



**Kerrin:** Hello, and welcome to the Untapped Philanthropy podcast. I'm your host and Fluxx co-founder, Kerrin Mitchell. I've spent my career exploring technology's role and amplifying impact within our social sector, and more specifically, helping funders to learn to leverage technology and data to connect and better serve our collective causes, constituents, and communities.

In this podcast series, my team and I will profile social sector leaders, public figures, philanthropists, and industry futurists to explore this fascinating intersection of funding, technology, and policy. We're here to analyze the most critical and formative topics and trends that shape philanthropy both today and tomorrow. We hope this series leaves you inspired to think and act through a more collective and visionary lens.

**Today, I'm thrilled to sit down with a leader who brings a wealth of experience, and of course, brings a very unique lens to what it means to be a CIO at a large foundation. And that is our very own John Mohr, Chief Information Officer at the MacArthur Foundation.**

Hi John! It's so fun to talk to you in this environment. Usually, we're connecting over hotel drinks at conferences. So, this is very virtual of us. So 2020.

**John:** Yes. I can't wait for it to be in our rearview mirror.

**Kerrin:** I know. And now I miss getting a drink at a random hotel bar with like our colleagues, I really genuinely can't wait for that.

**John:** Yeah, I often say that one of my favorite parts of conferences is the meetings in between the meetings, right? Can be at the end of the day or just in the hallway? And so I think part of the challenge of pandemic time is to figure out how to still have those.

**Kerrin:** Well, I've known you for over eight years now, but for those who don't have a knowledge of who you are, tell us a little bit about yourself?

**John:** Sure. So, as you said, my role is the Chief Information Officer at the MacArthur Foundation. We're a global foundation based in Chicago, but with offices in India, Nigeria, and Mexico, and in the past Russia as well. I've been at the foundation for almost nine years. And my I guess, career has, by and large been as a technologist. But perhaps at the end, we'll touch on my alternate, interesting career as a musician, but we can save that for later. But I guess I think of myself as a businessperson that uses technology itself, business problems.

**Kerrin:** Awesome. And I mean, in terms of MacArthur, obviously a huge chapter of your life and one that we're going to dive into as part of our conversation today. But prior to that you spent 10 years at the University of Chicago, and you managed all their applications and all of these sort of aspects of that business. So, tell us a little bit about that. And then what prompted you to come over to MacArthur?

**John:** Yeah, so I worked at the University of Chicago from 2002 through 2012. And, you know, it's a large, well known University, and I had a few different jobs there. And one of the benefits I think of being in a bigger organization is that you can keep the same parking space and still have a career path. So, I started there leading the web development team, which was actually an internal consulting group we actually charged for our time, so it was a 20 plus person group.



Then I worked on an enterprise system for fundraising development system. And then the latter part of my time there, I led the academic systems, which is all the systems that students use, so grades, billing, housing, etc. And also the city's management. So, which is an arcane, little corner of technology. It was a good experience in a very large environment. 450 people in it, and I think, going to MacArthur there were a couple of reasons. One was MacArthur was about 200 people total. So, I could have a much bigger impact. My team at MacArthur was 15 people. So, it was a familiar size team, but it is, you know, the entire Foundation's technology. And I think the scope of the responsibilities being responsible for all the technology at the Foundation was of interest. I think the Foundation's reputation was also quite appealing. So, you know, it was the combination of those.

**Kerrin:** The CIO role was something you were excited to kind of move into and evolve to, and this is something where I know, you have a strong sense of our role and this emphasis on the importance of technology. And technologists have a seat at the table at the Foundation, or in any org, but specifically at a Foundation. So, tell me a little bit about your ethos around the CIO role at MacArthur how you approach that.

**John:** I think I try to be as good a partner as I can, I really need to understand what our business is. We have a number of different grant programs. Yesterday's big news was the 100 and Change \$100 million reward from our Fellows Program where the MacArthur geniuses are selected, and then there's our day-to-day work that maybe is a bit more standard.

