

Innovations in Nonprofit Management

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ABSTRACT

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) play a critical role in addressing societal needs through services in health, education, the arts, housing, and more. Yet, managing these mission-driven organizations is becoming increasingly complex. This paper explores recent innovations in nonprofit management by examining historical and structural differences in NPOs, emerging leadership approaches, technology integration, financial sustainability, strategic planning, volunteer management, and impact evaluation. Drawing on contemporary research, the paper highlights the role of adaptability, risk-taking, and individualized management strategies tailored to diverse legal, economic, and technological environments. By identifying cutting-edge practices and the conditions under which they succeed or fail, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of what constitutes effective and innovative management in the nonprofit sector. It calls for more evidence-based and context-sensitive approaches to leadership, sustainability, and performance evaluation in nonprofit organizations.

Keywords: Nonprofit Management, Organizational Sustainability, Strategic Planning, Innovation, Leadership, Volunteer Management, Technology in NPOs, Impact Evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

Nonprofit organizations have become essential to society, but managing them effectively is increasingly challenging. These entities receive billions in tax dollars through government contracts and contributions, supporting vital services in education, health care, job training, child care, housing, and the arts. However, many nonprofits struggle to survive, let alone thrive. Effective management requires identifying potential problems, conducting complex analyses, and developing bold, creative strategies. Small nonprofits, in particular, face mounting difficulties. There is an urgent need for understanding good management practices to assist these organizations. This article presumes that effective management exists and that many nonprofit issues can be outlined and resolved. The experiences of various organizations are reviewed, highlighting that good management is both a science and an art, often requiring intuitive responses to complicated challenges. Innovators propose intangible ideas that may succeed in one setting but fail in another, necessitating individualized examination of each concept. Consequently, organizing and articulating this knowledge for those in need has proven difficult. Nevertheless, it is believed that this knowledge can be articulated since many challenges are not unique to nonprofits and are theoretically manageable, with established procedures for information collection and documentation [1, 2].

Historical Context of Nonprofit Organizations

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) have a long-standing history in North America, from early philanthropic activities by individuals to providing charity services to the mentally ill. Despite being one of the fastest-growing sectors, with approximately 661,000 registered 501(c)(3) organizations in the United States, little research has been conducted to study innovations in NPOs. Georg von Schnurbein discovered significant differences in the management of foundations and associations, but NPOs with other legal types were neglected. Even though NPOs may differ concerning their missions, governance structures, and funding concepts, they are also heterogeneous concerning their legal types. In addition, peer-reviewed articles on NPO management were utilized that referenced their legal form them. The research

focuses on how NPOs differ in their management, implicitly or explicitly linked to unique legal arrangements that provide particular structures and degrees of freedom for action. Because such differences may lead to significant consequences in practice, managers need to consider the specific features of their organization's legal type. A conceptual framework was developed based on a literature review, and the findings of an empirical study in a sample of Swiss NPOs were presented. Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) are regarded as economic entities that differ from other private economic units specifically in their voluntary commitment and absence of profit incentive. These differences account for the view of NPOs as a third subdivision in addition to the state and market sectors. Although the heterogeneity of NPOs is repeatedly emphasized, distinctions in NPO management are scarcely made in describing and analysing them. In this view and concerning VOs, the predominant classification typologies typically build upon either the mission of NPOs or the purpose of public funds. For instance, in mutual benefit NPOs, the identity principle of the members and customers is in force, while in third-power NPOs, members or donors do not have to be simultaneously beneficiaries. In the last few years, the management orientation of NPOs has been gaining importance. Management is said to make the organization of NPOs more effective and efficient. However, until now, the influence of the institutional settings is often neglected in NPO management literature [3, 4].

