T4SJ Key Interview Takeaways

We interviewed 110 people for the T4SJ project. We used a [semi-structured interview guide](#) for all interviews, and recorded interview audio for transcription. Immediately after each interview, interviewer(s) wrote up notes about the interview and key takeaways. Later, after reviewing full interview transcripts, interviewers edited notes down into the following short summaries. These have been (roughly) organized in this document according to the top level categories of our research design.

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Key Interview Takeaways: Ecosystem

Kimberley (Founder of Digital Rights Org) uses an inclusive definition of technology. She and her organization see technology as part of their liberation strategy, but do not consider technology to be their sole emancipation strategy. They weave many old and new strategies together, and due to that, other 'tech' organizations have a hard time understanding orgs like them that are lead by women, POC, and gender nonconforming folks.

Stevie (Tech Fellow at a Foundation) struggled with terms like 'technology for social good' and 'civic tech.' For him, these terms put the technology first, rather than the people, and he believes that 'anyone who's doing good work would be more specific than that.' He finds it hard to identify with 'civic tech' because these spaces are very U.S.-centric, very white, very technocratic, and their work is usually not about social justice.

Arata (Technology Capacity Builder) felt that the term "public interest" connotes policy, power, and privilege, and does not connote work with frontline communities. Additionally, they recognized that most of the technology work being done in nonprofits right now can be described as stopgap, and is being done by "accidental techies."

Richard (Broadband Expansion Manager for a Rural City) feels that the term 'technologist' is a coastal term. He said that other than coastal folks, everyone else in this field sees themselves as engineers. He suggested we do a spatial analysis to see if there is a correlation between the terms people identify with and their location in the country.

Terry (Policy Director of a Public Library) argued that digital equity is one of the primary responsibilities of libraries, and that libraries are the largest piece of civic infrastructure addressing the problem, although they may not always be doing it strategically.

Dishad (Eco Justice Community Organizer) feels that smaller, grassroots, and more radical organizations are discriminated against by funders, in favor of large, national nonprofits that more closely align with the interests of their corporate boards. Additionally, he said that open government data needs to be a priority in order for citizens to know where pollution risks are.

Godtfred (Tech fellow – at a local youth chapter) noted that in this field, like any field, you have to play the political game to get funding. They felt that the way we frame our work opens and closes doors, and determines funding opportunities. They said that you have to jump through hoops to get funding, but felt that 'if funders are going to be there for us, they should be there for us without controlling our framing and our analysis.'

Ileana (CEO, Digital Advocacy Company) argued that community colleges, as low-cost ways to gain computer science skills, often with financial aid available from the government, are critical pieces of the ecosystem. Additionally, she criticized the toxic and fragile work environments that exist in many nonprofits, and wanted more organizational development grants.

Hibiki (Freelance Digital Security Trainer) noted that conferences are the main way to get connected with the field, but they are prohibitively expensive. Even when they do offer diversity scholarships, the application process is long, and they don't cover accommodations or travel. Additionally, she saw a lack of digital security capacity within organizations as a threat because they must always rely on someone not from their community, so it slows them down and takes away power and agency.

Valeri (Co-Founder of a Public Benefit Tech Corporation) noted that overhauls of government services technology often serve to turn people with years of expertise and empathy into "IT help."

Like many of the other women we interviewed, Alda (Community Organizer and Consultant at a National Newspaper) does not consider herself a technologist. She said that this is because she has been around men who are programmers who have made it clear to her that she is not a technologist, even though her whole job involves technology. She learned most of her project management skills through student organizing.

Tivoli (Freelancer and UX Research at a Tech Corporation) makes very conscious decisions when it comes to who she does or does not work with. While part of an open science project funded by a venture capitalist, she was forced by the funders to do certain things that did not match with the vision of the project, and as a result, left her job. She worked with people who identified as civic technologists, and noticed that they often do not want to make anyone uncomfortable, and are apolitical. Due to these experiences, she no longer works with venture capitalists or civic technologists.

