



The Tech Governance Playbook

Technology Leadership for Nonprofit Boards

Executive Summary

For high-performing boards in both corporate and nonprofit environments, technology board leadership is swiftly becoming a critical focus area. These board leaders recognize that tech expertise and oversight are critical to modern governance.

Ambitious nonprofits, like their for-profit counterparts, have long since accepted that technology must power business. Tech helps nonprofits do things faster, more efficiently, and often more effectively. As technology becomes more and more central, the strongest organizations are thinking of tech as driving their core business, not just supporting it, and developing more unified operating models that help them to responsibly and effectively harness the power of technology to maximize their impact.

Bringing the concept of tech governance to a nonprofit board can be critical in enabling this transformation. For the nonprofit sector, which has historically under-invested in technology (whether by choice or necessity), tech governance is a breakthrough opportunity to bring critical expertise to the boardroom, develop strong networks in the tech industry, close critical tech resource gaps, and build a sustainable approach to tech that is deeply integrated into organization. Tech leaders are searching for new opportunities to contribute, and the time is now.

Technology governance is an emerging field that addresses the growing importance of technology in society. It extends the foundation of financial and legal oversight on boards to technology, recognizing that organizations need sound and ethical technical policies, clear and contextually appropriate counsel on technology choices, and access to the tech resources they need to advance their mission.

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There is a huge opportunity to transform existing boards....
Every ambitious nonprofit needs tech.

Jim Fruchterman
Founder/CEO, Tech Matters



But organizations and their leaders need to know how to make this transition. As with finance and legal oversight on boards, the best technology governance leverages specific expertise, establishes norms and responsibilities, and involves a named board seat. Nonprofit CEOs need the framework, tools, tech fluency, and access to tech leaders to make this board shift happen.

Board.Dev is building the field of tech governance to help close this gap and accelerate nonprofit progress. This playbook was written for nonprofit executives and their boards who want to understand and implement tech governance in their boardrooms.

Nonprofits Face a Tech Investment Gap

Restricted resources, competing priorities, and a lack of guidance mean that nonprofits only spend \$1 on technology for every \$3 that private companies do¹—yet we know that tech-savvy nonprofits are 4x more likely to achieve their missions², and nonprofits

¹ Nonprofit Technology Networks, Flexera

² Salesforce.org, Nonprofit Trends Report, 2023



using technology effectively have 95% increased ability to serve beneficiaries and 68% decreased operational costs³.

In fact, only 25% of nonprofit organizations have a clear tech vision and strategy, and only 25% of those report having the resources to implement their strategy.⁴ Most nonprofits are caught in a tech underinvestment cycle.

These figures reflect what Board.Dev discovered in more than 50 interviews with nonprofit sector tech experts, board leaders, and nonprofit CEOs. While nonprofit leaders are certainly thinking about risk–security issues and ethical use of tech are what keeps them up at night—they are also increasingly motivated by technology opportunity: the new ways to amplify their work and accelerate progress toward their missions that technology affords.

But nonprofit CEOs are also increasingly realizing that they don't have the right expertise on their boards to guide them on these issues.

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My Board Chair is constantly asking: is there a way tech can make that more efficient?

He talks about data, compliance, reporting, but also in terms of how we make things more efficient and effective—for example, how to streamline our intake for senior services. But what it means is I have someone asking me about tech who isn't tech-savvy.

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Success would be a culture shift—if we can elevate my board in talking about tech. They aren't technologists, but we all need to be taking this on. Sharing and learning going both ways, relationships built with the people on our team.

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Our board chair will say 'you need this, that'. But we need really thoughtful solutions for all our tech decisions—curriculum, hardware, security, compliance, risk management—making sure we're engaged in best practices. We don't want to make tech practices the weak link or Trojan horse that comprises financial operations or day to day. Tech is our area of greatest exposure.

³tech-food-impact-whitepaper.pdf (independentsector.org)

⁴<https://page.techsoup.org/data-handling-and-digital-readiness-in-civil-society>

Embracing Tech and Data Is an Imperative

A nonprofit's outcomes, as for almost all organizations, are now directly tied to how they use data and technology. Successful organizations are using data to inform their tactics and strategies as well as to help communicate their impact to donors and stakeholders; they are considering how to leverage generative AI and automation to operate more efficiently and free up time for impact-focused work. Technology strategy is amplifying the impact of their teams so they can deliver more impact per dollar and attract and retain the best people.

To thrive today, nonprofits must embrace tech and data.

