ACCELERATING GENERATIVE AI FOR NONPROFITS

INSIGHTS FROM 25 PRACTITIONERS, TRAINERS, AND FUNDERS

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About This Report

Mark Zitter is an independent philanthropist focused on capacity building and infrastructure investments in the social sector. **He views generative artificial intelligence as a powerful opportunity to improve the sector's effectiveness**. Mark funded this field scan with fiscal sponsorship from Apples and Oranges Arts and commissioned Devi Thomas to conduct the research and write this report. The purpose was to explore the current use of gen AI in US nonprofit organizations and identify opportunities to expand and accelerate adoption. Interviews were conducted from April through June of 2025. A full list of interviewees can be found on the last page of the report.

About Devi Thomas

Devi Thomas is a recognized leader in corporate philanthropy and AI-driven social impact, with a focus on empowering underserved communities through technology. With over 20 years of experience, she blends data-driven insights and storytelling to advance scalable solutions for nonprofits and educators. Her work centers on bridging innovation and purpose, ensuring nonprofits harness generative AI to maximize their impact.

Most recently, as head of AI Skills and Nonprofit Community Capacity at Microsoft Philanthropies, Devi spearheaded global initiatives to equip nonprofits with AI tools, fostering economic opportunity across 24 markets. She founded Microsoft's AI for Good community and the Global Nonprofit Leaders Summit, creating platforms for collaboration on tech-driven social challenges.

Previously, at Salesforce.org, Devi led tech-for-good programs addressing humanitarian issues and STEM education. Her expertise spans multi-sector collaboration, with a focus on inclusion, climate action, and the future of work. A trained journalist, she serves on the board of Project Scientist, guiding underrepresented girls into STEM careers.

About Mark Zitter

Mark spent his career as a healthcare services entrepreneur. He was founder of Zitter Health Insights, a market research and data firm focused on access to medical technologies, and founding CEO of Vital Decisions, a telephone counseling company for patients with serious illness. Mark also founded and chaired the nonprofit Zetema Project, which convened a diverse group of top US healthcare leaders. Mark served as the healthcare advisor for Convergence California, a non-profit, bi-partisan coalition focused on achieving universal healthcare coverage for Californians.

Currently Mark advises growth companies as a Venture Partner for the Israeli venture fund ICI, the US-based venture fund StartFast Ventures, and Stanford BioDesign program, as well as through the advisory committee for the private equity firm Riverside Partners. He co-leads and coordinates educational programming for SERGE, a private national entrepreneur's group. Mark created and chaired the board of SFJAZZ, the nation's leading presenter of jazz, and contributed to the development of the SFJAZZ Center, the first freestanding center for jazz in America. He served on the Board of Governors of the Commonwealth Club of California and contributed to establishing that organization's first facility. Mark is the founding board chair of Reel Medicine Media, which produces media and provider training on end-of-life issues. He also chairs the UpStart Council on Innovation and Entrepreneurship. Mark has worked with not-for- profits on Board development and published articles on NFP Board governance in Stanford Social Innovation Review and other journals. See more information and his blog at www.markzitter.com.

Nonprofit organizations face mounting challenges: surging demand for resources, shrinking budgets, burnt-out staff, and more. While there is no magical answer to these problems, there is a powerful new tool that can help substantially: generative artificial intelligence (AI), most commonly experienced through chatbots. This futuristic capability is available right now, and with little training and minimal cost. And its potential is astonishing.

I say astonishing because during half a dozen short sessions with nonprofit leaders, funders, entrepreneurs, and business executives, they have been astonished at how dramatically and immediately chatbots can increase their impact. This led our team to wonder: **How widespread is gen AI use in the nonprofit world?** Could brief exposure to relevant use cases move teams from AI reluctance to enthusiasm? And if so, what sort of scalable program might be practical and welcomed?

We fielded an investigation to answer these questions. This report draws on more than two dozen conversations with nonprofit leaders, technologists, funders, and AI trainers. The takeaway is clear: **the biggest barrier to using AI is the inspiration and permission to get started**. Most teams don't need a deep technical background. What they need is **a nudge and some powerful real-world examples.**

That starts with leadership. Boards and executive teams need to set the tone and the parameters—encouraging smart, responsible use of AI and helping staff feel safe experimenting. From there, the key is practical, low-cost training that meets people where they are. **Short sessions focused on real tasks—writing, budgeting, planning, donor engagement—can generate excitement and unlock huge value.** Importantly, this works best when early adopters within the organization—program managers, operations leads, development staff—start using AI and then share what they've learned. Peers spread their success and experience naturally, in the language of their actual work.