Dan (CEO and Founder of a Civic Tech Organization) felt that the civic tech field has pushed volunteerism to its limit, and as a result, volunteers are getting burnt out. Additionally, he feels that civic tech has hit a ceiling in funding, and that many organizations find it difficult to sustain themselves.

Vishnu (Founder of a Nonprofit) **felt that libraries are critical sites for reaching communities that have been ignored by the infosec and digital security worlds, but who paradoxically live with the highest levels of risk: people of color, poor people, formerly incarcerated people.** She also felt that she needs to use certain terms to appeal to funders, and different terms to appeal to allies in the communities she works in. She sees misogyny and other forms of oppression based on identity as rampant problems in the tech industry in general, but especially in free software and hacker communities.

Judyta (Facilitator, Education Technology Collective) shared that they see a lot of funding for STEM projects within Universities if the projects have profit or capitalist motives, but not for projects that include critical questioning or feminist critical thinking. They also noted the stark

difference between the developers, creators, and users of technology, and highlighted the undue focus on developers and the disregard for end users.

Key Interview Takeaways: Demographics

Amardeep (Developer/Coder/Artist at a Progressive Nonprofit) said she was only able to find a community and an education in the technology world by surrounding herself with queer people of color, which is abnormal in the broader tech world.

Rashmi (Director of Tech at a Civil Rights Org) shared that, after the 2016 election, many technologists contacted nonprofit organizations to look for a way to help, but most of them had no policy experience and didn't have any idea of what to work on. Rashmi pointed out that it was nice that they wanted to help, but it would take a whole job to manage them. Also, they felt that oftentimes, technologists do not come to 'social good' work with humility, and do not respect the knowledge and expertise others have.

Nessa (Journalist and Founder of a Nonprofit) noted that non-coastal areas are "funding deserts," where it can be difficult to sustain critical work. Additionally, her organization takes a deliberately local approach, and focuses on the unique needs of youth in her county, and occasionally the state.

Blair (Fellow for a Legislative Body) said that making people feel comfortable by asking basic questions about technology is critical to raising the general understanding, and confidence, of non-technical teams. **They also felt that the privacy field was gender and racially diverse, and that the tech industry in general has an "arrogance of youth" that results in discrimination against older people.**

Martha (Lead of Acquisitions at a Gov Office) **felt that hiring practices are critical to building organizations with a multitude of perspectives, and that racial justice should be at the forefront, since the field has historically valued white men.** Additionally, she highlighted a trend in the field of government tech of inadvertently replicating work.

Rowan (Founder of a small for-profit tech consulting) noticed a trend that Drupal conventions have become a little bit diverse, and also that the space has been professionalized. They have seen that open source spaces are often dominated by those that have free time. **He also noted that nonprofit orgs are foregoing Drupal's rich ecosystem, where they could build myriad functionalities on their websites, and are migrating to low cost third party tools like Chartbeat, Google Analytics and others.**

Margareta (Founder and Co-Director of a Gov Tech Department) feels that compliance and procurement are some of the biggest barriers to producing high quality, low cost government technology.

Nyx (Research Lead at an International Nonprofit) alluded to the fact that that our framing of this field is yet to conceptualize women's experience of discrimination and sexual harassment in this field. We are also not yet conscious of the concentration of wealth and monopolies of the platforms we use.

Danna (Project Lead at a Foundation) shared a horrid experience of being catcalled on stage at a conference with over 1,700 people. She said that being one of the only few women in tech spaces is something she had to learn to navigate. She is at an interesting intersection where her Asian identity and Asian 'techie' stereotype has counteracted her being a women in tech.

Moses (Digital Security Consultant) asked other practitioners to consider the following questions about the sustainability of the field: "who's the next generation of you? Are you training someone? Are you working with someone younger? Are you working with a woman? Who are you sharing your skills with?"

Peter (Digital Literacy Instructor) noted that, when conducting digital literacy workshops for youth, it's important to have young instructors between the age of 18-25 that have also gone through a similar program. It makes it easy for the students to relate with the instructor and see the instructor as an ally.