So, I guess I think of it in a couple of ways. One is that as technologists we really need to understand the work. The Foundation does the grantmaking and we partner across the foundation. But as we've seen in the past year, and with the pandemic, and everyone going remote, technology is really critical to the entire organization's functioning.

So, you can have technology as a baseline and then you layer on analysis and use that information to make better decisions. I think one of the interesting things about the job, is that technology is really evolved quite a bit. And I would say the last 10 plus years. And so, taking advantage of cloud computing and SaaS applications really opens a lot of other areas where the team's time can be spent. And that then ties into the need for and importance of being a good partner to the other areas.

**Kerrin:** And that makes sense to me. I think now more than ever we're seeing the need for that virtual world, but I think it opened people's eyes to that need to communicate, connect, and use technology to operate at a grander level within our community. It's an interesting, almost tectonic shift in the way people are starting to think and it's one of the things as a technologist, I get super excited about because if you looked at this 10 years ago and say the opportunity for shared data is incredibly strong, or the opportunity for collaboration beyond a program and organization is incredibly strong, but that willingness we have today to invest in change management is such a huge shift in our mindset.

But you know, in our industry, there's obviously a balance of both. There are the strategic benefits of having the right technology and the right rigor of processes. And then suddenly, you're governed by this sort of grand vision that you want to be able to pull in. So, talk to me a little bit about where you perceive the role of CIOs to balance that in that transition and driving, you know, sort of philanthropy space as a whole. Tell me a little bit about where you see sort of your role and responsibility and pushing that forward.



**John:** I think, one of the things we've learned from a pandemic, and I hope everyone agrees, is that the change management of doing things remotely is totally doable. And, you know, we had implemented a new AV system, right, as we were going remote. And that had previously been a pain point. But now we're all comfortable leading AV systems.

So, change is hard, but we know we can adapt quite well, we just need the right incentives. I think that's something that we should collectively keep in mind. Hopefully, the reasons in the future are different. So, for me, the role in how I think about it, in my role has changed. Early on, it was quite tactical, operational, and internally focused, getting us to where we needed to be in terms of enterprise application capabilities, or security posture, building the right team, and getting the right skills within the team.

For example, when I joined, we didn't have any project managers, and it was a little perplexing to me. But the reason was that we were largely in a maintenance mode, and doing a lot of projects, you didn't need a project manager. Now we do a lot of projects. And so along those lines, I think that was a revelation for the organization how that kind of professional capability is important. So, of course, you need project managers, but that was sort of a new element for us. Over time, we've added a strong IT governance process, so that these projects get prioritized by a group of leaders across the foundation.

It's thinking broadly about the priorities of the foundation. I think as we've modernized our systems, I've found myself wanting to not just participate or lead at the Foundation, but also in the sector. And so I think I've joked that I'm a joiner, but I really enjoy, working with others and collaborating. I'm a part of a couple of different customer advisory boards, I've also been participating with TAG as a board member for a number of years and connecting to people who are trying to solve the same types of problems.

Then in the past year or more, I've been trying to figure out how to have a more strategic impact on the sector. One way is to better utilize the data that the sector has, and the foundations have to either share that we're using to reduce the burden for grant seekers and allow them to more easily apply for grants and get access to capital. And that can be a number of different things. But just as a, as a broad concept, or umbrella. That's a really compelling space for me. And so it's an area that I want to continue to spend time on in the coming years.

**Kerrin:** Good. I've also heard you quote that technology often outstrips the pace of philanthropy. And I think, to your point, that ability for you as a CIO leader to move trends forward and figure out ways to move industry initiatives and engage the private sector and the public sector is hugely important.

Chicago does a wonderful job of this. That idea of hyper-local focus and expanding to affiliation groups is just an opportunity for us to think differently. So, as you examine these industries and communities and your impact, how do you decide which of these important industry initiatives you want to get involved in? I know you have a couple that you're working on that you just mentioned a moment ago, but where do you sort of how do you look at those? What's your thought process around how you and your team organize your time?

