

**3rd Annual**

# **Nonprofit Board Engagement Survey Report**



**boardable**



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## The 2020 Board Engagement Survey Results

Nonprofits continued to serve constituents during 2020, despite the disruption brought on by Covid-19, political instability, and economic uncertainty. Further, the resources, support, and services of nonprofits became even more critical to millions of people across the country affected by the events of the year.



**1.3**  
**MILLION**

**Nonprofit Organizations  
Operate Causes**



**12.3**  
**MILLION**

**Nonprofit Employees  
Support Missions**



**64**  
**MILLION**

**Nonprofit Board Members  
Champion Orgs**

According to [Nonprofit Impact Matters](#), there are around 1.3 million nonprofit organizations currently operating in the United States, with 12.3 million employees supporting local, regional, national, and international causes. Additionally, [more than 64 million board members](#) and volunteers – and tens of millions of donors – help to support nonprofit organizations each year.





## What is Board Engagement?

**Board engagement is the degree to which individuals on a nonprofit board prepare for meetings, participate actively in meetings, complete tasks between meetings, advocate for the nonprofit in the community, further development goals, and bring ideas and solutions to the larger board.**

At the strongest nonprofits, the board of directors was able to provide long-term vision while adapting to short-term conditions. Boards that have these abilities are characterized by members who contribute during meetings and are productive between them.

In short, the level of “board engagement” is the single most important health measure of a nonprofit board of directors and directly impacts the organization’s effectiveness and resiliency.

This annual survey report evaluates the state of nonprofit board engagement, providing insights into strengths and areas for improvement.



# Key Insights



★ The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the nonprofit board meeting experience by forcing a complete shift from in-person meetings to largely virtual or online meetings. Prior to 2020, most nonprofit boards had a consistent board meeting cadence, whether twice monthly, monthly, quarterly or bi-annually, and these board events (often lasting hours or days at a time) were critical to the strategic planning and forward movement of the nonprofit. As boards were forced to shift tactics and pivot to virtual meetings, many boards **met more often for shorter amounts of time** throughout 2020.

★ Interestingly, the swift changes required to adapt to virtual board meetings **created a bifurcation in the nonprofit world**. On one side are the nonprofit organizations who were able to meet the changes and turbulence head-on by adopting tools and resources to meet virtually, modifying engagement methods with donors and constituents, and deploying new strategies for internal efficiency. As a result of these changes, proactive organizations experienced increases in funding. Conversely, nonprofit organizations who hesitated to adapt and make changes, cancelling events and stopping meetings, subsequently experienced downturns in funding.



- ★ In some cases, even if a nonprofit board was able to successfully shift to virtual or online meetings, the transition did not go smoothly. Some survey responses indicated the need for in-person meetings in addition to virtual meetings in order to complete governance tasks such as obtaining signatures and voting. These responses indicate such organizations were ill-prepared to tackle a tech-heavy project and highlight **the foundational need for the right technology** and resources to complete “essential tasks” via digital processes.
- ★ At the same time the COVID-19 pandemic was impacting the country, additional turbulence from political, social, and economic instability created an even greater need for nonprofit support and resources from the public. **For nonprofit board members, this meant an increased sense of engagement and dedication**, in spite of increased responsibilities and more fundraising pressure.





# What It Means



While 2020 presented unforeseen challenges to nonprofit boards, the year also gave boards insight into how to prepare and respond to difficult situations.

In order to meet future challenges more adeptly, **nonprofits are encouraged to proactively adjust board operations to be more digital**, to reduce unnecessary red tape in bylaws, and to embrace an organization-wide culture of problem solving and creative thinking.