Barbara (Manager of a Nonprofit) felt that they can't continue to develop software and engage in this space for long, due to the transphobia they constantly face. Just in the past two years, they have seen hordes of minority women leave these spaces due to harassment and discrimination.

Key Interview Takeaways: Practitioner Experiences

Gertruda (Digital Security Researcher) defines himself as a computer science researcher rather than a technologist. **He studied computer science and political science, and he says he traded his technical skills for other skills that computer science grads miss out on, such as grant writing, grant management, and people skills. He says this has enabled him to think of the political implications of his research, and to discern that his work is just a means to an end rather than the end in itself.**

Loredana (Cofounder, National Legal Policy Tech Organization) noted that civil rights and social justice policy work that intersects with technology is not usually considered "tech policy," because although technology is involved, it's not the core of these issues. Additionally, they

highlighted that **one major issue for hiring technologists into policy organizations is not just training technologists in policy, but also helping organizations figure out what kind of work will be useful and interesting to the person they're hiring.**

Jaylen (Tech Consultant for Nonprofits) remembered stumbling upon this field at the age of 18, and it being nerve racking. They feel that figuring out a career path in this field is really difficult, and that there are few opportunities for young folks between the age of 16-25. Therefore, many young people will never engage in this space, and will end up perpetuating the same problems later on, especially CS majors. They feel that **this field should not be something you have to stumbleupon.**

Pich (Web-Developer at a National Think Tank) did move from a computer science degree to a public interest job, but said that he was actually not interested in technology, coding, or computing before college. He only chose to major in computer science because of the influence of one gay professor, who he felt served as a role model and buffer from the super male dominated bro-culture of his university computer science department. He never considered the traditional Silicon Valley career path, but instead wanted to use computer science to do data visualization, mapping, and urban planning.

Polya (Tech Program Manager at a Lab) noted that as a young, African-American woman from the Bronx, she was often not taken seriously in the intelligence community, and it was rare for her to meet others who looked like her. She also mentioned that more often than not, problems that she has to deal with are not technology problems, but rather policy or legal problems.

Isaac (Founder of a Civic Tech Network)**, like many of his peers, was mobilized through political campaigning, and then leveraged that energy to continue working on politically progressive technology projects.**

Bartholomeus (Economic Development Director for a City Government) is leveraging technology and innovation in his rural community by organizing smart agriculture meetups, working toward municipal broadband, creating the broadband infrastructure necessary for telecommuting, and teaching technology and entrepreneurship in K-12 schools. He noted that there is a huge divide between urban and rural communities, and that rural communities are often looked down upon.

Manu (Deputy Editor of a Media App) considered majoring in computer science, but was advised that it would not teach her how to do journalistic data visualization. She ultimately advanced primarily through a series of internships with great mentors.

Artemis (Technologist, International Policy Technology Nonprofit) felt that it is very important to organize and fund "water cooler"-type convenings for the people who work across disparate parts of this space.

Marie (Digital Security Expert at a Foundation) said that participants in this field are underpaid and overstressed, and if women, people of color, and gender non-conforming folks do not have safety nets, they are forced to go into the corporate sector. Her background in comparative literature and power and language studies helped her understand that Java and Python are also languages that exert structures and controls.

Tom (Developer at a Federal Gov Office) shared that, in government software development projects, accessibility for people with disabilities was seen as a priority in a way that it is not in private sector technology. She felt that while the administration may not directly decide what government technology gets built, the administration's politics have an influence, and cooling effect, on which kinds of projects get built. Additionally, she noted, IT Governance and procurement are major barriers to government software acquisition.

Lou (Senior Technologist at a National Think Tank) stated that he feels out of place and at a disadvantage because he came from a circuitous, nontraditional background, did not go to an elite private school, and cares more about operations than about "big ideas."

Candide (Co-Founder of Nonprofit Coding School) feels that, despite a track record of success, as a "non-traditional founder" (i.e. a woman of color) she has struggled to get funding as easily as her white male peers in the startup space.

