

180DC FRANKFURT IMPACT PAPER

Pole Position for Impact

A Blueprint for Sustainable, Scalable and Mission-Driven Target
Operating Models in the Social Sector



21

Social organisations surveyed

5

Operating dimensions analysed

1

Target Operating Model: the
Impact Racer

**180 Degrees Consulting
Frankfurt e. V.**

Author



CONTENTS

1	Introduction	5
2	Target Operating Models in the Social Sector	5
3	Lighthouse Showcase	6
4	Methodology	7
5	Study Results	8
6	The Impact Racer	13
7	Discussion	17
8	Conclusion	18
	Sources	19
	Appendix: Survey Instrument	20

AT A GLANCE

Rich in purpose, fragile underneath: the levers with the biggest effect on robustness cost little money. See page 3.

ABSTRACT

Lasting impact depends on the foundations that carry a mission

Social organizations face growing pressure to generate measurable impact while operating under financial and human resource constraints. This study explores how resilient and scalable operating models can be developed in this environment, drawing on survey data from 21 social organizations.

The findings reveal a sector with strong mission clarity and external visibility but persistent internal structural fragilities, including financial dependency on single funding sources, reliance on volunteers and key individuals, limited outcome-based impact measurement, and insufficiently formalized processes. Importantly, organizational robustness is not solely a function of budget size. High-leverage practices such as systematic volunteer recognition, lean impact tracking, funding diversification, and clear process documentation can substantially strengthen operational capacity without requiring major investment.

Building on these insights, the paper develops a practice-oriented Target Operating Model tailored to the realities of social organizations, identifying concrete structural priorities that enhance resilience and enable sustainable scaling. Ultimately, lasting social impact depends not only on mission strength but on the operational foundations that allow organizations to endure and grow.

ABOUT 180 DEGREES CONSULTING FRANKFURT

180 Degrees Consulting Frankfurt is a student-led, pro bono consulting organization with a mission to empower non-profits and social enterprises to achieve their full potential. We are dedicated to providing affordable and high-quality strategic and operational assistance that enables our clients to create meaningful impact in their communities.

As an integral part of the world’s largest student-led consultancy, our branch operates within a vast global network that has expanded to over 180 branches across 35 countries.

AT A GLANCE

Rich in purpose, fragile underneath

Social organisations know exactly why they exist and are visible to the outside world. What holds them back is the structure behind it: funding that hangs on one source, work that hangs on single people, and processes nobody wrote down. The good news: robustness is not only a question of budget.

21

Social organisations surveyed, mainly in the DACH region

67%

Operate on less than €50,000 a year

24%

Collect no systematic impact data

3.24

Average maturity score across all dimensions (1 to 5)

Six key findings

- 1 The mission is clear, the measurement is not.** 81% have a written mission, yet 24% collect no systematic impact data and 76% count only outputs.
- 2 Work depends on single people.** Only 29% say project work continues smoothly when key personnel are absent.
- 3 One funder can end it all.** A third of the organisations get more than 80% of their budget from a single source.
- 4 Polished outside, analogue inside.** 95% have a website, but only 14% use a CRM and 19% have digital admin workflows.
- 5 Recognition drives recruitment.** Organisations that systematically recognise volunteers find it far easier to recruit new ones.
- 6 Frequency beats sophistication.** Measuring impact often matters more than measuring it elaborately: it is what makes the data useful for decisions.

FIVE LEVERS, ONE CAR

The Tires	Recognise volunteers before recruiting new ones
The Cockpit	Track three to five outcome indicators every quarter
The Fuel	Bring any single funding source below 50%
The Engine	Document processes before buying software
The Branding	Base communication on verified outcome data



OUR WORK

Two active consulting engagements

To illustrate our approach, we present two active consulting engagements with social organizations. 180 Degrees Consulting Frankfurt is optimizing operational structures and helping with go-to-market strategies by identifying diverse challenges and potentials within different organizational dimensions.

Health & education · East Africa

Strengthening targeted women's health and education programs in East Africa

The client is a Germany-based non-profit organization focused on improving health and educational opportunities for girls and women in East Africa. It operates as a lean, volunteer-driven vehicle that channels financial and in-kind contributions from Europe into locally anchored programs, with a particular emphasis on disadvantaged rural and peri-urban communities. Its mission is to close critical gaps in access to basic gynecological care, reproductive health information, and school participation, thereby addressing structural inequalities in health outcomes and life chances.

180 Degrees Consulting Frankfurt supports the organization in developing a professionalized impact and strategy framework: establishing robust monitoring and evaluation systems to quantify program outcomes, formalizing partnership governance with local and European stakeholders, and developing targeted fundraising strategies including institutional grant applications and corporate engagement models. Working closely with the leadership team, we analyze existing operations, impact data, and funding streams while stress-testing strategic priorities to create a replicable blueprint for community-based women's health interventions.

EdTech · Germany

Refining the go-to-market strategy for an EdTech startup

Our client is an early-stage educational technology startup that develops an innovative learning product to support language acquisition for children through interactive, play-based engagement. The founders aim to enter the German market with a solution that combines user-friendly design with clear educational value.

180 Degrees Consulting Frankfurt is actively guiding the startup through a comprehensive market entry optimization. We are reviewing, strengthening, and stress-testing the planned market entry strategy and underlying business model. Our consulting focuses on three critical areas: positioning the product against existing international solutions, designing a structured go-to-market approach specifically for Germany, and defining a pricing model that balances families' willingness to pay with sustainable growth. Working in close partnership with the founders, we analyze their pitch materials, market-entry roadmap, and initial marketing concepts, while systematically challenging key assumptions on competition, pricing, and overall commercial logic to ensure a robust, viable strategy.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Social organizations and non-profits are increasingly expected to deliver demonstrable impact, expand their reach, and operate with a high degree of professionalism. At the same time, they often face volatile funding structures, tight personnel resources, and underdeveloped digital processes. Many organizations cope with these pressures through exceptional individual commitment and ad hoc solutions, which can keep operations running but frequently result in structural overload, inefficiencies, and limited scalability.

In this environment, the question of how to design a robust operating model for social organizations becomes central. In practice, however, such an operating model is often not explicitly defined. Existing

Target Operating Model (TOM) frameworks have largely been developed in corporate contexts and typically assume levels of standardization and resources that many social organizations do not possess. As a result, leaders in the field lack a practical playbook that translates TOM thinking into actionable guidance suited to their realities.

