Unlocking the Power of AI

A Charity's Guide to AI, its benefits and how to get started

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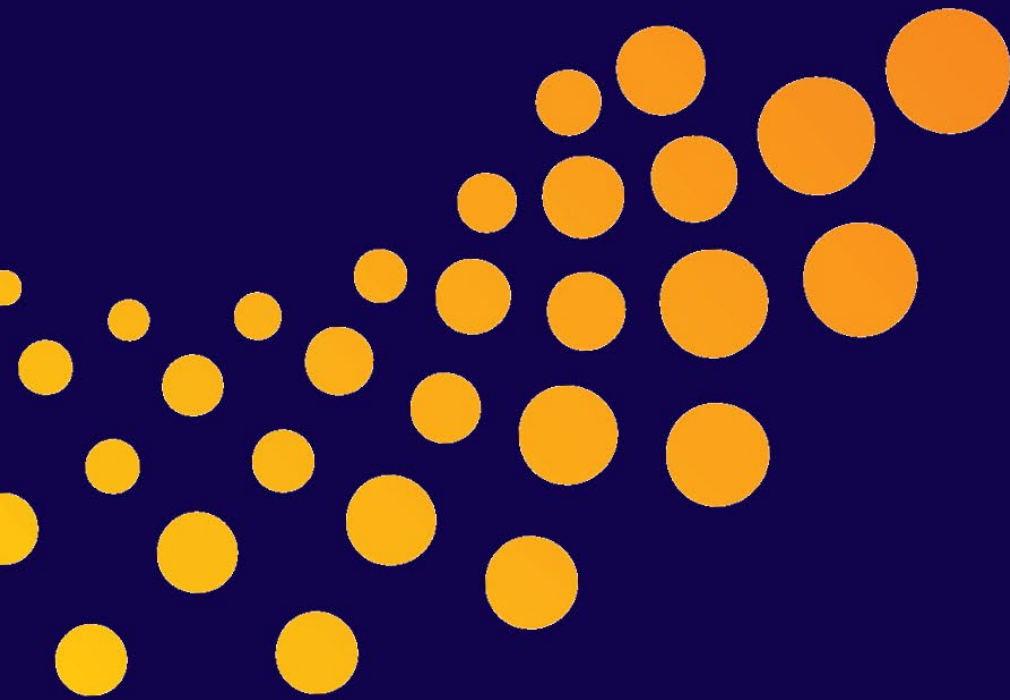
Unlocking the Power of AI for Charities

In today's rapidly evolving landscape, artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative force, revolutionising organisations and redefining the way we approach society's challenges. Over time, experts believe charities stand to reap significant benefits from its implementation.

However, as a small charity, it may be difficult to understand how the use of AI might be helpful to you and your organisation and what risks it could present as well as knowing where to start to use it effectively.

At Cranfield Trust, we are committed to supporting and empowering small charities to thrive through our pro bono services which include management consultancy and mentoring. We also support the development of charity leaders and provide regular webinars on a range of useful topics. We are pleased to provide this guide which summarises what experts shared at our recent webinars. We're very grateful to AI experts, Daniel Hume, Chief AI Officer at WPP, James Crawford, Business Director and Change Catalyst, Ketan Varia, trustee for not-for-profit organisation Mediation Hertfordshire and Dr Naveen Thomas of EY, who shared their insight and knowledge on AI technology and how it can be used and embedded by charitable organisations. We have written this guide based on the knowledge and expertise shared by the above experts in our webinars and we have also used AI to inform some of the content.

This guide will cover:

- What AI is
- How AI works
- The benefits of using AI for charities
- The risks AI presents
- How to get started using AI

What is AI?

By its Oxford Dictionary definition, AI can be described as:

'the theory and development of computer systems able to perform tasks normally requiring human intelligence, such as visual perception, speech recognition, decision-making, and translation between languages.'

To put it simply, AI consists of data driven decision making systems. These systems process information and are able to generate human like responses or behaviour and even predict and recognise patterns, enabling it to assist with tasks that would otherwise be completed by a human.

Throughout this guide, when we refer to AI, we will be mainly talking about Generative AI which processes information and then quickly generates new information, based on the inputs it receives.

How AI works

AI is built upon a concept known as neural networks, which are modelled on the way human brains process information. Neural networks allow AI systems to recognise patterns in data and improve their decision-making capabilities. As the internet continues to grow, so too does the amount of data available for AI systems to analyse, giving them greater potential to improve upon existing processes and provide more efficient and effective solutions to complex problems.

