seeking to increase their impact: it realized it wasn't growing fast enough to match the scale of the issue it had chosen to address.

**“We were building hundreds of playgrounds when we needed to be building thousands.”**

“We were doing great on the core model,” says COO Bruce Bowman. “But the reality was, we were only making a dent in the problem. We were building hundreds of playgrounds when we needed to be building thousands.”

Moments like this are a critical crossroads for ambitious nonprofit startups.<sup>13</sup> Many begin with an innovative service model: helping low-income teens graduate from high school, for instance, or getting more people into housing. But growth quickly becomes complicated: either the founders don't have the management skills, or the drive, or they can't raise enough capital.<sup>14</sup> Very few nonprofits reach above \$1 million in scale.<sup>15</sup>

10. KaBOOM! disagrees and cites scholars who have documented that play is critical to a functioning society. It contributes to children's social, physical, emotional, and intellectual well-being (Sallis & Glanz, 2006; McKenzie et al, 2000; Farley et al, 2007; Cole-Hamilton, Harrop, Street, 2001; Burdette & Whitaker, 2005). Recent reports from Stanford University have reinforced these findings (*Building Generation Play*, Stanford University, 2007), and the issue has gained new urgency with the rise in childhood obesity.
11. Corporations may build playgrounds for many reasons: cause marketing, local brand recognition, team-building for their own employees, etc. Typically, the community is asked to raise at least 10 percent of the funding, so that local volunteers also are invested in the project's success.
12. For a more detailed case study on the organization's evolution and a focus on its corporate funding, see the July 2002 Harvard Business School case study, “KaBOOM,” by James Austin.
13. Monitor Institute has consulted with many nonprofits working to scale their model, and as part of parent Monitor Group has worked with New Profit Inc. and mezzanine-stage social entrepreneurs. We've helped these nonprofits develop their strategies, including models for direct and leveraged impact. Additionally, Heather McLeod Grant observed a similar pattern among the 12 high-impact nonprofits she and Leslie Crutchfield studied for their book, *Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact Nonprofits* (Jossey-Bass, 2007).
14. The market for social capital has been studied over the past decade by both scholars and practitioners, including Clara Miller and George Overholser of the Nonprofit Finance Fund.
15. Approximately 90 percent of nonprofits have annual operating budgets of less than \$1 million, according to data from the National Center for Charitable Statistics. According to New Profit Inc. analysis, only 24 of 2,100 nonprofits founded since 1970 had reached a budget of \$20 million or more by 2004 (as quoted in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, “Way to Grow” by Ben Gose, Sept. 2007). A similar study by Bridgespan looked at how many youth-serving nonprofits had reached \$50 million in annual revenue: only 144 of 200,000 (“How Nonprofits Get Really Big,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* by William Foster and Gail Fine). By all accounts, it is incredibly difficult to scale up in the social sector.

Traditionally, nonprofits have taken a franchise or affiliate approach to address this dilemma, maintaining control but pushing the costs of expansion to the local level. This is also when some nonprofits begin to explore a more leveraged strategy to supplement their direct growth. Some will advocate for policy change; others try to transform market systems. Still others pursue a more “networked” approach to social change: rather than try to control everything themselves, they decide to evangelize their model and ask others to follow their example.<sup>16</sup>

When KaBOOM! hit its inflection point in 2004, the management team looked at its options. The traditional approaches to scale didn’t inspire them. “We talked about different ideas: chapters, affiliates, opening more offices around the country and managing them directly,” says Becker, the VP who oversees playground building. Nothing resonated. She recalls them asking, “‘Why don’t we just give away the model? We can’t do everything anyway. If we give it away, people can replicate it on their own.’”



*The KaBOOM! toolkit of handbooks, published to support playground builders before KaBOOM! moved its trainings to an online platform*

KaBOOM! knew that there was pent-up demand for its program in local communities. Each year, the nonprofit received thousands of requests from local groups to bring a playground to their neighborhood. In response, the nonprofit had already developed a number of tools and resources to support playground builders: it had documented and codified its building process, published handbooks, and developed a number of in-person training sessions for local leaders.

KaBOOM! was also an internet early adopter; it launched its first website in 1996. Some of its training materials were already online. But it had never fully committed to promoting these resources, nor to developing them into a full-blown program. Now, after 10 years of experimentation, Hammond and his team realized that their website could provide a natural vehicle for scaling.

The connection was, in part, serendipitous. Hammond had been looking at online wedding sites and noticed parallels with the playground-building process: both efforts took months of organization, coordinating multiple people and resources that all came together in a single day. If TheKnot.com could help couples to plan their perfect wedding, “Why couldn’t we help people plan a playground build same way, using online tools?” he asked.

Another strong influence was Meetup.com, which provides simple online tools for connecting groups of like-minded people for real-world activities. Hammond was inspired, too, by the philosophy of the open-source software movement. He believed that all KaBOOM! tools should be free for anyone to adopt—or adapt. This combination formed the core of an emerging innovation: a nonprofit that codifies its processes into a step-by-step website that helps groups to self-organize in the real world.