Current Trends in Nonprofit Management

The nonprofit sector is experiencing significant changes, raising concerns about the future of political, journalistic, local, and civil institutions. Some nonprofit organizations face renewed criticism and political opposition, leading to worries about their impact on democracy and civil society. Criticism includes a lack of accountability and transparency, as well as allegations of self-dealing. A major question regarding journalism involves the role of civil society organizations and their revenue models. The assumption that these organizations can replace traditional models through voluntary contributions, advertising, and paid political appearances reveals a misunderstanding of the need for reliable, credible knowledge distribution in democracies. While some nonprofit news networks exist, they cannot replace the full range of traditional civil society knowledge organizations. Governments collaborate with nonprofits in performance measurement and reporting; however, distrust in the accuracy of performance measures and governmental data collection has emerged. Strategic fields like planning, management, and governance have seen peaks of innovation followed by conservatism and stability. Nonetheless, the political, economic, social, and technological landscape is evolving rapidly, changing the missions, roles, and outputs required of nonprofit organizations. In response to relentless scrutiny, the sector has begun conveying clarifying messages, and new fields are emerging that look proactively to the future [5, 6].

Technology and Nonprofit Management

Assumptions about purely technological challenges faced by nonprofit organizations are difficult to keep in check because the technology sector itself feeds them. The technology community is sometimes derisively referred to as a "cult," with its vendors/developers who preach the gospel and nonbelievers who are written off as "still using a typewriter." Everyone knows that algorithmic technologies can be a boon to social service delivery and activism. Who wouldn't want a drone to deliver food to remote locations? Despite well-founded assumptions that nonprofits lag behind the private sector, nonprofits have adopted technologies at a disturbingly rapid rate over the past two decades, largely in response to competition for grants, credibility, outreach, and effectiveness. Email and the Internet, for example, are basic informational technologies that were, at one point, only available to well-funded nonprofits. As nonprofit organizations get larger and more professionally staffed, however, there are signs that in some places, technologies are not being used effectively. In addition to the bigger-picture questions about technology policy, the progression of a trend toward globalization has introduced concerns about e-competitiveness in the information age. A phenomenon of concern to international economic development authorities in many countries is global "digital divides," the disparities in access to the information and communications technology infrastructure that is changing the world economy. International (and national, regional, and local) infrastructure inequalities must be examined. Do all communities have equitable access to the cable or fiber backbone, fiber to the homes, and wireless nodes needed to participate in the telecommunications revolution? Within communities, however, the issue does not stop with infrastructure. Many advocacy organizations are concerned about equity of access, affordability of access, cost of equipment, and ability to speak "the language" of technology. This is a class situation, analogous to literacy or industrial literacy. Members of some communities simply may not have access to an office or any type of computers, while others may work among the latest systems and printing presses [7, 8].

Innovative Leadership in Nonprofits

As public and nonprofit organizations face new challenges and pressures, the discourse on innovation has become increasingly relevant to them. Despite the attention to innovations in the public and nonprofit sectors, existing examinations have generally not sought to provide an understanding of the differences in nonprofit and public sector managerial perceptions of the conditions of successful innovation. The idea of innovation is an important one to study, as it must also be concerned with issues of validity. New public management theorists might laud innovations in other organizations and in other sectors, but excellence must not be confused with success. What is considered an innovation in one organization or a sector is not always translatable or relevant as an innovation in another organization or another sector. The results of this analysis have demonstrated that risk aversion is most likely negatively related to innovation. Organizations, both public and nonprofit, have found ways to be innovative. In a discussion about nonprofit innovation, it is noted that "nonprofits are a major creative force in our society." In fact, not only are nonprofits a creative force, but they are also increasingly becoming a mechanism for implementing innovative public policy. More importantly, the government has turned to nonprofit organizations because of their innovativeness, as a mechanism for improving both effectiveness and efficiency. One of the many proposed solutions to the problems of government is the delegation of government powers and duties (in whole or in part) to an independent nonprofit agency. However, drawing on the Appreciative Inquiry literature, organizational researchers must help understand the consideration of the filtering conditions and barriers to success for those implementing and proposing new policies, ideas, or areas of innovation. While nonprofit scholars draw on the burgeoning literature on public sector innovation, they should also temper the enthusiasm for the imaginative forces of the nonprofit sector. Government, be it public or nonprofit, has always been considered a risk-averse sector, as are most organizations. Yet, ostensibly, the nonprofit sector has been risk-averse in a manner distinct from the public sector. Nonprofit organizations innovate, acting as creative agents in their communities. However, as the sector grows, attempts to manage the performance success of these innovations necessitate scrutiny of the associated mechanisms and levels of risk aversion in nonprofit organizations. A blurred line of institutional legitimacy exists at the nexus of privatization and philanthropic initiatives that challenge both understandings of publicness that ground democratic accountability and the motivated role of resource dependency in the nonprofit sector's distinctive yet related paradoxes of collaboration and competition [9, 10].

