

Nonprofit Board Recruitment

In the Remote / COVID Era



With Nonprofit Board Expert, Adriane Johnson-Williams



It's no understatement to say 2020 transformed the way nonprofit organizations do business – and these changes will continue to ripple throughout the nonprofit sector for years to come. While many nonprofits have faced a variety of challenges and roadblocks, the global pandemic also opened the door for some unique opportunities and changes that were much needed in the industry.

Boardable partnered with Adriane Johnson-Williams, a corporate consultant specializing in nonprofit work to develop an extensive look at how the COVID era has impacted nonprofit board recruitment and nonprofit success.



About Adriane Johnson-Williams

As a three-time board chair, [Adriane Johnson-Williams](#) has seen a thing or two in the nonprofit world. Working with these three different organizations and seeing firsthand the different types of work required from nonprofit board members made Adriane want to figure out how she could put her business acumen to work in a new way.

Adriane founded [Standpoint Consulting](#), an agency focused on organizational effectiveness for both for-profits and nonprofits. Her concentration on nonprofit boards stemmed from the realization that when many nonprofits hit barriers in fundraising it has nothing at all to do with the organization itself but with the board. Investors simply do not trust a nonprofit organization to use funds correctly if a board is in disarray, as evident in poor communication, cultural dysfunction, and poor mission outcomes. There is plenty of work to do in this space, which is where Standpoint Consulting comes into play.




Amid all the changes and adjustments, it's understandable that boards are just now starting to grapple with how to plan for succession in a virtual environment.

The Impact of COVID on Nonprofits

While no industry has been untouched by the pandemic of 2020, the nonprofit sector has been transformed. Here are a few key areas of nonprofit work that have been impacted by the COVID crisis:

- **Fundraising:** Millions of people have been facing economic challenges during 2020, which means that finding the means to [donate to nonprofit organizations](#) has been harder than ever. People simply don't have as much disposable income to donate, and nonprofits have taken a hit. The impact of this challenge does vary, however, between local organizations which may rely heavily on smaller donations from community members and national organizations which deal with grants and other funding sources.
- **Government regulations:** There has been a lot of uncertainty and confusion around responses from localities and municipalities regarding COVID. In many cases, if an organization isn't doing work that specifically addresses the 2020 pandemic and ensuing crises, then it may be at risk of losing funding.
- **Group work:** Because it has become dangerous to meet face-to-face with a large group of people, nonprofit organizations who work with groups – think youth organizations, sports groups, etc. – have been scrambling to replicate their experiences online. Nonprofit boards who are used to meeting in person have also had to adjust.
- **At-risk populations:** Reducing potential liability is a foundational responsibility for a nonprofit board, and 2020 has put every board decision under a microscope. Groups that deal directly and safely with at-risk populations (such as elder care) have had to pivot their entire operational processes in order to stay afloat.

A Change in Nonprofit Board Recruitment



One of the big gifts of 2020 has been that it has forced nonprofit boards to rethink board recruitment. Recruitment, particularly on local boards, has traditionally been a closed social network practice based on who knows whom. There was typically a quick [checklist of criteria](#), and if a person met these few requirements, they were in. Thanks to the COVID crisis, nonprofit boards have had to think about expanding their methods of recruitment to find people interested in the work and mission of their nonprofit.

Pro-Tip: Make a wish list of new board member traits and put it out on social media, email bulletins, message boards, etc.

One key way to find new board recruits is to look outside of your personal or professional network. Being forced out of your comfort zone presents a unique opportunity for board members to do some great things they might not have been able to in the past, such as [increase the diversity of a board](#) or build a volunteer pool. Nonprofits who have been thoughtful about presenting the 2020 pandemic as an opportunity rather than a challenge are the ones that will come out on top with stronger boards.

According to Adriane, there are a few opportunities ahead for nonprofit boards:

- The opportunity to be **more systematic about board recruitment**. There is time to do the work of assessing board needs, research board candidates, and make informed recruiting decisions. Go through the checklist in this guide for ideas on what to include in your formal process.
- The chance to build [job descriptions for board members](#). Being part of a nonprofit board is a job – albeit a volunteer one – that requires clear guidelines and descriptions. When looking for a new board member you're recruiting for a job with specific skills. A job description should include things like what the work entails, what the time commitment is, and what the member requirements are.
- The time to think about [recruitment pools](#). The days of recruiting board members from personal networks is over. Boards can be more strategic about who they recruit by posting on job boards and forums, talking to people with connections to young professionals' groups or civic organizations, and reaching out to people who would be a good fit.
- Starting to rethink the [board member interview process](#). In the old way of board recruiting, a member could vouch for a new recruit. Stepping out of a personal networking recruitment process means that a board now has to check references and see if a new board member is a good fit, making the interview process essential.