The KaBOOM! board endorsed Hammond’s strategy in 2005, but big questions loomed. Would free online tools cannibalize the fee-for-service business that was the organization’s lifeblood? How would they fund the tools, anyway? Was this plan sustainable?

Says COO Bowman: “We were writing the book.”

>> See online platform examples on pages 15 & 16:  
**UNDER THE HOOD OF KaBOOM.ORG**

16. This framework for leveraged strategies draws upon research in *Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact Nonprofits*. A number of the 12 nonprofits studied in that research pursued a looser “network” strategy rather than a more traditional franchise or affiliate model. For example, the Exploratorium gave away its model and trained others on how to start similar interactive museums in their local communities. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities trained local state groups on its approach rather than seeking to expand directly. Alcoholics Anonymous and Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) are perhaps the most well-known organizations to scale by simply disseminating their ideas and letting others self-organize around the model. See also, “Scaling Social Impact: Strategies for Spreading Social Innovations,” Greg Dees, Beth Anderson, and Jane Wei-Skillern, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Spring 2004.

### >> INTEGRATING ONLINE AND OFFLINE STRATEGIES

It is worth remembering where internet technology was six years ago, when KaBOOM! first conceptualized this approach. What we now think of as Web 1.0 got rolling in the mid-1990s and extended into the early 2000s. Nonprofits like KaBOOM! put up websites with information about their organizations (mission, programs, board, staff, annual reports, etc.) and started using tools like email to communicate with donors, raise money, or update supporters. It was a one-to-many model.

By the mid-2000s, technology companies were empowering users to generate content, connect with one another through social networking sites, and collaborate and share knowledge. This is the wave of innovation we've come to call Web 2.0—enabling more powerful many-to-many communication with the launch of services such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, and opening up new opportunities to rethink nonprofit strategies and operations.

The majority of nonprofits are only now beginning to recognize the implications of Web 2.0, and adoption varies greatly. At one end of the spectrum are new online marketplaces—GlobalGiving, DonorsChoose, VolunteerMatch, and others—with strategies based purely or mostly on Web 2.0. Such sites connect funders to recipients, or volunteers to opportunities. The online micro-lending site Kiva is one of the best known, in part because of how quickly it scaled.

At the other end of the spectrum are traditional nonprofits that live primarily in the offline world. Think of a group like Feeding America, where resources are focused on providing face-to-face services. Such organizations may use the internet to raise funds or sign up volunteers, but new technology hasn't affected their basic program model. For them, the internet is not so different from the telephone or direct mail.



KaBOOM! was attempting a new hybrid approach: it wanted to keep its established offline model while also adapting it for online use in an attempt to scale faster and cheaper. Unlike traditional nonprofits, it would use the internet as a bona fide organizing tool. Unlike Kiva, it wanted users to take real-world action. Unlike VolunteerMatch—or even Meetup, which it studied closely—it wanted people to do something very specific: build a community playground.

**“It felt like the natural next step.”**

Says Hammond: “We saw no examples of nonprofits using online platforms to empower people to self-organize around the *nonprofit’s own model* for community change. But to us, it felt like the natural next step.”

The approach is more familiar today because of Barack Obama’s successful 2008 presidential campaign, which famously leveraged online tools to mobilize supporters for offline action—neighborhood canvassing, local phone banks, house parties.

Recently, other nonprofits have begun to experiment along the same lines. For example, both the Surfrider Foundation and Ocean Conservancy help website users to organize real-world action such as cleaning up beaches.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, groups like MomsRising are shifting from a model in which the action happens mainly online (signing a petition, for instance) to one that engages supporters in direct local action.<sup>18</sup>

17. We met both of these organizations through our work with the Packard Foundation, exploring the connection between philanthropy and networks.

18. Thanks to social media expert Allison Fine for this example, which will be included in her forthcoming book, *The Networked Nonprofit: Connecting with Social Media to Drive Change*, co-authored with Beth Kanter (Jossey-Bass, July 2010).

KaBOOM!'s attempts to integrate online and offline operations offer a hint of what the future holds. New technologies challenge nonprofit leaders to shift to more networked ways of working, characterized by principles of greater transparency, openness, distributed action, and engagement.<sup>19</sup> But this shift doesn't come without challenges.

In recent interviews with 18 nonprofit leaders, Monitor Institute unearthed many concerns about how technology has challenged existing organizational leadership, structures, cultures, and business models.<sup>20</sup> And certainly, the transition hasn't been painless for KaBOOM!.

### >> MANAGING THROUGH CHANGE

Like any nonprofit breaking new ground, KaBOOM! had no "best practice" to copy when it started to implement its new strategy. The nonprofit had to learn by doing. "We've probably made every mistake there is," says COO Bowman. "We're just trying not to make any of them twice."