Employees expect and need better productivity and collaboration tools.⁵

Donors contribute more when they get better data, and the personalized experiences that AI or automation can enable.⁶

The **clients** we serve expect and depend on the improved user experiences we can deliver with technology.⁷

Communities need to share and engage with data to better understand and serve their constituents.⁸

Philanthropy is both increasing expectations around technology and helping to create opportunity through grants and collaborations.⁹

⁵ <https://www.zdnet.com/article/nonprofit-trend-report-technology-is-fueling-relevance-and-growth/>; <https://hbr.org/2021/12/how-smart-tech-is-transforming-nonprofits>

⁶ https://ssir.org/articles/entry/how_impact_data_changes_the_way_donors_give

⁷ <https://insights.som.yale.edu/insights/can-technology-transform-the-nonprofit-sector>; <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/01/tech-for-good-innovations>

⁸ https://ssir.org/articles/entry/driving_social_change_with_data#

⁹ <https://www.twosigma.com/articles/data-and-tech-for-good-landscape/>

Boards Are Critical to Building a Sustainable Tech Strategy

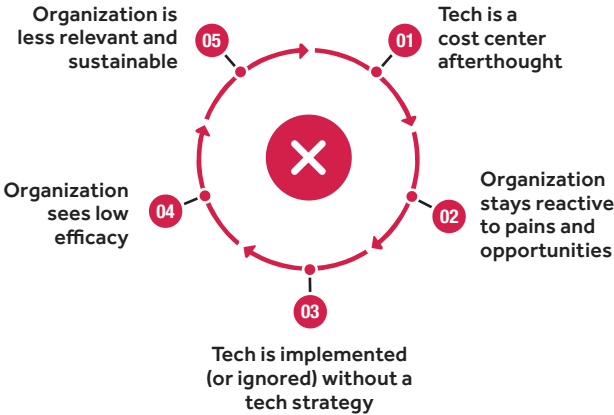
To go from a reactive to proactive tech strategy, you need your board's leadership and support. If the board has ownership of your tech vision and strategy, they will also be your partner in ensuring you have the resources necessary to execute. It is this partnership between leadership and board that will ensure your organization is sustainable and delivering on its mission.



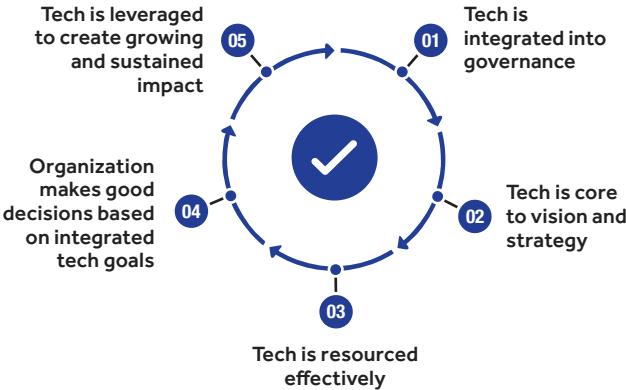
While smart tech helped scores of nonprofits to pivot to suddenly remote and digital delivery of programs and services at the start of the pandemic, it may also enable us to turn the page on an era of frantic busyness and scarcity mindsets to one in which nonprofit organizations have the time to think and plan—and even dream. We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to remake work and focus on social change, and it requires people and organizations who are thoughtful and knowledgeable about the use of smart tech.

Harvard Business Review ¹⁰

Reactive model



Proactive model



¹⁰<https://hbr.org/2021/12/how-smart-tech-is-transforming-nonprofits>



Tech Governance Means Codifying Board Technology Leadership

Tech governance extends the foundation of financial and legal oversight to technology. Organizations need sound and ethical technical policies, clear and contextually appropriate counsel on technology choices, and access to the tech resources they need to advance their mission.

Understanding the Four Areas of Tech Governance

To take on tech governance, a nonprofit board should regularly engage four key areas: oversight, planning, resourcing, and visioning. To start, this could be as simple as putting these topics on your standing board agenda. At Board.Dev, we offer an assessment that helps nonprofit leaders and board leaders start the conversation by raising shared concerns and opportunities for leverage or improvement.