This Impact Paper aims to address this gap by developing an adaptable, practice-oriented TOM blueprint for social organizations, based on real-world best practices and broader field evidence. It is targeted at practitioners and stakeholders in the sector and seeks to provide concrete orientation on how to connect governance, finance, people, digitalization, and impact measurement into a coherent operating model.

CHAPTER 2

Target Operating Models in the Social Sector

A comprehensive Target Operating Model represents an integrated framework through which an organization aligns its mission, resources, and operational capabilities into a coherent system (Horváth, n.d.). While various pillar-based frameworks exist, some organizing around four pillars, others around five, six, or seven, the fundamental principle remains constant: a robust TOM establishes coherence across all critical operational dimensions rather than optimizing isolated functions.

The specific pillars selected, their naming, and their relative emphasis should reflect organizational context. Different organizations require different pillar architectures based on their mission model, resource constraints, workforce composition, and operating environment. An organization dependent on volunteer labor emphasizes different pillars than one with permanent professional staff. A social organization navigates different realities than a commercial enterprise. The most effective Target Operating Models

customize pillar frameworks to organizational specifics rather than applying generic templates.

Within each pillar, organizations establish clear goals and targets aligned with strategic priorities. These measurable objectives provide the foundation for implementation, performance tracking, and continuous improvement. The interdependencies between pillars mean that progress in one area creates enabling conditions for progress in others, but only when pillars are intentionally designed to reinforce one another rather than operate independently.

This multidimensional, customized approach distinguishes a robust TOM from isolated improvements. Rather than applying standardized templates or optimizing single functions independently, a comprehensive TOM ensures coherence across all operational dimensions tailored to organizational context, preventing misalignment when organizations implement changes in one area without corresponding alignment in interdependent dimensions.

CHAPTER 3

Lighthouse Showcase: Profiles of Impact & Scalability

Before identifying the key challenges social organizations are facing, we examine four emerging non-profits, as their story may have exciting implications for non-profits. We identified these Lighthouse Organizations as best-practice references across diverse sectors, highlighting them as exemplary growth models without invasive data extraction. These organizations demonstrate how social initiatives successfully scale while maintaining diverse operational footprints, proving sustainable growth is achievable across verticals. The following profiles provide a practical reference for our Target Operating Model concept.

3.1 · Education · Mentoring

Legmon e.V.: empowering first-generation students through mentorship and community

Legmon e.V., founded by Michael Linke, provides complimentary mentoring and educational support to disadvantaged young people, particularly first-generation students pursuing higher education and professional development. The organization pairs mentees with volunteer mentors from comparable backgrounds, delivering one-on-one guidance coupled with structured programming, expert-led webinars, regional networking forums across major German cities, intensive seminars, and corporate site visits.

Since its inception, Legmon has established a substantial community of engaged mentors and mentees, with research on comparable mentoring interventions demonstrating enhanced labor market outcomes and academic performance for disadvantaged cohorts. Through expansion via digital channels and strategic partnerships, Legmon pursues nationwide scale while positioning itself as a credible, scalable model for establishing equitable access in German education and employment pathways.

3.2 · Cleantech · Environment

Everwave: turning plastic waste into measurable impact

Everwave is a German cleantech social enterprise that removes plastic waste from rivers before it reaches the oceans, combining cleanup technology with a Plastic Credit model that enables companies to finance measurable environmental impact. Using collection boats, floating barriers, and local cleanup teams, supported by sorting infrastructure and zero-waste centers, Everwave routes the material to recycling and processing facilities, preventing it from ending up in landfills.

Since 2018, Everwave has extracted several million kilograms of waste from rivers and other waterways, with more than 2.3 million kilograms documented in recent impact reporting and over 150 partner companies supporting projects in Europe and Asia. By linking 1 euro to 1 kilogram of removed waste through transparent, trackable Plastic Credits, Everwave offers organizations a practical, scalable mechanism to reduce their plastic footprint and protect marine ecosystems at the source.

3.3 · Social entrepreneurship

Enactus Germany: mobilizing students for entrepreneurial impact worldwide

Enactus Germany is part of a global student-led network for social entrepreneurship, uniting around 1,700 students at 30 universities in more than 100 active projects with measurable social and environmental impact. The organization empowers interdisciplinary teams to develop ventures that contribute to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, supported by universities and corporate partners within an international non-profit framework.

Globally, over 42,000 students at more than 1,000 universities in over 30 countries work with around 550 companies, having already reduced millions of tons of CO₂ and waste and contributed to the creation of over 100,000 jobs through Enactus projects. Through its competition format culminating in national championships and the Enactus World Cup, the network systematically highlights and scales the most effective impact ventures.

3.4 · Mental health · Digital

krisenchat: scalable digital youth crisis support

krisenchat is a Germany-based, low-threshold digital counseling service that offers 24/7 messenger-based psychosocial support to children, adolescents, and young adults in acute crises. It provides anonymous access via common messaging apps, where trained volunteers and mental health professionals deliver immediate emotional support, crisis stabilization, and, where appropriate, guidance toward further help services or trusted adults.

Many chats lead to concrete referrals to psychotherapists, school psychologists, social services, or family members, fostering more sustainable help-seeking behavior. Through partnerships with corporate and public stakeholders as well as collaborations with research institutions, krisenchat strengthens its financial resilience and builds an evidence base that positions it as a reference model for scalable, technology-enabled early intervention.

CHAPTER 4

Methodology

A quantitative, practice-oriented research design based on a standardized online survey. The objective is to capture the operational status quo of social organizations and to identify structural patterns across core dimensions of organizational management.

N = 21

Organisations of different sizes, fields and maturity levels

6

Thematic survey sections, from governance to technology

6–12 min

Anonymous questionnaire in German and English

Spearman

Rank correlations, read as indicative patterns

Data were collected between December 15, 2025 and January 15, 2026 from N = 21 social organizations, reflecting a heterogeneous mix of organizational sizes, thematic fields, and maturity levels. The sample includes both smaller, resource-constrained organizations as well as larger, more established entities, allowing for comparative insights across different organizational contexts.

4.1 Survey design and instrument development

The survey instrument was developed through a structured, multi-step process. Questionnaire items were derived from (1) extensive desk research on best practices and recurring challenges in the social sector, (2) existing frameworks on operating models and organizational development in non-profit contexts, and (3) insights from the lighthouse analysis of scalable social organizations. Based on this foundation, the questionnaire was structured along six thematically distinct sections: organizational profile, governance & strategic leadership, HR & volunteer management,

4.3 Question types and analytical approach

The questionnaire combined multiple question formats to balance comparability and depth. Closed questions included five-point Likert-scale items (ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”) as well as single- and multiple-choice questions capturing structural and organizational characteristics. In addition, selected open-ended questions were used to qualitatively complement the quantitative findings by capturing individual perceptions of challenges and organizational needs.

financial management & fundraising, marketing & communication, and processes & technologies, complemented by open concluding questions on perceived challenges and support needs. To facilitate broader participation, the survey was provided in both German and English.

