



Whitepaper

The nonprofit CFO's survival guide

While many challenges face CFOs in both the nonprofit and for-profit sectors, some challenges are unique to the nonprofit sector.

Here, we explore those challenges—and share financial management tips and best practices from experienced nonprofit finance experts.

Sage

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About Sage Intacct



Your mission: Support the mission

Increasing revenue? Budgeting?
Consolidating across multiple
entities? Implementing internal
controls? Facilitating audits and
compliance reporting?

Common challenges for CFOs

It can be easy to overlook the fact that the CFOs of nonprofit organizations share many of the same challenges as for-profit CFOs. And that they're often in pursuit of the same overarching goal—optimizing the returns of the organization's activities by carefully managing all aspects of its finances.

The goal of the nonprofit CFO

Of course, it's not about maximizing profitability in the nonprofit world. It's about maximizing impact. Nonprofits typically pursue a “mission-first” philosophy, aiming to achieve greater social or philanthropic goals and balance the competing interests of social mission and a sound financial foundation. But this can result in a host of additional challenges that can burden the nonprofit finance team—and its financial software infrastructure. The fact is, it's never easy to be a CFO. And, regardless of the organization, every CFO faces both common and unique challenges and pressures.



Additional challenges in the nonprofit world

However, in many ways, financial leaders at nonprofits must address even more significant difficulties than their for-profit counterparts. Whether that's a result of thin, part-time, or even volunteer staffing, tight budgets, or primitive tools (think of dozens of spreadsheets from multiple contributors and far-flung management teams). Nonprofit CFOs are under the gun to achieve so much. To automate processes, improve productivity, create greater transparency and visibility, enhance the organizational governance, and strengthen the team's decision-making and strategic focus. So, how can nonprofit CFOs survive in this challenging environment?

Help is at hand

This guide explores some of the significant challenges, special requirements, and unusual constraints that nonprofit financial managers face—and shares tips and best practices from nonprofit finance experts.

Accounting 101: It's still job one

The challenge: Accounting in nonprofit settings involves significant complexity.

The solution: Implement solutions that provide flexibility for diverse accounting and reporting needs.

For so many nonprofit organizations, the daily tasks of bread-and-butter accounting and financial management are inextricably driven by a broad array of complexities. Beyond the basics of accounts payable and receivable that everyone needs, the basics for nonprofits encompass a distinct set of standard documents, including statements of activities, statements of financial position, statements of cash flow, and the Form 990. If only it stayed that simple.

Revenue management

Revenue management makes nonprofit accounting an especially thorny challenge—particularly with the way revenue is recognized. If the organization collects annual dues or periodic donations at different times of the year, it may be important to decouple cash receipts and disbursements from revenue recognition.

Separate income streams

Some nonprofits operate for-profit subsidiaries and others sell items on a break-even basis. But many depend on donated monies, fundraising, and other sources. They might receive grants and directed donations—perhaps dozens (or, at the high end, even hundreds) of separate income streams. And each of those donors rightfully wants to know how their investment in the mission is faring. The result: You need to isolate the activity for each revenue source, which enables you to create a regular series of specific reports, each with its own unique requirements, for each source of funds.

The need for flexibility

These demands mean the accounting system that supports the team must offer an extraordinary level of flexibility. *“You need to be very careful in how you design your chart of accounts,”* explained Nancy Fliss, Partner with LeapThePond, a services consultancy specializing in the needs of nonprofits. *“When you have a financial accounting system that properly reflects the fiscal levels of the organization, you’ll be in great shape.”*

Fund-based accounting

“Fund-based accounting is an essential requirement for most nonprofits. Every funder has their own requirements for reports. That means the accounting system must be designed to present information from a variety of dimensions, such as geography, project, timeframe, and funding source. That enables you to do custom reports, support multiple entities, and consolidate more easily.”

—Jacqueline Tiso, CEO and founder of JMT Consulting Group.

A hierarchy of entities

For some nonprofits, there can be a complicated hierarchy of entities, such as chapters, subsidiaries, and locations. At Healthcare Businesswomen’s Association, a centralized accounting function has helped the organization step up to a higher level. *“Previously, we had numerous chapters, all submitting different spreadsheets for consolidation,”* said Nikki Jones, Controller. *“We have board volunteers with high turnover and we’re a completely virtual organization. There’s a level of complexity here that’s equivalent to what a major for-profit organization deals with.”* In nonprofit accounting, survival depends on flexibility.

