Research shows nonprofit boards improved during COVID due to digital tech adoption

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, as organizations across the country had to shift their operations to the digital realm because of social distancing restrictions, a common fear among nonprofits was that the lack of in-person, face-to-face contact would hamper their organization’s management. Nonprofits have been slow to adopt the kinds of digital technologies that they were now having to rely on out of necessity—especially virtual meeting platforms, online file-sharing and related tech solutions that made it possible for staff, leadership and boards to interface, share ideas and strategize on how to keep their operations going.

However, those fears were misplaced, according to new survey data from OnBoard, a board management software provider serving the nonprofit community. In fact, the shift to virtual meetings, online fundraising channels and other digital tech led to increased effectiveness and collaboration, the company said. Per the survey, 79% of respondents said their boards have improved effectiveness in the past 12 months, with 59% citing the shift to remote work as the primary cause; 66% have seen improvements in board collaboration; and 47% have spent more time discussing strategic issues.

Nonprofit Business Advisor recently spoke with Rob Kunzler, OnBoard’s Chief Marketing Officer, about the survey results and the changes that the pandemic has wrought in nonprofit boardrooms.

Q: The survey shows that during the pandemic, boards became more effective and collaborative. How do you explain that?
A: We believe several factors contributed to this increased effectiveness. First, many of our customers

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USPS proposes broad rate hikes

The United States Postal Service has requested across the board rate increases that will mean substantially higher postal charges for nonprofits across the country.

According to the agency, the rate increases are being proposed as part of Delivering for America, the USPS’ 10-year plan to achieve financial sustainability and service. The proposal—which would need to be approved by the Postal Regulatory Commission—would take effect Aug. 29.

The proposed price changes would raise overall Market Dominant product and service prices by approximately 6.9%. First-class mail prices would increase by 6.8% to offset declining revenue caused by first-class mail volume declines. In the past 10 years, mail volume has declined by 46 billion pieces, or 28%, and is continuing to decline, the agency said. Over the same period, first-class mail volume has dropped 32%, and single-piece first-class mail volume—including letters bearing postage stamps—has declined 47%.

The proposed mailing services price changes
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and survey respondents work in sectors that were acutely impacted by the pandemic, including health care and higher education. The boards that lead these organizations faced uniquely new challenges caused

by the pandemic itself, which led them to spend more time on genuinely strategic decision-making that directly impacted the health, safety and survival of the business or organization, as well as its staff and clients. But everyday businesses and organizations faced similar challenging decisions.

However, the factor that survey respondents cited most for increased effectiveness and collaboration was the shift to remote work and virtual meetings. Suppose you think about the boardroom and the personal interactions that occur there. In that case, conversations and chit-chat before, during and after meetings—you can see how some view a virtual meeting as a more effective meeting method, as it runs a bit more quickly and indeed more deliberately.

Another factor is that when you move everyone into a single shared platform, effectiveness increases. When everyone occupies the same amount of digital space, there’s also a democratizing effect. Meeting participants who may have been less vocal in an in-person setting feel more obliged to participate or say their piece, increasing collaboration. Many boards also noted increased attendance, as traveling to or from the meeting were no longer necessary.

Q: Your research determined that many boards went through sort of a forced digital transformation because of the pandemic. What changes did those organizations go through—which tech did they adopt and why?

A: Anecdotally, we know that almost everyone had to adapt to using video conferencing platforms like Zoom, Hangouts, or GoToMeeting; this was the minimum requirement for any virtual meeting or remote work.

However, many boards also decided to adopt digital board meeting platforms like OnBoard. We’ve heard from many customers that the impetus for this leap over the “digital divide” occurred for two reasons. One, without an in-person meeting, there’s also no need for paper-based board books, so board support staff explored new ways of doing the board’s business in a digital format with software tools specified for the task.