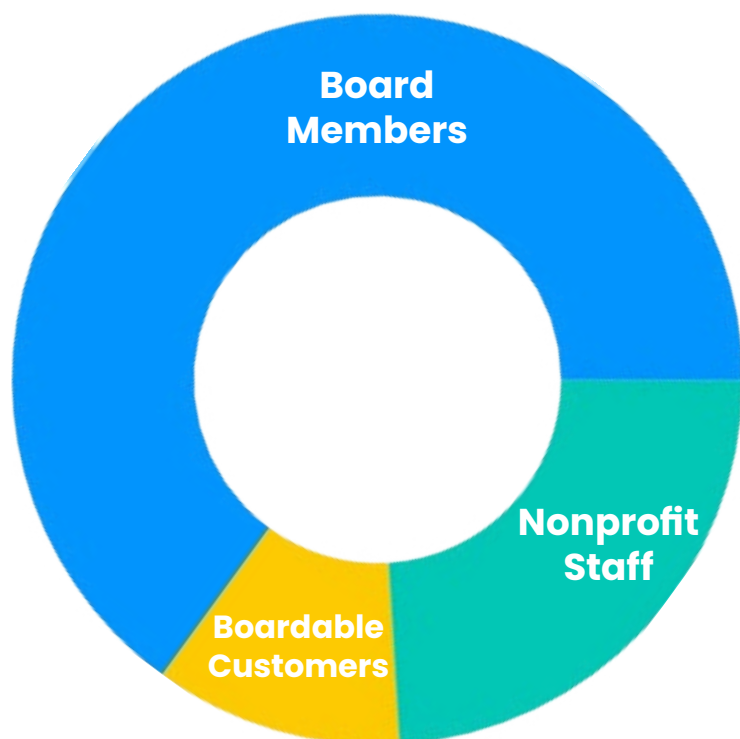
# The Fine Print: Analyzing the 2020 Board Engagement Survey



The 2020 Board Engagement Survey Report reflects the responses of nonprofit board members from large, small, local, and national boards – and everything in between.

This is the breakdown of the 2020 Board Engagement Survey respondents:

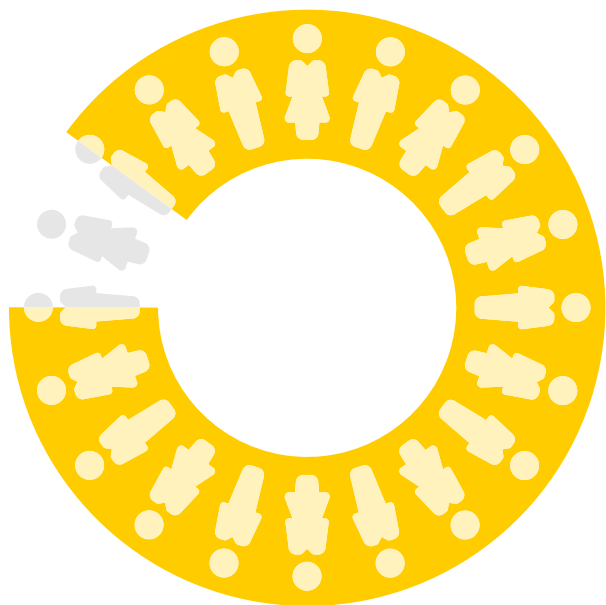
## 729 Total Survey Respondents



- **65%** of survey respondents were board members or board member executives (board chair, vice-chair, etc.)
- **24%** of survey respondents were nonprofit staff members
- **11%** of survey respondents (79 individuals) are Boardable customers

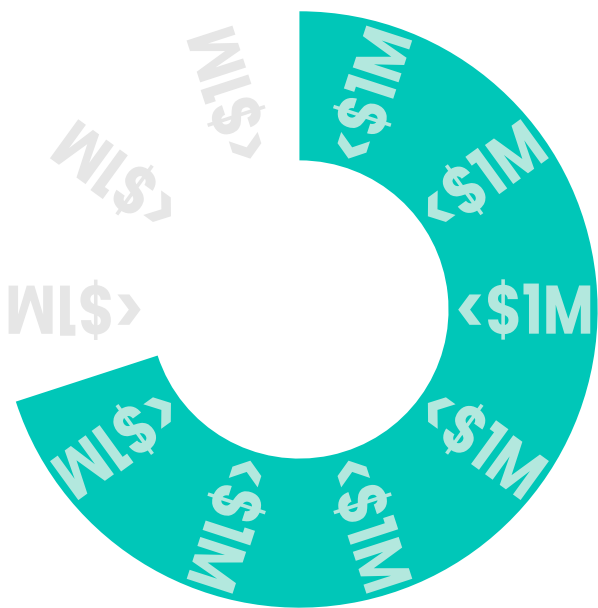


## 90% of respondents have boards with 20 or fewer members



- **50%** of survey respondents work on or with a board with fewer than 10 members
- **2%** (*only 11 respondents*) work on or with a board with more than 50 members
- **According To Board Source**, the average size of a nonprofit board is 15 members

## 70% of respondents have budgets less than \$1 million



- **56%** of survey respondents are working with an organization annual budget of less than \$500,000
- **18%** of survey respondents have an organization annual budget between \$1 million and \$5 million
- **2%** (*only 11 respondents*) are working with an annual budget of more than \$50 million

## Where did the survey responses come from?


The Boardable team promoted the 2020 Board Engagement Survey on social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram), partner and sponsor-driven email lists, and in webinars. Boardable customers were also offered the survey.