AI tools such as ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Copilot, Gamma, and Otter can boost productivity across every function. But this isn't just about doing things faster. It's about **freeing up human talent to focus on what humans do best—relationship-building, big-picture thinking, and the heart work** that defines mission-driven organizations and inspires their staff.

Our investigation found that there is tremendous opportunity for nonprofits to benefit from greater use of gen AI to better serve their missions, reduce costs, and save staff from common, repetitive administrative tasks. While many current training programs exist to address the gap, most are commercially sponsored (and typically tied to that sponsor's AI product), require a significant time commitment, or both. We see an opportunity for low-intensity, technology-agnostic training intended not to create AI experts but to generate usage, creativity, and enthusiasm. This is especially effective when paired with easy-to-use resources like prompt libraries and ongoing support for follow-up questions.

Many thanks to Devi Thomas, an AI and Social Impact Leader, who led the research and preparation of this report, and to Tim Kashani of Apples and Oranges Arts, our fiscal sponsor. **I hope this report encourages funders and mission-driven organizations to accelerate responsible use of gen AI to enhance their productivity and impact.** Gen AI is one of the most powerful tools ever invented. It's incumbent upon social sector organizations to use it in their efforts to improve our world.

Mark Zitter

Executive Summary:
From Reluctance to Enthusiasm

Nonprofits face immense pressure to solve complex social problems with limited resources. Generative AI represents a powerful capability to help. We wanted to understand the degree to which nonprofits have adopted gen AI, the barriers to greater use, and what could accelerate it.

We talked to **25 sector leaders** (11 nonprofit leaders, 9 AI trainers/strategists, and 5 foundations). From the front lines of service delivery to the tech experts and foundations funding the future, we wanted to understand the full spectrum of adoption, from the curious and hesitant to the confident super users. We found that 1) gen AI use is limited and 2) **the primary barrier isn't the technology itself but failure to realize just how valuable generative AI can be and taking the first step.**

Key Findings

- **Gen AI use among nonprofits is limited**: Perhaps half of nonprofit staff are using AI tools (often secretly) and then frequently for such basic activities as search, editing, and meeting summaries.
- **Fear and ethical concerns create resistance**: Human service organizations worry AI will depersonalize relationships and amplify biases; staff need clear frameworks showing AI as a helper, not a threat
- **Leadership and policy enable adoption**: Board buy-in and simple usage policies legitimize AI use and provide psychological safety
- **Successful nonprofits adopt AI early**: The most important step is starting now rather than waiting for perfect tools or strategies
- **Hands-on training drives breakthrough moments**: When teams see AI instantly draft grant proposals, brainstorm campaigns, or organize logistics, usage accelerates
- **Internal champions matter most**: When a trusted colleague models successful AI use, adoption skyrockets and staff devise organization-specific applications

The Path Forward

Success requires moving beyond one-size-fits-all approaches:

- **Show, don't tell**: Provide hands-on training focused on real-world use cases and everyday tasks
- **Build confidence incrementally**: Encourage small wins to create momentum that transforms resistance into curiosity and ultimately enthusiasm
- **Provide ongoing resources**: Offer prompt libraries and peer support to maintain momentum after initial training
- **Address the full AI ecosystem**: Recognize that AI is not just chatbots—teams need exposure to diverse tools matched to specific needs

AI will disrupt the nonprofit sector, presenting both tremendous opportunities and substantial threats. Organizations that adopt AI intelligently and rapidly will be far more successful in achieving their missions – and much more likely to survive – than those that don't. Staff will migrate to nonprofits that use AI to increase their productivity and free them from repetitive tasks to focus on deeply human work. The shortest path to that future is through accessible, inspiring, and practical AI training, and **the time to begin is now.**

Nonprofit AI Use: Top 10 Takeaways

Interviews with 11 AI Nonprofit Leaders, 9 AI Trainers and Strategists and 5 Foundations funding AI projects were conducted as part of a feasibility study examining AI training and use among small to medium nonprofits, with the goal of developing targeted training programs and resources that would help build AI capacity among nonprofit teams.

1. Just Use It: AI Adoption Starts With Practice

'Go with something, try it, and the best way to get good at it is to use it.'