**We've probably made every mistake there is. We're just trying not to make any of them twice.**

KaBOOM! had a false start with its new management structure, for instance. What began in 2005 as three separate departments—online, advocacy, and marketing—proved unwieldy and was combined into a single group dubbed Mass Action. "Having three silos limited our collaboration and increased costs," says Jim Hunn, a vice president who now leads Mass Action. "Today we're a single department with a shared priority: to drive people to use our online tools."

KaBOOM! also had a hard time finding the right people to run its website. "The first person we put in charge was a nonprofit person who didn't get the technology," says Hammond. "He was excellent at partnerships, but he didn't know social media." Then, he says, KaBOOM! hired someone who was focused on technology but "didn't get the organizing piece."

Lately the organization seems to have found a balance, with a full-time website staff of six who are equally at home on playgrounds and online—and who have a mandate to tap the skills not just of Mass Action colleagues, but of every KaBOOM! employee.

The biggest challenge has been figuring out how KaBOOM! can fund its online strategy in a sustainable way. Website development and online program support cost about \$2 million a year—only 10 percent of the nonprofit's total annual budget, but a large amount by any measure. Funding so far has come mainly via a \$14 million commitment from the Omidyar Network, the philanthropic investment firm founded by eBay pioneer Pierre Omidyar and his wife Pam. But KaBOOM! is required to transition to other sources.

Omidyar Network is highly comfortable with internet-centric investments—it has funded organizations from Meetup to DonorsChoose to the Wikimedia Foundation—but KaBOOM! has struggled to make its funding case to more traditional foundations. "For some foundations we're already too big," Hammond says. "For others, we're too risky. One person even told us that reading our concept paper was 'like reading a foreign language.'"

Hammond blames himself for failing to communicate the power of the internet: a dollar spent by KaBOOM! on online tools in 2009 helped to improve 10 times as many neighborhoods as a dollar spent more directly on playground equipment. To be sure, the impact of KaBOOM! varies from community to community—but the overall leverage is clear, and some foundations are being converted.

19. From "Working Wikily 2.0: Social Change with a Network Mindset," by Monitor Institute's Diana Searce, Gabriel Kasper, and Heather McLeod Grant.

20. As part of Monitor Institute's research into the future of membership and advocacy organizations, we interviewed 18 nonprofit leaders to surface qualitative themes, which we are now testing in a national survey. Results should be published this fall.

“By giving up direct control and growing its impact via an open-source methodology, KaBOOM! has a social return that **should** be appealing to more funders.”

“It’s easy [for a funder] to say, ‘We don’t build playgrounds,’ and not be responsive,” says Vince Stehle, a consultant to the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, which recently made a \$1.5 million commitment to KaBOOM! “From my perspective, KaBOOM! is a nonprofit that is high-impact and deserves another look. By giving up direct control and growing its impact via an open-source methodology, KaBOOM! has a social return that *should* be appealing to more funders.”

Monitor Institute is also observing increased philanthropic interest in network strategies, including the use of technology for greater impact. In addition to the Omidyar Network and the Knight Foundation, pioneers include the Barr Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Hawaii Community Foundation, and the David and Lucille Packard Foundation.<sup>21</sup>

Going forward, KaBOOM! is trying to add corporate funding to the online mix, offering branded campaigns that are built around online contests, cause marketing, or events such as its annual Play Day promotion. And KaBOOM! is venturing carefully into fundraising from individuals, leveraging the online social network that it is building out.

## >> **THE EMERGING LESSONS**

While KaBOOM! continues to work through these challenges, it is also eager to share what it has learned so far in the hopes that other nonprofits can move up the learning curve faster. With its assistance, and the consultation of several social-media experts,<sup>22</sup> Monitor Institute has extracted seven key lessons from the KaBOOM! experience. We believe they should inform any nonprofit seeking to leverage new technology in innovative ways—and we’ve included a sidebar on applying these ideas. (See “How Does This Apply To You?” on page 10.)

### **1 Keep it simple and concrete.**

In order to “give its model away” to DIY playground builders, KaBOOM! first had to understand, simplify, and codify how it builds playgrounds. Much of this work had been done long before: the KaBOOM! culture has always been obsessive about documentation—and about improving its processes every year. “From the beginning we had a principle that we were going to put everything we learned into binders and documents, so anyone could learn from it,” says Hammond.

Importantly, KaBOOM! recognized that the simpler it could make its model, the more easily it could train others—whether offline or online. Equally important, KaBOOM! decided not to try to control the DIY builds, nor to impose its brand in any way. DIYers may use the tools however they see fit.

It also helped that, at its core, KaBOOM! is promoting a very concrete outcome that anyone can relate to. Quite literally, it is child’s play.

21. For the past year, Monitor Institute has been facilitating a Network Funders Community of Practice, supported by the Hawaii Community Foundation and the Packard Foundation. Participants include a number of foundations that are interested in exploring these new, more networked ways of working both online and offline.

