Non-profit AI adoption: Money and skills slow it down, missing safeguards make it fail

What 147 graded sources and 32 cases tell executive directors and boards.

THE ANSWER

Almost every non-profit uses AI, but few have built it into how they work. Money, skills, and privacy fears slow adoption. What decides the outcome is whether people check the AI's output, test it before scaling it, and tell the people it affects. Write those three habits down before buying more tools.

4% of staff and executives call AI fully integrated

53% report AI use outside approved tools

55% of executives call privacy a major barrier

90% of foundations give grantees no AI support

NTEN and The Bridgespan Group, September 2026 (917 respondents; 404 executives). Center for Effective Philanthropy, September 2025 (209 foundations).

Five findings

01 **Use is common; integration is rare.** Every grade-A survey puts full integration at 4 to 9 percent. Only 38 percent of executives have written AI guidance, and 24 percent say their data is organized enough for AI.

02 **Privacy, skills, and money slow adoption.** Privacy is the barrier executives most often call major, and 57 percent have no AI budget. Organizations with budgets under $10 million trail on every measure.

03 **Funders are largely absent.** In a 2025 survey, 90 percent of foundations gave grantees no AI implementation support, and 83 percent of non-profits said no funder had raised AI with them.

04 **Successes review and test.** Nine of the 10 measured successes kept a person reviewing the output, and nine tested against a baseline first, as Pew Research Center did with 1,200 human-coded answers.

05 **Failures skip telling people.** In 11 of the 13 non-profit failures, the people affected weren't told, didn't consent, or weren't asked. In a 2026 survey of 3,000 US adults, 37 percent would trust a non-profit less if it used generative AI widely.

What leaders should do now

1. **Publish a short AI-use rule** before buying more tools.
2. **Tell and ask the people affected** first.
3. **Keep a person reviewing** what goes out.
4. **Test one use against a baseline** before scaling it.
5. **Take a fundable plan** to your funders.

Method and limits

In November 2026 we logged 202 searches, graded 147 sources, and coded 32 cases. A second reviewer checked every headline figure.

Limits: most data is self-reported, failures are under-reported, and no survey covers Washington, DC non-profits.

Principal sources: NTEN and The Bridgespan Group (2026); Center for Effective Philanthropy (2025); Charity Digital Skills Report (2026); Imagine Canada (2025); Humanitarian Leadership Academy (2025, 2026); Independent Sector (2026). Full report and a quoted source for every figure: iiibc.com/non-ai-research · /evidence

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