## Deeper Understanding: Board Meeting Attendance




**Over the course of 2020, board attendance increased from 2019.** The number of survey respondents reporting high meeting attendance increased by 10% from the [2019 Board Engagement Survey](#).

There are a few key contributors to increased meeting attendance indicated in survey comment fields:

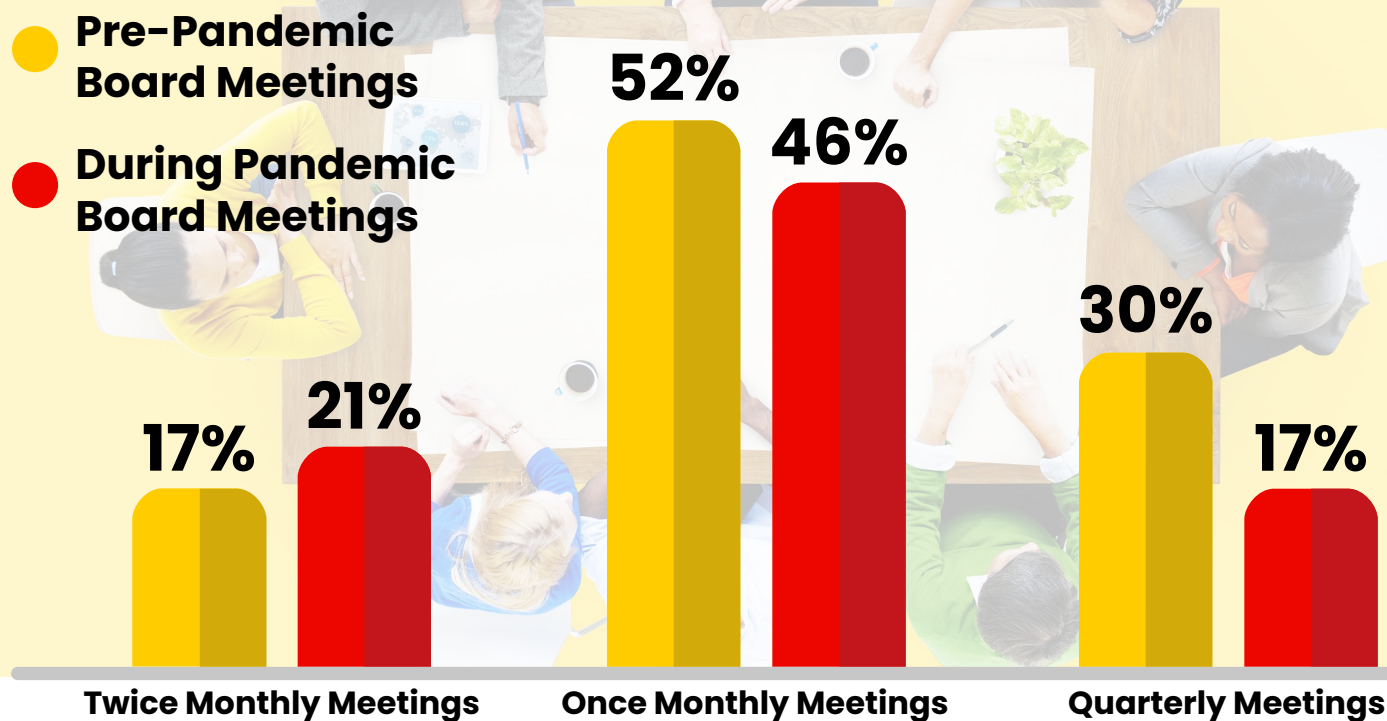
 It is easier for board members to make time for board meetings when many other events in their lives were canceled and meetings took place virtually.

 Instead of day-long board meetings that required travel, board members can easily log in to meetings from the comfort of their own homes, eliminating roadblocks to attending.

 The nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the additional stress put on nonprofit constituents increased board member motivation to provide strategic assistance and increase engagement with organizations.