22. We are especially indebted to Eugene Kim of Blue Oxen Associates; Allison Fine and Beth Kanter, co-authors of the forthcoming book, *The Networked Nonprofit*; and Cynthia Gibson, consultant. They all underscored the importance of simplicity to scale. Beth has blogged on this topic at <http://beth.typepad.com>.

“Simplicity scales,” says Eugene Kim, of Blue Oxen Associations, an expert on collaboration. “Many nonprofits are emotionally attached to complexities in their frameworks that make them hard to communicate clearly and that act as a barrier to scaling. If you want to scale, you have to be willing to let go of those complexities.”

## 2 **Treat your online strategy as mission-critical.**

For KaBOOM!, online organizing is one of the main ways it achieves real-world impact. The nonprofit’s online tools don’t exist to support its other programs; they are at the very heart of the group’s mission. Online is not the icing, but the cake.

“A lot of organizations think that this ‘online stuff’ is outside of our core work, it’s a sideline,” says Chris Wolz, president of Forum One, a consulting firm that has helped KaBOOM! “Our view is that it’s not an add-on. This *is* the work.”

In some ways, KaBOOM! is still coming to grips with the significance of this shift, recognizing that it needs to support the online strategy as much as its fee-for-service builds. For example, it didn’t hire a person devoted solely to supporting its DIY builders until early 2010.

At the same time, the organization has invested in integrating online efforts with other offline programs, encouraging its staff to experiment with this new approach. Employees are constantly urged to spend time using its online tools—even to “adopt” specific DIY playground projects in their hometowns. This helps create a sense of connection across the offline and online strategies and reduce the tendency to silo the programs.

## 3 **Build your own technical competency.**

For years, KaBOOM! outsourced all the work on its online tools to third-party vendors—a typical approach for many nonprofits, who often feel they lack the expertise or resources to do their

# HOW DOES THIS >> APPLY TO YOU?

Is the KaBOOM! approach to scale—spreading its program via online tools—applicable to every nonprofit? Is it applicable to you? Monitor Institute believes it is too early to formulate a rigorous framework, but we can offer some rules of thumb. Online dissemination strategies seem to work best for nonprofits that:

- Deliver a program locally, mainly via volunteers
- Have a relatively simple program model
- Create procedures that are easy to teach and to learn
- Don’t need significant national infrastructure or brand
- Prefer to inspire and engage others, rather than to control them

Nonprofits that might use a similar approach to KaBOOM! include those that tutor children, run neighborhood watch programs, clean up parks, hold benefit “fun runs,” or cultivate community gardens, for example—essentially any activity that can be self-organized.

The aim should be to make it easier for others to copy what you’ve done and to build a network of mutual support. The better your online tools, the more likely others will follow your program model closely.

When does the promise of “giving away the model” online work less well?

It’s hard to envision a nonprofit that conducts cancer research putting its program online for anyone to copy—because medical research requires experts and labs. However, fundraising for the cancer cause *would* lend itself to online organizing, as would sharing research findings.

Groups like Feeding America, which requires national physical infrastructure (in this case, trucks and warehouses), might also find it harder to use online strategies to scale—although local food kitchens could benefit from shared best practices.

Other groups rely on a national profile for their effectiveness. Teach for America, for example, could be replicated locally—but without national recruiting efforts, and a national reputation, it would likely be less successful.

The key is figuring out which elements of the KaBOOM! online strategy apply to your organization. Can the internet help you share best practices with others? Could it help you get input on your approach? Might it help you aggregate useful knowledge, as KaBOOM! does with its Playspace Finder? Could you build a website that helps others to self-organize in their own communities?

These questions might lead you to new insights—and even, perhaps, to a new way to make a difference.

own website development. But this was a source of much frustration: KaBOOM! changed vendors; vendors changed platforms; and website requirements changed along the way. Each change cost money and caused delay, plus it created huge overhead in meetings and specification documents. The end result was seldom what KaBOOM! had envisioned.

In 2009 the management team finally brought technology development in-house, hiring its first software engineers. The switch has been a liberation. “If you’re developing a resource that is truly strategic, you shouldn’t outsource it,” says Laurence Hooper, who runs the online operation. “But also, as a practical matter, it’s hard to get what you want using contract resources. You cannot iterate quickly enough, you can’t have a sufficiently collaborative process, and it will cost significantly more.”

In addition to having more control over the technology development process, KaBOOM! also benefits from building its own internal capacity. It does this even more through constant iteration and rapid learning—a practice common in for-profit, internet-based companies like Google.

**“We know we won’t get it exactly right from the get-go.”**

“You just have to get something out there, then measure, test, and improve,” says Hooper. “We know we won’t get it exactly right from the get-go.”

As part of its 2009 shift, KaBOOM! also committed to using well-known open-source software platforms: Ruby on Rails for custom tools and Drupal for content management. Besides being cheap (it costs nothing to license the

software), this makes it easier to hire developers who are already familiar with these platforms and can get up to speed quickly.

