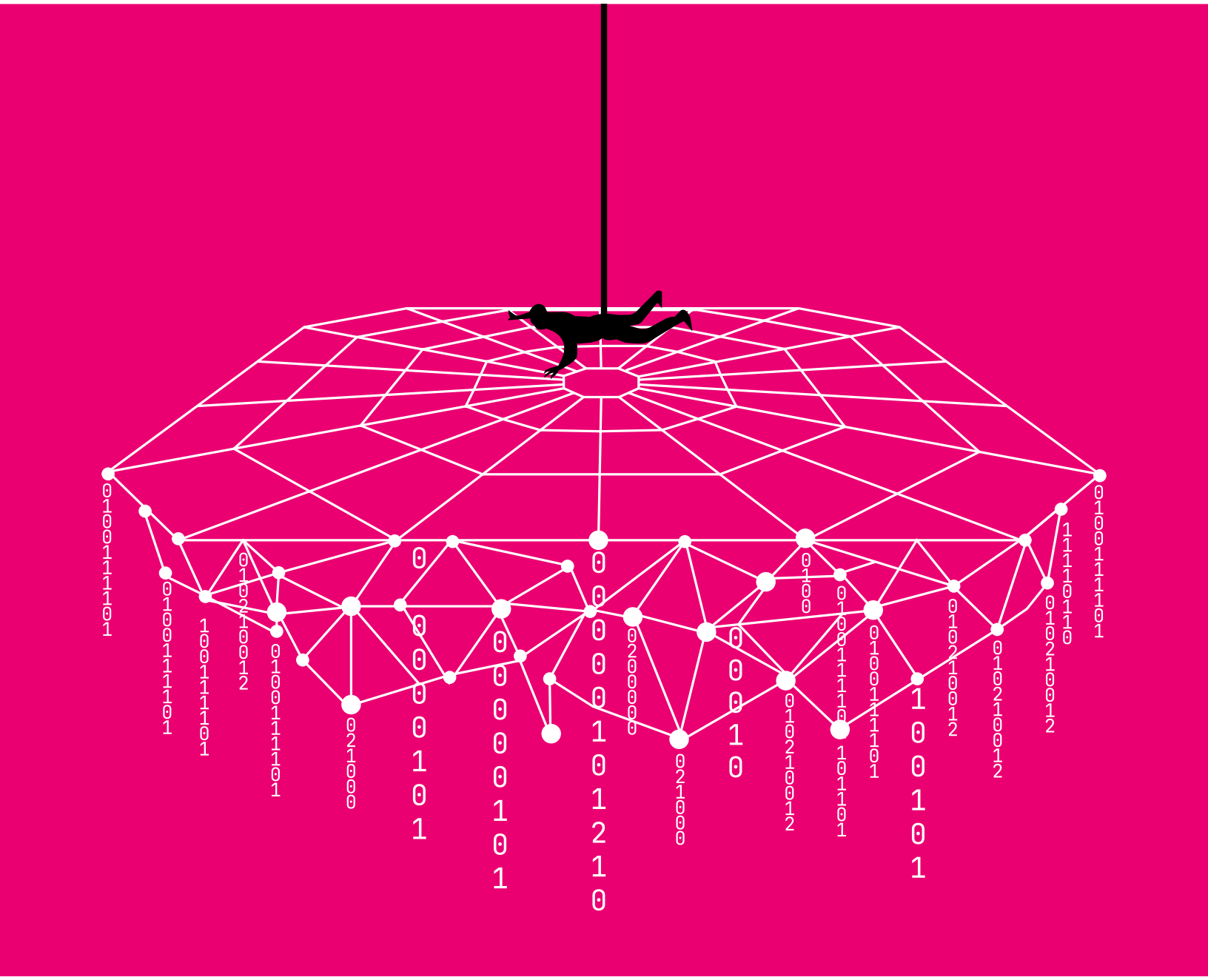
Mission AImpossible

Impact of generative AI on Canada's nonprofit sector workers

Viet Vu | September 2026



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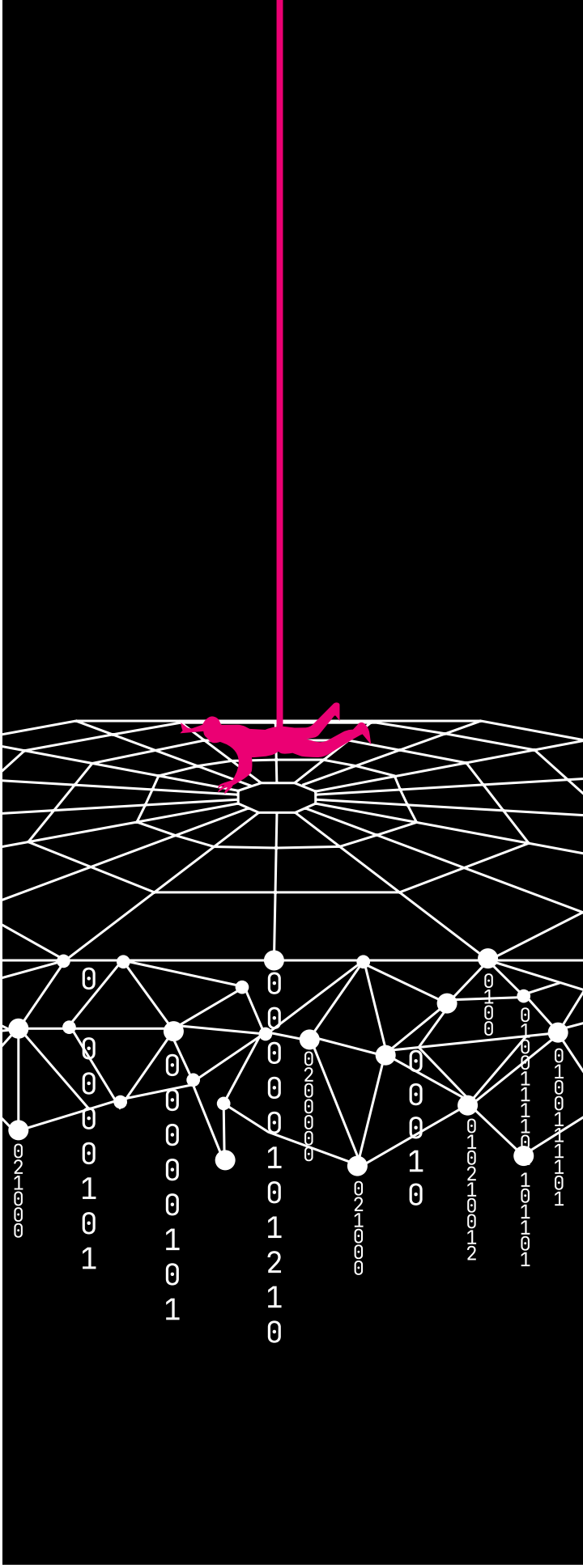

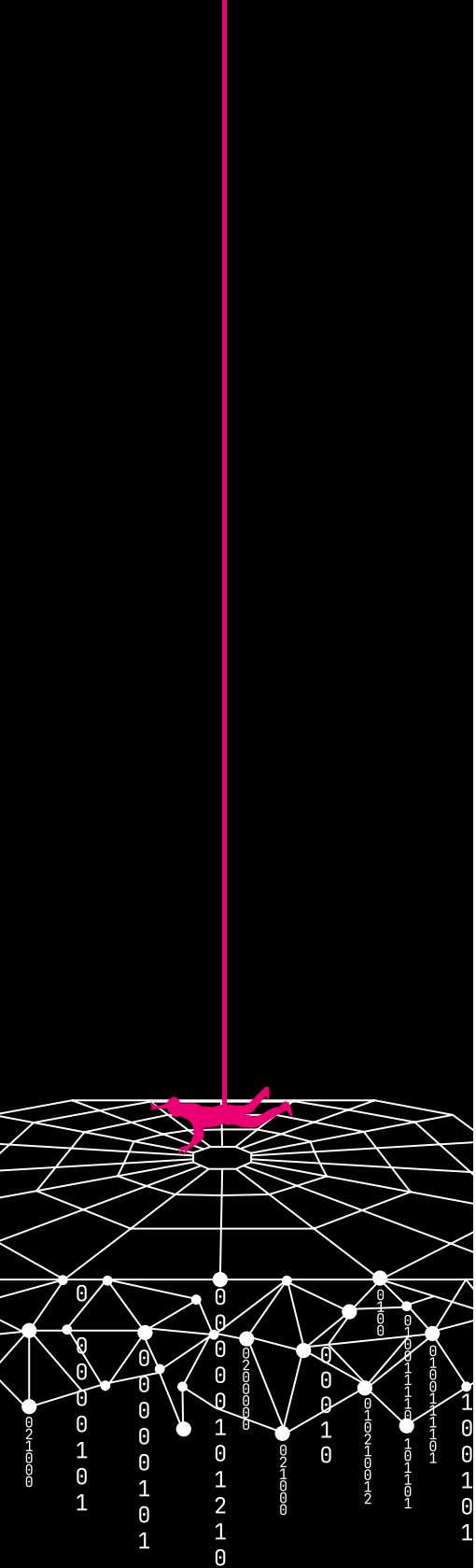

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1 Executive Summary



Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly reshaping how organizations operate and how workers perform their jobs.

While much attention has been paid to how generative AI might reshape the corporate sector, there has been less focus on the potential impacts—and benefits—the technology could have on Canada's nonprofit sector.

As the technology spreads, expectations around productivity and efficiency gains are rising in step. Nonprofits, which have long faced pressures to do more with less, are not immune from this trend. As demand grows for the critical services provided by many nonprofit organizations, and funding pipelines face growing constraints, generative AI presents both an opportunity to free up capacity and a challenge whereby nonprofits want to adopt the technology responsibly amid structural challenges preventing investment in digitization.