4.2 Sample and data collection

The target group consisted of decision-makers or operationally responsible individuals within social organizations. Recruitment was conducted via targeted online research, direct email outreach, personal networks, and professional platforms such as LinkedIn, with a primary geographic focus on the DACH region and selected international organizations. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The survey was administered via Microsoft Forms. Respondents were given the option to provide an email address solely for the purpose of receiving the study results, processed separately from survey responses.

Data analysis proceeded in two stages. First, descriptive statistical analyses were conducted, including frequency distributions and mean values, with Likert-scale items aggregated by thematic operating dimension to assess overall tendencies. Second, exploratory correlation analyses were performed to identify structural relationships between key variables. Given the ordinal scale level and the limited sample size, Spearman rank correlations were applied where appropriate. The results are interpreted as indicative patterns rather than causal relationships.

CHAPTER 5

Study Results: Status Quo of Social Organizations

This chapter presents the empirical findings: common patterns, bottlenecks, and capabilities across the core dimensions of organizational management. The results in 5.1 are purely descriptive; correlations follow in 5.2.

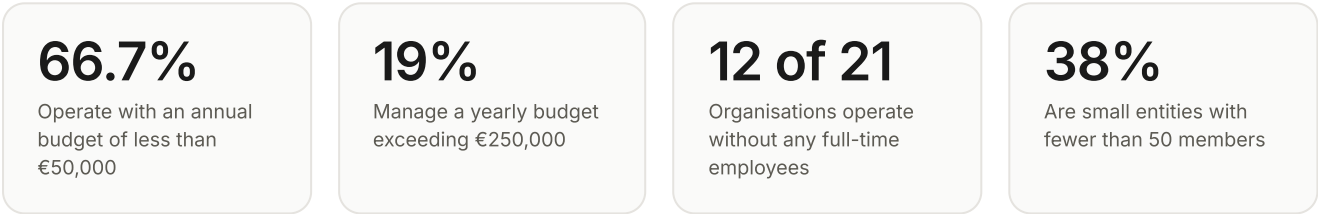
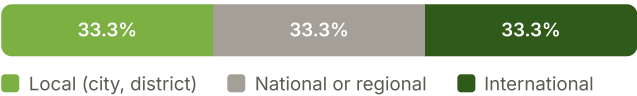
5.1.1 Demographics

A heterogeneous landscape, characterized by a split between early-stage initiatives and established entities, operating primarily under tight resource constraints.

AGE Years in operation



SCOPE Geographic focus



The remaining 62% maintain a medium-to-large membership base. Only one organization with a dominating ratio of full-time employees participated in this study. Thematically, the organizations primarily focus on social inclusion & poverty alleviation, followed by education and human rights & democracy. This reflects a strong alignment with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals of 'No Poverty' and 'Quality Education'.

5.1.2 · GOVERNANCE AND STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

Direction is well defined, the instruments to track it are not

81%

Have a written mission or vision that is actively communicated

24%

Collect no systematic impact data at all

76.2%

Rely on counting outputs, such as participant numbers

23.8%

Use indicators capable of measuring outcomes

The findings indicate that strategic direction is generally well defined. A majority (81%) of the organizations have a written statement or vision that is actively communicated or documented internally. Only a small fraction (14.3%) relies on implicit or oral transmission of their purpose. This suggests that despite resource constraints, these organizations maintain a clear sense of purpose and strategic intent.

However, the mechanisms for tracking strategic progress are often underdeveloped. The survey reveals a significant gap in impact measuring practices. Nearly a quarter of the organizations (24%) collect no systematic impact data at all. For those that do, the

focus is predominantly on output metrics, which satisfy reporting requirements but do not necessarily indicate social impact. Only 23.8% utilize indicators capable of measuring outcomes (changes in knowledge, behavior, or life situation).

Furthermore, the frequency of data collection is often insufficient for agile decision making. While 47.6% of organizations assess their impact monthly or quarterly, a significant portion of 28.6% measure rarely or never. Out of the 15 organizations measuring impact, 10 report utilizing their impact data strongly for strategic planning, such as resource allocation or project prioritization.

5.1.3 · HUMAN RESOURCES AND VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT

Skilled teams, but no redundancy

71.4%

Say their team has the skills it needs

43%

Struggle to find sufficient volunteers

61.9%

Claim to offer systematic appreciation

28.6%

Continue smoothly when key personnel are absent

The vast majority of organizations are classified as volunteer-driven. This reliance on volunteering shapes the operational reality of the sector. The professional competence of the volunteers is rated highly, with 71.4% of respondents agreeing that their team possesses the necessary skills to fulfill their tasks. However, maintaining this workforce is a challenge. Recruitment is cited as a major difficulty; nearly 43% of organizations report struggles in finding sufficient volunteers. While workload is generally perceived as sustainable (71.4% agreement), there is a significant

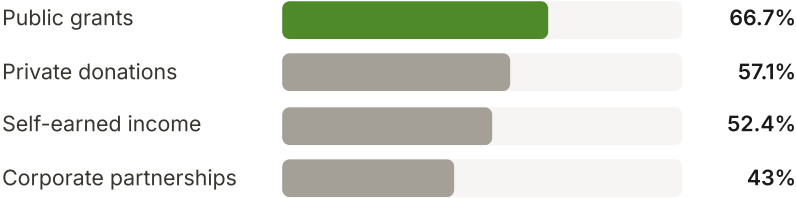
discrepancy regarding recognition: 61.9% claim to offer systematic appreciation; a notable minority feels this area is lacking.

A critical structural vulnerability identified in the study is the lack of redundancy in personnel. The dependency on key individuals is alarmingly high. Only 28.6% of respondents agreed that their project work continues smoothly if key personnel are absent. For the majority, the loss of a single central figure threatens to disrupt operations significantly. This indicates a heavy reliance on individuals rather than structural capabilities.

5.1.4 · FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT AND FUNDRAISING

The mix looks diversified, the volumes are not

FUNDING Sources used, share of organisations



Multiple answers possible. Corporate partnerships as reported in chapter 6.2.3.

The survey indicates a hybrid funding strategy across the sector. Most organizations utilize a mix of three primary sources: public grants, private donations, and self-earned income. This suggests a baseline level of diversification for most organizations.