# The cadence of nonprofit board meetings also changed in 2020.



## Pre-pandemic board meeting cadence:

- **17%** of survey respondents met twice monthly
- **52%** of survey respondents met once a month
- **30%** of survey respondents met once a quarter

## During pandemic board meeting cadence:

- **21%** of survey respondents met twice monthly
- **46%** of survey respondents met once a month
- **17%** of survey respondents met once a quarter

Boards met more frequently over the course of 2020, and the cadence shifted to take advantage of new, flexible meeting options. Boards needed to address the ongoing changes and challenges throughout the pandemic, and were fortunately able to meet more frequently without the burden of planning details and logistics.

Additionally, while meeting frequency increased, meeting duration decreased, indicating that boards prioritized efficiency and urgency. Because board members were in more contact (and, perhaps, due to new solutions to help them operate virtually) they were able to conduct pressing business faster with brief sessions.

# Implications of Changing Meeting Cadence

Almost 80% of survey respondents conducted meetings fully virtual during the COVID-19 pandemic. In-person meetings represented 5% of survey respondents and 12% relied on a hybrid of virtual and in-person board meetings.

Nonprofit boards got creative over 2020, with survey respondents saying they had met outdoors, indoors with masks on, or with social distancing measures in place. Multiple survey respondents reported using email, simple conference calls, and video conferencing to conduct virtual meetings. A handful of survey respondents said they simply cancelled meetings instead of trying to meet virtually.

Why did some boards continue to meet in person instead of going fully virtual? Boards that were ill-equipped to conduct their strategic board business virtually – without sacrificing decision-making, discussion, and security – were more or less forced to meet in person.

If board bylaws required in-person signatures or voting, these boards were unprepared with alternative methods. Planning ahead and implementing proactive, flexible solutions and guidelines allowed some boards to pivot quickly, while others were left to use outdated methods.



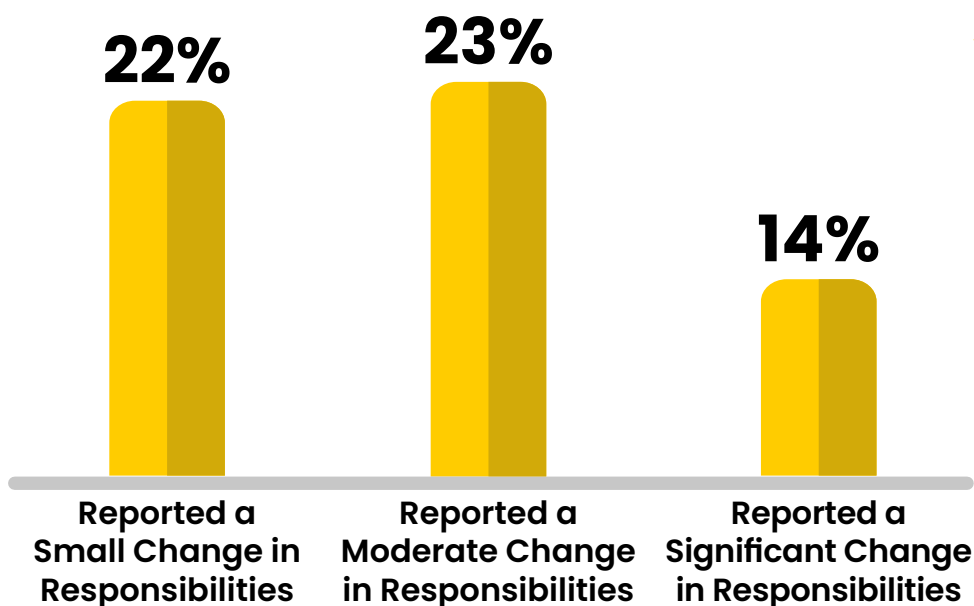


# Deeper Understanding: Pivoting To Virtual Operations



Personal and professional experiences were altered by the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, and nonprofit board responsibilities were no different. Conducting board business no longer meant simply running through a pre-planned agenda. Instead, nonprofit board members were tasked with trying to keep the nonprofit fiscally solvent and providing services.