This report examines the impact of generative AI on the nonprofit sector. We analyze both how likely the technology is to assist or replace common tasks, and how it is already being used in practice. Using occupational exposure and complementarity analysis and survey data alongside real-world usage data from Anthropic's Claude and Microsoft Copilot, we assess where AI is most likely to affect nonprofit work and identify recommendations and use cases to support responsible adoption in the sector.

Our key findings suggest that:

- **Generative AI is more likely to complement nonprofit work than replace it:** Nearly three-quarters of the nonprofit workforce are in occupations highly exposed to generative AI, but only 38.9 per cent fall into the high-exposure, low-complementarity segment where AI is more likely to substitute for tasks rather than assist workers.

- **Current AI adoption patterns suggest unrealized opportunities for productivity gains:** The technology remains underused in some tasks that appear well-suited to generative AI, including providing basic information to clients and completing routine program reporting documentation.

- **Organizational capacity, not distrust, is the primary barrier to AI deployment:** Despite strong interest in the technology, many nonprofit organizations lack the infrastructure, funding, and skills development resources needed to support broader digital transformation.

To support responsible adoption, we recommend that nonprofit organizations:

- **Invest in digital and AI literacy:** This approach works best since most identified use cases are assistive rather than task-replacing and require workers to exercise informed human oversight.

- **Focus initial deployment on back-office tasks:** Such prioritizing will build organizational familiarity and refine responsible-use practices before expanding into core service delivery.

- **Prioritize deployment in front-line client interaction:** As AI uptake ramps up, routine program reporting, fundraising, and grant writing are areas where current use patterns suggest the clearest immediate value.

Ultimately, the evidence suggests that the nonprofit sector has the interest and complementarity to adopt generative AI technology. However, building a resilient and digitized nonprofit ecosystem requires addressing systemic barriers. Dedicated funding streams for organizational capacity building will have the greatest impact, allowing nonprofit workers, who are already adopting AI thoughtfully, to build on their momentum and responsibly scale their impact.

2 Introduction



Artificial intelligence (AI) covers a wide range of technologies: industrial robots that anchor Canada's advanced manufacturing industry, machine-learning algorithms that power the apps on our smartphones, and chatbots that many Canadians use every day. Yet when policy conversations explore how AI can boost productivity, they tend to focus on the private, for-profit sector. Fewer have asked how AI can transform the nonprofit sector.

This report explores how exposed nonprofit jobs are to generative AI, and how people in the sector are already using the technology in their work. The sector is diverse, spanning from membership organizations to health and education services, meaning that generative AI is likely to impact nonprofit jobs—and the tasks that make up those jobs—in more varied ways than it does in the private sector.

We build on an analytical approach from previous research to assess the nonprofit sector's workforce **exposure** to AI (i.e. how likely workers are to interact with AI systems day-to-day), and **complementarity** to AI (whether it's more likely to assist workers with common tasks or replace those tasks). We also examine how workers actually use generative AI tools across common tasks in the nonprofit sector, using data from Anthropic's Claude and Microsoft Copilot. Together, the analysis and usage data inform our recommendations to help nonprofit leaders understand where to safely adopt generative AI tools to support their staff and mission.

3 Sector Background



The nonprofit sector in Canada is diverse. It includes groups like community health centres, organizations that tackle both systemic and symptomatic poverty, as well as sector associations that build community and advocate for workers in specific industries or professions. These groups fill in gaps left by the government and the private sector and advocate for essential social services. The nonprofit sector employs over 700,000 workers, whose work touches many thousands more. Organizations in the sector generally aim to maximize impact while remaining financially sustainable.

The nonprofit sector is chronically under-digitalized and slow to adopt new technologies. By 2024, fewer than five per cent of nonprofit organizations had adopted generative AI—half as many as in the private sector.[1] This isn't because nonprofits lack interest; in fact, many studies have found that nonprofit leaders and employees see value in adopting and deploying digital technologies. One survey showed that 70 per cent of nonprofits believe generative AI has the potential to help them achieve their mission.[2]

However, funding constraints often require nonprofits to favour direct program spending instead of internal investment, leaving them without money to invest in the infrastructure and talent necessary to drive significant digital transformation.[3] Previous work has also found that nonprofits lack the resources and space to develop digital literacy, which would act as a catalyst for technology adoption.[4] The growing excitement among nonprofits around generative AI likely reflects them seeing the technology as a way to ease the pressure on nonprofits to deliver more with less.

Industry analysis and survey responses from RAISE, a national nonprofit AI-upskilling program, show that conversations about generative AI in the nonprofit sector tend to focus on four broad domains: improvements in service delivery, improvements in service design, use in administrative tasks, and use in facilitating the funding pipeline.

Regarding **service delivery**, a common theme is generative AI's capacity to translate between different languages, enabling organizations to provide higher-quality support for populations who don't speak English or French (such as newcomer or refugee communities).[5] Generative AI is also viewed as a way to supplement stretched service-delivery staff, helping them reach more participants than would be possible without these tools (for example, by having generative AI help workers respond to helpline inquiries).[6]

Regarding **service design**, another common point of interest for the sector is incorporating AI systems into organizations' data infrastructure, where generative AI could help administer surveys (collect data), and analyze that data directly.[7] Some RAISE survey respondents pointed to AI helping workers recall the right Excel spreadsheet functions for their data analysis workflows.[8] This application is seen as particularly promising, since many nonprofit organizations lack the funding to invest in dedicated data infrastructure.