61.9% of organizations state that their fundraising efforts are strategically focused on building long-term relationships with partners. However, this correlates to budget size: smaller organizations are more likely to operate within a short-term framework rather than securing long-term funding agreements.

MONO-DEPENDENCY

33.3%

get more than 80% of their total budget from one single source.

Despite the apparent mix of sources, an analysis of volume distribution reveals significant dependency risks. This creates a fragile financial structure where the loss of one source of income could jeopardize the organizations' existence.

5.1.5 · PROCESSES AND TECHNOLOGIES

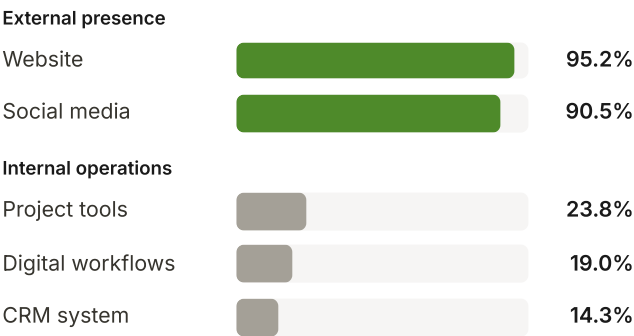
Sound basics, few digital tools

The basic operational processes are relatively sound. Despite limited resources, 66.7% of organizations report that their key workflows are clearly documented, and 76.2% state that critical information is easily accessible.

The results indicate a substantial absence of implementation regarding internal digital tools. Only 23.8% utilize specialized project management tools (e.g. Trello, Asana). The vast majority rely on manual methods, such as central Excel lists (38.1%) or informal email and verbal communication (38.1%). The management of stakeholder data is inefficient: nearly half of the sample (47.6%) uses decentralized, individual address books or unsynchronized Excel sheets. Only 14.3%, exclusively those with higher budgets, have installed a professional CRM system. A third of the organizations still rely on paper-based administration, especially those with an annual budget smaller than €50,000.

Interestingly, there is an emerging awareness of artificial intelligence. While deep integration is rare, 61.9% report sporadic use of AI tools (e.g. ChatGPT, DeepL), suggesting a readiness to adopt new technologies if they are accessible and relevant.

DIGITAL DIVIDE Polished outside, analogue inside



Share of the 21 organisations.

5.1.6 · MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS

The strongest dimension is the one facing outward

In contrast to the internal operational infrastructure, the external presence of the organizations is highly digitalized. They have successfully adopted digital channels, with 95.2% maintaining a website and 90.5% active on social media. This indicates that the external face of the sector is modern and accessible, in contrast to often manual or analog processes operating in the background. Furthermore, the understanding of the target group is generally strong: approximately 62% of organizations claim a detailed understanding of their stakeholder needs.

62%

Claim a detailed understanding of their stakeholders' needs

5.2 · STRUCTURAL CORRELATIONS

What drives what

Building on the descriptive analysis, these statistical relationships uncover the systematic mechanisms driving the challenges observed. With 21 organisations they are indicative patterns, not proof of cause and effect.

$\rho = 0.72$ $p < 0.05$

5.2.1 The volunteer engagement cycle

A strong positive correlation was observed between the systematic recognition of volunteers and the ease of recruitment. Organizations that established structured appreciation and training mechanisms reported significantly fewer difficulties in attracting new personnel. Recruitment struggles in the social sector are not merely a function of external labor market conditions but are significantly influenced by the internal culture.

$\rho = 0.83$ $p < 0.001$ · strongest correlation

5.2.2 Impact measurement as a steering mechanism

The frequency of impact measurement is linked to the strategic utilization of data. Organizations measuring impact on a monthly or quarterly basis demonstrated a high capacity to use this data for funding planning, project prioritization, and resource allocation. Conversely, organizations measuring annually or on an ad-hoc basis showed negligible strategic integration.

$\rho = 0.49 \cdot 0.73$ $p < 0.05 \cdot p < 0.001$

5.2.3 The resource-professionalization gap

Financial volume is the primary predictor of professional infrastructure. Annual budget correlates with an overall professionalization index integrating staffing structure, CRM usage and administrative automation ($\rho = 0.49$), and most strongly with the capacity to employ paid staff ($\rho = 0.73$). Organizations below the €50,000 threshold are often systematically excluded from this professional infrastructure.

$\rho = -0.58 \cdot -0.64$ $p < 0.05$

5.2.4 The mono-dependency trap

Organizations dependent on a single funding source for more than 80% of their budget showed significantly lower scores in strategic fundraising ($\rho = -0.58$) and stakeholder knowledge ($\rho = -0.64$). High dependency forces organizations into a reactive mode, consuming the management capacity required for diversification strategies and relationship building.

$\rho = 0.85$ $p < 0.01$

5.2.5 Process hygiene and accessibility

A rather obvious, but still very important correlation links process documentation and information accessibility. Organizations that maintain clearly documented workflows show consistently higher internal transparency and information accessibility. While technology scales efficiency, documentation appears to be the prerequisite foundation for organizational accessibility.

5.2.6 · SUMMARY OF EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Financial management emerges as the operational bottleneck

