

The Humanless Nonprofit: An Intentional Experiment

Event Recap
September 18, 2025



Imagine a nonprofit without humans.

Many of you found this idea unsettling at first. After all, nonprofits exist to serve and connect people—so why imagine one without humans?

In September, Intentional Futures and the Gates Foundation's Philanthropic Partnerships team brought together a fantastic group of nonprofit, technology, philanthropic, and business leaders to consider this provocation. We had no intention of designing for a fully automated future. Rather, by working back from this radical future state, we shed new light on the advantages and peril of AI and, most importantly, on where humans will have the greatest impact with and without AI.

Humans will continue to be indispensable to nonprofit work. Together, we saw AI reshaping how nonprofits operate and redefining the vital roles people play, and we imagined a hybrid future where humans *and* AI unlock radical improvements in impact and efficiency, reinventing how many things work at a systemic level.



A Recap of the Event

When we reached out with an invitation to a session on Humanless Nonprofits, many of you understandably had reservations about the premise of the exercise. We designed the flow of activities to harness that discomfort, ease those reservations, and demonstrate the power of exploring extreme positions.



Setting the Stage for Exploration

We kicked off by presenting a short video of an advertising executive arguing that gas-powered vehicles are better than electric ones by creatively imagining that electric cars were the norm. This was a great way to get everyone to understand how different framing can push our thinking to reveal new perspectives and assumptions we might hold.

To have a productive session, we set some parameters that enabled us to suspend disbelief and fully immerse in the future state:

- In the future, AI agents can do everything humans can online
- Organizations can be run, staffed, and even formed by AI
- Robots are available and highly functional
- This is all relatively affordable



Warming Up with a Rapid Round of Brainstorming

In our first exercise, we had small groups select a nonprofit challenge card at random and brainstorm an AI-only approach to addressing it before the group. These cards included challenges such as “Raise \$1 million from new donors in one week” or “Recruit 100 skilled, values-aligned volunteers for an event happening in two weeks.”

This warm-up activity got us thinking together about the structure, challenges, and possibilities of an AI-only nonprofit. By having each of you participate, we created a shared understanding of what we meant by a humanless nonprofit.



Humanless Nonprofit Functions

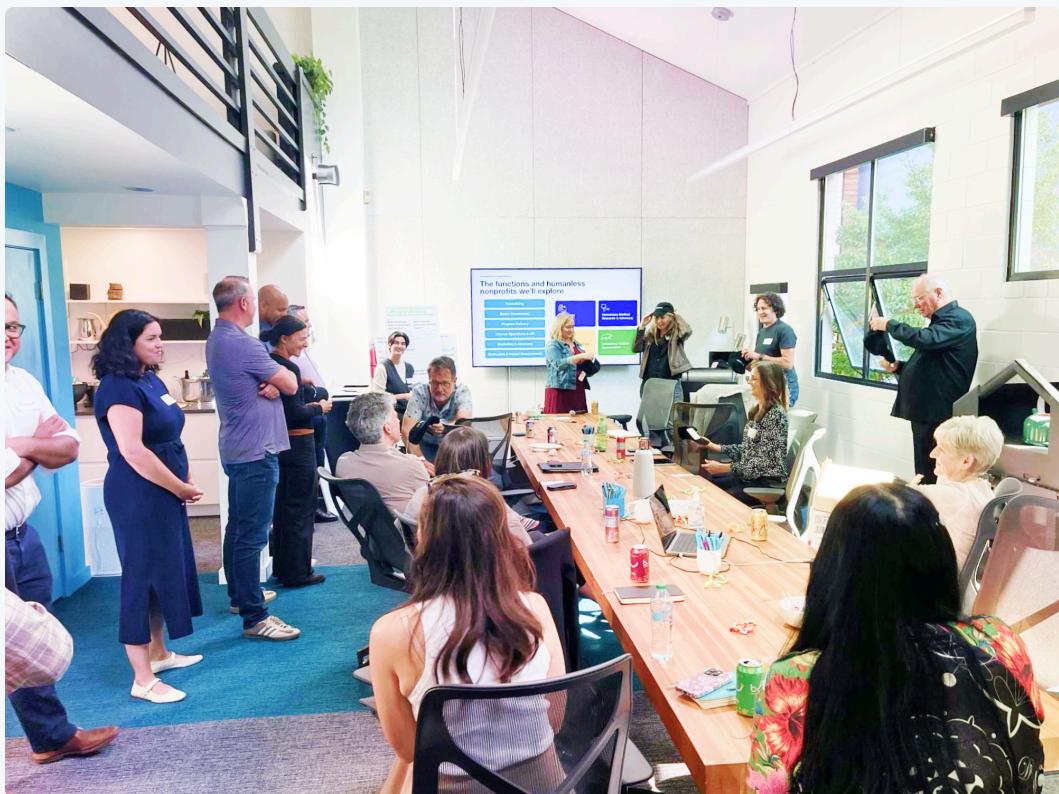
We then split into three teams to dive deeper into specific functions. We assigned each group a nonprofit and two functions, including board governance, program delivery, marketing and advocacy, fundraising, human resources and internal operations, and evaluation and impact measurement. We asked teams to advocate for an AI-only approach to fulfilling that function. Articulating why an AI-only approach was advantageous and what outcomes it could drive, teams