Overwhelmingly, discourse in the nonprofit sector focuses on its applications for **administrative tasks**. RAISE learners identified use-cases such as meeting notetaking, summarizing meeting notes, and editing of internal and external communications, as well as other assistive functions in writing and editing.

Finally, generative AI technology is also viewed as having the potential to improve the **funding pipeline** for many nonprofit organizations.[9] Common use cases include helping to write and edit grant applications, particularly to satisfy organization and grant-specific requirements by "remixing" existing material. Others use generative AI to customize, refine, and personalize marketing and communications materials to different funders and donors.[10]

These common themes were corroborated in a sector survey administered by Imagine Canada and the Canadian Centre for Nonprofit Digital Resilience (CCNDR).[11] It shows that AI uses in Canadian nonprofit organizations clustered around three major use cases: in fundraising (used by more than one-third of nonprofits), in data, information, and evaluation (used by nearly 40 per cent of nonprofits), and to a lesser degree, in strategy and operations. Crucially, the report also shows that most organizations "experiment" with generative AI in communications, fundraising, or data and evaluation before integrating it into strategic or operational uses.

Sectoral AI adoption considerations

While excitement is building about the productivity benefits of generative AI, the nonprofit sector risks unintended harms unless it prioritizes thoughtful adoption. Such risks are especially pronounced for organizations working with vulnerable populations[12] (such as refugee support organizations) where the consequences of harms are higher.

Harms stemming from generative AI can be direct and indirect. Direct harms can come from using an AI system that was designed without consideration or inclusion of specific cultural information, or from AI systems worsening the welfare of those who are in distress (e.g. encouraging self-harm, or retraumatizing victims), or misleading users with hallucinated information—where the AI generates incorrect or fabricated data—(e.g. giving false hope, or referring to non-existent supports).[13]

Indirect harm involves concerns around data privacy and anonymity, such as sharing sensitive personal data with AI chatbots.[14] In the Imagine Canada/CCNDR survey, 62 per cent of nonprofits surveyed understood the reputational risks of using AI, while 60 per cent were aware of the legal, ethical, and environmental issues. More than half were also aware that AI can reinforce the very biases and inequities that the nonprofits seek to fight through their activities.[15]

The concern around the risks of AI use is compounded by the fact that many organizations have insufficient resources to develop a comprehensive digital and AI strategy. This gap is widespread, with nearly 90 per cent of Canadian charities lacking a comprehensive digital strategy.[16] Without a strategic approach to AI adoption, many nonprofit organizations lack the ability to identify necessary nontechnical investment (such as staff training) to minimize inappropriate AI use. Developing an AI adoption strategy is also difficult considering that almost half of nonprofits surveyed in the Imagine Canada/CCNDR survey identified barriers around staff knowledge, skills, and tool access as barriers for AI use (48 per cent). Another common barrier was organizational IT capacity (41 per cent).[17]

These concerns, along with the structural barriers nonprofit organizations face in training staff and deploying AI, help explain why discussions of AI's role in the sector focus disproportionately on back-office tasks rather than service delivery.