**John:** Oh, I'll start with the easy part. I recently got my driver's license renewed and realized that the next time I need to do that, I will be 60, which was a stunning realization. I think of myself as quite a bit younger in age. And so, something that I've always been interested in has been leadership development. And certainly, there are people on my team and in my department that



I mentor at the Foundation, but I also mentor others in a slightly more formal way. This gives back and provides a long-term impact.

I do like solving hard problems. So that's always sort of been an area of interest. The world has also changed, and problems have shifted.

**Kerrin:** So true! Sometimes I kind of miss some of those older problems, they seem so much easier.

**John:** Participating in the sector has been great because you sort of see the common challenges that organizations and people face. I should add that prior to working at the University of Chicago, I worked at startups, and they were in different industries – one was security, and the other was e-commerce. And so, I've been in different industries.

So now as I look at our sector, I do also think about the problems we're wrestling with and explore whether they've already been solved in other areas.

For example, in a for-profit organization, let's say you're selling consumer goods and your web team, figures out how to deliver web pages faster with a better user experience and all that converts to making more money. That's a compelling way to demonstrate the value. It's a straightforward compelling proposal that we don't always see in our sector. But I think allowing either greater access to capital, reducing the time it takes to get from a grant application to cash out the door, will have an impact and move millions and millions of dollars.

There are always constraints and time is one. So, the degree to which things can be automated or work faster can help create capacity. In a way it's thinking like, how do I reframe this value proposition that I see working in other sectors and use that effectively in the space? This is the way that I think about my job now.

**Kerrin:** Right. And when we're talking about these large-scale industry initiatives the focus is always on driving community impact. But there are also vendors and technologies which have competing incentives to some degree all within this collaborative environment. So, it's a really interesting to think of as well. What is the right level of governance? And honestly, who should be owning that initiative? Does it sit in a collaborative? Or is it something that should be tackled, you know, off with a smaller group? It varies, right?

So, tell me, what are some of the initiatives you're most excited about? Tell me a little bit about what you gravitate towards.

**John:** Well, one, starting from the leadership topic is sort of furthering the maturation view and appreciation of IT leaders and the importance of the roles they can play. To the extent that leaders can mature and evolve, that helps all of us. So that's one dimension.

Another is around standards and data interoperability in the sector. And as you know, I'm working on an initiative right now that's focused on the common application, but what we're learning is that there's a fair amount of variety in those processes. And that's fine.

So, say there are around 190 data elements that consistently get used and reused. How can we, you know, make better use of those across the sector or in our little working group of a half dozen funders to share that information? That's brought some interesting things into play. And



of course, there is the question of why are we asking for this kind of information? Some of it, I think, maybe warrants re-examination.

But the other is if we're not using the exact same applications, how can we share and standardize wherever possible? When I was in higher ed, we created a standard protocol for transmitting transcripts from institution to institution. And that was 15 or 18 years ago. So it is not just conceivable to me, but kind of obvious that the sector should be able to take advantage of existing technologies either define or agree on standards, and then take steps towards utilizing them to make better use and reuse of data that already exists.

**Kerrin:** Like you said, getting this adoption in the industry is no small feat. There needs to be an openness to embracing these opportunities. I also think we will see a momentum shift in that too at some point, which is exciting.

Now why do you think there is such a lack of clear standards in philanthropy? In a non-compete industry this is collaborative in nature, why is it that we keep running into these challenges and creating some of these common denominators?

**John:** I have some thoughts. Honestly, will say that every day when I go to work, even if it's just stepping into the other room here in my house, I think, okay, today we're going to work on changing the world. And, you know, it's such a privilege to literally be in a place where I think, can try to do that.

But the sector is under a ton of pressure and yet the motivations to make those changes have really been lacking. As being as a private foundation we're beholden to our board. That's our key governance; and then we file our taxes and follow laws. And then beyond that, we kind of do what we do.