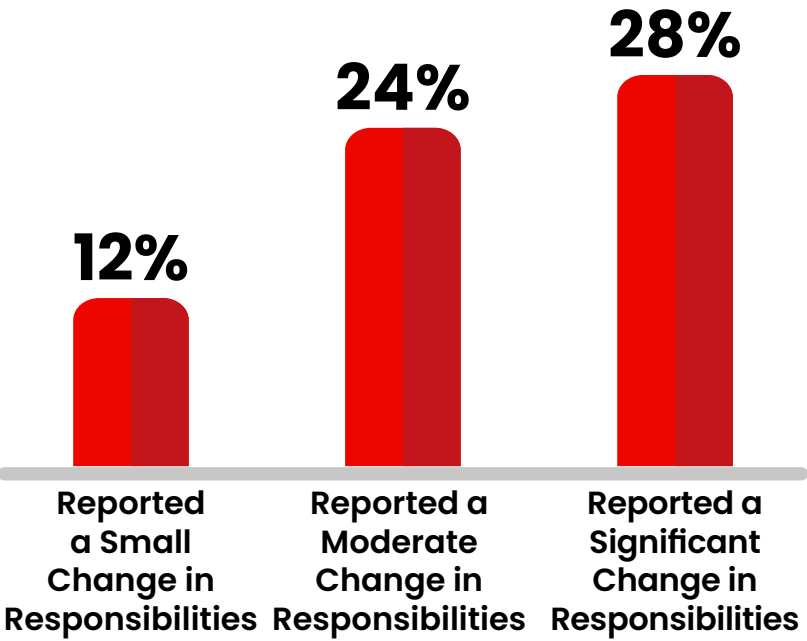
## Changes in Board Member Responsibilities



★ Board members should take care to not let an increased sense of urgency cause interference in staff work, a challenge mentioned by several respondents.

It wasn't just nonprofit board members feeling the impact of responsibility changes in 2020. In fact, nonprofit employees were faced with more changes in their roles.

**Nonprofit employee responsibility changes in 2020:**



**How did board and staff responsibilities change in 2020?**

The most significant area of change for both nonprofit board members and staff members was fundraising. With safety protocols eliminating large gatherings, nonprofits halted donor outreach and fundraising events. For board members, focusing on short-term financial decisions took focus from long-term goals of an organization.

Another common area of change was in nonprofit programming. From modifying group events in favor of virtual programs to keeping community spaces properly sanitized, there were countless changes to be made to accomodate the conditions of 2020.

As financial constraints forced furloughs and layoffs, many nonprofit employees had to deal with increased workloads as well.



**Challenges of virtual operations cited in the survey include:**

- Loss of rapport, networking and relationship-building between board members
- Difficulty effectively communicating and engaging with board members virtually
- Missing the social interaction that being on a board or working with community members offered
- Virtual event fatigue as board meetings and nonprofit programming shifted to online operations



# Deeper Understanding: Fundraising During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Even before 2020, board member fundraising was an area of focus – and concern – for nonprofits. Although fundraising is often seen as one of the main responsibilities of any nonprofit board member, it was listed as the weakest area of board engagement on both the 2019 and 2020 Board Engagement Surveys. As nonprofit roles, responsibilities, and fundraising requirements have shifted in 2020, being able to rely on board members to carry their share of a nonprofit's fundraising efforts is critical.

**92% of respondents** expect board members to participate in revenue generation or fundraising activities.



- **27%** of respondents said only a few board members execute a majority of fundraising efforts
- **25%** of respondents said board members are happy to help with fundraising efforts if asked to do something specific
- **19%** of respondents said that while all board members are expected to participate in fundraising, few actually do, even if asked

## How to turn your board members into fundraisers:

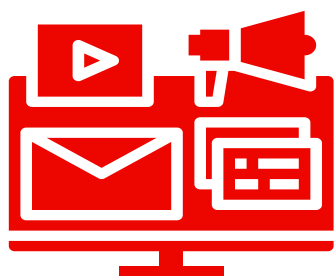
Based on survey responses, board members need a specific task from leadership. Make sure to educate board members during orientation and through ongoing training on fundraising tactics, their personal fundraising goals, and fundraising best practices.

Common board member responsibilities like hosting events or galas, inviting influential guests to these events, and hosting in-person auctions were no longer feasible in 2020. Instead, nonprofit board members participated in different types of fundraising efforts.