— Aaron Katler, CEO, UpStart

Many human-centered organizations worry that AI will depersonalize their services and increase bias, and staff who joined the sector to build relationships are often resistant to automation. To address these fears, organizations like Project Evident suggest creating clear frameworks for how AI should and shouldn't be used. Additionally, trainers like Beth Kanter use demos to show how AI can reduce bias instead of amplifying it.

Another barrier is concern over AI's environmental impact. As Áine Duggan, CEO of Partnership to End Homelessness in New York City, noted, "There's a lot of chatter about generative AI having a negative impact on the climate... so make sure you're only using it for certain things."

The most important step is to start experimenting with AI now, rather than waiting for the perfect tool or strategy. Teams often get stuck in "analysis paralysis," but the simple act of using AI for tasks like summarizing meetings or aligning goals quickly demonstrates its value. As author of *The Smart Nonprofit*, Beth Kanter, advises, nonprofits should create a "playground with a high fence"—a safe space for staff to tinker with AI without fear.

2. Fear and Ethics Slow Progress

'There's some resistance... a protectiveness of our staff over the clients... Somehow this is seen as an opposition.'

— Lindsey Dohlman, Data and Evaluation Project Manager at JFCS East Bay

3. Board Buy-In and Policy Enable AI Culture

> 66
> 'AI culture starts with leaders showing they're still learning.'
> — Beth Kanter, author of *The Smart Nonprofit*
> 99

Board support is a key enabler of AI use. Patrice Johnson acknowledged, "We have a board member who is an expert in AI," which helped bring the team along faster. Additionally, a formal policy legitimizes AI use and gives staff clear boundaries and psychological safety, says Afua Bruce, author of *The Tech that Comes Next*. For example, Project Scientist's "80-20 rule" encourages staff to use AI for 80% of specific administrative tasks, with the final 20% being a human-led strategic edit to check for accuracy. This policy gave one team permission to ask ChatGPT for help naming a new initiative, which led to a successful outcome and generated internal excitement. Other experts advised more caution in the division of labor shared with AI tools. "AI should save you 30% of your time at this point in its maturity, with 70% of the work remaining as yours to validate and ensure you can stand behind the work," said Chantal Forster, a senior AI Strategy Resident.

4. Prompt Libraries Are Key Onramps

'We are building a prompt library... something that can be useful to nonprofits.'

— Woodrow Rosenbaum, Chief Data Officer of GivingTuesday

Prompt libraries act as recipes for new users, removing guesswork and building confidence. They provide a crucial starting point for staff who are willing to use AI but don't know where to begin. Trainers emphasize showing tactical prompts for simple tasks like thank-you notes or newsletter drafts.

This concept can expand to a use-case library. Beth Miller, EVP at Convergence Center for Policy Resolution, noted, "the thing that I would say that I use AI for most successfully is I often ask it for frameworks for things." Similarly, Michael Delapa from Landwatch shared that legal teams are using AI to summarize dense policy documents.

General training to introduce staff to the power of gen AI may be sufficient to create initial adoption, but for maximum benefits training should address a team's specific use cases, workflows and different tools. After a grant writing-focused training, Patrice's team began using the presentation tool Gamma to auto-generate board decks, saving hours of work. Trainers should be tech-agnostic or gear training to the organization-wide AI tool and match tool demos to specific needs. An ongoing resource to answer questions is also key to keeping momentum alive after the initial training.

5. Relevant Training Increases Engagement

'We surveyed the team to ask what tools they would actually use.'

— Patrice Johnson, CEO, Project Scientist

6. AI is Not Just ChatGPT

" 'They think AI is ChatGPT... it's not the only tool.' — Amy Sample Ward, CEO, NTEN "

This common misconception narrows an organization's imagination and limits what it can achieve with AI. Training must emphasize that AI is a broad ecosystem of tools, including general-use chatbots like Claude or Copilot and task-specific assistants, such as custom GPTs designed specifically for fund-raising or marketing. As David Goodman of the Jim Joseph Foundation said, "We just need to level set everyone's understanding of what AI is." To avoid over-reliance on a single product, nonprofits need access to unbiased, comparative lists of AI tools with clear pricing and strengths. This can be at odds with training programs or other support offered by the tool-makers themselves, which typically only focus on the sponsor's product.