This has led to the development of AI systems that can perform a wide range of tasks, from image and speech recognition to natural language processing and decision-making. These capabilities have the potential to impact a variety of industries, including charities, improving efficiency and productivity.

AI can even go as far as understanding sentiment. So if you provide AI with a document written in a certain style, it can give you an insight into what the writer may have been thinking when they wrote it.

How AI can help charities

"_Over the next ten years, we'll see a 'Cambrian explosion' of jobs and uses of this technology. I believe we all have an innate desire to want to contribute positively to humanity - AI has the ability to create a world of abundance, freeing people up, actually to contribute to humanity._**" - Daniel Hulme, CEO, Satalia & Chief AI Officer, WPP**

AI systems like Chat GPT can be valuable tools for enhancing efficiency and productivity, particularly for organisations or individuals that are trying to accomplish a lot with limited resources. The ability of these systems to generate documents or communication materials quickly and effectively can save time and allow individuals to focus on higher-level tasks that require creativity or critical thinking. AI systems can help with organisation and planning by taking a set of ideas or points and turning them into a structured action plan with prioritised objectives.

For charities, the benefits of using AI systems like Chat GPT are particularly significant.

The ability to automate certain tasks or to get help with planning and communication can allow staff more time on providing services to beneficiaries or engaging with donors and supporters. The ability of AI systems to analyse and understand large amounts of information quickly and accurately can be invaluable for charities that are trying to make data-driven decisions or to evaluate the impact of their work.

For organisations that are struggling with the challenge of small but overstretched teams and limited budgets meaning resourcing more staff is not possible, AI can propose a solution. Many AI systems are free and available to use, without any cost to the charity and whilst they require input and managing effectively, they can still significantly increase productivity and are accessible to all.

However, it's important to consider the potential implications of introducing AI into your organisation, including the impact on your team and how it will be received by the people you support. Careful planning and communication will be key to ensuring a smooth integration of AI into your charity's operations so that staff can embrace the opportunity it can offer to enhance what they are doing now, rather than feel daunted that it could mean job roles change or worse still, are taken away.

Examples of how AI could be used within a charity

Keeping up with new regulations or guidance from the charity commission is essential for charities to ensure compliance and maintain public trust. However, this can be a time-consuming task, especially for charities with limited resources. By using an AI system like Chat GPT to generate a summary of these changes, charities can quickly get up to speed on what they need to know, without getting bogged down in legal or technical documents. This allows them to focus on their core mission and activities, and to use their resources more efficiently. Overall, this is an example of how AI can enhance efficiency and support organisations in achieving their goals.

It's important to note that at this stage, these AI systems can make mistakes, and so it is important to check through the information it provides.

AI is an opportunity for us to engage many more people, bring education, medical support, social support, advice to people wherever they are, in their own language, in their own way, at their own time.

AI-powered translation tools offer a significant opportunity for charities to reach and engage with diverse communities, especially those that are linguistically diverse. By using AI to translate their materials and messages into different languages, charities can ensure that their work is accessible to a wider audience and can more effectively communicate their mission and values. This can be important in fields such as healthcare, education, and social services, where accurate communication is essential for providing effective support. AI-powered translation represents a powerful tool for charities to expand their reach and impact, and to better serve the communities that they work with.

Ultimately, how successful AI can be, can depend very much on the information that is provided to it. The more specific and detailed you can be in the information or request that you give to AI, the better the outcome it can provide.

AI is able to understand the importance of tone and writing for different audiences and so including details such as tone, audience, purpose in your requests to AI, will only improve its efficiency.

For many, a good starting point with AI is to simply ask it a question.

Here are some other examples of questions that you could ask AI, as a charity:

- What are some best practices for engaging with donors and building lasting relationships with supporters?
- What are the most effective communication strategies for promoting a charity's mission and activities to the public?
- How can a charity use data and analytics to improve the effectiveness of its programs and services?
- What are the most effective strategies for managing volunteers and ensuring that they have a positive experience working with the charity?
- How can a charity use social media to reach new audiences and engage with its supporters?

These are just a few examples of the questions that charities could ask an AI system and offer a starting point for different tasks you might use AI to assist with. Of course, the specific questions that a charity might ask will depend on its mission, activities, and priorities.