Key best practices for survival:

- Make sure your accounting system can support the separate, balanced sets of books required for fund accounting.
- Carefully design your data structure and chart of accounts to support maximum flexibility.
- Be ready to accommodate multiple locations and entities.

Internal controls and cash management:

The importance of vigilance

The challenge: Nonprofits must be vigilant stewards of donated monies and carefully monitor what they spend on every initiative and program.

The solution: Centralized controls only go so far—spreadsheets and single-user “quick accounting” programs aren’t up to that task. Nonprofits need centralized control and distributed responsibility by event, program, donor, and other dimensions—in one system.

Most for-profit corporations create their internal controls, reporting, and financial monitoring by products, divisions, geographies, and entities. Nonprofits have remarkably similar needs, seeking to manage their monies by grants, donors, programs, geographies, and other dimensions.

For Healthcare Businesswomen’s Association, a bottom-up planning process leads to greater accuracy and ownership by various departments and chapters. “We previously had just one tax ID, but we operate in a very decentralized manner,” Jones explained. “We have multiple entities with various independent chapters who want their own autonomy. When local managers have that autonomy, you get higher levels of engagement and ownership because they are involved in the planning process and feel more accountable. In a multi-entity model, we can plan right down to each chapter’s monthly events—and determine if an event was successful or whether it cost us money. You simply can’t do that on multiple spreadsheets.”

By decentralizing the planning and control process, nonprofits can achieve a granular level of accuracy. Setting budgets for each event, campaign, program, and funder—and then tracking the actuals—creates tighter controls and helps prevent unexpected outcomes.

Capital budgets

Do capital budgets matter to nonprofits? Quite often, they do. Although many nonprofits don’t require extensive capital investments in property, plant, or equipment, capital budgeting still plays a role for some organizations. Great Books Foundation, a fee-for-service nonprofit, promotes literacy from kindergarten through college. James Linday, CFO, Great Books Foundation, notes that part of that mission is built around developing books and curricula—which involves capital budgets. “Absolutely, capital budgeting is essential for us when we kick off a new book project,” he said. “That can range from \$30,000 to \$2.5 million. Our accounting infrastructure has to carefully capture the milestones as we convert from a project to a product.” In nonprofit financial control, survival depends on careful monitoring.

Key best practices for survival:

- Make sure your accounting system can support the separate, balanced sets of books required for fund accounting.
- Carefully design your data structure and chart of accounts to support maximum flexibility.
- Be ready to accommodate multiple locations and entities.



“Without question, internal controls and cash management are important challenges. We find it’s best to mimic our chart of accounts and create three-year rolling budgets and forecasts that we adjust four times a year. You need the frequent refreshes to stay on-course.”

Michael Mohr

Director of Finance, Women’s World Banking

Funds and grants: The lifeblood of a nonprofit

The challenge: No two funds or grants are alike, creating extraordinary complexity in nonprofit accounting.

The solution: From revenue recognition to reporting, the nonprofit's accounting system must quickly respond to unique needs.



Whether it's a major foundation, an anonymous philanthropist, or major sponsor, nonprofits rely on the generosity of like-minded people who provide the bulk of the organization's funding and resources. But, just as CFOs at for-profit companies must respond to owners' and shareholders' (and regulators') demands for transparent information, the nonprofit CFO must likewise deliver customized slices of results and reports tailored to each funder's unique requirements.

Nonprofits must also carefully track general vs. restricted dollars donated for a specific purpose or cause. That can mean viewing actual dollars, percentages, and actuals-to-budget across multiple financial periods. "Balancing by grant is a best practice for nonprofits," said Mohr. "You need a real-time view of all your assets in order to make effective strategic decisions about your activities. One thing we've also learned is how important it is to manage cash by grant. Each month, we close by fund and I can quickly see how much unrestricted cash we have on hand—which is a key metric for our organization."

In nonprofit finance, survival depends on the ability to maintain separate balances by grant, fund, or donor.

Key best practices for survival:

- Balance and close each fund independently.
- Put processes in place to track general vs. restricted dollars.
- Create an infrastructure that supports rapid customized reporting by fund or donor.