Ultimately, by bringing development in-house and leveraging open-source platforms, KaBOOM! has “lowered program costs while directing our investment toward our own staff,” says Hooper.

### **4 Nurture your online community via its leaders.**

Online tools are only as powerful as the individuals and communities that use them. Many nonprofits and foundations think that if they just invest in building new tools, individuals will find and use them—but this is often a myth. Getting users to take full advantage of these tools is a full-time job, literally.

“Raising money, recruiting volunteers, and planning a playground build is a huge undertaking,” says Hooper. “Our DIY users need high-touch support.”

KaBOOM! focuses its efforts on the leaders of each DIY playground planning project. Besides recently hiring a full-time staff person to support them, Hammond has reached out personally to this self-selected group, sending messages of encouragement and making introductions to people who can assist them. Leaders who are making significant progress are invited to consult with KaBOOM! on how to make the online tools better.

And while KaBOOM! staff members still answer lots of technical questions from users, Hammond hopes that the builders will gradually start answering one another’s questions. To speed up this process, nearby projects and leaders will soon be identified to one another, in another attempt to strengthen connections in the online and offline network.

“They’re in a transition as an organization to more of a networked approach,” says social media expert Allison Fine. “But there are significant structural issues still to be overcome. The fact that users don’t really talk to one another, don’t teach one another or learn together, means that it is still a hub-and-spoke model.”

KaBOOM! is well-aware of this tension; Hooper says that 2010 is about letting the voice of the community—not the organization—dominate the online space.

### 5 Create incentives for action.

At the crux of getting people to take action in the real world is the ability to tap into their intrinsic motivations. “Self-organizing is a high hurdle,” says Jim Hunn, the vice president who runs Mass Action. “Every DIY playground project is like creating a mini-nonprofit. We’re increasingly focused on delivering both soft and hard incentives to reward self-organizers who keep their projects moving forward.”

**“We’re increasingly focused on delivering both soft and hard incentives to reward self-organizers who keep their projects moving forward.”**

Specifically, KaBOOM! is now developing an online, points-based recognition program to “reward” active volunteers. The idea was inspired by the devotion of users to startups such as Yelp and FourSquare, which are based on a similar concept of “reputation management.” The KaBOOM! website will soon offer different levels of recognition “badges” on the profiles of users who have done something significant, either online or offline.

KaBOOM! has also found that the chance of winning a relatively small financial contribution creates incentives for projects to compete against one another for more progress. A grant of \$1,000 to \$5,000 toward the purchase of playground equipment has motivated its DIYers, even if their entire playground can cost up to several hundred thousand dollars.<sup>23</sup>

Hunn has slated a series of these contests for 2010, all with modest prizes for achievable signs of momentum. For example, in a recent “Why We Need a Playground” video competition, self-organizers were given tips on producing a video to generate press. Many projects secured TV, newspaper, and online coverage, garnering new supporters and volunteers that will be critical to their success.

So far, these contests have sparked involvement by a wide range of communities, from schools in rich suburbs to family shelters in urban centers. All the contests target significant hurdles in organizing a playground build—getting initial buy-in and support, creating a design for the playground, and fundraising. Each entry helps move a project along further, faster.

“With a concrete intermediate goal, these leaders suddenly start to rally their whole community, including local media and local businesses, which they’ll need to make their project a success,” Hunn says. “It’s hugely encouraging. It’s a smaller version of our theory of change.”

### 6 Give up credit to increase your impact.

KaBOOM! has offered its online tools to other websites at no charge, only to find that inclusion of its own brand (or a funder’s brand) is regarded as unacceptable by some potential partners, who balk at any perceived co-opting of their own effort.

In 2008, for example, a corporate funder underwrote development of the playground database and KaBOOM! put the company’s logo on the tool in return. But after several organizations said they wouldn’t carry the branded tool on their websites, KaBOOM! nixed future sponsor recognition—making corporate funding harder to obtain.

23. KaBOOM! cited an example of a special-needs playground that competed for—and won—one of these small prizes for a build that will cost \$450,000. (The typical tab for a community playground is more like \$75,000 to \$125,000.)

In an effort to overcome this hurdle, KaBOOM! has since developed limited-time promotions with special “landing pages” for sponsors and is also targeting support from foundations that don’t expect logos everywhere. Still, finding the right balance remains a work in progress.

Meanwhile, KaBOOM! is working on true “white label” versions of its tools to ensure the widest possible adoption. “We don’t care whether we get any credit for it,” says Hammond. “We have two big aims when it comes to distribution: that our tools make a real difference in people’s lives, and that the resulting data, such as playground information, ends up in a central repository so that we can learn from it.”

### 7 Care more about real-world impact than online metrics.

KaBOOM! tracks an array of conventional website metrics, such as the number of unique visitors to the site, which grew by about 85 percent in 2009. But such measures do not accurately reflect what KaBOOM! *really* wants to know: the number of real-world playgrounds that are built by people using its tools to organize themselves—and the impact of these playgrounds on local children and communities.