FIGURE 1 Average self-assessment (1–5) by operating dimension · average 3.24

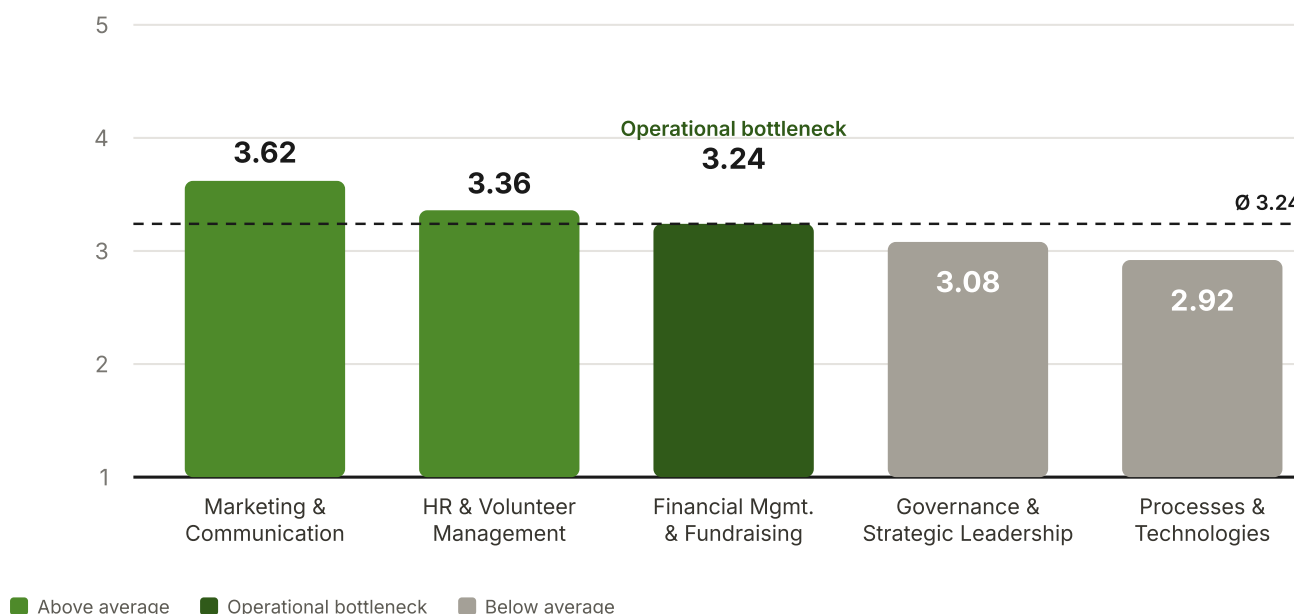


Figure 1 illustrates the mean self-assessment scores across five operating dimensions of the Target Operating Model. Scores were calculated by averaging Likert-scale items (1–5) per category; text-based closed questions were quantified using a standardized coding scheme before aggregation. Among the surveyed nonprofit organizations, Marketing & Communication achieved the highest mean score ($M = 3.62$), followed by HR & Volunteer Management ($M = 3.36$), both exceeding the overall average of 3.24. Three dimensions scored average or below: Financial Management & Fundraising ($M = 3.24$), Governance & Strategic Leadership ($M = 3.08$), and Processes & Technologies ($M = 2.92$).

Notably, Financial Management emerges as the operative bottleneck. Resource constraints in this dimension appear to limit organizational capacity for

strategic development and technological investment. This pattern suggests a sequential dependency: sustainable improvements in Governance and Processes may require prior stabilization of the financial base.

The data confirms that operational success is driven by specific leverage points: systematic volunteer recognition serves as a catalyst for recruitment ($p = 0.72$), while frequent impact measurement acts as the primary driver for strategic agility ($p = 0.83$). However, the path to professionalization remains gated by financial volume ($p = 0.73$), creating a barrier where low-budget organizations struggle to access the infrastructure needed to scale. Furthermore, financial mono-dependency emerges as a critical inhibitor, actively degrading an organization's ability to plan strategically and understand its stakeholders.

The results depict a sector that is rich in purpose but constrained by a lack of diverse resources and structural redundancy.

CHAPTER 6 · TARGET OPERATING MODEL FOR SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS

The Impact Racer

Building on the theoretical foundations and the identified gap in sector-specific operating models, we introduce the Impact Racer. This framework conceptualizes the nonprofit organization as a high-performance vehicle designed for the purpose of winning the race for social impact. Sustainable speed and reliability rely on the seamless interaction of five main components, each corresponding to a core organizational dimension.

FIGURE 2 Target Operating Model for social organizations



6.1 The structure of the Target Operating Model

At the heart of the vehicle lies the **Engine**, representing the organization's Processes and Technologies. It is the operational centerpiece that converts resources into forward momentum. Without a well performing engine, even the best strategy stalls. This mechanism is powered by the **Fuel** of Financial Management and Fundraising, a vital resource that must be efficiently refilled and stored in a leak-proof tank to ensure the journey continues without interruption.

Steering this complex machine falls to Governance and Leadership, acting as the **Cockpit**. This dimension sets

the direction, navigates strategic curves, and ensures the organization stays on the track defined by its mission. However, horsepower is useless without traction. HR and Volunteer Management therefore serve as the **Tires**, translating the organization's energy to the road and ensuring that the team's dedication results in tangible progress. Finally, Marketing and Communication forms the vehicle's Bodywork and **Branding**, providing the external visibility necessary to attract essential sponsors and supporters.

6.2 · OPERATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Five intervention areas, one for each component

Social organizations possess strong mission clarity and external visibility, yet operate with structural fragilities that limit their capacity to scale impact sustainably. Rather than prescribing an idealized end-state, we present five intervention areas, each corresponding to a core component of the racing vehicle.

THE TIRES

3

Volunteer engagement as strategic lever

FINDING

75%

recruitment success with strong recognition

20%

with weak recognition practices

LEVER

Recognition before recruitment

In the Impact Racer model, HR and Volunteer Management represent the Tires: the critical part that translates organizational energy into forward movement. Without reliable traction, even the most powerful engine spins uselessly.

The correlation between systematic volunteer recognition and recruitment success ($p = 0.72$, $p < 0.001$) represents the single most actionable finding for organizations dependent on voluntary labor. With 81% of surveyed organizations relying predominantly on volunteers while 38% report recruitment difficulties, investment in recognition systems offers measurable returns. Practical implementation requires minimal resources: documented appreciation protocols, structured feedback conversations, and visible acknowledgment of contributions.

The implication is clear: before expanding recruitment efforts, organizations should audit and strengthen their retention infrastructure. Volunteers who feel valued become ambassadors; those who do not become silent attrition. In racing terms, tire preservation through systematic care extends performance far more cost-effectively than constant replacement.

THE COCKPIT

2

Impact measurement as strategic navigation

FINDING

 p 0.83

measurement frequency and strategic data use

76%

rely exclusively on output metrics

LEVER

Three to five outcome indicators, tracked every quarter

Governance and Leadership constitute the Cockpit: the command center where strategic decisions are made and the racing line is set. A driver without functional instruments flies blind, unable to respond to changing conditions.

The strongest correlation in this study ($p = 0.83$, $p < 0.001$) links measurement frequency to strategic data use, confirming that effective cockpit instrumentation determines whether organizations can navigate strategically or merely react to crises. This finding challenges the prevailing view that impact measurement is primarily an accountability exercise for funders. Yet 24% of respondents conduct no systematic measurement, while 76% rely exclusively on output metrics such as participant counts.

The recommended shift is not toward complex evaluation frameworks, which resource-constrained organizations cannot sustain, but toward lean, frequent measurement with explicit connection to planning cycles. Measurement frequency, not sophistication, drives strategic utility. Installing real-time telemetry enables the Cockpit to adjust the racing line dynamically.