1. Risk Management and Security: Operating Safely and Ethically in an Online World

Managing risk is one of the core responsibilities of a board, and today it requires digital expertise. The board should set the ethical and legal standards for the use of data that balances risk (legal, reputational) with impact (mission, resourcing) in these areas:

- Employees and volunteers. Do you know you're following best practices for internal and external controls? Are you requesting more data from employees or volunteers than you really need for programs?
- Donors and paying customers. How will you assure donors or customers that you're protected from data breaches, and how will you handle an incident if it does occur?
- Beneficiary community. What do beneficiaries need to know about how you collect and manage data? Are you honoring your commitment to the duty of care in your data policies?
- Community partners. Do you want to share community data with donors, the government, or partners, and if so, how do you approach these situations to maximize your impact while minimizing risks and following best practices for data ethics?

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Our board—our whole team—is so much more comfortable with a tech leader on the board, someone who has been able to identify where we need to make changes to minimize our risks, coach us on how to make those changes, and follow up with us on the results.

Alex Godin
Cofounder, Lemontree Food Helpline

The logo for Lemontree, featuring the word "lemontree" in a lowercase, cursive script font.

2. Tech Strategy and Planning: Making Sure You're on Course

A board with tech acumen can help the leadership team develop a clear tech strategy and plan that enables you to move from being reactive to proactive, including topics like:

- Internal tech planning. Can we leverage tech to increase productivity and job satisfaction for our employees?
- External tech planning. Can we serve our community better by engaging technology differently?
- Culture. How do we build a tech-savvy culture that renews and evolves organically?
- Data and AI strategy. How are we building a long-term data strategy to maximize our impact, build better stories for donors, and engage new technologies like AI to power our work?

- Business case development. How do we evaluate the true return on investment for specific tech expenses?
- Insourcing and outsourcing. What is our approach to building, customizing, and buying off the shelf software? How do we think about leveraging in-house and external expertise?

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I founded my nonprofit because I was driven to serve students. When we realized technology needed to be a significant part of that, I was starting from scratch. Thankfully, I had a tech executive on the board who became my mentor and thought partner on all things technology. They'd help us figure out between in-house and out-of-house, related fundraising and partnerships, and even attended finalist interviews for our first big tech hire, contributing the needed context around a topic that wasn't directly a part of our mission, but became critical to achieving it.

Reid Saaris
 Founder & Former CEO, Equal Opportunity Schools



3. Tech Resources: Ensuring You Can Get It Done

With a clear and co-owned tech strategy, your board can help you secure the right resources you need to achieve your plan. The biggest pieces include:

- Donations and pro bono. How do you secure donations of time, money, and in-kind services from the tech community to support your plan? How do you package your tech plan for donors?
- Hiring and mentoring. How do you source, screen, onboard, and mentor tech staff to maximize their impact?
- Vendor selection. How do you select the right tech partnerships to create a durable and extensible platform across your needs?

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Nonprofits do society's most critical work—and technology is essential to achieving and accelerating their impact. While the demands on nonprofit programs and services continue to grow, so do the gaps in their technology access and enablement. A tech leader at the board level plays an important intermediary role. By understanding the organization's challenges firsthand, they can activate their network to identify and secure the product, people and funding truly needed.

Erin Baudo Felter
 VP, Social Impact and Sustainability, Okta



4. Tech in the Community - Building a Vision

The right tech leaders can facilitate generative conversations about the longer-term potential for tech to impact your operations, fundraising, and programs. This energizes the board, increasing their ownership and engagement; but it also enhances your ability to leverage strategic thinking from a range of perspectives. For example, conversations about the impact of artificial intelligence or likely changes in government regulations will help you uncover new opportunities and manage your long-term risks. How can you solve problems for your beneficiaries in ways that no other organization is imagining today?

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We could do our work better if there was tech governance to guide our work. If we had someone on board who wanted to roll up their sleeves and lift up the hood, while staying in the realm of the possible for a nonprofit.... We have IT support that's more reactionary—we haven't spent much time thinking about it deeply.... We need to create a better understanding of when to use tech products. We need a governance structure around tech in general.

Nonprofit leader





Operationalizing Tech Governance

Understanding the Four Areas of Tech Governance

Many nonprofit leaders ask, are there people who really want to do this? Board.Dev and our partners say emphatically: yes

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The biggest win is that I get to use my skills and experience and knowledge to have a big impact. I'm leveraging myself to have a bigger impact.... It makes me feel good without having to quit my job and start a new career building a nonprofit myself.

Tech leader on a nonprofit board

For starters, right now there are over 400,000¹¹ tech professionals on LinkedIn who are interested in joining a nonprofit board—they need an introduction, an invitation, and the commitment from you that you'll work together to engage not just their checkbooks but their skills and expertise.