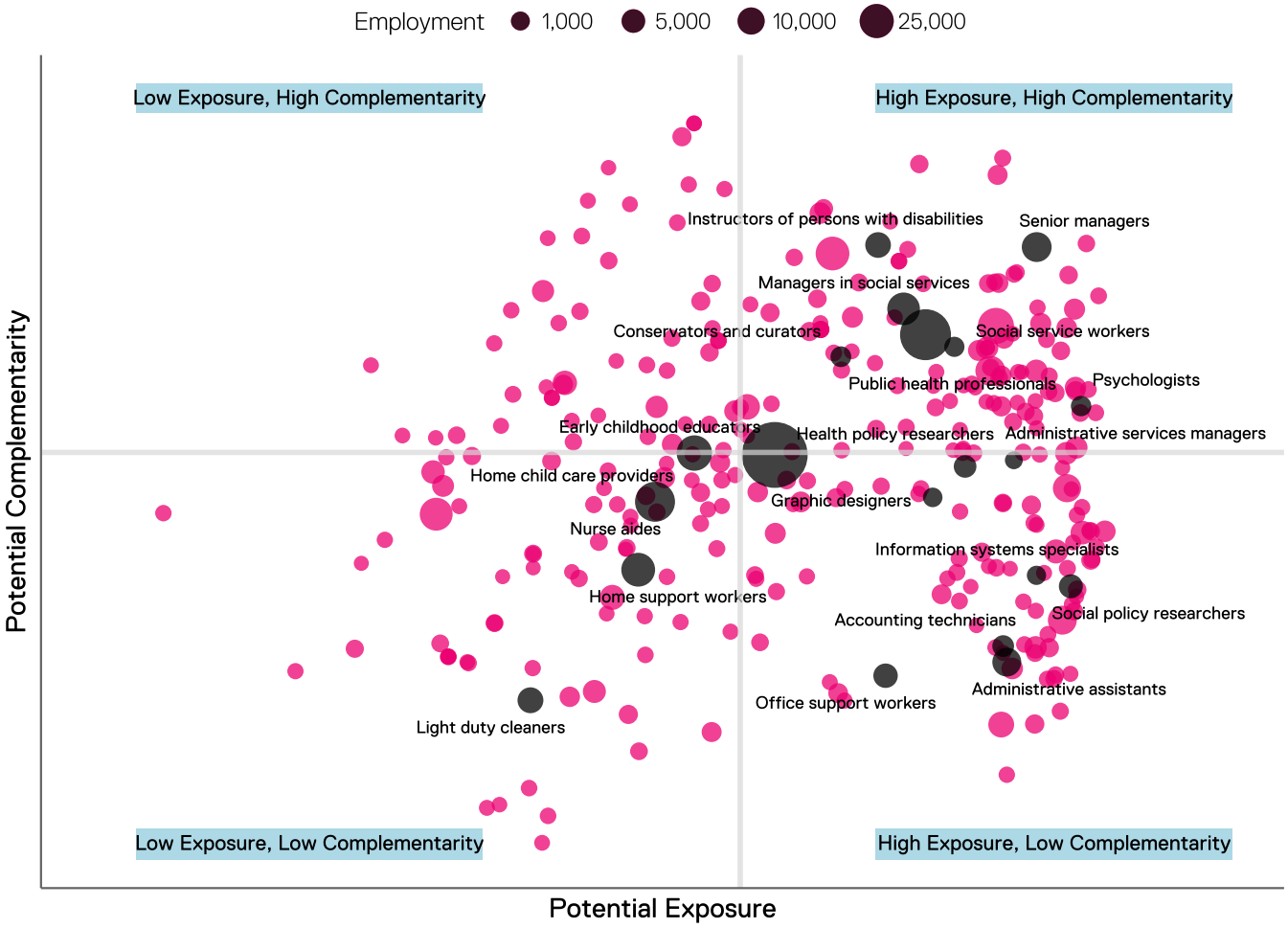
4 Nonprofit Sector Occupational and Task-Based Analysis

With the nonprofit sector-specific AI adoption context in mind, this section analyzes the AI exposure of workers in the sector and *likely* impact based on job tasks, and the task-based *actual use* of generative AI tools by nonprofit workers. This analysis informs the identification of common nonprofit use cases, and considerations for responsible AI use to support productivity-enhancing outcomes.

Previous research has examined the degree to which occupations in the Canadian economy are exposed to generative AI, and how well AI use may complement work.[18] [19] **Exposure to AI** reflects the likelihood of a worker encountering an AI system when they work, where high-exposure occupations are those most likely to interact with AI systems in daily work. **Complementarity to AI** measures the nature of a worker's interaction with AI. An occupation with high complementarity to AI means that a worker's interactions with AI are assistive, as opposed to an AI system replacing parts of their tasks.

Sectoral AI adoption considerations

Figure 1
Nonprofit Occupations by Quadrant and Employment Size



Statistics Canada 2021 census data identifies 771,640 workers in the nonprofit sector.[20] The exposure-complementarity analysis of the workforce presented in Figure 1 and Table 1 reveal that while a significant portion of the workforce (74.8 per cent) are in high-exposure occupations, only 38.9 per cent of the workforce is in the high-exposure, low-complementarity segment. Other sectors, like the financial and public sectors, have a much higher share of workers in this quadrant.

Table 1

Distribution of employment in the nonprofit sector by AI exposure and complementarity

Exposure to AI	Complementarity to AI	Number of employees	Employment share (percentage)	Employment share (percentage of the overall Canadian workforce)
High Exposure	High complementarity	276,865	36	27
	Low complementarity	300,270	39	29
Low Exposure	High complementarity	28,480	4	14
	Low complementarity	166,025	21	29

Note: percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

As reflected in Table 2, most highly-exposed workers are in education, law, and social, community and government services occupations, reflecting an important segment of the nonprofit sector's core workforce. Few health occupation workers, however, fell into the highly exposed quadrant despite health's important role in the nonprofit sector. This suggests that a sub-sector analysis could help to clarify AI's potential impact on the nonprofit labour force.

Table 2

Share of highly exposed workers, by occupational group

Broad occupational group	Example occupations	Share of highly exposed nonprofit workers in this group (%)	Share of highly exposed Canadian workers in this group (%)
Senior management	Senior managers in finance, health, trade, or construction	2.6	2.3
Business, finance and administration	Human resources professionals, administrative assistants, auditors and accountants	16.5	30.1
Natural and applied sciences	Information systems specialists, civil engineers, urban and land-use planners	2.8	13.9
Health	Registered nurses, orthopedic technologists, blood donor clinic assistants	8.2	7.3
Education, law and social, community and government services	Social workers, paralegals, policy researchers, lawyers	64.0	18.0
Art, culture, recreation and sport	Translators, editors, graphic designers and illustrators	3.4	3.6
Sales and service	Customer service managers and representatives, financial service representatives	2.2	21.0
Trades, transport, and equipment operators	Facility operation and maintenance managers, construction and transportation managers	0.3	2.7
Natural resources and agriculture	Managers in natural resources production and fishing, landscaping and grounds maintenance labourers	<0.1	0.1
Manufacturing and utilities	Utilities managers, supervisors, petroleum, gas and chemical processing	<0.1	0.8