So, there's not a ton of outside pressure, and I would think other organizations maybe have the same kinds of lack of constraints. And then you have McKenzie Scott and her efforts to give away billions of dollars, and I think she has a very dramatically different approach than what private foundations have historically done. And whether that's pure innovation or just a lack of legacy protocols... It certainly makes the point that we can do our work very differently.

Maybe it's a different way of thinking about how technology can aid things? Historically there hasn't been much investment into technology in our sector. But I think those investments are now improving in technology. But you need someone with a strategic lens to not just move from G Suite or office 365, but rather think critically about connecting systems even more.

There are grantmakers who want to give money away and grantseekers who want that money and they may well have the same target area but may not know about each other. So that idea of a connecting the two through a platform is huge. I'm aware of various COVID comments efforts, funders who want to fund things or have a COVID focus, and then nonprofits who are also working in that area. So, there's a couple of manifestations of that there. But you know, I think a lack of strong incentives, or legal or maybe organizational pushes is part of why things have not evolved more.

**Kerrin:** Right? It was really interesting, actually, we had a conversation about this at our client advisory board. Perfection is the enemy of progress. We have to meet complex problems that are daunting, but regardless we have to start somewhere. I'm hoping maybe data can be the



catalyst to some of this too. And some of those early adopters and early adoption could actually be something where we're just starting to tell stories a little differently and showing the benefit of that.

**John:** Yeah. And that, that reminds me of something that I've seen in the industry. And it's that when you've seen one Foundation, you've seen them all. And maybe that was true. I had a hard time with that when it was said to me, but I think that belief is pervasive, although, I would say I hope, less so now.

But that there was sort of an insular way of thinking. But we're increasingly using the same technologies... For example, salesforce.org has a common data model. Microsoft Philanthropies has a common data model. They're not exactly the same, but similar for sure. So why not just use one?

**Kerrin:** So, we're kind of coming to the end here but I had one more question. And it's what piece of advice that you would want to bestow on CIOs or folks who are aspiring CIOs? What would that be?

**John:** Something that I found super valuable when I joined the foundation was that I got an org chart, and then I used it to make my own influence chart, so I had a map of the organization and who has influence. And that served me well.

Also, think critically about creating standards and making greater reuse of your data. That's something that is super useful for funders and grantseekers, which, frankly, is why we should be doing all of this in the first place, right?

Technology companies and intermediaries are all part of the influence map too. And figuring out how to organize and prioritize and pull those entities together is helpful. Being a trusted partner, and doing that, through demonstrated accomplishments and follow-through is probably the most important way of doing that. And, you know, changing the world is something that will happen over a long period of time, even though every day I want to do it. I know, it may take years and years and years and potentially decades.

**Kerrin:** Makes sense. I look forward to seeing that collective evolve. This is important work and I'm excited to see it evolve. And on that note let's move into a rapid-fire section where I just shoot questions at you. Answer with the first thing that comes to your mind.

So, what is the most common misunderstanding about a funder technology that you hear about in philanthropy?

**John:** That it's comprehensive?

**Kerrin:** What is the biggest challenge you're facing this year in your role as CIO?

**John:** Well, this year is exceptional. I mean, it's keeping everyone in the boat as we head towards the post-pandemic shore while at the same time, you know, moving forward on all these important and time-sensitive initiatives.

**Kerrin:** On that note, what is the first thing you're going to do after after the pandemic?



**John:** Oh, boy, there's a lot of things that jump out. Travel, traveling would be one. I actually missed the various conferences, and I know, I never thought I'd say that. And more live music would be great.

**Kerrin:** And the final question. If you could have dinner with any philanthropist or non-philanthropist or whomever, any human being over the cross across history, who would it be?

**John:** I was reading about Abraham Lincoln. So, he's a little top of mind. Maybe Buddy Holly?