Strategic Planning For Nonprofits

A fundamental function of nonprofit organizations is to identify and address community needs. But, because most have limited staff and financial resources, it's also necessary to select priorities wisely. Thus, strategic planning becomes a relevant and valuable tool for focusing attention. A strategic plan is essentially a vision of who you are and what you will do over the next three to five years, and a review of the internal and external factors that will impact the success of that vision. Developing one involves an analysis that permits a clearer focus on how the organization can fulfill its mission most effectively. The strategic planning process is not unlike conducting an analysis, or assessing the organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. However, there are important differences. The first is that strategic planning requires key questions to be answered. These questions relate to the mission, vision, core values, strategies, and policies of the organization, its current direction, present situation, capacity, constituents and services, and proposed development direction. The responses to these key questions must be concise yet clear, long enough to assure comprehensive responses, but focused enough to prevent them from being excessively broad. Each question requires as much detail as necessary, but the entire document should fit within twenty pages. In addition to providing important information for the organization, responses to the key questions will provide the basis for major sections of the strategic plan [11, 12].

Financial Sustainability in Nonprofits

Coy analyzed the important steps nonprofit leaders, executive teams, and boards of directors can take to effect organizational sustainability in a proactive rather than reactive manner. In analyzing a nonprofit's sustainability, it is essential to define "sustainability," identify its components, and establish guidelines to assess the state of those components for an organization's future. Using an organizational sustainability overview involves defining organizational sustainability and identifying which components of sustainability are measurable and have assessment criteria in place. The fourth step is to involve others in assessing sustainability components. These others may include staff, board of directors, volunteers, stakeholders, and scholars engaged in nonprofit sustainability research. In defining "sustainability," Coy,

like many others, opted to use a phrase that included the term “financial,” indicating an understanding that “financial” was a critically important aspect of overall sustainability, especially for organizations established as 501(c)(3) tax-exempt charities. The Nevada Nonprofit Sector report noted that primary sources of income for Nevada’s nonprofit sector were envisioned revenues, contracts, and contributions, indicating the necessity of diversifying income stream sources. Coy observed that there was a need among nonprofit leaders to develop a strong understanding of the role and importance of sustainability as it relates to the nonprofit sector providing community services. In assessing a nonprofit’s sustainability, its “financial sustainability” components may have multiple assessment measures that illustrate the current state of sustainability across each component. Coy and providers of nonprofit capacity-building support identified five sustainability component areas: (1) expected revenue mix; (2) cost to effectively fulfill the program; (3) cost to effectively support the program; (4) infrastructure; and (5) capital structure. In his work with nonprofits wanting to achieve sustainability, Barr offered three strategies to propel a nonprofit worthiness into a sustainability discussion: (1) do great work and be able to define that it is working; (2) make a business work by having a full understanding of the business model; and (3) resist opposition to change [13, 14].