Here are the 3 steps to recruit and onboard the right leaders for your board right now.

¹¹Based on September 2023 LinkedIn search data

1. Get Clear on Your Needs

Before searching for anyone with tech industry experience, spend some time understanding your needs and how those might map to skills and expertise. Your nominating committee can develop a clear profile for the ideal candidate based on these factors:

- Tech governance priorities. Over the next 2-3 years, where do you think you'll see the most need: Risk management? Tech strategy? Deep networks for generating resources? Long-term vision?
- Your model. Given your impact area, revenue model, and population served, what industry experience would be most relevant? Do you need international expertise? Would a specific vertical like healthtech or fintech be most valuable? And so on.
- Given your current board membership and leadership team, what is the right level of seniority? Size or maturity level of the companies they've worked for? Are you looking for somebody who has been where you are today, or who knows first-hand where you're trying to go tomorrow?
- Redundancy. What are key areas of overlap with other board members to highlight or avoid?

2. Recruiting

You may need to use a recruiter to find the right board members, but you should begin by seeing if there are people in your network. Socialize the profile you identified with your current board, leadership team, individual donors, foundations, corporate partners, volunteers, and community partners. Ask your board members to use LinkedIn and search their first degree network for tech leaders seeking a nonprofit board position.

Even if a person is not interested in joining a nonprofit board, using someone's profile as an archetype for the recruiting process can be extremely helpful. "I know Jane doesn't have time for any boards, but she has the perfect combination of experience and connections that we need for our board."

And don't forget to look internally. Many nonprofit leaders tell us they have tech industry leaders on their boards already, but they just haven't figured out how to engage them differently from how they engage the rest of the board. With the right expectation-setting and support, activating a current board member might be easier than recruiting someone brand new.

3. Onboarding

In addition to the standard onboarding you provide for all your new board members, the best introduction for tech leaders will include some extra time to orient them to the current state of

your tech realities and aspirations. You should also review your current budget, both for tech-related hard costs that could be offset with donations, as well as other large costs in the budget that could be ripe for tech investments, such as task automation. Ideally, you and your tech leader will co-author some goals for how they can make a specific impact that aligns with your priorities in the course of their board term.

You might also want the tech leader to talk with key staff members involved in your technology planning and execution, perhaps a quick listening tour. Often the most tech-forward employees at a nonprofit are the most junior employees: they know the work, and have ideas on how to apply tech that managers or leaders may not be aware of.

Finally, you might also consider how other board members might react to this new role. Sometimes, non-tech-fluent board members feel uncomfortable when tech becomes more of a topic. How can you help them embrace it?

Choose a Few Anchor Systems and Processes

There are many ways to implement tech governance tuned to your needs, but a few best practices include:



Tech committees. Create a board committee to facilitate tech governance. Create a clear role and objectives for the committee. You will likely want to engage certain members of your leadership and tech team in support of the committee.



Standing reports. Add a tech report to every board meeting that can include updates on progress against your plan and information on new risks and opportunities as trends in the field.



Fundraising goals. Make sure your fundraising committee and team is working with your tech committee to identify and track resource generating to support your tech priorities.



Generative retreats. Develop generative conversations about tech and its long-term potential impact on your organization and the community.

No matter how you choose to make tech governance a topic, treat it as an important initiative. Set goals, show benefits, share learnings across committees or with staff, and celebrate the wins.

Building a Culture of Tech and Data Literacy

Just as finance and legal issues are relevant to board members for whom those are not core areas of expertise, tech and data literacy are important for everyone on the board, regardless of their tech industry expertise. To ensure coherence of business and technology strategy, think about a holistic upskilling strategy to build a baseline of tech knowledge across your board.

You can build tech comfort in a few ways:

- Make tech fluency an attribute you look for in all board members.
- When looking to solve challenges or realize opportunities, begin a board discussion by looking at how tech and data could be a solution. But also note when tech is not the right solution. The right technology is integrated and necessary, not a hope or a band-aid.
- Regularly share articles and information with the board about the application of tech and data in the nonprofit sector and in your specific impact area.
- Make it easy for board members to learn. Create opportunities for people to engage with the tech committee or specific topics; offer tech governance training for board members who want it.

Tech Governance Implementation Risks

When moving to a tech governance model, the two biggest risks are blurring the lines between staff, board, and volunteer roles, and not integrating this very unique role into your standard board dynamics.

To address both issues, be intentional and clear about the role of tech leaders on your board, and address this both in the onboarding process and when you introduce this new role to the rest of the board.