Internal advocates who model AI use are often the most effective catalysts for change. Robb Lippitt of Leading Edge shared how he regularly uses AI for meeting summaries and drafting documents, and his operations team actively tests new tools. The most successful trainings identify internal champions and spotlight them, turning individual enthusiasm into organizational influence. These can be staff or board members and need not be the organization's most senior leaders. In fact, rank-and-file team members often are the most effective internal champions because they are less threatening and have the largest number of peers with similar use cases.

7. In-House Champions Make the Difference

'During trainings, I usually have one or two power users who will speak up and talk about how great gen AI is.'

— Beth Kanter, author of *The Smart Nonprofit*

8. Strategy > Tactics

> **"** *'What you do is have a lot of inefficient deployment of funds.'*
> — Woodrow Rosenbaum, Chief Data Officer, GivingTuesday **"**

While tactical training can be highly valuable for accelerating adoption, the best organizations create an overall AI strategy to ensure that individual efforts integrate to serve the broader purpose. Focusing on tactical training for individual tools without a larger strategy can result in wasted money and effort. Lasting change requires a strategic plan that includes governance. As Nathan Chappell of Fundraising.AI noted, "AI governance isn't hard, it just needs to be done." A clear strategy defines who owns AI adoption, how success is measured, where to direct funding and training dollars, and what long-term outcomes the organization is trying to achieve.

9. AI & Data Go Hand-In-Hand

'AI is a gift because it offers sense-making of the messy data and makes it more usable for unlocking the information from the data.' — Woodrow Rosenbaum, Chief Data Officer, GivingTuesday

AI tools deliver better results with clean, organized data. Essential AI training includes data literacy and management. While generative AI can be used with existing (often inadequately structured) data, the real leverage comes from quality data management. This typically requires some expertise and staff training but an early investment in data cleaning and management usually pays dividends relatively quickly.

10. Small Wins, Big Shifts

> **"** When nonprofit teams work in open lab sessions with their executive leaders to model use and experiment with team workflows, everyone wins.' — Beth Kanter, author of *The Smart Nonprofit* **"**

Frequent, practical use of AI builds momentum, reduces fear, and creates cultural change. Even asking a chatbot to help name a program can increase curiosity and buy-in. To build skills in a low-stakes environment, Kaz McGrath, Founder and CEO, Purpose-led AI (PLAI) said, "Asking AI to plan your family meals seems trivial but it rewires something. Culture shifts in these playful, low-stakes moments when people realize AI fits their world."

Tracking these "aha" moments is key to transformation, particularly since AI adoption often happens quietly. As Chantal Forster, formerly an AI Strategy Resident with the Annenberg Foundation, said, "the challenge is most organization staff are secretly using AI tools... what you'll find when you survey is at this point, about 45 to 65% of their staff are using a free version of ChatGPT." Starting small and celebrating wins of any size generates enthusiasm that can lead to widespread AI use.

Takeaways from Trainers

Trainer insights repeatedly emphasized the need for both structure and flexibility. **Tim Lockie, CEO of the Human Stack**, called for shifting the key metric from knowledge to behavior: "frequency of use." He advocated training that helps individuals move from monthly use to weekly, then to daily. His model includes short, scenario-based sessions supported by role-relevant use cases.

Beth Kanter, AI Trainer and author of *The Smart Nonprofit*, reinforced this with an approach she calls "structured freedom"—providing guardrails for experimenting. She uses real team workflows to demonstrate AI tools and requires that executives participate. This not only legitimizes the training but encourages all levels to engage. "When the CEO came to the open labs and shared his prompt results, it changed everything," she noted.

Nathan Chappell from [Fundraising.AI](#) and author of *Nonprofit AI* focused on curiosity as the core trait to cultivate. He spoke of training rooms filled with hidden AI users—staff using free tools under the radar. By sharing success stories and live examples, **Chappell found that shadow users often became champions**. "We don't need more tech demos; we need inspiration," he explained, referencing his workshops built around storytelling and generative design.
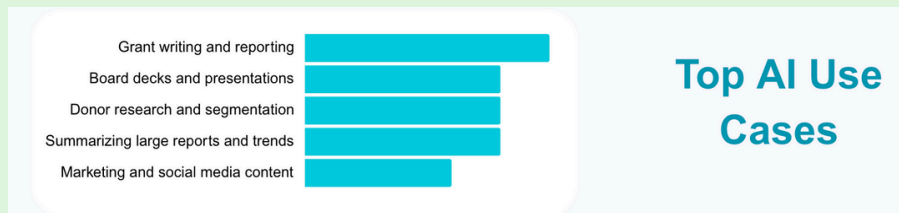
THE "SHADOW USE" PHENOMENON

48%

Of nonprofit staff are estimated to be using free AI tools like ChatGPT "secretly." This indicates a massive, untapped opportunity to formalize use and scale impact with AI-first training and support.