THE FUEL

4

Financial resilience through diversification

FINDING

33%

in the high-dependency category

43%

engage corporate partnerships

LEVER

Bring any single source below 50% within three years

Financial Management and Fundraising serve as the Fuel that powers the Impact Racer. Without adequate, reliably supplied fuel, the vehicle stalls regardless of its other capabilities. The tank must be leak-proof and efficiently refilled from multiple sources.

Financial mono-dependency emerges as a structural trap that threatens this supply. Organizations deriving more than 80% of their budget from a single source show significantly weaker strategic fundraising capabilities ($p = -0.58$) and stakeholder knowledge ($p = -0.64$). Dependency is not merely a vulnerability but an active inhibitor of organizational development: concentrated reliance on one funder absorbs management attention, leaving no capacity for relationship-building or diversification planning.

The practical target is reducing any single-source dependency below 50% over a three-year horizon, achieved through systematic cultivation of underutilized channels: only 43% currently engage corporate partnerships, and self-generated income remains underdeveloped despite being accessible to most organizational profiles. A hybrid fuel system ensures the race can continue even when one supply line is disrupted.

THE ENGINE

1

Documentation before digitalization

FINDING

 p 0.85

documentation and accessible information

48%

call internal data management chaotic

LEVER

Process clarity with accessible tools, before new systems

Processes and Technologies form the Engine: the operational centerpiece that converts resources into forward momentum. A well-tuned engine maximizes output from every drop of fuel; a poorly maintained one wastes energy through internal friction.

The data reveals a pronounced digital divide: 95% of organizations maintain external digital presence through websites and social media, while 48% report internal data management as chaotic or fragmented. Only 14% use professional CRM systems and only 19% employ digital workflows for administrative processes. The correlation between budget and professionalization ($p = 0.73$) confirms that technology adoption is gated by financial capacity.

However, the significant relationship between process documentation and information accessibility ($p = 0.85$, $p < 0.01$) suggests an alternative path. Organizations that document workflows, even using basic tools like shared spreadsheets, report substantially higher internal transparency. For resource-constrained organizations, the priority should be process clarity using accessible tools rather than premature investment in systems they cannot maintain. Rebuilding the engine block with documented, standardized processes reduces internal friction before expensive digital upgrades become necessary.

THE BRANDING

5

Connecting shell to chassis

FINDING

3.62

highest maturity score of all dimensions

95%

maintain a digital presence

LEVER

Communicate verified outcome data, collect data both ways

Marketing and Communication represent the Bodywork and Branding of the Impact Racer. It provides the aerodynamic shell that reduces drag in donor acquisition and the visual identity that signals the mission to the world. The study identifies this as the strongest component of the sector. However, while the external shell is polished and digital, it often conceals a manual, analog engine operating beneath.

The Target Operating Model mandates bolting the shell directly to the chassis. Instead of operating as a siloed broadcasting function, marketing channels must serve as two-way telemetry systems: gathering stakeholder data that feeds directly into the CRM engine and communicating the verified outcome data generated by the Cockpit. By grounding the brand narrative in internal evidence rather than just intent, organizations ensure their external speed is matched by internal reliability, preventing the structural instability that occurs when a high-speed vehicle has a loose frame.

6.3 · SYNTHESIS

Pole Position for Impact

The five intervention areas are interconnected, just as a racing vehicle only performs when all systems work in harmony.

- 1 **Recognition** improves tire longevity, reducing the human capital volatility that disrupts operations.
- 2 **Frequent measurement** provides the cockpit instrumentation needed for strategic navigation and compelling fundraising conversations.
- 3 **Financial diversification** creates the fuel reserves required for infrastructure investment.
- 4 **Documentation** reduces engine friction and mitigates key-person risk by enabling knowledge transfer.
- 5 **Evidence-based communication** bolts the shell to the chassis, so external speed is matched by internal reliability.

The Target Operating Model for social organizations is therefore not a static blueprint, but a dynamic system where improvement in one component enables progress in others.

The empirical contribution of this study lies in identifying which improvements offer highest leverage given the sector's constraints: volunteer recognition, measurement frequency, funding diversification, process documentation, and continuity planning. These are not aspirational ideals but statistically validated priorities for organizational development.

The race for social impact is won not by the flashiest vehicle but by the one engineered for sustainable performance over the long haul.

CHAPTER 7

Discussion

This chapter contextualizes the empirical findings within the broader landscape of nonprofit research, examines the methodological boundaries of the study, and outlines implications for both future research and organizational practice.

7.1 Interpretation of findings

The results of this study paint a differentiated picture of the social sector. On one hand, organizations demonstrate remarkable strengths: 81% operate with documented missions, 95% maintain digital external communication, and the majority report adequate volunteer competencies. These findings counter deficit narratives that characterize the sector as uniformly unprofessional.

On the other hand, structural vulnerabilities are pervasive. The presented results reflect broader societal trends documented in the DSEE survey 2024–2025, which, for instance, reports that 77% of voluntary associations experience bureaucratic overload. The challenges identified in this study are thus not organizational failures, but symptoms of systemic undercapitalization and politics.

7.3 Implications for research and practice

For researchers, this study opens several possibilities for future investigation. Longitudinal designs could test whether the correlations identified here represent causal relationships. Qualitative research could explore the mechanisms underlying key findings: why does recognition drive recruitment? How do organizations develop measurement habits? Larger samples would

enable subgroup analysis by budget category, thematic field, or organizational age.

For practitioners and funders, the findings suggest a reorientation of priorities. Rather than demanding elaborate impact evaluation frameworks, funders might more productively support organizations in establishing simple, frequent measurement routines. Capacity-building programs could focus on the high-leverage interventions identified: volunteer recognition systems, financial diversification strategies, and process documentation practices.

7.4 Contribution

This study contributes to the development of operating models for social organizations. The Target Operating Model presented here departs from corporate frameworks by acknowledging the structural realities of volunteer dependency, funding volatility, and resource constraints. Rather than prescribing idealized structures that most organizations cannot implement, it identifies leverage points where modest investments yield substantial returns. The empirical validation of these priorities through correlational analysis provides a foundation for evidence-informed organizational development in the social sector. The race for social impact is not won by organizations that look fastest on paper but by those that build sustainable operational capacity.

7.2 · METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

Sample size. N = 21 provides adequate power for detecting correlations but limits generalizability and prevents meaningful subgroup analysis.

Sample composition. Specific recruitment channels; participating organizations may differ from non-respondents.

Self-report. All data derive from self-report surveys, introducing potential social desirability bias.