“We had a real ‘aha’ moment last year,” says Hammond. “We started with a goal of raising our site traffic 10X, to 300,000 visitors per month. It was a pretty arbitrary number. Then we did some benchmarking, and noticed that only nonprofits with huge exposure, like the American Heart Association, reach that level.”

To hit 300,000 visitors, KaBOOM! would have to focus on “junk traffic”—people who might visit once but then would leave immediately and never come back. Instead, the nonprofit decided to focus on deeper engagement by the right people, and to change the metric to one that was more appropriate. “We realized what the real output of our online program is,” says Hammond. “It’s measured in the neighborhoods of our users.”

The nonprofit has commissioned external evaluations of its real-world impact and found that these projects—whether completed by KaBOOM! or a DIY group—benefit both the children who use the playgrounds and the larger communities that rally to build them.<sup>24</sup>

**“We started with a goal of raising our site traffic 10X, to 300,000 visitors per month.**

**Then we did some benchmarking, and noticed that only nonprofits with huge exposure, like the American Heart Association, reach that level.”**

24. Deborah Puntenney, the Asset-Based Community Development Institute, Northwestern University, final evaluation report, “KaBOOM! Building Communities One Playground at a Time.”

### >> CONCLUSION

The idea of giving away a nonprofit model isn't itself new: organizations like the Exploratorium and Youth Build have seen the wisdom of empowering others to copy their program, rather than controlling it centrally. But KaBOOM! is one of the first to put this approach online, and bring it into the twenty-first century. In doing so, they have truly broken new ground.

By pursuing multiple paths to scale, by bridging the online and offline worlds, and by enabling others to act on its behalf, KaBOOM! is experimenting with innovative ways of working beyond its own organization. KaBOOM! is also practicing what it preaches by being transparent about its learning in this case study, even though its strategy is still a work-in-progress.

And KaBOOM! continues to innovate, both online and off. Its latest project is called Imagination Playground, a partnership with architect David Rockwell to produce a “playground in a box”: a set of loose foam shapes like a giant Tinkertoy set—blocks, noodles, wheels, and more—that children use to construct their own playspace. A flagship installation will open this summer in New York City, and KaBOOM! is evangelizing it nationwide.

“KaBOOM!’s goal is to change play, to make it accessible to children all over the country and world,” says board member Greenblatt. “By pioneering this new business unit, it lays the groundwork to widen the impact.”

Meanwhile, KaBOOM! continues to help others to build DIY playgrounds with the support of its website. The nonprofit’s audacious goal is for DIY builds to eventually outnumber KaBOOM!-led builds by 30 to 1. “It’s like someone told me once,” says COO Bowman. “If you want to succeed beyond your wildest dreams, begin with some wild dreams.”

For other nonprofits that aspire to dream wild dreams, there’s a lot to learn from groups like KaBOOM! that are pursuing innovative approaches to scale. And as the field moves into another new frontier—the integration of online and offline action—these pioneers can help teach us all. To follow the cutting edge of this next chapter as it plays out, keep your eyes on KaBOOM!.

**“If you want to succeed beyond your wildest dreams, begin with some wild dreams.”**

>> **UNDER THE HOOD OF KaBOOM.ORG**

Many nonprofit websites feature basic information about the organization and its offline programs. On the KaBOOM! website, this information is an afterthought, relegated to a tab labeled “About KaBOOM!” The focus of the site is a set of interactive tools that communities can use to build playgrounds and advance the cause of play.

1 When visitors click on [Find Your Playground](#), they go to the KaBOOM! Playspace Finder, a user-generated database of playspaces mashed up with Google maps. For parents and caregivers, this practical tool provides them with an entry point into understanding issues around play. Since launching in 2008, more than 90,000 user-generated entries have been added. On a broader level, this tool is meant to raise awareness of the “state of play” in the U.S.—and to drive action by identifying areas of deficit, where communities lack adequate playspaces.



2 The [Build a Playground](#) tab reveals the heart of the KaBOOM! mission online. Launched in June 2009, the Build Planner is an online tool that allows any group to plan, fund, recruit for, and execute a DIY playground build via detailed step-by-step instructions. Launching a project creates a public website for each DIY project, which can then be used as a tool to organize the community. Since the Build Planner launched less than a year ago, more than 1,900 communities have registered projects.



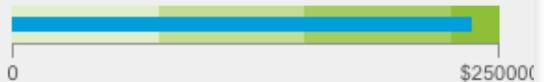
**Project Progress**

**8 Months since Build Day**

(August 29, 2009)

**6 people** have joined this project.

We have raised **\$235000**



Our goal is **\$250000**.