Project Evident proposed a cross-functional approach. Their model encourages sending up to four people per organization to every workshop—a program lead, tech facilitator, evaluator, and an influencer. "Change management isn't a solo job," said **Sarah Di Troia from Project Evident**. They suggested pre-training agreements to ensure staff feel supported to explore, reducing resistance and shadow use.

Jacqui Watts at Patrick J. McGovern Foundation (PJMF) aims to design scalable learning offerings that nonprofits can leverage as a group alongside their colleagues because "**nonprofits have unique journeys and don't move at the same speed.**" The PJMF Learning Hub provides recorded sessions, activity guides, and real-world case studies so small organizations can take steps towards AI adoption on their own timeline with minimal facilitation.

Takeaways from Nonprofits

Grant writing and reporting	
Board decks and presentations	
Donor research and segmentation	
Summarizing large reports and trends	
Marketing and social media content	

Top AI Use Cases

Leading Edge's Chief Operating Officer, Robb Lippitt, acknowledged that the relationship with technology and nonprofits has not always been strategic. He uses AI for a host of productivity reasons and is also thinking about a large language model that can support the network of nonprofit professionals supported by Leading Edge. "Not-for-profit leaders and organizations don't tend to think of technology as a dimension by which they can solve problems, whether they are or not. They tend to think about throwing people at problems, getting money to solve problems, building community and coalitions and collaborating to solve problems. They do not think about solving problems technically." At **Jewish Family and Community Services (JFCS) East Bay**, **Lindsey Dohlman** described a culture of protectionism around client interactions. **CEO of JFCS East Bay, Robin Mencher** emphasized that technology must be framed as an enabler of human-centered outcomes, not a shortcut. This insight explains why change in such environments requires more relational training—modeling empathy, ethics, and efficiency together.

The Malala Fund's Chief Development Officer, Anjali Singh Code, shared that "the hesitancy in adopting AI is primarily due to concerns about privacy, donor safety, and confidentiality." **Partnerships to End Homelessness' CEO Áine Duggan** is asking crucial questions as it relates to safety and integrity of AI use for a human services organization like hers. "I think understanding the tools that are okay to use and the ones that are not is important - there's a lack of knowledge across the entire team of what's safe and what isn't. So are there ways to make them safe? Are there subscriptions that the organization should have to certain tools that would make them compliant with the kind of donor integrity we want to maintain?"

UpStart's CEO Aaron Katler is also responsible for helping a network of entrepreneurs think about using AI. He leads by example. "I will write out the 30 things I have to get done in the next two days. And then I will use AI to organize, coordinate, balance, help with all that." UpStart is also leaning heavily into AI for its strategic planning - hoping eventually to support its portfolio network plan better, faster, and cheaper. Staff are leveraging gen AI tools to help build processes and operationalize their work.

Kyle Zimmer, CEO at **First Book** noted that "younger staff dove in fast," while some senior staff hesitated. Their approach included investing in ERP upgrades and workflow mapping to identify where AI could reduce friction—especially in logistics and research.

Sabrina Tadele, Director of Strategic Initiatives at the Capital Area Food Bank, which oversees over 700 different locations in the Washington D.C. area, shared that peer-to-peer learning and encouragement is key for AI adoption. **'I think facilitating opportunities for people to share how they are using AI with each other, brag a little bit, get rewarded, get some praise, I think could be beneficial for building momentum across the organization.'**

Convergence Center for Policy Resolution's EVP Beth Miller said they deal with a lot of policy- and issue-related conversations. She shared that "our process is inherently long, because it is relationships and it's issues that are stuck. And so we keep coming up against the fact that AI is developing so fast; is it a fit for our process? And AI will likely be more of a lane of one of our projects rather than something we take head on."

> " **'I really believe in the storytelling and the anchoring in use cases that are relevant to our sector as one of the ways to really open a bigger door for people to walk through.'**
> — Sarah Di Troia, Chief Innovation Officer, OutcomesAI, Project Evident "

Takeaways from Experts and Funders

Funders want collaboration, not duplication. Several noted they're behind in AI adoption internally, making it difficult to lead confidently. **David Goodman from the Jim Joseph Foundation** proposed the creation of ROI tools to help foundations assess training returns and programmatic value.

