Generative AI for Nonprofits: Practical Tools for Mission-Driven Work

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Your Biggest Hope?

Save time

Efficiency

Do More

Your Biggest Fear?

Complicated

Expensive

Unethical

What Is Generative AI? A Basic Definition

Generative AI is technology that creates new content from prompts you provide. It's a sophisticated pattern-matching engine that has learned from vast amounts of text, images, and data—but it's not a sentient mind, and it's not magic.

Think of it as an incredibly fast research assistant who has read millions of documents and can draft content based on patterns it recognizes. It doesn't "understand" your mission the way your team does, but it can handle certain tasks with remarkable speed and efficiency.

The key insight? AI works best when guided by human expertise, judgment, and heart.
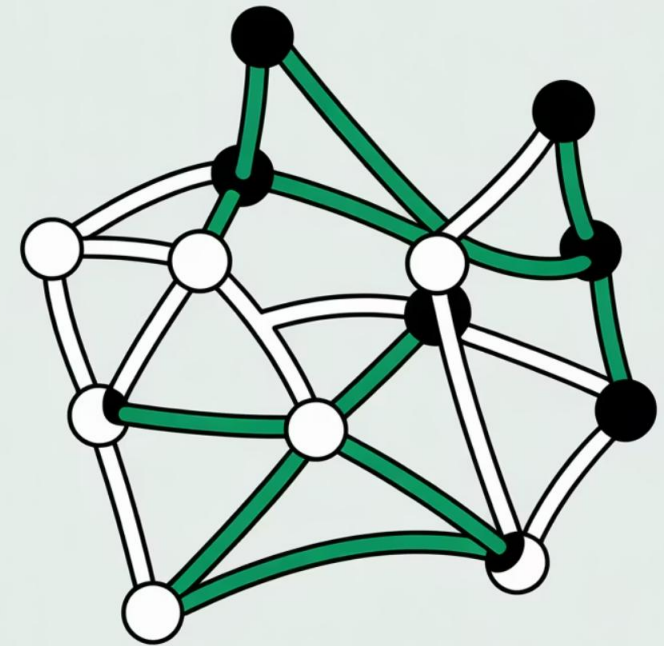
Research Basis

In addition to reading published research about how nonprofits are leveraging these tools

I conducted in-depth interviews with 15 nonprofit leaders in a variety of organizations, missions ranging from community health to education to environmental conservation, etc. about how their organizations are starting to use GenerativeAI, the opportunities and concerns they see, and their advice for leveraging these tools in ways that provide more benefit than harm for their organizations.

The Community Kitchen Analogy

Think of AI like a state-of-the-art calculator in a community kitchen. The calculator is fantastic for quickly calculating budgets, scaling recipes, and tracking inventory—saving the chefs immense time and reducing errors.

However, the calculator cannot feel the ingredients, taste the seasoning, or know the specific cultural preferences of the community being served. The chefs must still provide the human touch—the intent, the ethics, and the unique flavor—because ultimately, the meal relies on genuine human care and connection, not just numerical efficiency.

From Nonprofit Leaders;