**Members**

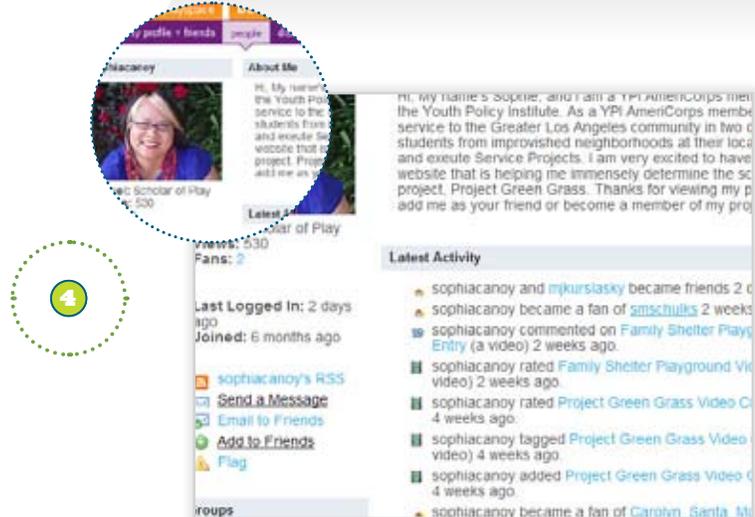
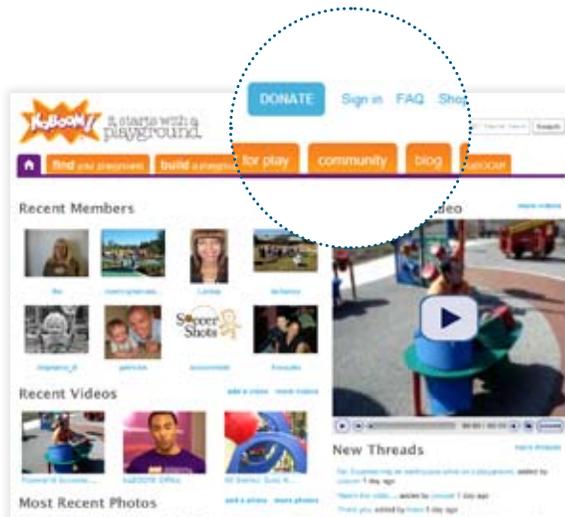
Some of the latest members involved



**3** The Rally for Play tab focuses on an annual campaign to raise awareness of the importance of play, where communities host local events celebrating play—called Play Days. In 2009, its inaugural year, this tool helped more than 1,250 groups launch, manage, and report on self-organized celebrations in all 50 states and on all seven continents. More than 350 groups completed service projects such as park cleanups during their Play Days.



**4** The KaBOOM! social network lives behind the Community tab. Here, more than 30,000 members can connect, share tips, and join in active discussions on play-related topics. Critically, “alumni” of KaBOOM!-led builds, DIY builds, and Play Days become mentors to less-experienced members. Users get “badges” based on points earned for online and offline action so that their expertise is visible to everyone.



**5** A final critical tool is online training, with a suite of training products accessible 24/7 from several points in the site. Initially, KaBOOM! conducted in-person training sessions for DIY builders, which it held around the country several times a year. In 2007, for example, KaBOOM! trained 472 people face-to-face at significant expense. But in 2009, after migrating training online, KaBOOM! reached more than 6,000 people—an increase of more than 10-fold at a fraction of the cost. Just as importantly, the breadth of training topics has expanded, and KaBOOM! has started inviting outside experts to offer specialized sessions.



## >> APPENDIX

### INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED

#### **KaBOOM! Leadership**

Darell Hammond, CEO and Co-Founder  
Bruce Bowman, Chief Operating Officer  
Kate Becker, VP Program Management  
Jim Hunn, VP Mass Action  
Laurence Hooper, Sr. Director Online Initiatives  
Paul Carttar, KaBOOM! board member  
Jonathan Greenblatt, KaBOOM! board member

#### **KaBOOM! Supporters**

Vincent Stehle, Consultant, Knight Foundation; former program director at the Surdna Foundation  
Chris Wolz, President and CEO, Forum One Communications

#### **Other Experts Consulted**

Allison Fine, Social Media Consultant, Speaker and Co-author of  
*The Networked Nonprofit: Connecting with Social Media to Drive Change*  
Cynthia Gibson, Principal, Cynthesis Consulting  
Beth Kantor, CEO of Zoetica, and Co-author of *The Networked Nonprofit*.  
Eugene Kim, Principal, Blue Oxen Associates