Katerina (Co-Founder of a Media Organizing Nonprofit) argues that "code switching," or the ability to translate concepts in different contexts with different audiences, is a core competency, and that an over reliance on specialized terminology can be ultimately classist. They also noted that the talent pool in the nonprofit sector is not the best, because the best people find work in the private sector where funding is less of a concern and they can be paid a living wage. They also mentioned that collaborations across large national and small grassroots organizations are critical, even if their politics and priorities do not always line up.

Vladilen (Software Engineer at a Gov Office), though currently a government employee, was initially hesitant to go into government work because of the stiff image associated with it.

Tomas (Co-founder of a law enforcement accountability nonprofit) shared that setting up and running a non-profit, with another full time job, is difficult. He described the bureaucracy of getting nonprofit approval from the IRS, sorting things out with the Post Office, and acquiring a bank account as major challenges that he and his co-founder faced when setting up shop. He said it feels as if these institutions don't want the status quo challenged.

The biggest challenge for Matthew (Open Source Developer – Freelancer) is finding a client that will pay to develop and maintain an open source project. He said that building a sustainable model around open source technology is laborious.

Key Interview Takeaways: Visions & Values

Farah (Executive Director of a Grassroots Organizing Nonprofit) identified a challenge where other folks want their assistance, but disassociate their raw skills from their political analysis. Even though they are an online movement building organization, they are not in the business of just building websites or providing tech support, unless these requests for assistance are politically conscious and have a deep understanding of the movement.

Robin (Worker, Tech Collective) said that we have to develop technologies, services, and tools that enhance our movements' communications and organizing capacity; and that we will never succeed without creating our own infrastructure.

Chandra (Research Associate at a National Think Tank) stressed that technology alone is not a solution to most problems, but that it has the potential to facilitate participation in a democratic system. She feels that technologists must engage with real, political problems that affect people of color and address redistribution of power. Without that, tech becomes an elite space where knowledge and power are not shared.

Milo (Partner Engagement Lead at Development Organization) noted that in many places, basic communication is very expensive. They feel that, to provide more access in the developing world, the public and private sectors, academia, and civil society need to meet in a multistakeholder process to create a set of principles that countries should adhere to in order to ensure affordability of communication technology.

Aston (Founder and Creative Director of a Design Collaborative) works to put design back in the hands of communities who are affected by things that they had no say in creating. She sees the design justice principles (designjustice.org) as her values and principles.

Garnett (Tech Consultant for Nonprofits) sees the biggest threat to the tech for social justice community is the lack of volunteers who want to work on real issues that affect real people. She identified a stark difference in how she's treated in the social justice community, compared to the tech community. In the social justice community she says she is treated with respect and dignity while in the tech community, which is 90% men, she says there is sexism and her request to collaborate in social justice work is seen to be 'cute'.

Sindri (Assistant City Manager for Small Business), who rose through the ranks in his city over 32 years of civil service, perceived design thinking and empathy to be the two most important considerations for technology projects to adopt.

Maggie (Developer at a Foundation) noted that civic tech spaces are extremely white and male, and that many people in those spaces have a conception of justice that stems from very different lived experience from those who are in the most dire need of justice. They feel that

that the motivation for making stuff within civic tech spaces is often not convincing, and that usually, t**here is no community around the products or the tools they make. They see an urgent need to expand civic tech so that people like them can meaningfully contribute.**

Rob (CTO of a City Government) said that technology changes very quickly, but the pace at which government can metabolize technological change is slow. **He noted that since efficiency is not a core value of government, it often means that you have to have a very different narrative about how and why technology can have a positive impact. You have to be able to tell a story that aligns with the way that people view the value system inside government.** At the same time, government digital services are judged by the standards of Amazon, Google, and Facebook by the public.

Gaufrid (Tech Policy Officer of Gov Executive Branch and Co-Founder of a Civic Tech Org) felt that incremental culture change, at scale, over the long term, is the key to changing government practices. Additionally, he felt that the most successful technology projects are those that involve subject matter experts, individuals affected by the technology being built, and civil servants at every stage of the process.