While Table 2 compares the overall occupational distribution of highly exposed nonprofit workers against the broader Canadian workforce, Table 3 looks within the nonprofit sector to break down these highly exposed workers into the high-complementarity (assistive) and low-complementarity (substitutive) quadrants. This suggests that a sub-sector analysis could help to clarify AI's potential impact on the nonprofit labour force.

Table 3

Occupational distribution within the high-exposure quadrants for the nonprofit sector

Broad occupational group	Example occupations	High exposure, High complementarity (percentage)	High exposure, Low complementarity (percentage)
Senior management	Senior managers in finance, health, trade, or construction	5.4	<0.1
Business, finance and administration	Human resources professionals, administrative assistants, auditors and accountants	5.4	26.7
Natural and applied sciences	Information systems specialists, civil engineers, urban and land-use planners	3.0	2.5
Health	Registered nurses, orthopedic technologists, blood donor clinic assistants	13.9	2.9
Education, law and social, community and government services	Social workers, paralegals, policy researchers, lawyers	64.5	63.5
Art, culture, recreation and sport	Translators, editors, graphic designers and illustrators	5.7	1.2
Sales and service	Customer service managers and representatives, financial service representatives	1.3	3.1
Trades, transport, and equipment operators	Facility operation and maintenance managers, construction and transportation managers	0.7	<0.1

Our previous report, *Banking on AI: Generative AI Adoption in Canada's Financial Sector*, introduced a task-level framework to connect broad occupational AI exposure to real-world usage data. By analyzing the specific tasks within common nonprofit sector roles and measuring their error consequence, nonprofit leaders can move beyond generalities. This analysis helps map where generative AI can be safely adopted to boost organizational capacity, and where human oversight must be maintained to protect against automated mistakes.

AI task exposure analysis

Reproduced from a previous Dais study, "Banking on AI: Generative AI Adoption in Canada's Financial Sector."

Occupational exposure analysis focuses on broad patterns in potential AI exposure. However, it provides little insight into where AI could be applied, or how such exposure maps to actual task-level AI uses, which often provide more insights into identifying high potential areas to deploy generative AI. To supplement our occupational analysis then, we introduce a new analytical method and a conceptual framework that links automation exposure to actual generative AI uses.

One factor that has often been overlooked when it comes to task exposure to automation is the consideration of quality differentials between tasks performed by humans as compared to tasks performed by machines, and how relevant those quality differentials are in the decision to automate a task. Some tasks, for example, may have large quality differentials between work performed by AI and humans, but may be used in instances where those quality differentials matter less (e.g. route navigation for taxis where different routing only impacts the time it takes to reach their destination). Other tasks, despite having low-quality differential between AI doing that work and humans doing that work, those small quality differences can have drastic consequences (e.g. prescribing and dispensing medication where getting exact amount and medication is essential).