Incredibly, it took a situation like the one we're experiencing in 2020 to get nonprofits to start thinking outside the box when it comes to board recruitment. Unfortunately, people do what they know how to do unless they're forced to do something else. If 2020 had a silver lining, acting as a catalyst for change would be it.



Your Checklist for Remote Board Recruitment

Although 2020 has been overwhelming at times, there truly is an opportunity for continued growth and success for nonprofits over the months to come. Putting the right people on your board and giving them the tools they need to be successful is key.



Here is Adriane's checklist for remote board recruitment:

- ☑ **Know what you need.** Where are the gaps in your board? What skills are you looking for?
 - Try an internal survey that assesses what skills or experience may be missing. A board full of lawyers or all creative types is probably not ideal.
 - Make a list of current skills. Discuss what perspectives, experience, and backgrounds would make your board more complete.
 - Filter this information into a profile of your ideal board member recruits.
- ☑ **Make sure [your board structure](#) is aligned with your nonprofit mission.** Now is the time to be 100% clear about how your board works and where changes need to be made. Some examples of what to consider:
 - Do you have the right number of board members? If you have too many, it may be hard to conduct engaging discussions. Too few board members feels like everyone is spread too thin and you don't have enough resources.
 - Outside of skills and experience, does the personality of your overall board match with your organization. For example, the board of a community arts program will be very different than a board dedicated to

- ☑ **Build clear job descriptions.** People need to know what they're signing up for, especially now.
 - Your job descriptions should be used when you reach out to potential candidates. Everyone should know what is expected of a board member.
 - Be sure to make job descriptions not just for general board members, but also for elected board officers.
- ☑ **Understand why you need a new board member, instead of a volunteer or committee member.** Could this needed perspective be added in a different role?
 - Whatever role you decide to look for, try your state's nonprofit association.
 - You can also list openings on a volunteer match site, LinkedIn, or with websites in your mission field.
- ☑ **Identify top candidates with your board and begin the interview process.** This may include:
 - Invite prospects to sit in on a board meeting.
 - Have board member prospects interview with senior board members.
 - Provide the opportunity for emeritus board members to meet with prospects.
- ☑ **Streamline how your board works by investing in the right tools and resources for success.** Keep your process centralized and convenient with board software like Boardable. [A free trial](#) requires no credit card or commitment!





Adapting to These Changing Times

With all of the changes discussed above, nonprofits have been forced to choose: adapt to these times or face the consequences. Replacing recruitment processes is key to adapting in our rapidly changing environment. The people who may have been preventing these changes from happening (aka people who were on boards for the wrong reasons) have hopefully reassessed their reasons for serving on a board during this trying year. The board members who have continued to show their dedication to the board throughout the pandemic are clearly committed to your mission and willing to do what it takes to keep your nonprofit afloat.

Pro-Tip: Having an executive director who is an expert in your service area and a board chair who is an expert at managing people sets your board up for long-term success.

In many cases, successful boards have been able to pivot due in large part to the relationship between the board chair and the nonprofit executive. [Competent executive leadership](#) is key to making changes in 2020. [A board chair](#) doesn't necessarily have to be an expert in the field or program of your nonprofit, but the more expert your executive is the more able they'll be able to work with your board and answer any critical questions. A strong relationship between the board chair and a nonprofit executive allows for fast and clear decision making, allowing projects to move forward.

Now is the time for nonprofit boards to embrace change, be empathetic, and make the right decisions for long-term success.

About Boardable

Built by nonprofit leaders, for nonprofits. Boardable empowers you to work more effectively with your boards and committees. We know the frustration you feel (and the hours you lose) just from organizing a meeting via email, phone, and text. We've lived it. We're from the nonprofit world, too. After looking around for the right tool but not finding it, we decided to build it. Boardable is a software platform that centralizes all communication between you and your board. Find the best meeting times, securely store all of your documents, archive discussion threads and more—all in one place.

For more information, to schedule a demo, or to sign up for your FREE trial, visit us at **boardable.com**.



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