Fiore (Labor Organizer at a University) believes that making research accessible to the people it impacts is a critical need, often ignored in academic research. Additionally, she feels that research and communications play a vital role in organizing.

Damodar (Director of Innovation and Citizen Engagement at a City Government) sees rural life as desirable and worth maintaining, and to do that, he believes that rural access to gigabit internet and the opportunity that comes with it, is critical.

Emanuel (Assistant Professor of Communication at an East Coast University) felt that the priority needs to be on people's, perspectives, and populations that have been marginalized or shut out, or who are receiving most of the fallout from the problem.

Johanna (ED of a computer training institution) noted that technology plays an outsized role in our society, yet is unsuccessful in terms of diversity. Additionally, they pointed out that the importance of technology means that digital literacy and access are key to full participation in society.

Charley (Executive Director at a Technology Nonprofit) sees capacity building, especially the capacity of people of color in politicized organizations, as the most urgent need in this field.

Joss (Developer at a National Think Tank) felt that collaboration and respect are the most important qualities to have on a team working with technology in the public interest, and the only places he has seen these qualities expressed have been predominantly black, gender and racially diverse tech teams. Additionally, he noticed a harmful trend of nonprofits adopting the

competitive technology models of for-profit corporations, which involves hiding innovation, rather than sharing, although they are working on shared goals.

Friedemann (Advisor of Tech projects at Gov Office) highlighted that the funding strategy of providing unrestricted operating funds, rather than metrics-driven return on investment and tightly restricted funds, while no longer popular among funders, was critical to motivating people to explore, self-actualize, and create innovation. He noted that the barrier to entry to this field is high, particularly because of the cost of conferences, and because the popular image of civil service and government work is unappealing. He has noticed **in a bias against younger people in civil service, and against older people in the technology field.**

When asked what urgent threats need attention, Jay (Digital Security Trainer at a Nonprofit) noted the lack of digital security experts focused on mitigating the intricate digital security issues of survivors of intimate partner violence.

Ruby (Co-founder of a law enforcement accountability nonprofit) referred to the tradeoff between running their own email services in-house and using services like Gmail. They worry about being targeted by trolls and right wing groups. They currently don't have the capacity to fight against malware attacks on their own, and note that despite the problems of relying on a large corporate provider for activist email, it seems Google has the best mechanisms to fight against these kinds of attacks.

Brook (Freelance Digital Security Expert) pointed out that even tech spaces that call themselves 'radical' do not necessarily have conversations about privilege, and even when they do, it is difficult to talk about diversity in technology design. They also shared that radical and progressive spaces often fail to talk about ableism and classism within their ranks. They noted that, although it has become cool to be a feminist, many people say they are feminists to have access to spaces and women even though they don't adhere to the principles of feminism. Many that claim to be allies are just good actors and they don't show up when they are needed most.

Key Interview Takeaways: Stories of Success & Failure

Hardy (Technology Capacity Builder) noted that it is important to consider how a product or solution will work when power or the internet goes down, especially in humanitarian relief and disaster scenarios.

For Melinda (Innovation Officer for a Midwest City Government), success starts with mapping the conditions of failure, and identifying the long term stakeholders and owners of the project. She noted that government is mostly reluctant to talk about failure, and that having an honest conversation about what went wrong is not always easy. Clarifying what failure looks like from the get-go makes this kind of conversation easier.

Ahmed (Technology Lead at West Coast City government) noted that working in government is not about finding cool new solutions, but rather, building solutions that are resilient and last over time. They feel that expanding public interest tech stakeholders will help deliver resilient, meaningful products.

Amardeep (Developer/Coder/Artist at a Progressive Nonprofit) characterized digital security training as less of technology training, and more of a culture shift. She feels that people in organizations need to learn how to incorporate digital security culture into their everyday lives, and that looks different for everyone, depending on their threat model.