## How nonprofit board members participated in fundraising efforts:



- **58%** of respondents reported board members participating directly (donating) in fundraising campaigns
- **55%** of respondents reported board members sharing giving opportunities with their networks
- **50%** of respondents reported that board members solicited donations on behalf of the nonprofit



**62% of respondents** said they changed their organization's fundraising methods to accommodate the new virtual environment of 2020.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, more than 54% of survey respondents said that board members have been less active in fundraising than before pandemic times or not active at all.

Nonprofit leaders are working with boards to introduce new ways to virtually fundraise and connect with potential donors, including:

- Peer-to-peer fundraising campaigns and programs
- Virtual and online events, auctions, and donor activities
- Personal donations or corporate donations made in the board member's name
- Online and social sharing of fundraising campaigns
- Assistance with research and execution of grant applications



## ★ How to cut through the noise:

Board members are a great resource for networking and connections, and these introductions can be made virtually. Work with your board to set up networking goals and specific activities to get your fundraising back on track.



It's important to note, however, that while board member fundraising efforts suffered throughout 2020, **54% of survey respondents reported that they were either on track to meet fundraising goals or even exceed them.**

The challenges of 2020 were not an end-all for nonprofit fundraising as many organizations were able to successfully pivot and reach fundraising goals in new and exciting ways:

- Nonprofits used their new virtual meeting capabilities to double-down on grant writing efforts and apply to government assistance programs like PPP and the CARE ACT.
- Organizations realized the need to devote more board member time to personal one-on-one appeals for donations. This way, board members can focus on cultivating relationships with high-income donors and nurture these relationships through remote donor appreciation efforts.
- Boards shifted traditional donor outreach efforts such as events, tours, donor appreciation events, and community engagement into a remote-first engagement strategy that leveraged technology and digital tools to bring people together when possible.

Working with board members on effective fundraising strategies is difficult. The organizations that were able to quickly adjust, build a creative fundraising strategy, and marshal their board members into virtual techniques realized that they could stay on track with their 2020 fundraising goals and, in some cases, exceed them.



★ **A renewed commitment to flexibility, creativity, and technology, as necessitated by the conditions of 2020, will position nonprofits to adjust to other unpredictable events in the future.**



## Deeper Understanding: How the COVID-19 Pandemic has Impacted the Board Member Experience and Board Engagement

Board member engagement is crucial for the health of the organization, but also for the board itself. As with any volunteer position, it is important that nonprofits examine what will encourage board members to feel effective and valued in their work.



**50%** of survey respondents said that they felt more passionate and engaged about the importance of their work on a board or for a nonprofit as a result of the **COVID-19 pandemic**. While 24% of respondents felt about the same level of passion for their role, around 22% felt disengaged, distracted, and discouraged about their role.

While concerns about financial stability, staffing, and community engagement were common, additional concerns include:

- The mental strain on board members worrying about the success of a nonprofit on top of the societal, political, and economic concerns of 2020.
- Staff burnout, especially the need to be constantly online.
- Frustration over trying to engage donors and board members, educate community members about COVID protocols, and not knowing when things will go back to normal.
- The sense that board members are micromanaging operations, fundraising efforts, and even nonprofit staff because they have fewer other things to do.
- The general feeling of being overwhelmed at having more to do with fewer people.

One encouraging trend throughout the 2020 Board Engagement Survey responses was the sense of renewed passion and belief in the mission of many nonprofits. For many, the COVID-19 pandemic has only increased dedication to the cause their nonprofit serves.



## Making the most of your virtual board.

While a majority of survey respondents said they feel effective working in a remote environment, there is an important distinction between effectiveness and engagement. Overall, the reduced number of in-person commitments and events has allowed nonprofit staff and board members to be more productive and efficient, but this efficiency has come at a cost.

Common themes on the topic of board engagement:

- While attendance is higher than previous years, engagement during the meeting suffers in the virtual environment.
- Developing deep, trusting relationships between board members is difficult to do virtually, especially with new board members.
- Collaboration is slower without in-person interactions. The informal conversations that occur in physical meetings that identify roadblocks are rare in the virtual environment.

Engaging a virtual board is less difficult with the right tools and resources.