"I think an overarching principle is using AI as a tool or an assistant... Rather than putting AI in the driver's seat."
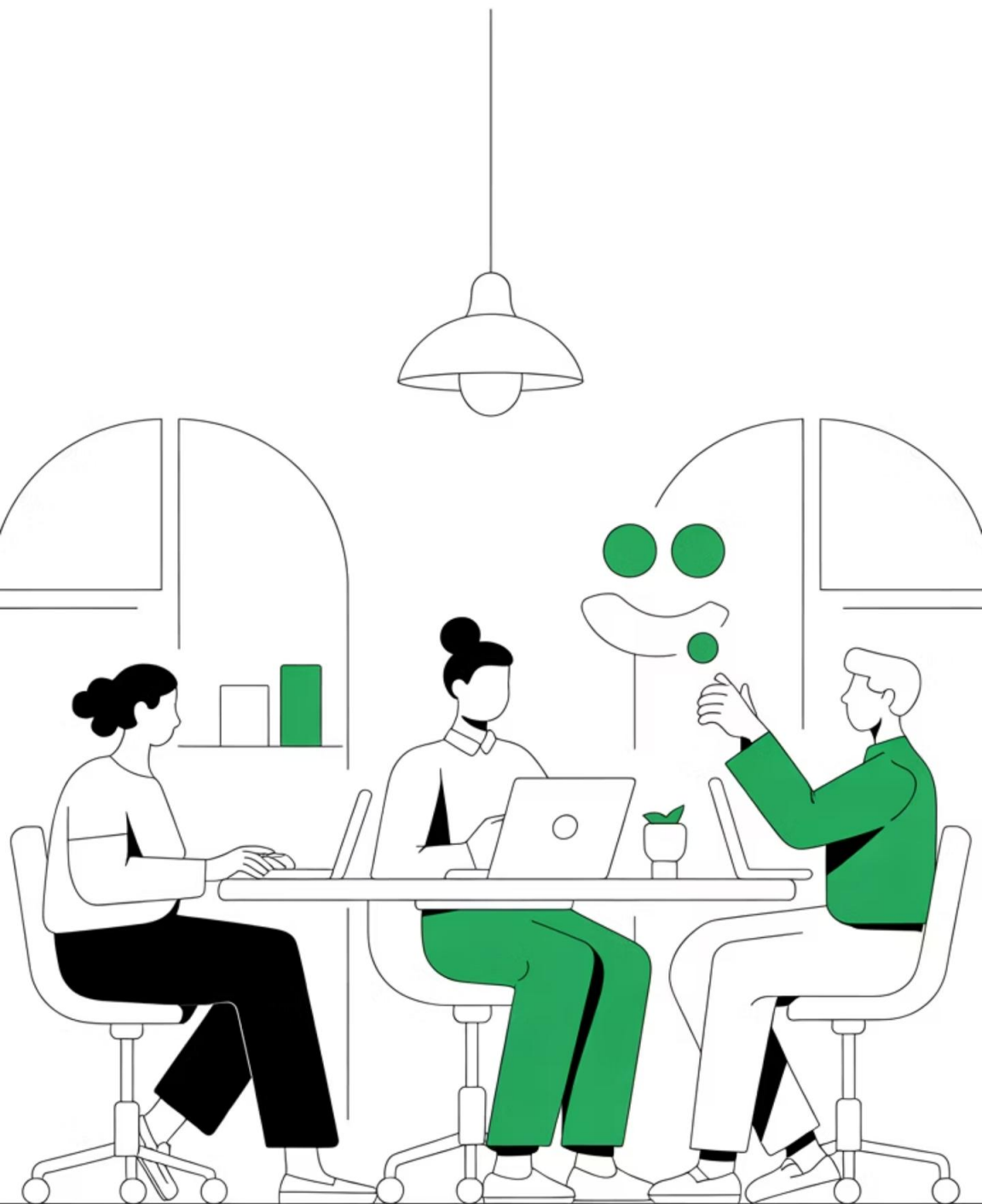
The Practical Playbook: How Nonprofits Use AI Today

Let's move from theory to practice. The following use cases come directly from nonprofit leaders who are using these tools right now.

Structures & Outlines (Grant Writing, Proposals, Newsletters, etc.)

Use AI for the heavy lifting of structure, not the final product.

> "Generally, I'm using it to structure or create outlines. So oftentimes I'll use it to structure a grant proposal or create the outline for a sponsorship proposal..."

Sample Prompt: "Act as a grant writer for a youth literacy nonprofit serving rural communities. Create a detailed BUT BRIEF outline for a grant proposal focusing on our mobile library van program. Include sections for Statement of Need, Project Description, Key Outcomes, Budget Justification, and Evaluation Methods."

One Example Tool: Google Gemini

Editing & Reducing Errors

AI as Your Second Set of Eyes

Before you submit that important proposal or send that donor update, AI can serve as a quick quality control check. It won't catch everything, but it's remarkably good at spotting typos, grammatical errors, and awkward phrasing that you might miss.

"It allows our staff to be more efficient... and it helps reduce errors... by running a proposal through to check for grammar errors or spelling errors."

Pro Tip: Paste your draft and ask: "Please review this for grammar, spelling, and clarity. Suggest improvements while maintaining a warm, professional tone."

Generic tools like ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude etc. can provide free basic feedback.

Specialized tools like Grammarly are available as well with more specific writing focus.

Taming Information Overload

Summarize Long Reports

Paste a 50-page research report and ask for "three key bullet points relevant to our youth program." Perfect for understaffed teams drowning in information.

Analyze Open-Ended Data

Upload survey responses or community feedback and ask AI to "summarize key themes with example quotations." This turns hours of qualitative analysis into minutes.

Curate your own data

Drop in your own last 3-4 annual reports and ask it to summarize your own trends, higli

"I'll plop a report into ChatGPT and ask it to summarize or pull out some key insights for me... we are generally understaffed in nonprofits."

Try Google's NotebookLM to summarize your own Open-Ended Data or Reports

NotebookLM can also produce audio summaries, mind maps, and other output forms.

Breaking Creative Blocks

Writer's block doesn't care that your social media post is due in an hour or that your donor newsletter deadline is tomorrow.

> "I will use ChatGPT like if I'm trying to write a social media caption, and I am just stumped... I'll go into ChatGPT... and that usually will get my brain flowing."