Lulu (Technology Project Funder at a National Legal Nonprofit Funder) funds technology initiatives within legal aid services across the country, so that attorneys can work at the top of their license. He wants to automate most of the day to day work of legal aid, so that when attorneys sit with their clients they have all the information they need to help them. One of the biggest challenges he faces in doing this work is the lack of integration of user design at the start of projects, and the inability of developers and coders to write code and develop products in plain language that users of all ranges can understand.

Hilary (Executive Director of a Legal Network) noted that technology such as phones and the internet are critical to ensuring that rural people in disparate geographies have access to legal help, medical help, and employment. Additionally, she noted that commercial providers of access-to-justice technology don't often understand the statutory restrictions in each different jurisdiction, and so their products usually fail.

Erica (Fundraiser at a Foundation) found sustainability to be a blind spot in this field. When core funding changes, key players evolve, merge, or spin down. She said we are not ready to ensure that the work continues to serve the people it was designed to serve. We also don't think about how we ensure that our projects are freely and openly accessible for generations to come, because the space is so rapidly evolving, and it's very hard to think beyond a two to five year cycle.

Zdravka (Tech Fellow at a National Think Tank) felt that technology is often deployed in schools without a strategy for how to use it, an assessment of what the community needs, and without using the expertise of community organizers.

Elioenai (Civic Tech Head at a Tech Corporation) noted that oftentimes, tech projects for social good replicate the work that another project or nonprofit is already doing. This time and effort would be better spent supporting existing groups. Additionally, he noted that because pathways into this work are unclear, young people constantly contact him for advice, and people who serve as connectors hold outsize power in the field.

Luna (Member of a Tech Cooperative) mentioned that her web development cooperative maintains a vocal political opinion, and that they get clients primarily because people know about

their politics. She has ethical and political oppositions to most tech spaces, and prefers to stay in politically conscious, cooperative, and free software communities.

Ivar (Founder of a Tech-Legal Fellowship Program) said that technology can be a tool to provide greater access to civil legal services to underserved populations. Additionally, he feels that a fellowship model can be used to provide paid opportunities for students of color in fields like law to gain design thinking and agile software development skills.

Manuel (Founder of a civic tech org and a for-profit advocacy company) felt that philanthropy can have a distorting effect on communities, because it can undercut work that is already operating sustainably. He shared the example of a FOIA automation business that was undercut and killed off by a foundation-backed copycat. He also noted that the technology field is overwhelmingly white and male dominated, and that organizations need to take proactive steps to prioritize the leadership of women and people of color, and to use codes of conduct to keep spaces accountable.

In Turee's (Co-Founder of a Media Organizing Nonprofit) web company, older users are the primary audience, so accessibility and ease of use must be prioritized. **He enjoys doing data and technology work with nonprofits, because there is constant low hanging fruit, so it's easy to make a major difference.** He also felt that finding community in the work was incredibly difficult, because it did not appear that anyone else was doing similar work.

Mel (Executive Director of a Nonprofit) noted that funders have focused on "parachuting" technologists into organizations, or focused on isolated social good technology projects, devoid of context, when the real need is capacity building.

Heiner (Executive Director a Legal Service Org) noted that in the public interest law and legal services fields, everything is very client oriented; lawyers doing this work are constantly interacting with people who need to navigate larger unequal systems. She would like to see this happen more in the tech space. She emphasized the importance of having people who are poor, are undocumented, are seeking housing, have dealt with the criminal justice system, involved in the creation of apps and technology systems that are supposed to be for them.

Franjo (Member of a Data and Tech Collective) mentioned that while rare, city-level data visualization done by non-governmental actors can be useful and legible, both to the public, through the media, and to policymakers.

Becca (Worker, International Data Tech Nonprofit) felt that it's essential to think about operational and programmatic technology together. She noted that when organizations build a project with a data component but without a foundational operational understanding of how to use technology and data in their work, it often collapses. Even if they build an excellent team for the project, without operational understanding of technology, ultimately the organization usually fails to incorporate the project into their overall strategic plan or vision.