Volunteer Management Innovations

The growing demand for workers and heightened competition among Nonprofessional organizations (NPOs), especially small ones, is driving them to increasingly rely on volunteer management software to enhance operational effectiveness. The rapid evolution of internet technologies necessitates frequent updates to such software. Nonprofits face challenges due to rising service demands and competition for financial resources, leading them to focus on demonstrating cost-effectiveness in service delivery. A significant portion of this work (70-95%) is done on a voluntary, unpaid basis, prompting efforts to optimize volunteer operations. As NPOs expand, many supervisory volunteers and staff lack proper training in managing large volunteer networks. Advances in information technology, particularly internet-based systems, offer essential solutions for improving volunteer management effectiveness. Integrated e-business solutions for volunteer management, encompassing automated online scheduling, databases, assessment tools, forums, and surveys, are crucial for selecting, training, rostering, and managing volunteers with diverse roles and availability. These systems additionally support group networking and online consultations, leading to improvements in communication quality, social presence certainty, and feedback opportunities [15, 16].

Impact Measurement and Evaluation

Impact measurement is increasingly important for all nonprofits. Informants who were on both sides of the funding/program delivery relationship indicated that measuring the impact that their project had on the target social issue was very important to both respondents. Although the level of sophistication varied across informants, and one informant downplayed its importance, the trend seems to be that the larger the grant-seeking organization, the more advanced its proposed methods of measuring impact. As nonprofits and donors get larger and more advanced, they recognize that measuring the impact of their projects on the social issue addressed is necessary for strategic management and gaining funding from a number of sources. This area of research focused on social measurement challenges, specifically from the vantage point of nonprofit and foundations managers. They face challenges in defining, measuring, and monitoring social value created or recommended by a grant/program. Survey responses indicated that this is a difficult area, with strong potential for ubiquitous and multi-dimensional challenges. It was suggested that perhaps with the increased transparency and with the help of the environment, field-level metric initiatives would grow. Some informants felt that trying to develop metrics that can “cut across all nonprofits” and all donors may be very difficult or impossible. Even some said that even within an area, there may be too many different types of programs/missions that make it impossible to assess the best in common design and can all be evaluated collectively. However, it was thought that some third-party assessment should exist. Given that many nonprofits rely on public monies, they should have public accountability systems in place. However, it was suggested that these would need to be very complex measures that were nonprofit-specific measures and needed to be comprehensive, not simply a prepared standard that focused on the lowest common denominator. It was thought that if such a standardizing system across the sector existed, it would lead to uniformly mediocre programs and widespread risk avoidance in taking on new and innovative projects. One donor said that their organizations operate in an unusual way by designing its programs [17, 18].

Marketing and Outreach Strategies

One key purpose of marketing is to communicate information by defining user needs and providing understandable information. Ultimately, marketing aims for user satisfaction. Libraries facilitate this by offering various services to help users access, evaluate, and utilize information. Publicizing library services, known as outreach, is essential for increasing service usage. Evaluating outreach effectiveness allows libraries to improve their strategies. Understanding the current state of outreach begins with its definition as any strategy informing users about library services and encouraging their use. Outreach delivery is influenced by controllable and uncontrollable factors, including staff availability and expertise in technology. For example, the timely distribution of materials in a law school is crucial for reaching unaware users. Large law libraries face unique outreach challenges compared to smaller libraries like public or K-12 institutions. Assessing outreach effectiveness requires adherence to several principles: aligning outreach with the library's mission, tailoring delivery methods for diverse constituencies, evaluating outreach for improvements, committing institutionally to outreach, and recognizing that outreach should be an ongoing process, not a one-time event. Continuous marketing efforts are necessary to achieve user satisfaction [19, 20].