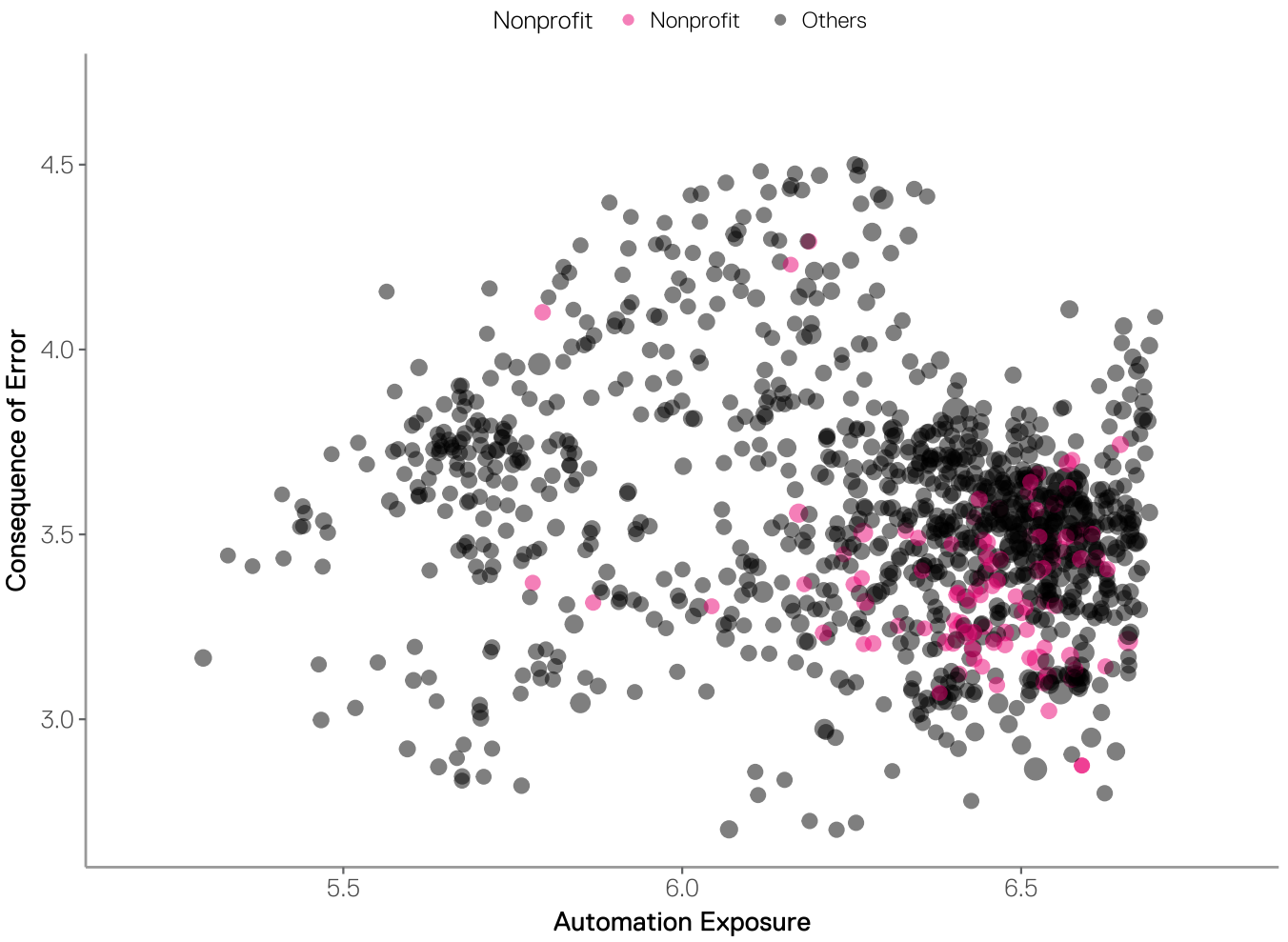
To improve our ability to provide linkages between automation exposure and real AI use, we introduce a measure on the suitability for tasks to be performed by AI: we distinguish between different automation suitability of each task by understanding the relative size of the consequence of errors, or providing lower quality goods in performing work tasks. We broadly call this a task's ***error consequence*** and rank work tasks (using the Detailed Work Activities, or DWA construct in O*Net, a US-based occupational taxonomy) on tasks that have the highest consequence of making errors, to tasks that have the lowest consequence of making errors.

We then use data on **actual AI use**, taken from those that cover use in Microsoft Copilot[21], and Anthropic's Claude[22] by all users of the tool. The use is grouped at different levels, with Claude's use being more granular at the DWA level, while Copilot's use being at Intermediate Work Activities (IWA), which is one level higher than DWAs.

We then calculate these concepts for tasks associated with **core occupations** in finance: we define core occupations to be occupations that relate to the core output within the sector. For the finance industry, this includes workers such as accountants and financial analysts, but excludes occupations in human resources and administrative departments. This focus allows us to discuss AI uses for core business needs, as opposed to ancillary uses of the technology within the sector.

Taken together, this analysis allows us to better understand how well automation exposure maps to the suitability of automating technology in performing tasks, to actual AI use, where such insights will allow better strategic decisions about where to deploy AI to be made. In a forthcoming paper, we specifically focused on analyzing the validity of this analytical frame as a way to understand the variation in AI adoption across the task and occupational space.

Figure 2
Task Specific Automation Exposure and Error Tolerance, Nonprofit Sector



In this report, we apply the same analysis of error as we did in the previously released *Banking on AI: Generative AI Adoption in Canada's Financial Sector*. Figure 2 maps all tasks at the DWA level along two measures: automation exposure and consequence of error (how suitable each task is for AI to complete). Tasks in the lower-right quadrant, which have the highest automation exposure and the lowest consequence of error, are the most compatible with AI. Tasks in the upper-left quadrant, which have the lowest automation exposure and highest consequence of error, are tasks that are the least suitable for AI to perform.

The tasks with the highest AI use align with what learners in the RAISE program reported using generative AI for in their work. These include common administrative tasks such as editing documents, conducting research, summarizing and explaining policies, and developing promotional materials. Nonprofit workers also use AI for tasks that are tied more directly to program delivery, such as teaching life skills to clients.

Table 4

Top 5 and bottom 5 DWAs by real generative AI uses (across all users, not just nonprofit)

	Detailed Work Activity (DWA) description
Top tasks	Edit documents
	Conduct research on social issues
	Teach life skills or strategies to clients or their families
	Develop promotional materials
	Explain regulations, policies, or procedures
Bottom tasks	Confer with family members to discuss client treatment plans or progress
	Develop health assessment method or programs
	Monitor performance of organizational members or partners
	Provide basic healthcare services
	Assist clients in handling details of daily life

However, a broader review of tasks within core nonprofit sector occupations reveals low use in tasks that seem well-suited to be performed by generative AI. For example, use appears low for "providing basic information to guests, visitors, or clients", although similar tasks have been a target for AI deployment in other sectors of the economy.

