

Feeling the Pressure to Use AI?

Here's What You Need to Know

Series: Automation & AI for Nonprofits and Small Businesses — AI Series, Paper 1

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1. The Pressure Is Real

Your customers are asking about it. Your competitors are using it. Your peers are posting about it on LinkedIn. And if you are a nonprofit, your board is asking about it and your funders are mentioning it in grant applications. And somewhere in the back of your mind, you ask yourself: are we missing out?

You are not alone. AI has entered every conversation in the nonprofit and small business world — and most of those conversations are either full of hype or full of fear. Neither is useful when you are running a lean organization with limited staff and a business or mission to protect.

Here is the truth: **AI is a powerful tool. But like any tool, it has to be used properly for you to see the benefits.** A hammer in the wrong hands does not build a house — it just makes a mess. The same is true for AI.

This paper is not here to hype AI or dismiss it. It is here to tell you what AI can realistically do for a small organization, what it cannot do, what it will cost you, and how to take one concrete step forward without derailing everything else you are working on.

No vendor pitches. Just what you actually need to know.

2. What AI Actually Is (And What It's Not)

AI — artificial intelligence — is software that learns patterns from large amounts of data and uses those patterns to generate responses, make decisions, or produce content.

The AI tools you have probably heard of — ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini — are called large language models. They were trained on massive amounts of text. When you ask one a question or give it a task, it draws on those patterns to generate a response. It is not searching the internet in real time. It is not copying from a database. It is generating something new based on what it has learned.

Think of it as a very capable first draft machine and thinking partner — one that is available 24 hours a day, does not get tired, and can turn around a draft in seconds.

That is genuinely useful. But it is not magic. And it is not a replacement for you.

We will say this: **AI is not going to make your organization thrive. Your ideas, your vision, and your relationships are what will make your organization thrive.** Yep, we said it. Do not approach AI with the mindset that it will make your problems go away. What AI will do is help you move faster on certain tasks that eat up your time — so you can spend more energy on the work that actually requires you.

3. What AI Cannot Do

Before you get excited — and you should get a little excited — it helps to be clear about what AI gets wrong.

AI makes things up. It can produce confident, well-written output that is factually incorrect. Dates, statistics, names, citations — all of these can be wrong. Always verify before you publish anything.

AI does not know your organization. It does not know your community, your history, your values, or your voice. Everything it produces needs your review and your personal touch before it goes anywhere.

AI cannot replace human relationships. Your donors give because they trust you. Your community members come to you because they feel seen. AI can help you communicate more efficiently — it cannot create the connection that makes your work matter.

AI raises real privacy questions. If your work involves sensitive information — client data, community member stories, health information — be very careful about what you share with AI tools. Read the privacy policy. Know where your data goes.

AI is only as good as the prompt you give it. Garbage in, garbage out. The more specific and clear you are about what you need, the better the output. There is a learning curve.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Every organization has unique needs, a unique community, and a unique way of working. Implementing an AI tool will require customization and experimentation. Be cautious of anyone who promises you an easy, out-of-the-box solution that requires no effort or adjustment on your part. That promise is almost never true — and chasing it leads to wasted money and frustrated staff.

None of these limitations mean you should avoid AI. They mean you should use it with clear eyes.

4. Five Things a Small Organization Can Do With AI Today

These are practical, low-risk starting points. No technical staff required. No large budget. Just a free or low-cost tool and a willingness to try.

1. Draft communications faster. Grant narratives, donor thank-you emails, customer follow-ups, service proposals, newsletter intros, social media captions, meeting summaries — AI can produce a solid first draft in seconds. You review, edit, and personalize. What used to take an hour now takes fifteen minutes.

2. Answer common questions on your website — automatically. An AI-powered chatbot can answer frequently asked questions around the clock. Business hours, pricing questions, service details, eligibility requirements, how to donate — whatever your visitors ask most. Visitors get instant answers. You get fewer repetitive emails and calls.

3. Translate content for multilingual communities. If you serve communities that speak languages other than English, AI translation tools have gotten remarkably good. They are not perfect — a native speaker should always review — but they can dramatically speed up the process of making your content accessible.

4. Summarize long documents. Got a 50-page funder report, industry study, or contract to read? A policy document your board or team needs to understand? Paste it into an AI tool and ask for a plain-language summary. You still need to read the important parts yourself — but AI can help you find them faster.

5. Think through problems and make a plan. This one surprises people. AI is a genuinely useful thinking partner. Stuck on how to frame a program proposal? Trying to decide between two strategies? Talk it through with an AI tool. It will ask you questions, offer perspectives, and help you clarify your own thinking. It is not a decision-maker — but it can help you get unstuck. Need to plan an event, map out a fundraising campaign, or build a social media content calendar? AI can give you a solid starting framework in minutes — one you then customize to your reality.

6. Research, find opportunities, and stay informed. Whether you are searching for grants, tracking industry trends, or researching potential clients and partners, AI can dramatically cut the time it takes to gather and synthesize information. Nonprofits can use AI to find funding opportunities, summarize RFPs, and draft letters of inquiry. Small businesses can use it to research competitors, understand market trends, or prepare for a client meeting. It will not do the thinking for you — but it will get you up to speed much faster.