Nathan Chappell from Fundraising.AI and author of *Nonprofit AI* emphasized governance as the first and often missing step. "If leadership doesn't sign off, nothing scales. But governance isn't hard—it just needs to be done." In his view, getting boards to understand AI potential unlocks the staff-level transformation. **Afua Bruce, a strategic advisor and author of** *The Tech that Comes Next,* emphasized the need for ethical guidelines that are acceptable to staff and leaders.

Chantal Forster, an AI Strategy Resident, formerly with the **Annenberg Foundation**, advocated for collaboration among major funders to create impactful initiatives, while also addressing the challenges of institutional ego and the need for agility in the rapidly evolving AI landscape.

Jacqui Watts spoke to the need for scalable models. **Patrick J McGovern Foundation** shifted away from intensive accelerators toward more open, modular learning via their AI Learning Hub. "We're trying to meet orgs where they are—not where we want them to be."

Sarah Di Troia at **OutcomesAI, Project Evident,** echoed this, stating that too much training is still trickle-down. "We need to start with the 80%, not the 20%. There's too much low-hanging fruit being ignored."

Beth Kanter, an AI Trainer and author of *The Smart Nonprofit,* reinforced that training is only effective when it's repeated, social, and contextual. She often requires leadership to attend labs and set the tone:

Tim Lockie from The Human Stack observed that some staff still feel using AI is cheating. This was echoed by **Project Evident**, who reported teams hiding their use out of fear or distrust. They advocated normalizing experimentation through transparent policy and leadership endorsement. These insights highlight the essential role of governance in shaping an ethical and open AI culture. By setting clear boundaries and expectations, leaders can transform hesitant shadow users into open adopters. Both Lockie and Project Evident called for written AI usage policies as well as modeling from leadership to create permission structures that allow staff to safely experiment and learn.

Common Tools and Use Cases

Nonprofits reported using a broad mix of tools:

- **AI tools**: ChatGPT, Claude, Copilot, Gamma, Otter, FundraiseUp, Perplexity, Gemini, Granola, Canva
- **Customizations**: GPTs for HR, intake automation bots, shared prompts via Notion and Slack

Common use cases include:

• Grant writing and reporting	• Impact reports
• Board decks and presentation drafts	• RFP Responses
• Donor research and segmentation	• Slide creation
• Creating tables and data organizing/management	• Newsletter for marketing
• Knowledge management or search	• Summarizing large reports and trends
• Event planning	• Landscape analysis and stakeholder mapping
• Creative writing	• Survey summarization and report synthesis
• Image and social media posts	• Social media content calendars
	• Naming programs and initiatives

The Big Needs

> ❝ **"I think bite-sized training might be a really good way to help break in and help build that muscle to be able to use AI and realize how much it can help."**
>
> — Beth Miller, EVP, Convergence Center for Policy Resolution ❞

Despite enthusiasm, nonprofits face substantial barriers:

- **Accessible and repeatable training**: Beth Kanter and Project Evident emphasized the need for modular training with open labs and post-session support. Tim Lockie urged us to "measure success by frequency, not exposure."
- **Team-based engagement**: Project Evident discourages one-person learning journeys. "This is change management—don't send a lone ranger."
- **Shadow use to sanctioned use**: Nathan Chappell noted that in most sessions, "two-thirds of staff are already using free tools—but secretly." Simple governance structures and organizational policies could legitimize and expand this usage.
- **Inclusive design**: Kyle Zimmer warned against assuming AI comfort levels. Some team members may feel intimidated or displaced. Training must validate those fears and show AI as a helper, not a threat.
- **Quality Data and AI**: Though many organizations are learning that AI can help make sense of messy data, it's best to incorporate data cleaning and management into an AI strategy so that the tools can be valuable for such critical applications as fundraising, membership, and planning.
- **Create a safe space for experimentation**: As Beth Kanter said, "You need a playground with a high fence." Trainers must provide spaces to experiment, guided prompts, and peer support.

Ultimately, successful adoption will depend on providing training, encouraging use, and creating an environment of trust, curiosity, and ongoing learning. When AI becomes a daily companion, not just a novelty, it will amplify mission impact across the sector.