Ethical Considerations in Nonprofit Management

As nonprofit organizations have grown, matured, and changed, the need to clarify the ethical responsibilities of nonprofit executive managers has grown commensurately. While various sectors, industries, and practices have defined “codes of ethics” to guide governance and management, no comprehensive resource exists in the nonprofit arena. Given the pressures exerted on nonprofits and the lack of an identifiable governing ability, scholars and practitioners were invited to contribute their expertise in hopes of developing a useful list of ethical considerations. The United States nonprofit sector is more robust and diverse than any in the developed world. It accounts for millions of volunteers, hundreds of thousands of paid employees, and hundreds of billions of donated and earned revenues. Although this sector is thus vast and of great societal importance, no central authority monitors the ability of its governing and professional managers, even as more and more accounting oversight and professional regulatory capability have entered the for-profit arena. Furthermore, competitive managers from the for-profit sector have either moved into the nonprofit sector or begun to emulate business practices, including ethical positions on conduct and procedure. Yet, nearly all proposed or adopted limitations on nonprofit organizational or management behavior have come from outside the sector or its governing regulators. Nonprofit and manager-proposed responses in the regulatory space have inherently defensive tones, largely aimed at the donor audience rather than a concern for those served. Some scholars have urged nonprofits and their governing abilities to invite rather than react to an ethical debate and prescription. While most entities presently have general, modestly useful governing and managerial expectations, there exists no consensus- or jurisdictionally-defined ethical expectations that are exhaustive or tailored to specific problems. Old Board Roles in New Governance Contexts. Too often, discussions about governance paradigms cease at simple dichotomies such as “one-tier” versus “two-tier.” This approach leaves out many aspects of the board's role and function that are pressing subjects of scholarly inquiry and practical concern. A more expansive typology that builds on the work of Jones is introduced, that also captures some of the newer streams of research on governance. Unfortunately, some of these “old roles” may be moving into a “not-so-gold” era. Many of the roles that have contributed to board effectiveness and better performance in the past are currently losing their significance [21, 22].

Policy and Advocacy in the Nonprofit Sector

Political activity significantly shapes policies and practices across various sectors, yet clients of nonprofit organizations (NPOs) often hold views that differ substantially from those of politicians and policymakers. NPOs are of pivotal importance for effectively expressing these diverse ideas and perspectives to government officials, acting as dedicated advocates and actively developing comprehensive policy proposals. Their intimate and detailed understanding of client needs positions them exceptionally well to represent these often overlooked perspectives within the governmental framework. However, the welfare state's complicated bureaucracy further complicates government processes, giving rise to multiple policy outputs and necessitating input from a range of political forces through structured debates and discussions. Bureaucracies evolve and adapt in response to the demands for resources, and an increase in expertise among stakeholders can significantly alter both the formulation and execution of policy initiatives. Inputs for policy creation come from political leaders or can arise from a coalition of various organizations, ensuring that a broad spectrum of interests is represented in the policy-making process. Committees are formed to facilitate constructive compromise among differing viewpoints, but

not all stakeholders may have the opportunity to participate, leading to claims that newcomers often face significant resource hurdles when attempting to engage in policy debates and discussions. The intrinsically complex agenda-setting process prioritizes certain political issues based on the distribution of governmental power, frequently ignoring many potential options due to ongoing political resistance and various bureaucratic challenges that further entrench existing power dynamics [23, 24].

International Nonprofit Management

Innovations in nonprofit organizations focus on emerging managerial approaches essential for addressing complexities, enhancing effectiveness, and fostering creativity. Effective innovation processes are critical for managing new programs, services, and organizational changes in nonprofits, paralleling public-sector innovations. Understanding nonprofit innovation management entails examining public-sector frameworks, commonalities between public and nonprofit organizations, and the unique characteristics and operational differences of nonprofits. Similar to the public sector, social innovation in nonprofits involves creating and implementing new services and processes that benefit society. Nonprofit managers navigate line-item budgets, emphasizing program quality over costs, and prioritize ethical guidelines over statutory regulations. A comprehensive view of social innovation management is crucial for nonprofits, considering their legal governance and monitored independence. Increasing oversight calls for audits reflect evolving governance practices, echoing concerns that past economic development efforts failed due to a lack of governance systems. These changing governance dynamics pose new challenges that have recently become relevant within public organizations [25, 26].