**66% of survey respondents** reported using new virtual tools or dashboards to help manage operations throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

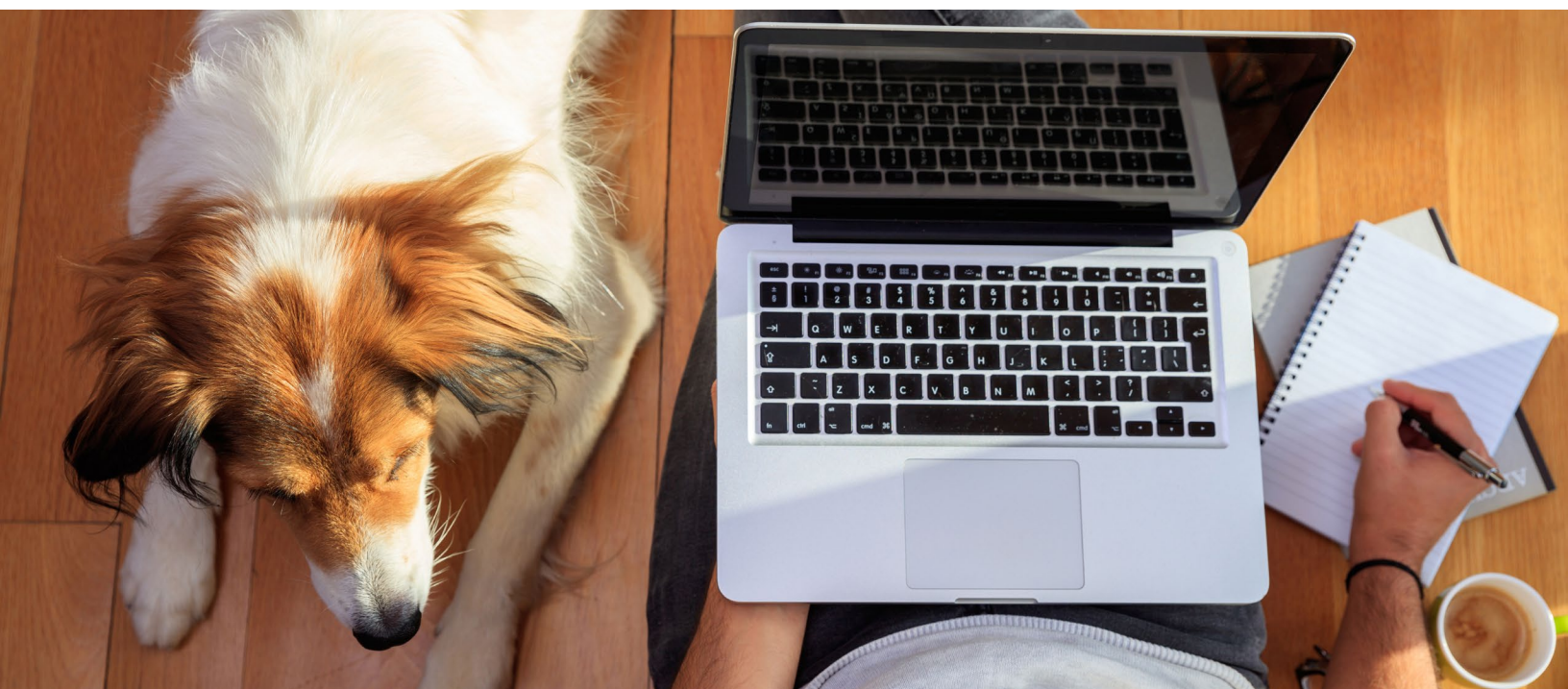


## Software tools being implemented across nonprofit organizations include:



- **Virtual and/or video meeting tools like Zoom, Google Hangouts, and Microsoft Teams.**
- **Nonprofit-specific team management software like Boardable.**
- **Traditional communication tools like Slack, Trello, and Asana.**

While board member engagement is one of the top concerns from the survey findings, connecting and engaging in the virtual environment is possible. The most effective nonprofit boards will find new ways to keep board members actively participating in virtual meetings, develop creative strategies to advance fundraising efforts remotely, and work to strengthen the relationship between boards and nonprofit staff for a more effective output on both sides.



# Conclusion

The last year was a testing ground for nonprofits and their boards. Those that had a culture of adaptability, innovation, and understanding were able to guide their organizations through a challenging era. Proactive boards suffered fewer setbacks than reactive boards, and the use of digital tools prior to 2020 was predictive of adaptability.

As board engagement continues to be the best predictor of nonprofit resiliency, the findings of this annual survey will be a guiding resource for years to come.



## THANKS TO OUR SPONSORS:



## 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](https://boardable.com).



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