

BoardSource[®]

Joining a Nonprofit Board

If you are considering board service, make sure you have the answers you need. Use the board's culture and structure, as well as the overall health of the organization you're considering to guide your decision-making process.

Why people join nonprofit boards

People have countless reasons for wanting to become nonprofit board members. Some are focused on giving back; others want to receive something in return; and still others want to do both. Some motivations are highly personal, even emotional, while some are purely rational. Sometimes people make the decision independently after looking for a board position, and sometimes the organization actively recruits them.

Most individuals have well-informed, honorable intentions, and with guidance, they have the potential to have fulfilling board experiences. But occasionally, motivations are misinformed, wholly self-serving, or simply not constructive. It is absolutely acceptable to

be guided by personal motivations. After all, you are devoting your own time to this task. Just be sure that personal benefit is not the only reason you want to join a board. Your commitment to the mission of the organization must be the primary consideration.

Consider the following motivations. Do you see some of your own on this list?

The desire to be useful

- You have a specific cause that is important to you and you want to be active in supporting it.
- You have specific skills that could help an organization stay or become more viable.
- You want to “give back” and do your civic duty.
- You are concerned about your community and want to have a say in its future.
- You are concerned about a particular organization and believe you can help turn it around and make it successful again.
- You have the time to commit to a meaningful activity.
- You are a leader and want to share this skill.
- You have volunteered in an organization and now want to have a larger impact on its future.

Personal interests

- You are building your career, and being a board member would allow you to learn new skills or practice current ones.
- You think nonprofit board experience would be considered a plus on your resume or in your academic credentials.
- You want the opportunity to network with like-minded or otherwise interesting people.
- You are retired and want to start a new “career” helping a nonprofit; serving actively on a board would give you meaningful work with a flexible schedule.
- You are new to the community and want to make friends.
- You want a challenge, and board service is something you have never tried before.
- You want to be an insider and have a direct influence on how a nonprofit functions.
- You are interested in a job with an organization, and serving on its board would be a way to get to know it first.

- You want to add fun to your life, and working with a team “doing good” would accomplish that.

However, some motivations are worth examining and questioning because they are not solid reasons to join a board. Some examples of these include:

- A friend asked you, and you feel you can't say “no.”
- Your company is pressuring staff to serve on boards, and you feel you must do so to keep your job.
- You made a contribution to a nonprofit, and now you want to make sure you have a say in how the money is used.
- You feel guilty because you have not given enough to your community.
- You are lonely and need a new activity to get out of the doldrums.

Steps in becoming a board member

Identify an organization you're interested in serving

If you are already a volunteer in an organization, you might investigate the possibility of joining its board. Familiarity is an asset. It is important, however, to realize that direct-service volunteering is quite different from board service.

If you aren't dedicating time to an organization already, you first need to determine what kind of an organization you would like to be affiliated. What mission areas are you interested in? Would you like to be involved with groups dealing with health, homelessness, hunger, arts, education, environment, religion, or international affairs? The choices are numerous.

Next, you need to define the scope of your interest. Are you interested in your neighborhood and other local activities, or would you like to have a national focus? As a novice board member you may benefit from starting with a homeowners' association, a church committee, or a community center board. Many national organizations also have local chapters that would allow you to get involved with larger issues.

You should also take advantage of local volunteer centers, United Ways, or regional associations of charities to start locating nonprofits. [GuideStar](#), by Candid, is a valuable database that allows you to search nonprofit organizations by location, mission area, or directly by name. More than one million organizations are included, along with information about each. Finally, you can also find board vacancies on nonprofit job posting sites such as [LinkedIn Board Connect](#), [Idealist](#), [Bridgespan](#) and [All for Good](#).

Contact the organization

After finding an organization that you would like to know better, contact that organization. Visit the offices. Look at the website. Gather as much information as you can about what the organization does.

If you are still confident about your choice, make an appointment with a board member or the chief executive and indicate your interest in joining the board. The organization may want you to join a committee or volunteer in another capacity before you are nominated for board service. A willingness to do this will help your chances.

Exchange information

Be prepared to [ask questions](#). Focus on the [mission](#) of the organization, financial stability, constituents and customers, and the structure of the board.

Make sure that the organization asks many questions about you. You want to be part of an organization that has a well-planned [recruitment process](#). Recruitment is a two-way street. Both sides need to get what they are looking for. Being willing and able is not enough. You must fill the need in the board at a given moment. Effective boards are composed of various skills, talents, backgrounds, and perspectives and they often rely on their profile as a tool for recruitment. Boards can create their own [profile matrix](#), which allows them to determine their present composition and evaluate their future needs.

Understand the expectations

Educate yourself and expect the organization to educate you on the [responsibilities and liabilities of a board member](#).

Make sure that you understand the expectations that the organization places on its board members. What are the [fundraising and personal contribution responsibilities](#)? What is the meeting attendance policy? How many committee assignments are you expected to

accept? Also keep in mind that **different types of nonprofits will have different expectations** of their board members based on their size, mission, and particular challenges.

Moving forward

If, after all the contacts and information sharing, the board extends an invitation for you to join, you can celebrate a victory. Most organizations are happy to occasionally change roles and turn from the recruiter to the recruited one. Searching and cultivating potential board members is a demanding and time-consuming task. Interested and committed board members are not easy to find. Willing candidates stepping forward is a promising sign for future productivity.

If, during the cultivation, it becomes clear that the match was not made in heaven, you still gained valuable experience for your next search. Don't give up. There are many other organizations that could benefit from your service.

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