Reporting and visibility: “Know and show” where you stand

The challenge: Nonprofits face stringent requirements for reporting and transparent operations—and those hurdles are multiplying.

The solution: The right financial infrastructure can help nonprofits “know and show” what’s happening in every aspect of their operations with superior speed and clarity.

In a challenging economy, agencies, social service organizations, charities, and other nonprofits are under tremendous pressure to acquire, secure, and maintain funding sources to ensure their continued operation. Transparency is an essential strategy for securing and keeping those donors and sponsors on board. “Funders have become much savvier,” Fliss agreed. “They can tell quickly whether you have financial command—which is so important to demonstrate today.”

Transparency is key

At Healthcare Businesswomen’s Association, Nikki Jones explained, audits to provide transparency were previously an expensive distraction. “We have an outside accounting firm that specializes in nonprofits audit our books every year,” she said. “Before we were consolidating spreadsheets and meeting onsite for up to a week. Now, we have a shared online accounting system that enables us to provide login to the auditors so they can perform their audit offsite. That saves enormous time and expense.”

“Make sure you have a good, clean audit, and a good, clean translation of your financials” advised Linday. “Funders want to see audited financial statements. And our partners want to understand where we spend money and what our margins are.”

Internal reporting

Even internal reporting requires new levels of efficiency. When nonprofit board members—who are often successful executives from different business disciplines—convene to review the organization’s status, they’re increasingly expecting the same caliber of reporting and analysis they see in the for-profit world.

In nonprofit financial reporting, survival depends on unprecedented levels of transparency, auditability, accountability, and trust.

Key best practices for survival:

- Transparency of financial reporting is emerging as a basic requirement for all nonprofits.
- Streamline auditing with online financial software that can support remote audits.
- Elevate financial reporting and analyses to differentiate your organization in crowded market segments seeking dwindling funding sources.



“Transparency is a non-negotiable best practice for leading nonprofits today. When you can quickly and accurately ‘know and show’ what funders want to see, you instill a sense of confidence that their discretionary investments are well-managed, you have an edge over other agencies competing for those same dollars.”

Jacqueline Tiso,
CEO and Founder, JMT Consulting Group

Cloud-based financial management: Simplifying life for the nonprofit CFO

The challenge: IT budgets and expertise are scarce and financial management software can sometimes seem like a distracting and risky headache.

The solution: Real-time, cloud-based financial management is enabling nonprofits to take advantage of the same functionality, performance, security, and infrastructure that major corporations use.

In the mission-driven nonprofit world, accounting and financial management can sometimes slip down the priority list. It's not always easy to allocate budget dollars to backoffice infrastructure that doesn't directly support the nonprofit agenda, and it's even harder to find the time and expertise to make it all work. Consider some of the obstacles:

- Capital investment for software and hardware.
- Facilities and expert personnel to implement and maintain the system.
- Lengthy deployment cycles.
- Capacity/scalability/reliability/availability.

These issues aren't part of most nonprofit organization's core competencies. That's why many nonprofits are increasingly turning to new-generation cloud-based solutions to automate financial management.

The benefits of cloud-based financials

Cloud-based financials enable the application vendor to deliver shared, scalable services that the nonprofit agency can access over the Internet using a web browser or mobile device. There's no need to buy, own, license, understand, manage, or control the underlying hardware, software, or data / networking infrastructure that supports the financial infrastructure. Cloud services are typically delivered on a term-based subscription basis, eliminating the need for upfront software licensing fees or major purchases of hardware. The result is cost-effective, anytime, anywhere managed access.

"Let's face it—nonprofits want to deliver programs, not buy technology," said Tiso. "They typically lag private enterprises in their technology adoption and usage, and hold onto technology longer because they don't want the expense and the distraction that comes from complex technology implementations. Cloud technology lets them sidestep those hurdles."



“All of our chapters can access our cloud-based financials,” said Jones. “We have volunteers working all over the world at all hours of the day and night. With our system, they access the same world-class financial foundation that many companies use. Our board and our chapter leaders have real-time access to reports, registrations, metrics, and analyses. That means we’re constantly on top of our operation and can make strategic decisions faster. For us, the cloud is critical. It’s the only way to go.”