Summary and Next Steps

This field scan reveals a sector at an inflection point. While perhaps 40-50% of nonprofit staff are already experimenting with AI tools (often secretly), most organizations lack the governance, training, and strategic frameworks to harness this potential systematically.

What's Working

- **Peer-to-peer learning** and internal champions drive faster adoption than external training alone
- **Simple policies** like "80-20 rules" give staff permission to experiment safely
- **Use-case specific training** generates more engagement than generic AI overviews
- **Leadership modeling** legitimizes AI use and reduces resistance

Critical Gaps

- **Inclusive training design**: Current approaches often miss staff who feel intimidated or displaced
- **Ongoing support**: One-time training sessions have limited impact without follow-up resources and peer networks
- **Strategic integration**: Tactical tool training without governance leads to inefficient or risky deployment
- **Data infrastructure**: Though AI can help any staff be more productive immediately, many nonprofits need basic data management before using AI for the highest value applications

Recommendations & Immediate Actions:

- Support AI training designed to generate enthusiasm for near-term responsible use
- Fund or provide prompt libraries and use-case resources that nonprofits can access
- Develop or adopt governance policies for safe and ethical AI use
- Invest in data literacy and quality as foundations for high-value AI applications

Recommendations & Medium-term Investments:

- Create cross-funder collaboration to avoid duplication and maximize impact
- Develop ROI measurement tools to assess training effectiveness
- Build networks for ongoing peer support and knowledge sharing
- Consider both opportunities and threats that could result from the ways that AI may fundamentally change the need for your services and the way you deliver value.

Vision: Transform AI from a source of anxiety into a daily companion that amplifies mission impact. Evaluate success not by knowledge acquisition, but by frequency of use and cultural integration—**turning today's shadow users into tomorrow's confident practitioners.** Lay the foundation through brief trainings designed to demonstrate gen AI's potential and **move staff from reluctance to enthusiastic use**. Provide ongoing support and subsequent task-specific instruction to continually increase AI's value.

For nonprofits interested in learning about new common-use scenario-based training and foundations interested in training for grantees, visit www.markzitter.com/ai and sign up for upcoming news and information.

These nonprofits and thought leaders provided invaluable insights into the current and future state of AI adoption.

1. Kyle Zimmer, Chief Executive Officer, First Book
2. Beth Miller, Executive Vice President, Convergence Center for Policy Resolution
3. Robb Lippitt, Chief Operating Officer, Leading Edge
4. Aaron Katler, Chief Executive Officer, UpStart
5. David Goodman, Program Director, Technology Strategy, Jim Joseph Foundation
6. Sabrina Tadele, Director of Strategic Initiatives, Capital Area Food Bank
7. Áine Duggan, Chief Executive Officer, Partnership to End Homelessness
8. Anjali Singh Code, Chief Development Officer, Malala Fund
9. Jacqueline Watts, Learning and Insights Lead, Patrick J. McGovern Foundation
10. Michael Delapa, Chief Executive Officer, Landwatch Monterey County
11. Dr. Patrice Johnson, Chief Executive Officer, Project Scientist
12. Sarah Di Troia, Chief Innovation Officer, OutcomesAI; Simon Morfit, Director, OutcomesAI
13. Nathan Chappell, Founder, FundraisingAI; Author of *NonprofitAI*
14. Woodrow Rosenbaum, Chief Data Officer, Giving Tuesday
15. Lindsey Dohlman, Data and Evaluation Project Manager, Jewish Family and Community Services East Bay; Robin Mencher, Chief Executive Officer, Jewish Family and Community Services East Bay
16. Beth Kanter, AI Trainer; Author of *The Smart Nonprofit*
17. Chantal Forster, AI Strategy Resident and Independent Advisor, Warren West Advisory
18. Afua Bruce, Founder, ANB Advisory Group; Author of *The Tech That Comes Next*
19. Amy Sample Ward, Chief Executive Officer, NTEN
20. Tim Lockie, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, The Human Stack
21. Kaz McGrath, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, PLAI
22. Jim Friedlich, Chief Executive Officer, The Lenfest Institute for Journalism
23. Brian Komar, former Vice President of Global Sustainability Programs, Salesforce
24. Peter Brach, Founder, Propel Philanthropy
25. Tim Kashani, Chief Executive Officer, Apples and Oranges Arts

We are grateful to the 25 participants who were interviewed for this report.