AI risks and challenges

While AI can offer significant benefits to small charities, it's important to be mindful of the potential risks and challenges, especially when it comes to data privacy and security.

AI systems rely on data to function and improve, so it's critical that this data is collected and processed in a responsible and ethical manner. This includes ensuring that any personal or confidential information is not used without the explicit consent of the individuals involved, and that proper safeguards are in place to prevent unauthorised access or misuse of data.

Small charities, in particular, may need to consider the implications of using AI systems for their data privacy and security policies, and to ensure that they are complying with relevant data protection regulations, such as GDPR.

Another potential risk to consider when using AI is accuracy. AI systems themselves will come with a disclaimer that the information they provide may not always be 100% accurate, so just like you would if using information gathered from online research, it is important to check your facts to avoid mistakes.

Bias in AI systems is another challenge to consider. As AI systems learn from the data they're fed, if that data contains biased or stereotypical information, the system can reflect and amplify those biases in its outputs.

It's also important to note that the way the data is collected, labelled, and processed can introduce bias into AI systems in several ways. It's not just a matter of the data itself being biased, but also how it's used and interpreted by the AI system.

To reduce the risk of bias issues when using AI, it's necessary to be especially vigilant in ensuring that any AI systems do not perpetuate harmful biases or stereotypes.

While AI can offer significant benefits for small charities, it's important to approach it with caution and consideration for potential risks and challenges, including those related to data privacy and security.

As this technology continues to develop, so will many policies in place around it, both from the AI companies themselves and central governing bodies, so keep an eye out for those in the future to ensure your AI use falls in line with these.

Key tip

Remember! You can use AI as a tool to enhance productivity and it can make a great asset to any charity team, but the use of AI needs to be carefully controlled and managed. We like to refer to an analogy given by Dr Naveen Thomas, Director in EY's Digital and Emerging Technology Consulting group, at our Charity Management Matters event in London in December 2023. Dr Thomas likened the use of AI to jam on toast for breakfast. It adds to the breakfast experience, making it tastier, but just eating jam for breakfast wouldn't be a balanced diet and so it is best consumed in moderation, in combination with toast. AI can be viewed in the same way, excessive use could cause problems and for the most effective use, AI needs to be used in collaboration with humans.

This guide provides an overview on what AI is and the benefits and risks it can offer charities based on what experts have told us during recent webinars, but what are the practical steps you need to take now to start using AI in your organisation?

Three things you can do to get you started with AI:

1. Experiment with AI systems to find out which work best for your organisation. There are many different free AI systems, all with slightly different features so scanning what is out there and having a go at asking questions or using it to help with tasks will help you to decide which one most suits your needs and purpose. Some of the available AI systems you could try are Chat GPT, Pi.ai, and Google Bot. If you're stuck on what to ask or how to ask it, check out

Prompt Genie, this will provide advice on which platform is best for your query and how best to word it, to receive best results.

2. Decide what the purpose of using AI will be in your organisation. Whilst AI can be a great tool, it can't be used for everything so being clear on exactly what you want to use it for and what you want to achieve by using it, will help you to get the best out of it. This is also when you should be thinking about how you will implement AI and consider the impact it will have on your staff, key stakeholders and policies.

3. Make a start. You can start small but the best thing you can do, once completing the above steps, is to just start using AI in your day-to-day work processes. Evaluating its use as you go along and asking teams using it for feedback will help you to track its effectiveness and may highlight areas where you need to try a different system or perhaps need to learn a bit more. By starting to use AI and regularly assessing how it's working, you will soon start to see how it can improve productivity.

Final words of advice

AI is some of the most advanced technology that we have seen, and it offers significant benefits for small charities, enabling you to enhance productivity, work, and better serve your communities. However, it's important to approach it with caution and consideration for potential risks and challenges. By being mindful of issues such as data privacy and security, ethical considerations, and the potential for bias, small charities can effectively leverage AI to enhance their work and better serve their communities. Ultimately, the key is to approach AI with a combination of optimism and caution, embracing its potential while remaining vigilant to its limitations.

We at Cranfield Trust produced this guide with help from AI technologies.

With thanks to the following experts for their contribution to this guide:

Daniel Hulme

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Dr Naveen Thomas

Useful Resources:

Find out more about AI and how it can be used in our webinars below:

Charitable AI – Where Do I Start and What Do I Do After That

Rethinking AI and its impact on businesses, charities and humanity.