Snapshot. Single measurement points in December 2025 and January 2026; trends over time remain invisible.

No causality. The design captures associations; the reverse pathway or confounding variables cannot be excluded.

Likert scales. Standard practice, but they introduce measurement imprecision; Spearman correlations are less powerful than parametric alternatives.

CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

External legitimacy grows faster than internal robustness. The limiting factor is rarely motivation or strategic intent, but a resource–professionalization gap.

This study examined how social organizations can develop scalable and resilient operating models under conditions of persistent resource constraints. The empirical results reveal a consistent pattern: many organizations demonstrate strong mission clarity and high external visibility, yet their internal operating structures remain comparatively fragile. A large share operates with very limited budgets and without full-time staff, while relying heavily on volunteers and informal coordination. Public-facing communication and outreach are often well developed, whereas internal capabilities, particularly in financial resilience, process robustness, data management, and continuity planning, are less mature.

Several structural findings are especially salient. Impact measurement is frequently absent or limited to output indicators, yet more frequent measurement is strongly associated with actual strategic use of data for planning and prioritization. Volunteer-dependent organizations often report recruitment difficulties, while structured recognition and development practices are closely linked to stronger recruitment and retention outcomes. A relevant portion of organizations shows high dependency on a single funding source, which is associated with weaker strategic fundraising capacity and lower stakeholder insight. Operational continuity is often tied to individual key persons instead of documented processes and shared knowledge. At the same time, a digital asymmetry is visible: while external channels are widely professionalized, internal workflows and stakeholder data management are often handled through fragmented or manual solutions.

In synthesis, the results point to a central structural challenge in the social sector: organizations tend to achieve external legitimacy and programmatic activity

faster than internal operating robustness. Financial capacity influences access to staff, systems, and formalized structures. However, the findings also indicate that several high-impact improvements are primarily organizational and cultural rather than capital-intensive.

Practical implications for social organizations therefore center on low-cost, high-leverage measures. Systematic volunteer recognition and feedback routines represent a powerful and immediately actionable lever for stabilizing volunteer-based capacity. Lean and frequent outcome-oriented measurement, using a small number of indicators collected on a regular cycle, provides greater steering value than complex but infrequent evaluation frameworks. Clear process documentation and shared knowledge repositories should precede major software investments; even simple shared drives, structured templates, internal wikis, or lightweight task boards can significantly reduce dependency on individuals and improve coordination. Financial resilience can be strengthened through diversification of funding sources and more structured relationship management with supporters and partners. Accessible nonprofit versions of common collaboration and productivity tools can support these steps when anchored in clearly defined workflows.

The contribution of this study lies in empirically identifying a small set of structural leverage points that are consistently associated with greater organizational robustness and strategic agility in social organizations. Rather than proposing idealized models, it highlights realistic priority areas where incremental, resource-conscious improvements can materially strengthen operating capacity.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Scalable social impact depends not only on the strength of a mission, but on the reliability of the structures that carry it. The race is not won by the organization that starts the fastest. It is won by the one built for the long haul.

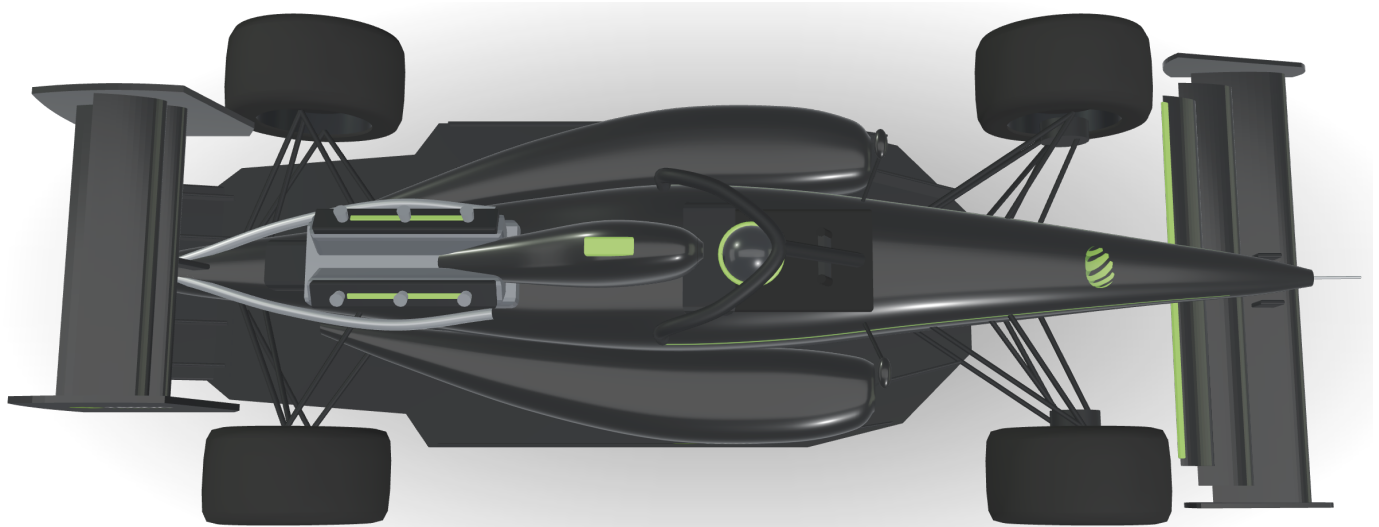
REFERENCES

Sources

Bornemann, M., & Binz-Fietkau, G. (2019)	<i>Zukunftsfähigkeit von Non-Profit-Organisationen – Studie 2019: Immaterielle Erfolgsfaktoren.</i> Stuttgarter Non-Profit-Forum.
German Foundation for Engagement and Volunteering (2025, February 20)	<i>DSEE survey: Bureaucracy is the biggest hurdle in volunteering</i> [Press release]. deutsche-stiftung-engagement-und-ehrenamt.de/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Pressemeldung_Umfrage-Buerokratiebelastungen-im-Ehrenamt-der-DSEE_de_vom_20_02_2025.pdf
Horváth (n.d.)	<i>Target Operating Model.</i> Retrieved May 22, 2024, from horvath-partners.com/de/expertise/strategy-organization-restructuring/target-operating-model

HOW TO CITE THIS PAPER

180 Degrees Consulting Frankfurt e. V. (2026). *Pole Position for Impact: A Blueprint for Sustainable, Scalable and Mission-Driven Target Operating Models in the Social Sector.* Impact Paper, February 1, 2026. Frankfurt am Main.