- Make sure the board member understands the line between their role as a board member (governing) and volunteer (planning, mentoring, fundraising). As a CEO, you report to them, but in their role as a volunteer, all board members report to the organization's staff leadership. Some of the responsibilities we're suggesting add up to a very active role, but you should continue to evaluate the tech leader's work plan to ensure this role doesn't creep into volunteer territory.
- Similarly, make sure your team knows when the board member is acting as a board member vs a volunteer. Be clear about what role this board member plays (or not) in decision-making.

- Most tech leaders come from well resourced and larger organizations. As a result, they might suggest strategies and approaches that won't work for your situation. Or, conversely, they might assume you can't take on big changes due to resource constraints. You'll need to orient them to your reality and vision, and you'll both need to stay curious, learn, and partner on what makes the most sense.



Key recommendations

Adding a tech governance board leader to your board—whether by recruiting a new individual or activating someone already on your board—can be one of the most high-impact changes you can make in your leadership model, but it does take effort. Every step counts, but here are some of the most key takeaways to get started, and keep moving.

Make technical expertise a priority capability on your board. Today, technology is so interconnected with strategy and compliance that it is imperative that you have technical acumen on your board to fulfill your governance responsibilities.

Help other board members see tech expertise as a value-add. Having a tech specialist on the board can help you with progress toward your mission; but it can also help other board members gain a new network and skills. If they see the value for their own development, they might be more eager to engage.

Recruit tech executives to your board. Tech leaders are interested in nonprofit board service but are rarely asked. You can significantly uplevel your board by recruiting tech leadership to drive your technical governance. They will not only bring new expertise but a diverse perspective and access to new networks of supporters.

Develop tech governance systems and practices. Unlike legal, accounting, and general business executives, tech leaders are rarely engaged effectively. It is critical to build tech into the agenda of meetings and the annual planning process so the expectations are clear and there is accountability.

Right-size tech governance for your organization. While the board needs to play a critical role in setting your tech strategy, their involvement will be heavily dependent on the size and technical maturity of your organization.

About Board.Dev

Board.Dev is a community of purpose-driven tech leaders who are catalyzing and steering the emerging field of technology governance for the nonprofit sector. We are a social enterprise that partners with companies and nonprofits to level up tech governance in the social sector to ensure nonprofits can responsibly harness the power of technology.

We were founded in 2023 by the catalysts and architects of the pro bono service movement and the social impact team at Okta. We advocate for the field, conduct research, set technical governance standards, train leaders, host a community of practice and place tech leaders on nonprofit boards.

Alethea Hannemann, CEO and Co-founder



Alethea Hannemann is the CEO and Co-founder of Board.Dev, a social enterprise leading the field of tech governance in the social sector. She has extensive expertise in cross-sector collaboration, including building standard-setting programs at the Taproot Foundation, the nonprofit capacity builder that has delivered \$100M in critical services to nonprofits and social enterprises around the world, and launching Taproot+, the first online marketplace for skills-based volunteering. She has also served as strategic advisor to social impact teams at companies like Okta, Google, and Splunk, and as COO of a \$25M food access nonprofit. With co-founder Aaron Hurst, she wrote Powered by Pro Bono. Alethea started her career writing technical and product content in Boston and Silicon Valley, bridging the gap between brilliant engineers and the people who used their products.

Aaron Hurst, Co-founder and Chair



Aaron Hurst is a serial social system entrepreneur who catalyzed the \$15 billion pro bono service market as the founder of the Taproot Foundation. He most recently co-founded Board.Dev, a social venture working to catalyze the field of technical governance. Aaron has served on multiple nonprofit boards including BoardSource and Net Impact as well as an advisor to LinkedIn in the development of their member board placement strategy. Prior to Board.Dev, he founded and was CEO of the Imperative, a venture backed B Corp. He is the author of Powered by Pro Bono and the Purpose Economy as well as an Ashoka, Draper Richards Kaplan, and Manhattan Institute fellow. He began his career as a software developer and product manager in Silicon Valley.

OKTA, Founding Corporate Partner



Okta, the leading digital identity and access management company, partnered with us to advance their goal to enable everyone to safely use any technology.

OKTA IS COMMITTED TO:

- Using their voice and expertise to develop the field of tech governance
- Engaging their tech leaders on nonprofit boards

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OUR GOAL IS TO BUILD A
COMMUNITY OF 30,000
TECH LEADERS SERVING ON
NONPROFIT BOARDS BY 2030.