outlined benefits like personalized targeting, increasing operational efficiency, reaching a wider audience, and maintaining historical consistency.

By getting teams to argue for a position they may not personally favor, we pushed the dialogue into exploring what could be possible instead of what could go wrong. This artificially and intentionally constrained the brainstorming to skew toward potential benefits.

When we regrouped, we had you imagine that your automated nonprofit is up and running, achieving all that you promised—until things start to go terribly wrong. Together, we identified concerns like over-optimization, misalignment between the system and the organization's mission, and issues of accountability.

Once we examined the risks and downsides, we had you all—literally and figuratively—put on your human hats to outline what human roles could mitigate these risks. This approach allowed us to work backwards from the extreme to a more plausible state where humans and AI collaborate together.



Future Roles for Humans

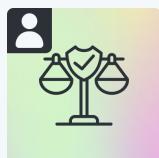
In breakout groups, teams envisioned AI systems that handle operations, data entry and analysis, contract processing, and continuous monitoring. They saw plenty of ways AI could reduce the administrative burden required of running a nonprofit. Yet, AI's potential efficiency raised as many questions as it promised to solve. Our conversation returned repeatedly to the idea that trust, empathy, and cultural nuance are not easily automated. The loss of human capacity to build relationships in an AI-only nonprofit could introduce alignment issues or erode the important role nonprofits play for their beneficiaries. There were more tactical questions as well: Who is accountable when an automated system makes a mistake or acts with bias? How can the system be stopped if something goes wrong?

Through the humanless nonprofit exploration, one thing became clear: the importance of human involvement is critical even as our roles shift.



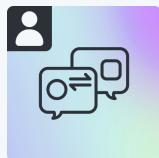
The potential of AI lies in freeing up human resources for relational and creative work, not replacing them.

With our human hats on, we outlined several distinctive human roles. Below are the ones that surfaced multiple times across our conversations, though there are certainly many more roles to explore.



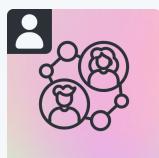
When AI manages daily operations, the Chief Ethicist becomes the organization's moral anchor.

The Chief Ethicist provides a check on the automated systems, examining whether and when to take a specific action. Their primary role is to identify when harm is possible and redirect or pause the system.



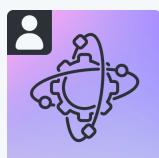
The Human Interpreter bridges the gap between the automated system and lived human experience.

The interpreter ensures that the voices of real people—especially those of the communities being served—remain central to decision-making and are faithfully represented in program operations. This role brings cultural nuance, empathy, and local context to what might otherwise be a sterile, automated organization.



The Connector ensures that relationships remain at the heart of nonprofit work.

They safeguard against the loss of human empathy, trust, and experience which are the heart of much nonprofit work. They provide a human face and experience to a nonprofit whose operations are largely automated.



The Center of Accountability is the human responsible for a fast-moving, machine-driven system.

This role ensures transparency and alignment between the organization's mission and real-world impact. It embodies the principle that while AI can optimize for outcomes, humans must still own the consequences.

Together, these roles suggest that as AI becomes more capable, the role of humans will be to preserve purpose and ensure alignment, not handle administrative or bureaucratic activities.

Big Themes That Emerged

Across our discussion, multiple themes emerged regarding the impact of AI on individual nonprofits as well as the sector as a whole.



The pace of AI vs. the pace of impact.