Case Studies of Innovative Nonprofits

Two innovative nonprofits are highlighted for their unique approaches to managing technology and organizational challenges while serving neglected populations. Three more nonprofits are also discussed, each providing creative programming that offers significant public value and articulating their innovations. Though operating in different realms, these organizations share similarities that may inspire replication. In one of the wealthiest nations, a core population remains homeless due to family breakdowns, substance abuse, and mental health issues, lacking proper support after being discharged from institutions. RHY does not function as a traditional shelter; instead, it creates a supportive space for homeless young adults, allowing them to spend the day freely without the typical constraints of shelters. While RHY provides basic amenities like bathing and laundry facilities, staff engagement tends to be limited, addressing only urgent needs like injuries or overdoses. Larger cities often push the homeless into the outskirts, employing private security to remove them from public areas. It's suggested that similar strategies may be applied to homeless youth, risking their safety and the nonprofit's reputation. Despite potential changes to Missouri's age of majority, necessary support structures for homeless young adults, such as transitional housing and job training, are insufficient. Conversely, RHY prioritizes the needs of these individuals daily, even helping them fill out essential paperwork they struggle to understand. Rather than having the youth tackle forms alone, RHY acts as their agent, requiring them to return to confirm results and authenticity [27, 28].

Future Trends in Nonprofit Management

Many leaders in the nonprofit sector say they have always been challenged by scarce resources, service delivery trends, and customer expectations. Interestingly, many of these leaders also admit something is different today: the drivers of change are more structural and long-term than in the past fifty years, affecting many different types of nonprofit organizations. Here are some observations about and examples of some of the current drivers of change. Several, but not all, of these current drivers of change reflect larger economic, demographic, and societal trends. For example, we are evolving away from an industrial age toward an economy that is service-based and knowledge-driven. Society is trending toward two-income families, an almost 50 percent divorce rate, and a smaller nuclear family unit. Demographically, our society is aging and becoming more ethnically diverse and, in some cases, less educated. Inevitably, as shown by recent riots in America's cities, society is also fragmenting, with gaps in wealth and income inequality growing significantly. Many nonprofits are experiencing additional layers of environmental change, reflecting policy trends at the federal, state, and local levels as well as shifts in charitable giving, volunteerism, and fundraising. Devolution of programs from the federal to state and local levels, coupled with decreasing federal support, is pressuring states and local communities to raise additional revenues. Consequently, there is renewed discussion about the tax-exempt status of some nonprofits, especially as states and communities are facing deficits. In some states, there are even attempts to tax all nonprofits, given the belief that a business's worth is based entirely on whether it pays taxes. The vastly increased

stock of dollars and the influx of whole new categories of competition for those dollars also affect many nonprofits. All this is happening at the same time budgets are being tightened and are increasingly conditioned on performance measures. In the past, few nonprofits or foundations were concerned with the actual performance of funded programs [29, 30].

CONCLUSION

Innovations in nonprofit management are critical to the survival and thriving of organizations committed to the public good. This study has shown that while NPOs are diverse in structure, mission, and legal form, they share common management challenges, limited resources, heightened expectations for accountability, and increasing competition. In response, innovative practices have emerged across key areas including leadership, technology integration, volunteer coordination, impact measurement, and financial sustainability. However, the success of these innovations is deeply influenced by contextual factors such as organizational size, sectoral focus, and stakeholder environment. Effective nonprofit management requires a blend of science and intuition, standardized practices and adaptive strategies. Going forward, nonprofits must continue embracing innovation not only in service delivery but also in how they plan strategically, measure impact, and sustain financial and human capital. Future research should deepen empirical understanding of what works in nonprofit innovation, with attention to scalability, replicability, and the ethics of accountability in mission-driven work.

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