“Cloud financials are absolutely key to running a nonprofit today,” said Lindsay. “Now we can eliminate lots of manual work, be more productive, and eliminate all of those capital investments. This is a predictable, flat operating expense, and we save at least \$30,000 a year this way.”

In nonprofit financial management, survival depends on predictable costs, a reliable infrastructure, and world-class functionality.

Key best practices for survival:

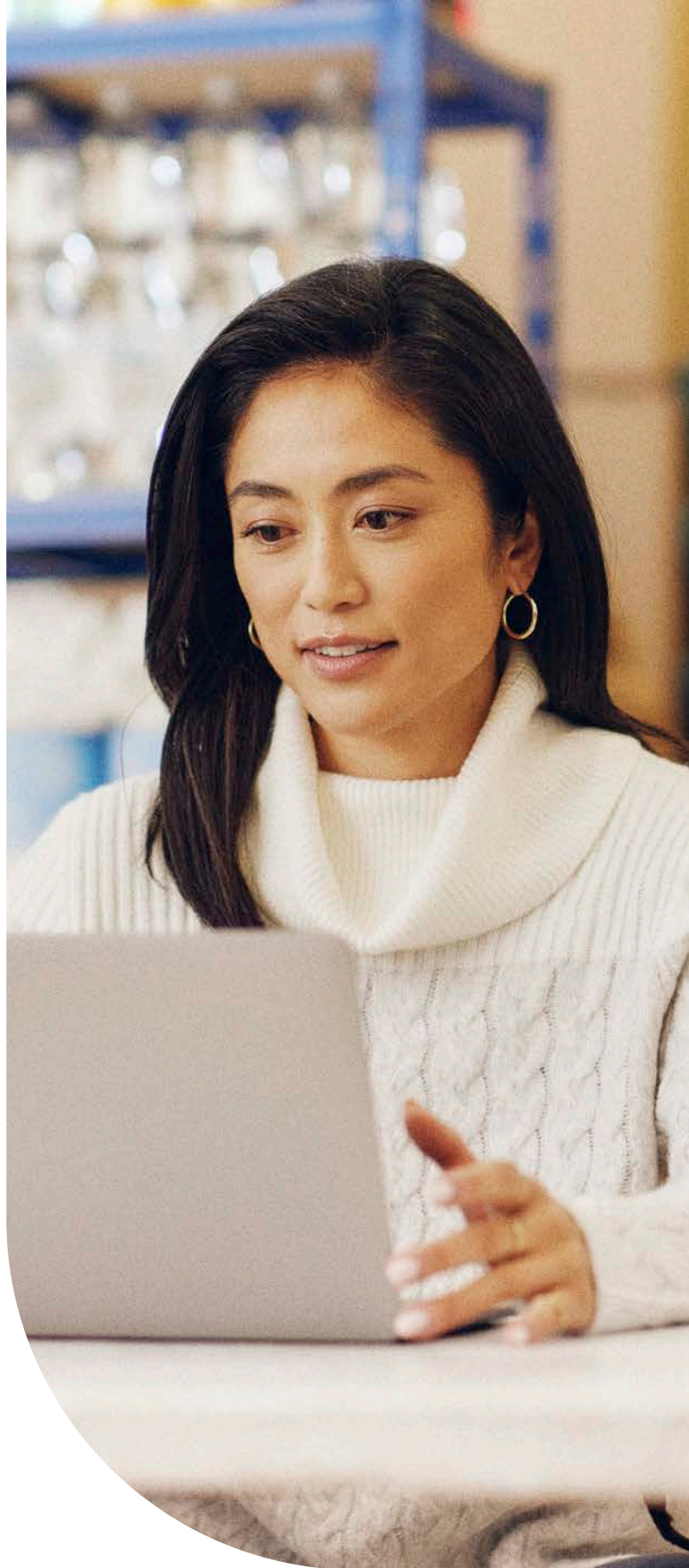
- Move financial management to the cloud for optimal accessibility and lower cost.
- Enable global real-time access to financials, reports, and analysis.
- Use cloud architectures to eliminate manual work and improve productivity while providing world-class functionality that far exceeds primitive single-user tools.