The second reason is that those who tried to use a hodge-podge of digital tools to accomplish the same task encountered a lot of frustration adapting to the new normal. For instance, using a shared Dropbox or file storage tool for meeting materials like the board book, but also having to communicate via email, then logging onto a virtual meeting platform to actually hold the meeting, in addition to needing to have a Word doc or note-taking system in place to

Digital (continued from page 1)
record the minutes.

Each of these is a minor inconvenience to an individual user, but the total number of meeting participants compounds that inconvenience: when you’re holding a board meeting for a dozen or so directors that’s quite a lot of inconvenience and frustration.

**Q:** How does digital tech lead to more effective boards? What specific processes or advantages do they offer, and how do these translate to better boards?

**A:** In the case of a board management platform or a board intelligence platform like OnBoard, there are many benefits that increase effectiveness. The elimination of paper-based processes for support staff, such as compiling, printing and distributing board books, is a substantial time-saving. With a digital board platform, materials can be sent just in time and updated with the push of a button if an update is required. In other words, there are no more version control issues.

Next, consolidating multiple channels into a single platform purpose-built for board communication and board activities like creating agendas, voting, book annotations and record-keeping reduces the number of discrete tasks needed to prepare and hold meetings. That single platform also acts as a single system of record for every board member, which means they can easily remember and access information from previous meetings, even years later.

Every minute of administrative effort you save the board administrator or the meeting participant is one more minute that can be spent on the meeting’s agenda and strategic deliberation.

Security is another significant benefit. A platform built on a secure foundation increases board agility by reducing the effort required to keep multiple channels secure (less anxiety, too). In addition, a cloud-based board management platform is nearly infinitely scalable. So if you’re part of an organization that features multiple boards, committees or subcommittees, having all these meetings occur on a single platform drastically reduces the exponential effects of minor inconvenience or the time required for training individual board members on new technology.

**Q:** What does your organization recommend going forward with regard to digital tech adoption based on the survey’s findings?

**A:** Based on the survey data and what we’ve heard from customer and board governance experts, there are a few key recommendations:

- As COVID-19 vaccination rates increase and in-person meetings are again possible, designate some full, in-person meetings and a number of all-remote meetings per year. Before the pandemic, we all experienced the “hybrid” meeting where some are in the room, and others join by video or phone. Don’t repeat this mistake. Virtual meetings were in part more effective because everyone was on a level playing field.
- Get everyone on the same platform and support them. Even better, find a platform that offers the best ease of use for your meeting participants, then proactively train them on the technology and support their needs as they meet the learning curve.
- Keep security top of mind. IBM’s annual data breach study now pegs the cost of a cybersecurity breach in the United States at more than $8 million on average. If that’s a cost your organization is unwilling to bear—let alone the loss of credibility or favorability among customers or constituents—keep data and information security top of mind when digitally transforming your board.

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**For more information**

Rob Kunzler is chief marketing officer of Indianapolis-based OnBoard. Launched in 2011, OnBoard serves as the board intelligence platform for more than 2,000 organizations and their 12,000 boards and committees in 32 countries worldwide. With customers in higher education, nonprofit, health care systems, government and enterprise business, OnBoard is a leading board management provider. For more information, visit https://www.onboardmeetings.com.

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**RATES (continued from page 1)**

| Product                          | Current Prices | Planned Prices |
|----------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Letters (1 oz.)                  | 55 cents       | 58 cents       |
| Letters additional ounce(s)      | 20 cents       | 20 cents       |
|                                  | (unchanged)    |                |
| Letters (metered 1 oz.)          | 51 cents       | 53 cents       |
| Domestic postcards               | 36 cents       | 40 cents       |
| Flats (1 oz.)                    | $1.00          | $1.16          |

According to the Alliance of Nonprofit Mailers, the new rates would translate to an overall increase of 7.8% for nonprofit marketing materials, which include marketing mail, periodicals, and first-class mail.

For more information about the proposal, visit https://bit.ly/2Un77bA.