APPENDIX

Survey Instrument

Empirical Study on Scaling Social Impact in Nonprofit Organizations · 180 Degrees Consulting Frankfurt e.V. · Statements marked "Scale 1–5" were rated from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree.

A · INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR ORGANIZATION

Q1. In which thematic areas does your organization operate?
(*Multiple answers possible*)

Education & Child Development · Social Inclusion & Poverty Alleviation
· Health & Care · Environment & Climate · Culture & Sports · Human Rights & Democracy · Other

Q2. And which of the following thematic areas represents your organization's primary field of activity?

Same options as Q1, single answer

Q3. What is the geographical scope of your organization's activities?

Local (e.g., city, district) · Regional (e.g., federal state) · Nationwide (Germany) · DACH region · International

Q4. How long has your organization been in existence?

0–2 years · 3–5 years · 5–10 years · 11–20 years · More than 20 years

Q5. What is your estimated annual budget?

Under €10,000 · €10,000–€50,000 · €50,001–€250,000 · More than €250,000 · Prefer not to say

Q6. How many members does your organization have?

0–10 · 11–50 · 51–100 · 101–500 · More than 500 members

Q7. How is your current staffing structure composed?

100% volunteer-based · Mostly volunteer-based · A mix of paid staff and volunteers · Mostly paid staff

B · GOVERNANCE & STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

Q8. In what form are your organization's purpose and underlying long-term goals documented? (Mission / Vision)

Only verbally / implicitly · Short description on the website or social media platforms · Fully formulated mission statement in internal documents · Written mission statement that is actively communicated internally

Q9. How do you currently measure the impact of your work?
(*Multiple answers possible*)

We do not collect systematic impact data · Output metrics (e.g., number of participants, events, materials distributed) · Outcome indicators (perceived changes among target groups, e.g., knowledge, behavior, life situation) · External evaluations / studies · Qualitative feedback (interviews, feedback, stories) · Other

Q10. How frequently do you currently measure the impact of your work?

We do not collect systematic impact data · Monthly or more frequently · Quarterly · Semi-annually · Annually · Less than once a year

Q11. To what extent do your impact data support your organization's strategic planning? (Examples: funding planning, project prioritization, resource allocation)

N/A · Very low · Low · Moderate · Rather high · High

C · HUMAN RESOURCES AND VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT

Q12. The professional competencies of our (volunteer) staff meet the requirements of their respective tasks (e.g., on the executive board or in project work).

Scale 1–5

Q13. Collaboration between full-time and volunteer staff generally proceeds smoothly. (*Leave unanswered if your organization has no full-time staff.*)

Scale 1–5

Q14. It is easy for us to recruit a sufficient number of volunteers for our organization.

Scale 1–5

Q15. Our organization provides systematic recognition and training opportunities for volunteers.

Scale 1–5

Q16. Our full-time and volunteer staff perceive their workload as sustainable in the long term.

Scale 1–5

Q17. Project work continues smoothly even when key personnel are absent.

Scale 1–5

D · FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT & FUNDRAISING

Q18. What are your organization's primary sources of funding? *(Multiple answers possible)*

Self-generated income (e.g., membership fees, participation fees, sales of services/products) · Public service remuneration (e.g., service contracts, care rates) · Public grants (e.g., project funding, subsidies) · Private donations (e.g., individuals, foundations) · Corporate partnerships · Asset management (e.g., investment income) · Other

Q19. What proportion of your total annual budget comes from your most important funding source (e.g., your largest funder)?
< 20% · 20–40% · 41–60% · 61–80% · > 80%

Q20. Our fundraising efforts are strategically focused on building long-term relationships with donors and funders.

Scale 1–5

E · MARKETING & COMMUNICATION

Q21. We have a clear understanding of the needs of our various stakeholder groups (e.g., donors, clients, members, the public).

Scale 1–5

Q22. How important are collaborations with companies or other organizations in your work?

We maintain established, strategic partnerships · We collaborate on a case-by-case or project-specific basis · We do not collaborate yet, but are planning to do so in the future · We are currently not pursuing such collaborations

Q23. Through which channels do you communicate with your target groups? *(Multiple answers possible)*

Website / Blog · Newsletter / E-Mail · Social Media (e.g., Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook) · Local or national press · Events or in-person formats · Other

F · PROCESSES & TECHNOLOGIES

Q24. Our key operational processes (e.g., project management, finance, volunteer management) are clearly defined and documented.

Scale 1–5

Q25. Key information (e.g., contacts, project data, templates) is easily accessible to all relevant individuals.

Scale 1–5

Q26. How is daily collaboration and task management organized within your team?

Tasks are assigned informally via email, verbally, or through meeting minutes · We use central overviews (e.g., Excel lists, Google Sheets) to document and track task assignments · We use dedicated project management tools (e.g., Trello, Asana, Planner, Jira) where tasks are directly assigned to individuals and dynamically tracked

Q27. How do you manage data on members, donors, clients, or partners?

We use individual address books or simple Excel lists without centralized synchronization · We use a central file accessible to everyone, but with limited automation · We use a professional database (CRM) that links contacts, history, and communication, and automates processes

Q28. How are administrative processes handled in your organization (e.g., accounting, HR, leave requests, travel expenses)?

Paper-based processes using signature folders, postal mail, and physical filing · Forms are completed digitally and sent via email · We use software solutions with digital workflows (e.g., digital accounting systems, HR software)

Q29. What role do AI applications (e.g., ChatGPT, DeepL, image generators) currently play in your work?

We do not use any AI tools · Individual staff members use AI tools occasionally for support (e.g., drafting text, translations) · We use AI tools intentionally and on a regular basis

G · CLOSING SECTION

Q30. What is currently the greatest strategic challenge facing your organization?

Open answer

Q31. In which area (e.g., digitalization, talent acquisition, funding) do you most urgently require support or change?

Open answer

Q32. Are you interested in receiving the results of the study?

Yes, please send the results to my email address · No, I am not interested in the results

Q33. What is your email address? *(Optional)*

Your email address is processed separately from the survey data, is not linked to your responses and is used solely for delivering the study results.

CONTACT

Let's talk.

Questions about the study, an organisation that wants to work on its operating model, or an idea for the next edition? We read every message.



E-MAIL

frankfurt@180dc.org

Projects, partnerships and general enquiries



LINKEDIN

180 Degrees Consulting Frankfurtlinkedin.com/company/180-degrees-consulting-frankfurt

INSTAGRAM

@180dcfrankfurtinstagram.com/180dcfrankfurt