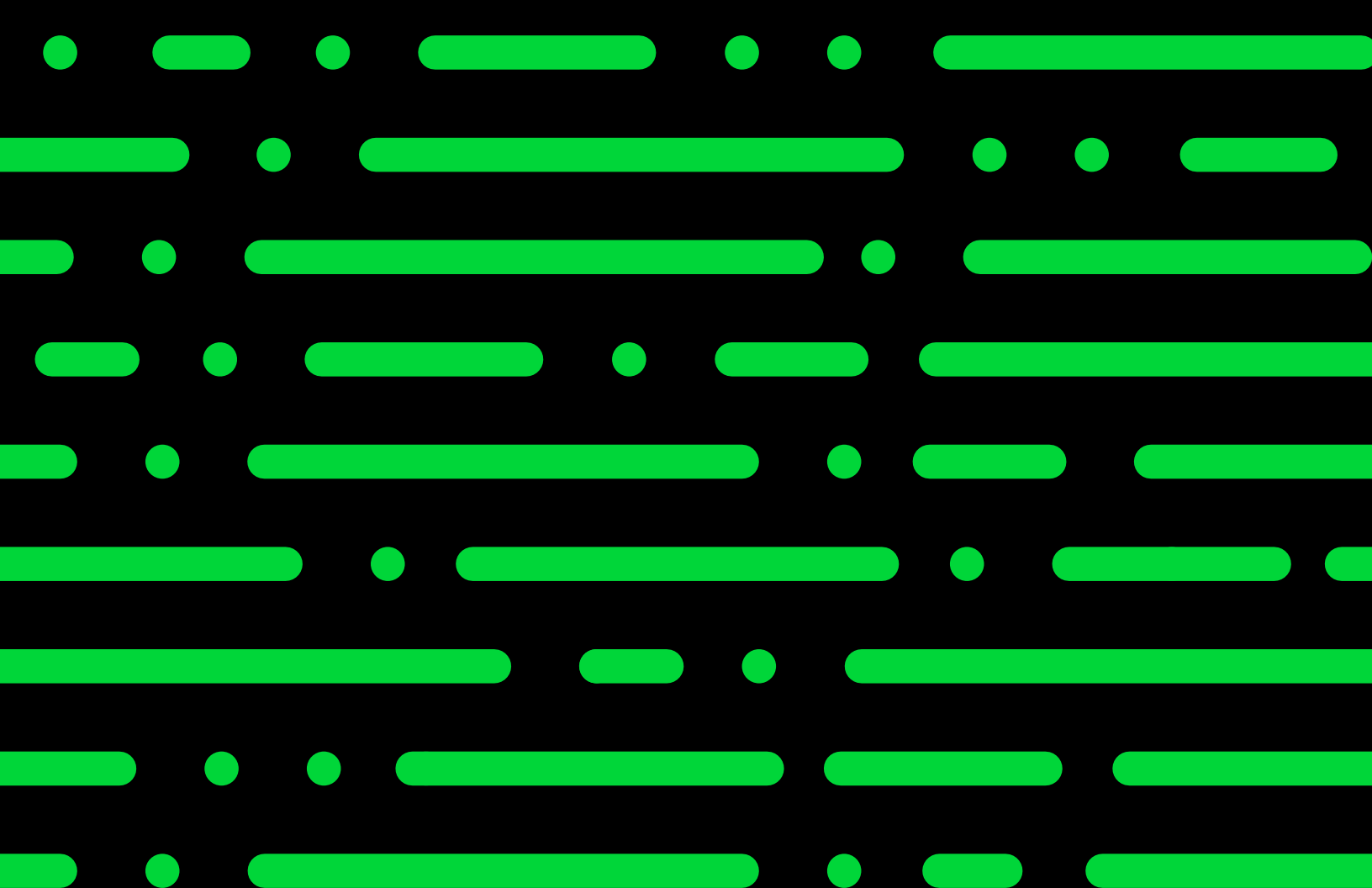
About Sage Intacct

Sage Intacct is the AICPA's preferred provider of cloud financial applications. Specializing in helping nonprofits of all types—including faith-based organizations, charities, trade and membership associations, and cultural institutions—Sage Intacct streamlines grant, fund, project, and donor accounting, while delivering real-time visibility into the metrics that matter.

Our modern, true cloud solution, with open APIs, gives nonprofits the connectivity, visibility and efficiency they need to do more with less. At Sage Intacct, we help nonprofits strengthen stewardship, build influence, grow funding, and achieve mission success.

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