### DOCUMENTS AND ARTICLES CONSULTED

1. *Going to Scale Strategic Plan*, internal document presented to the KaBOOM! board in Jan. 2005
2. *Going to Scale Update*, internal document presented to the KaBOOM! board in July, 2007
3. *KaBOOM!* Harvard Business School Case Study, James Austin, Jan. 2002
4. "Strategic Alliances: Managing the Collaboration Portfolio," James Austin, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Summer, 2003
5. "Scaling Social Impact: Strategies for Spreading Social Innovations," Greg Dees, Beth Anderson, and Jane Wei-Skillern *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Spring, 2004
6. *KaBOOM! Annual Reports*, 2007, 2008, 2009
7. KaBOOM! internal marketing fact sheets (one-pagers)
8. *Online Community Strategy Engagement Roles*, internal document, presented to KaBOOM! leadership team by Forum One Communications; June '08
9. *KaBOOM! Mass Action Programming* internal document
10. *KaBOOM! Mass Action Review*, 2007-09 and Lessons Learned, internal document
11. *KaBOOM!: Building Communities One Playground at a Time*, Final Evaluation Report, Deborah Puntteney, PhD. For the Asset-Based community Development Institute, Northwestern University. June '08
12. Foundation proposals describing KaBOOM!'s online scaling plans, as sent to Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Kresge Foundation
13. *Assessment of Play: KaBOOM! Recreation Study*, a Harris Interactive poll, May 2009 on the importance of play, and executive summary
14. *Play Matters: A Study of Best Practices to Inform Local Policy and Process in Support of Children's Play* a recent study published by KaBOOM! by the Sheridan Group
15. "Building Playgrounds is Serious Business" Jennifer Reingold, *Fortune Magazine*,
16. *FUNDamentals* internal document considered the "bible" on all things KaBOOM!, used to share knowledge among staff about the organizations culture, strategy, operations, etc.
17. "Way to Grow" by Ben Gose, *Chronicle of Philanthropy* Sept, 6, '07
18. *KaBOOM! DIY Success Stories*, internal document
19. *KaBOOM! Online Product Development Plan*, 2010/11
20. KaBOOM! website
21. *Cascading Steps of Courage: An Entrepreneur's Work to Save Play*, draft manuscript by Darell Hammond

### >> ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Heather McLeod Grant** is a consultant with Monitor Institute, and a published author, speaker, and advisor to high-impact organizations. Recently, her work at Monitor has been focused on developing a network practice—looking at the intersection of online technology, network approaches, and social change—and on scaling social innovations. She is the co-author of the best-selling *Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact Nonprofits*, named a Top Ten Book of 2007 by the *Economist*; and of the recent article *Working Wikily: Social Change with a Network Mindset*. Additionally, she serves as an advisor to the Center for Social Innovation at Stanford University's Graduate School of Business (GSB), and was a fellow with the Center for the Advancement of Social Entrepreneurship (CASE) at Duke University. She is a former McKinsey & Company consultant and a co-founder of *Who Cares*, a national magazine for young social entrepreneurs published from 1993-1999.

Heather has 20 years of experience in the social sector, and consults with leading philanthropic and nonprofit institutions. She teaches at Stanford, speaks at numerous industry conferences and has been published in the *New York Times*, *Inc.*, the *American Prospect*, and online. Heather serves on the advisory boards of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, the Woodside Elementary School PTA, and the alumni Women's Information Network at the GSB. She holds an MBA from Stanford University and an AB from Harvard University, and resides in the Bay Area with her husband and daughter.



**Katherine Fulton** is a partner of Monitor Group and president of Monitor Institute, the Group entity dedicated to helping innovative leaders develop and achieve sustainable solutions to significant social and environmental problems. She has spent three decades chronicling and catalyzing social change as a leader, strategist, teacher, editor, writer, speaker, and advisor.

Katherine is passionately interested in how private resources can be used more effectively to create public good, and in recent years, her work has increasingly focused on how philanthropy and social investing can adapt to a rapidly evolving global context. She has advised many of this generation's leading philanthropists and foundations, given dozens of major speeches about the future of philanthropy, and co-authored several well-known publications about social investing and philanthropy.

Katherine's work draws upon diverse life experiences. In her 20s, she co-founded *The Independent*, an award-winning investigative newspaper in North Carolina, which won her both a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard University and a foundation prize for community service. After leaving journalism in the early 1990s, she worked as a consultant and later as co-head of the practice at Global Business Network, another Monitor Group company, where she advised leaders in more than a dozen industries as they sought to adapt more skillfully to changing circumstances. She has served on a number of governing boards, including at present the board of Monitor itself.

### >> MONITOR INSTITUTE

Monitor Institute is a social enterprise that is part consulting firm, part think tank, and part incubator of new approaches. Our mission is helping innovative leaders develop and achieve sustainable solutions to significant social and environmental problems. We believe that achieving these solutions requires bold leaders to integrate innovative ideas, effective action, and efficient capital. And we believe that today's complex challenges call for leadership from all three sectors—business, government, and nonprofit.

The Institute was founded by and is fully integrated into the operations of Monitor Group. A global advisory and capital services firm, Monitor works with the world's leading corporations, governments, and nonprofit organizations to drive sustainable growth in the areas that are most important to them. The Institute leverages and coordinates the Group's diverse resources in 24 offices around the world to fulfill our mission. For more information, see [www.monitorinstitute.com](http://www.monitorinstitute.com) and [www.monitor.com](http://www.monitor.com).