

10 Principles for Humane Justice Technology

As the use of technology in the justice system becomes more common, it is important that those designing and implementing new systems adhere to principles that support human dignity and advance best practices. These principles were developed by the Center for Court Innovation in collaboration with the Open Society Foundation and Blue Ridge Labs at the Robin Hood Foundation.

1. Technology should be humane first

Technology should consider the people using it and its impact on them.

- Make technology comfortable, minimally-intrusive, and non-stigmatizing.
- Ensure technology adds to quality of life rather than diminishes it.
- To the extent possible, use technology to reinforce positive behavior rather than punish.

2. Technology should be inclusive

Technology should be used to enhance systems, not deepen existing inequality.

- Defendants should not be charged to use technology.
- To promote true accessibility, implementors should consider different languages; abilities; levels of technical and language literacy; and access to technology, such as phones, computers, and the internet.

3. Technology should be implemented with true consent

Court-involved individuals are at a vulnerable moment in their lives. Their consent must be truly informed. A consent form must be easy to understand so that individuals know what they are agreeing to, how it will impact their lives, and how their data will be shared and stored.

- Explain technology to court-involved users using simple language—ideally in multiple formats—detailing the impact it will have on their lives.

4. Problems should drive technology

Technology should solve problems—rather than be a solution in search of a problem. It is important to first assess the needs of an organization, team, and potential individual users and then find technologies that help meet these needs.

- Include all stakeholders and roles in defining and implementing technology.
- Define specific objectives before selecting or creating technology.
- Define what success looks like for each stakeholder.
- Use technology to facilitate and strengthen relationships and processes rather than replacing them.

5. Less is more

Technology should achieve its objectives in the simplest and least intrusive way possible.

- Make technology flexible and customizable so that users are given and asked to do only what is necessary for their circumstances.
- Collect only the data required to achieve the end goal—too much data is both inefficient and raises ethical concerns.

6. Technology should be sustainable

Technology needs frequent maintenance, which is often overlooked when planning a project.

- Use an off-the-shelf option that has a history of being implemented and updated by others whenever possible.
- When selecting vendors, keep in mind their ability to provide support in the future.

7. Work with vendors with a common vision

Knowing that the technology will reflect the vision and ideas of the vendor, when possible choose vendors who have a vision that aligns with yours.

8. Start small

Always test technology thoroughly, and don't assume that it works as described and presented. Small pilots allow users to explore functionality in practice.

- Define what success for the pilot looks like, and what data is needed to measure success.
- Test quickly and cheaply with off-the-shelf options—even if they aren't perfect—and populations that will be minimally impacted.

9. Know what technology does and doesn't do

Every justice system actor should have a realistic understanding of what a technology solution does and doesn't do.

- Everyone touching the technology should understand how it impacts all stakeholders and the realistic limitations of the technology.

10. Be prepared to pivot

When you find that a technology is not achieving its objectives or fulfilling these principles—or that it is creating new problems—take a step back and reassess.

- Constantly get feedback from all the users.
- As needs change or new ones surface, be prepared to pivot to new technology or non-technology solutions.
- Be comfortable admitting failure and restarting as needed.

For More Information

The Center for Court Innovation is committed to exploring how the power of technology can improve the work of justice reform. For more information, e-mail cci-tech-dept@nycourts.gov.