Achieving impact takes time. AI promises to accelerate progress, but the benefits of this always-on efficiency hit a ceiling when they run up against real-world realities. Many nonprofit missions don't have deadlines; conserving a forest or providing community health services are ongoing efforts. Impact is limited not by technology, but by the pace of behavior change, trust, and ecological systems. The mismatch between AI and human timelines raises important questions about how to move at the right speed. AI's 24/7 nature risks pushing nonprofits to act faster than their missions or beneficiaries can sustain, even as it enables greater efficiency and historical continuity.



Functions will fundamentally change.

As AI takes on more of a nonprofit's behind-the-scenes work, nonprofit functions and roles will become more fluid. Instead of organizing by departments like fundraising, marketing, or program delivery, nonprofits will orient around goals: raising a target amount of money or achieving a certain level of impact. This will allow both humans and AI to collaborate more effectively and think creatively about achieving impact—outside the confines of a department or job description.



Reconsider and reinvent at every level.

Today's processes and operational models persist by inertia, creating inefficiencies and missed opportunities for innovation. For example, if AI can provide continuous oversight and monitoring of a nonprofit's work, why limit board governance to a quarterly meeting? Likewise, if any nonprofit can instantly apply to thousands of grants, what does that mean for how funders identify recipients? Exploring these types of questions allows us to reinvent entire functions from the ground up. Perhaps board governance is ongoing, with an AI-augmented board providing historical context and infinite perspectives. Perhaps funding shifts toward new ways of matchmaking or proactive giving.



Talent pipelines will face new challenges.

As AI automates routine and operational tasks, it risks erasing entry-level roles that today serve as training grounds in the nonprofit sector. Though often tedious, these jobs are where junior professionals develop judgment and context to make informed decisions down the line. If AI takes on these responsibilities, organizations may unintentionally erode their own talent pipelines, leaving fewer opportunities for humans to build the skills and intuition needed for future leadership. Especially as human roles become focused around accountability, human interpretation, and empathy, it will be critical for young talent to develop the foundation to perform these roles well.

Closing Reflections

This format generated rich discussion, thanks to your thoughtful contributions. Starting from such an extreme assertion is never easy, but you all engaged thoughtfully to challenge assumptions and explore both the risks and opportunities AI brings to the nonprofit sector.

This exercise has potential to help teams engage deeply and think creatively about the nature of human and AI collaboration, not just in nonprofits but across a breadth of sectors. Working backward from an extreme position has applicability for organizations looking to:

- Drive more imaginative thinking by exploring a radically different future state
- Shed new light on the meaningful and novel roles humans will play in the future
- Generate greater receptivity and energy for experimenting with AI
- Create space for exploring AI's impact and potential in a nuanced, deep way
- Empower teams to author their own roles

Below are some opportunities for improvement we identified:

1. **Explore the impact of AI on the entire nonprofit sector.** We began to get to this in our final discussion but see value in giving this topic greater attention. When most organizations change in the ways we've outlined, what does that mean for the whole system? This line of thinking opens up a conversation about how the composition of the sector will shift and what functions will need fundamental reimaging.
2. **Go deeper on roles of the future.** While we identified various roles for humans, we see value in fleshing out and interrogating the unique strengths humans and AI bring. We could go deeper on what these roles would look like, what skills are needed, and the nature of human and AI collaboration.
3. **Anchor on goals, not function areas.** We focused our exploration in the nonprofit functions of today—board governance, fundraising, human resources. This constrained our thinking to what we know today instead of earnestly exploring a radically different future. We believe anchoring to goals (e.g., raising enough money to achieve a certain level of impact) instead of functions (e.g., fundraising) could open the aperture for more creative, ambitious thinking.

We are excited about the potential of this exercise to enable people to break out of their current mode of thinking, laying the foundation for a richer conversation about AI.

We believe the “humanless” exploration could be even more powerful if followed by sessions which put ideas into practice and produce actionable experiments. Imagine, for example, coupling this session with one outlining a roadmap for AI adoption and experimentation within an organization or helping teams rapidly prototype their own AI agents.

Our hope is that this exercise becomes a model for helping teams and leaders facilitate deeper, more intentional conversations about the future impact of AI. Reacting with fear at the provocation of a humanless nonprofit is understandable. But, by taking this provocation seriously we revealed the opposite of what the name suggests: automation makes humans even more essential. Nonprofits of the future will leverage AI, but they’ll do it in a way that elevates human ingenuity, relationships, and creativity instead of eroding them.

We’re always eager to continue the conversation. Reach out anytime with your thoughts, questions, or opportunities to collaborate.



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