

## Joining a Board & How BoardConnect Can Help



### **Why join a nonprofit board?**

Joining a nonprofit board offers many benefits – you can give to a cause that you care about and make a difference. You can learn new skills – practice your leadership skills for example by chairing a committee. You will meet new people who care about what you care about. And hopefully you will even have fun!

### **Who is able to join a nonprofit board?**

Most people think that you have to be very wealthy and/or be an executive in the C-suite to join a board. That just is not true anymore. In fact, if anything, nonprofits are recognizing that diverse voices make them stronger. More and more, boards want people who are earlier in their careers or have life experiences that match the people the nonprofit is serving.

There are so many studies that show that groups make better decisions when there are people with different perspectives. This strongly applies to boards. Once you join a board, it will be part of your responsibility to contribute with your own voice and listen to others so you can maximize that benefit.

Traditionally, nonprofits had a “give or get” requirement. This meant that someone joining a board would need to either personally give a certain amount – let’s say \$5000 – or get it by having their company or friends donate. More and more, nonprofits are requiring that board members “give an amount that is significant for you” or “place your nonprofit’s charity as one of the top three charities that you give to (many people give to their religious institutions and universities). Almost all boards expect you to give a donation, even a small one—it shows that you feel that what the organization is doing is important enough to support it.

We always say that nonprofit boards are the opposite of for-profit boards – with nonprofit boards you make a donation in addition to your other contributions of time and talent; with for profit boards, you receive payment. If your goal is to make money from the experience, this is not the place for you!

Nonprofits want you to serve on our boards! We need people who can contribute in many different ways -with funds, with ideas, with passion!

## **Which nonprofits are looking for board members?**

Most nonprofits have term limits and allow board members to serve only a certain number of terms. So, they are ALWAYS looking for board members. Boards vary in when they bring on new members. Some will bring them on throughout the year; others have a specific time of year when they add board members. NonProfitConnect hears from nonprofits all the time who update their needs.

There are more than 2,000 nonprofits in Mercer County alone. So, the best way to start thinking about boards is to consider what you are passionate about. If you are going to spend a lot of time and give donations to an organization, make it one that serves a cause you care about. There are thousands of nonprofits so it is ok if you are not interested in some of them. Don't worry – someone else is!

Here are some of the categories we use to consider interests:

**Animal Welfare**  
**Arts and Culture**  
**Crisis Intervention**  
**Special Needs/Disabilities (nicer way to say?)**  
**Diversity Initiatives**  
**Education**  
**Elderly**  
**Environment**  
**Healthcare**  
**Historical**  
**Housing Insecurity**  
**Food Insecurity**  
**Immigration**  
**Incarceration**  
**Mental Health**  
**Science/STEM**  
**Well-being/Wellness**  
**Women and Girls**  
**Workforce Development**  
**Youth Development**

## **How does BoardConnect work?**

Our training class is 4 virtual sessions and then on the fifth session, participants can meet nonprofits in person. We have a variety of nonprofits at representing different causes and with different board member needs.

Once the participants have met the nonprofits at the Meet & Greet, participants and/or nonprofits will follow up with each other to express their interests. A nonprofit may invite a potential board member to meet other board members or the CEO. A nonprofit may invite someone to attend a program or event to learn more about what the organization is about. It is always a good idea to read up on the nonprofits' websites and financials (we recommend [guidestar.org](https://www.guidestar.org)) and ask lots of questions to make sure you have found the right board match for you.

If a BoardConnect participant does not find a board that they want to serve on, our staff continue to work with them until they find a fit. Depending on the process that the nonprofit takes, it can take weeks to months to finally land on a board. Some nonprofits want potential board members to get to know them better by serving on a committee first. Many nonprofits require a vetting process with a few board members and then a formal vote to come on the board that occurs at a board meeting.

## **What do Nonprofits Look for in Board members?**

Many nonprofits create what is called a board matrix to figure out who they are missing. The characteristics can vary widely – some boards look for specific skills like marketing or accounting. Others may be looking for people who live in a certain region that the nonprofit represents. Some want to find people who have experienced firsthand the issue that the nonprofit is addressing. Many nonprofits these days are looking for people of color who have been traditionally underrepresented on boards.

A nonprofit that is newly founded probably is looking for someone who has the capacity to “roll up their sleeves,” while a more mature organization (not necessarily older), may want big strategic thinkers or may be more focused on people who can bring funds.

To be frank, one of the most desirable characteristics in a board member is someone who follows through. It is important to find out from the nonprofit that you are looking at what their specific time requirements look like and check that with your capacity. Be honest with yourself. There is nothing worse for a nonprofit than having someone promise to do something and then be left “holding the bag” when it does not get done.

## **What is involved in being a board member?**

We have a whole course on this - -BoardConnect. So, to get the details, we recommend that you take it!

### **Time Commitment**

However, many people ask about the time commitment involved. This truly varies based on the organization that you join, the role that you play (Board Chair is more work!) and the needs of the organization. Typically you will spend 1.5-2 hours per month at board meetings. Some boards have virtual board meetings, some in person and others hybrid. You will likely be asked to serve on a committee—Governance, Finance, Development—and may spend 1-2 hours every month or every other month at committee meetings, most of which are virtual. You will probably be expected to go to the nonprofits' events—fundraising or big programming events. You definitely will ask these questions when talking to a nonprofit.

Most nonprofits have term limits and expect board members to serve and then make way for others. The most common term limit is 2 terms of 3 years each. There are some boards who do not have a limited number of terms.

### **Donation**

See section on "Who is Able to Join a Board"

### **Ambassadorship**

If you serve on a board, you are expected to be an ambassador for the nonprofit in your community. That means sharing with your colleagues, friends and whomever you meet about the good work that your nonprofit does. It means connecting resources and people you know to support the success of the nonprofit.

There are other responsibilities as well but these are the ones that people are usually most interested in.