Similarly, relatively middling uses are seen in tasks with high exposure and low consequence for error, such as "complete documentation required by programs or regulations"—a task associated with routine reporting and information synthesis that current generative AI technology is well positioned to assist workers in the sector in. This analysis suggests that, with the right investments in literacy and deployment, generative AI technology could empower nonprofit workers instead of risking alienation of these workers through partial automation of their jobs.

Table 5

Illustrative tasks in core nonprofit occupations by automation exposure, error consequence and current AI use

Detailed Work Activities (DWA)	Occupational context[23]	Automation exposure (percentile) - higher means more exposed	Error consequence (percentile) - higher means worse consequences	Current Claude use (percentile) - higher means more usage
Conduct research on social issues	Policy analyst	89	13	97
Develop promotional materials	Marketing analyst	87	61	96
Interview clients to gather information about their backgrounds, needs, or progress	Program officer	47	24	28
Provide basic information to guests, visitors, or clients	Receptionist	44	44	11
Complete documentation required by programs or regulations	Project lead	73	26	47
Maintain professional social services knowledge	Social worker	76	3	7



5 Nonprofit Sector AI Deployment Recommendations

Compared to other sectors, such as the creative sector, generative AI does not pose an existential challenge that strikes at the core of the nonprofit sector's activities. Instead, generative AI, if introduced responsibly, may greatly help the sector to scale impact and reduce the burden placed on staff.

However, the challenges that the nonprofit sector faces with generative AI technology are mirrored in the challenges the sector faces with digital technology as a whole. As a result, for nonprofit organizations to take full advantage of generative AI, they must be in the position to invest in skills development and infrastructure to allow them to capitalize on digital technologies more broadly. With this in mind, we offer the following recommendations, use-cases and deployment priorities for the sector:

- **Invest in digital literacy and AI literacy:** Many use-cases identified in this report are assistive rather than task-replacing. In assistive uses, workers need a sufficient level of AI literacy to use the technology effectively and provide appropriate level of human supervision.

- **Focus initial deployment on back-office tasks to build familiarity before expanding into core operational areas:** As the sector invests in digital and AI literacy, we recommend continuing the current momentum of AI deployment in back-office support tasks. This allows organizations to complement formal training with "learning-by-doing", refine internal processes around responsible deployment of AI, and encourage a culture of experimentation.

- **Prioritize deployment in first-line client interaction, routine program reporting, and fundraising and grant writing:** These priority areas consider current use patterns as well as adoption trends in other sectors. Examples include:

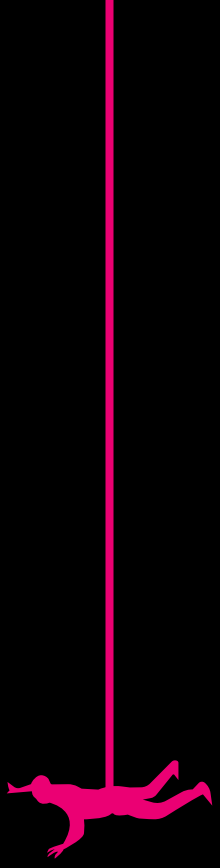
    - ***First-line client interaction:*** An intake officer could use AI chatbots to draft responses, sent only with human approval, potentially allowing the intake officer to support multiple clients at once and reduce wait times.

    - ***Routine program reporting:*** A program officer could use generative AI to summarize activities for routine project reporting required by funders, freeing capacity for program delivery.

    - ***Fundraising and grant writing:*** A grant writer could adapt an existing project or funding proposal for a related but slightly different program goal, allowing them to tailor pitches to multiple funders.

A key barrier for nonprofits is not a lack of trust or unwillingness to adopt digital technology, but systemic barriers preventing them from investing in technological transformation. Funding bodies, including granting bodies and public bodies, should create dedicated funding streams that allow nonprofit organizations to invest in the core organizational capacity that supports responsible AI adoption.

6 Conclusion



In Canada's current economic climate, many nonprofit organizations have been under pressure to do more with less to make up for gaps created by dwindling public funding and decreased personal giving. Many organizations have had to find ways to improve operational efficiency without sacrificing the service standards that people rely on. As a result, many organizations have started to adopt AI to help alleviate these pressures.

When we examine AI use in the nonprofit sector, along with the sector's potential exposure to the technology, a picture emerges of a sector that is experimenting with AI despite systemic constraints that limit the technology's potential. We find that, compared to many other sectors, generative AI has a much higher potential to complement nonprofit work as opposed to replacing it.

The evidence suggests that current nonprofit AI adoption patterns align well to a responsible adoption framework. We believe that actions to address systemic barriers, including dedicated funding streams for organizational capacity building, are likely to have the greatest impact on expanding AI adoption in the sector. Addressing these barriers would let nonprofit workers—who are already adopting AI thoughtfully—build on that progress, and contribute to a resilient nonprofit ecosystem that is vital to the Canadian economy.

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