As you get more comfortable with AI, more advanced capabilities become available — including AI agents that can handle multi-step tasks on your behalf. We will cover that in a future paper.

5. What It Will Actually Cost You

Let's be honest about the real costs — because they are not just financial.

Money: Most AI tools useful to small organizations cost between \$0 and \$20 per month per user. That is not a budget-breaking investment — but it is not free either, and the costs can add up if you subscribe to multiple tools without a clear plan.

Time: The learning curve is real. Plan for 2-4 weeks of experimenting before AI feels natural. You will write bad prompts. You will get outputs you do not like. That is normal. It gets easier — but only if you put in the time.

Attention: AI tools require human oversight. The time you save generating a draft gets partially spent reviewing and editing it. The net time savings are still significant — but AI does not eliminate the need for human judgment. It reduces the time you spend on the first 80%.

Trust-building (internal): If you have staff, introducing AI tools requires conversation. Some people are excited. Some are worried about their jobs. Be transparent about how you plan to use AI and what it is not replacing. The organizations that navigate this well treat AI as a capacity builder, not a cost cutter.

6. Free vs. Paid — When Do You Upgrade?

Most AI tools offer a free tier and a paid tier (typically around \$20/month). Here is how to think about when each makes sense.

Stick with the free tier if:

- You are just getting started and still experimenting
- Your usage is light — a few tasks per week, not dozens per day
- You are testing whether AI actually saves you time before committing
- You have one person using it, not a whole team

Consider upgrading to paid if:

- You hit usage limits on the free tier regularly
- You need faster responses or access to more powerful models
- You are using AI daily as a core part of your workflow
- You need features only available on paid plans — like longer documents, image generation, or API access

Our honest take: Start free. Use it for 30–60 days. If you find yourself hitting limits or wishing it could do more — that is when the upgrade pays for itself. Do not pay for a tool you are not yet using consistently.

One more thing: **do not subscribe to multiple AI tools at once when you are starting out.** Pick one, learn it well, and get real value from it before adding another. Paying \$20/month for three different AI tools you barely use is not a strategy — it is just a recurring expense.

7. Are You Ready? A Simple Checklist

You do not need to check every box. But the more boxes you can check, the smoother your first steps will be.

- ☐ I can identify at least one task that takes significant staff time and follows a predictable pattern
- ☐ I have 2–4 hours in the next month to experiment with a new tool
- ☐ I am comfortable reviewing AI output before it goes public
- ☐ I understand that AI will make mistakes and I am prepared to catch them
- ☐ I have thought about what kinds of data I will and will not share with AI tools
- ☐ I have at least one person on my team who is curious about this and willing to learn alongside me

If you checked four or more — you are ready to start.

If you checked fewer than four — that is useful information. It tells you what to address before you invest time in AI tools.

8. Tools Worth Exploring

These are starting points — not endorsements. The AI landscape changes quickly, but these tools have proven useful for small organizations and are accessible without a technical background.

For writing and drafting:

- **ChatGPT** (chat.openai.com) — the most widely used AI writing tool. Great for drafting emails, grant narratives, social media posts, and program descriptions. Free tier available.
- **Claude** (claude.ai) — strong at longer documents, analysis, and nuanced writing. Particularly good as a thinking partner when you need to work through a complex problem. Free tier available.

For meetings and transcription:

- **Otter.ai** — records and transcribes meetings automatically. Generates summaries and action items. Useful for board meetings, staff calls, and community sessions. Free tier available.
- **Fireflies.ai** — similar to Otter, with strong integrations for Zoom and Google Meet. Free tier available.

For everyday work:

- **Notion AI** — if your organization already uses Notion for notes and project management, AI is built right in. Summarize pages, draft content, and brainstorm without switching tools.
- **Google Gemini** — built into Google Workspace (Gmail, Docs, Sheets). If your organization uses Google, Gemini is already available — no new tool to learn.

One piece of advice: Pick one tool and use it for 30 days before adding another. Depth beats breadth when you are learning something new.

9. Your First Step

Here is what we suggest as a first step: spend 30 minutes with a free AI tool — ChatGPT, Claude, or Gemini — and give it one real task from your actual work. A draft email. A summary of a document. A first pass at a social media caption.

See what it produces. Notice where it was helpful and where it fell short. That single experience will teach you more than any article about AI — including this one.

From there, the next task will present itself. And the next. That is how it usually works.

The organizations and businesses that benefit most from AI are not the ones with the biggest budgets or the most technical staff. They are the ones that start small, take the time to learn how to use AI the right way for their specific needs, stay curious, and keep their mission and their people at the center of every decision.

AI alone won't make your organization thrive, but it can help you get there.

Raíz Digital helps nonprofits and mission-driven small businesses build the technology infrastructure they need to amplify their mission. We work in English and Spanish.

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Technology that amplifies your mission.