The key is to treat the AI output as a **starting point for your own thinking**, not the finished product. Let it generate ideas, then select and refine the ones that resonate with your organization's authentic voice.

> 🗂 Prompt example: Given the attached grant proposal, suggest 3-4 possible titles that will catch the reader's attention and communicate the importance of the grant without being overly informal.

For those of you who have used GenerativeAI, what use cases have been most helpful for you in your organizations?

The Number One Skill: CAR Writing Effective Prompts

1   **Context** *&* Background

Share relevant information: "Our organization serves low-income families in a rural community. We're applying for a grant to fund a mobile library van that will visit 12 elementary schools monthly..."

2   **Assign** a Role or Persona

Give the AI a 'persona to be': "Act as an experienced grant writer for a youth literacy nonprofit..." This dramatically improves the quality and relevance of responses.

3   **Results**

Tell it exactly what you want: "Create a bulleted list...", "Output in a table...", "Draft an outline with sections for...", "Write a 5-sentence paragraph..."

The Art of Iteration

Your First Prompt Is Just the Beginning

The most effective AI users treat their first prompt as a conversation starter, not a one-shot request. If the result isn't quite right, refine your instructions:

- "Make the tone more formal"

- "Shorten this to 100 words"

- "Expand on the second point with specific examples"

- "Rewrite this for a donor audience instead of program staff"

"If you don't give it a good prompt, it's not going to give you a good result... One of the most useful skills that somebody could learn is just how to produce a quality prompt."

For those of you who have used Generative AI, what tips/tricks do you have to get the most out of your prompting?
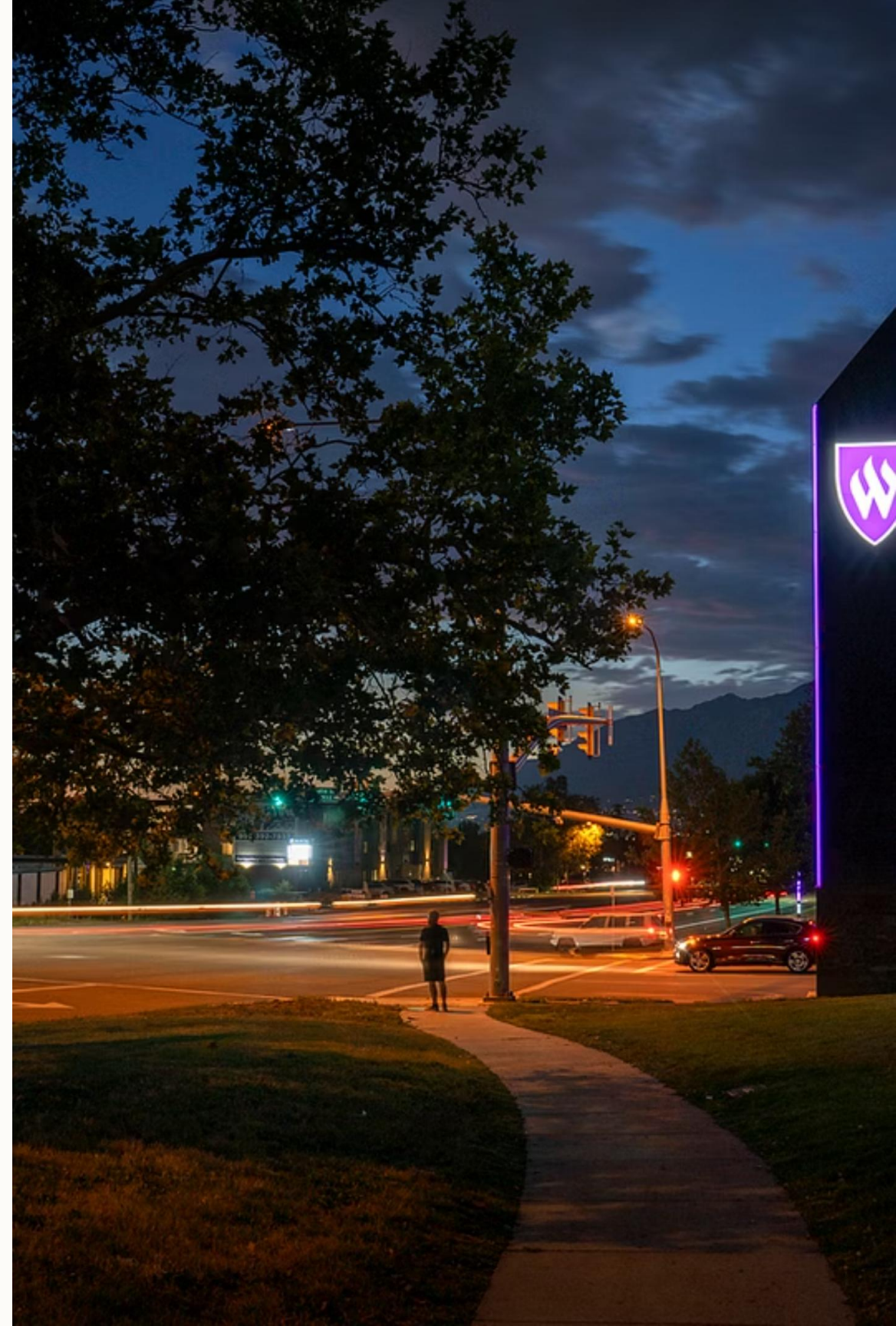
Navigating the Pitfalls:

AI isn't a perfect solution, and nonprofit leaders are rightfully cautious about adopting new tools. Let's address three major concerns head-on: cost, quality, and ethics. These aren't trivial obstacles—they require thoughtful consideration and clear policies.

The Cost Reality & Quality Control

The Financial Barrier

> "In all of the roles that I've been in, we just can't afford [advanced tools] as a nonprofit..."

Many advanced AI tools require paid subscriptions ($20-100/month). However, free versions of ChatGPT, Google's NotebookLM, Gemini, Claude, and others offer substantial functionality for organizations testing the waters.

Inaccuracy is Real

> "I've just found [AI output] is not 100% true, you have to really do your fact checking to make sure that what AI is producing is legitimate."

AI will confidently state incorrect information. Never use AI output without human verification, especially for data, statistics, or claims about your programs.

The Authenticity Problem

> "If you want to sound super fake and be super fake, then use ChatGPT for professional correspondence... I can tell within 2 seconds if something is written with AI and somebody didn't edit it."

Unedited AI writing has a distinctive, generic quality that undermines trust. Your donors and community can tell.

ESPECIALLY true for images/video

The Ethical Core: When Human Touch Is Essential

Ask Yourself This Critical Question

What does my audience need right now?

> "I consider what is my audience's need at this time? Is it just information, or is it emotion? Do they need some sort of emotional support, acknowledgement, connection?"

AI might help draft a program update email, but it should *never* write a condolence message to a grieving donor, a personal thank-you to a volunteer, or a response to a client sharing trauma.

You Are Accountable: Own the Output

> "In our policy, we really make the point that AI is a tool. But you are the user of the tool, and you are responsible for what that AI produces before it goes out to the public."

If AI-generated content contains an error, misrepresents your programs, or offends your community, **your organization bears the responsibility**—not the AI tool. Every piece of AI-generated content must be thoroughly reviewed, fact-checked, edited, and approved by a human who takes ownership of the final product.

Data Privacy is Non-Negotiable

Protect Sensitive Information

Never input personally identifiable information (PII), client data, donor financial details, or confidential organizational information into public AI tools. Anything you paste could potentially be used to train the model or be accessed by others.

Make it Policy

> "As far as privacy, it's against our policy for any personal, identifiable information to be input into any kind of AI."

Establish clear guidelines about what can and cannot be entered into AI systems. Train your team on these boundaries.

What other concerns have you been balancing as you consider AI adoption in your organizations?

Building Your First AI Policy: A Simple Framework

01

Purpose Statement

AI is used to support and amplify—not replace—human-driven mission work. It serves as an efficiency tool while humans retain strategic control and final decision-making.

02

Confidentiality Rules

No personally identifiable information (PII), client data, donor financial information, or confidential organizational details may be entered into public AI tools without explicit authorization.

03

Quality & Accountability

All AI-generated output must be reviewed, fact-checked, edited, and approved by a staff member who takes responsibility for accuracy and appropriateness before publication or distribution.

04

Transparency & Voice

Final content must authentically reflect our organization's voice, values, and mission. AI serves as a drafting tool; humans ensure genuine connection and cultural competence.

For those of you who have (or are considering) AI policies, what do you think are the most critical elements?

Your Path Forward: Start Small, Stay Intentional

AI is your assistant, not the director

Keep humans firmly in the driver's seat for strategy, relationships, and anything requiring empathy or cultural competence.

Master the art of prompting

The quality of your results depends on the clarity and specificity of your instructions. Practice, iterate, and refine.

Always fact-check and add your heart

AI can draft and organize, but your authentic voice and verified accuracy are what build trust with your community.

Protect sensitive data like your mission depends on it

Because it does. Establish clear policies and train your team on data privacy boundaries.

What action step will you take this week?

- Choose **one specific, small task** to try with a free AI tool?
- **Branch out** into an AI tool you haven't tried before?
- Introduce a conversation about an **AI Policy** for your organization?