



Wired to govern

A trustee's handbook for the digital revolution



Foreword Tesse Akpeki, senior Onboard consultant

A survey by Disney in 2013 rated an internet connection one of the 'bare necessities' of modern life. It came top of a list of 20 things Britons can't live without. But living with it throws up its own challenges! One thing is certain – any organisation that is not able to reach its audience through mobile search or display or is unable to provide a satisfactory experience will miss vital opportunities.

Critical requirements for board members and those who support them are to listen hard, learn fast, be transparent and balance opportunities and threats. This requires exploring new uses, creating different experiences, identifying the best ways of making vital connections and evaluating the pros and cons of the latest technologies.

The way our organisations think and work needs to be responsive to specific digital needs. It needs investment to meet the demands of a digital age in a way that is as purposeful and fulfilling as possible. This guide is our attempt to craft that strategic framework. We explore opportunities, threats, the potential of e-governance and share some legal and good governance guidance. With best practice guidelines, templates, checklists, and an analysis of how the *Code of Good Governance* should be interpreted as regards digital responsibilities, this handbook will help your board to strengthen its practices and avoid the potential pitfalls.

We set up the Onboard *Wired to Govern* project in 2011. It started with an idea. There was no space for governance players to come together to share, explore and create models of governance that took account of the needs and concerns of board members as regards fast-changing digital technology. We convened a workshop, which grew into a seminar series, with supporting surveys. To date, more than 600 people have participated in the project.

Participation has been varied, encompassing chairs, chief executives, trustees, staff and volunteers. We are continuously learning and welcome your feedback and input on how the digital revolution is impacting modern governance practices. No project is successful without the input of numerous people. Please forgive me if I have inadvertently left you of my appreciation list. I would like to thank the chairs, chief executives, board members and senior staff who took part in the *Wired to Govern* project.

The case studies that organisations shared with us brought the theme of digital governance to life. My thanks goes to my co-authors, Tess Woodcraft and Lindsay Driscoll who dedicated months of their time to the *Wired to Govern* project. Marta Maretich supported us in developing the outline for the guidance and helped us design a map to navigate the guide. My specific appreciation goes to Philip Kirkpatrick, joint head of BWB's Charity and Social Enterprise team who has been such an encourager, an inspirer and wise counsel during the *Wired to Govern* Project. He supported the idea of setting up the project and offered crucial support year on year. Further appreciation goes to Mathew Little, our editor who painstakingly worked through the detail. Jonathan Knight, head of software services at Board Intelligence Ltd, Dai Clegg who is responsible for product marketing at NuoDB, and H Taylor (trustee of Croydon CAB Service) made the technical aspects understandable.



The speakers at the *Wired to Govern* workshops who generously contributed their time deserve thanks. They include Alex Swallow, Ruke Amata, a film director and producer in Nollywood, Natalie Richards (formerly of Apple) and Marta Maretich. I would also like to acknowledge Dr Simon Davey, Baroness Diana Warwick, Rosamund McCarthy, Sir Stuart Etherington, Alice Faure Walker, Christine Rigby, Julia Cruikshank, Margaret Bolton, Paula Okonneh, Karen Collins, Pam Henry, David Carrington, Linda Laurance and Dorothy Dalton for their invaluable insights.

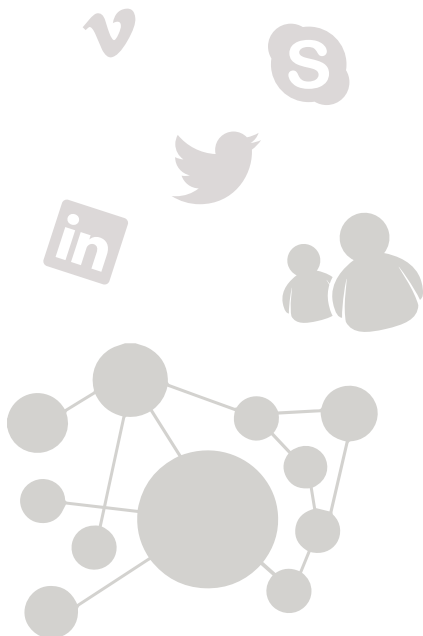
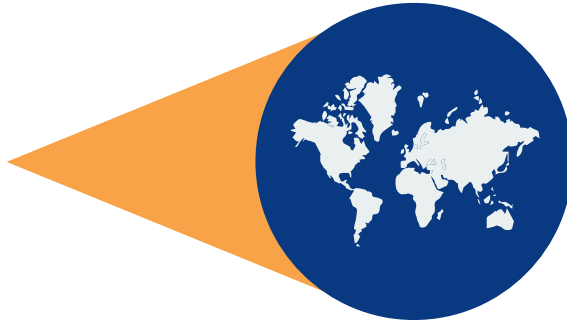


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Introduction

Digital communication is, in a very real sense, revolutionary. A poll of 10,000 people from around the world, conducted by the British Council in 2014, judged – by a huge majority – the invention of the World Wide Web to be the most momentous event of the planet’s last eight decades.



By 2020, it is estimated that 50 billion devices around the globe will be connected to the internet. A third will be computers, smartphones, tablets and TVs. The remaining two-thirds are likely to be other kinds of ‘things’: sensors, actuators and newly-invented intelligent devices that monitor, control and analyse the world around them. Usage on mobile devices now stands at 51% compared with desktop usage, which is 42%.

No organisation – commercial, governmental or charitable – is or will be untouched by these developments. For trustees of charities, those charged with overseeing the vision and strategic direction of their organisations, the digital revolution is a phenomenon that simply cannot be ignored.

To be a trustee in a period of such profound change can be very unsettling. The new technologies present trustees with multiple challenges. On the one hand, they must ensure that their organisation is fully exploiting the potential of the digital transformation; understanding the changes and demands it

makes in communicating with the public, beneficiaries, staff, volunteers and regulators.

At the same time, the new media and digital communication bring in their train manifold threats; from the loss of beneficiary data, to cyber fraud, from reputational damage to the release of misinformation in blogs and emails. Trustees need to take a proactive approach in formulating policies to minimise these risks.

Beyond all this, the new technologies offer myriad ways of transforming the conduct of governance itself. Board portals, video conferencing and ever-present communication tools such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter mean the walls of the boardroom are falling and meetings are no longer conducted according to traditional rules. Trustees need to grasp these changes as well as ensuring that no board members are left behind in the ensuing tech-euphoria.

It is the aim of this report to provide a road map for trustees in dealing with the advancing digital revolution. Change is coming, ready or not. It’s better to be ready.

SECTION ONE

The opportunities

The digital transformation will revolutionise the way charities meet their objects and provide public benefit. Charities' purposes may not change but how those purposes are delivered almost certainly will.

For trustees, this multi-faceted shift is central to their role. According to the *Code of Good Governance*, a trustee board provides good governance and leadership by “developing and agreeing a long-term strategy” in order to meet new challenges. The digital revolution demands a long-term strategy.

While many charities have travelled some way down this path, there are worrying signs that many still have a long way to go. The Charity Commission holds website addresses for 76,579 charities out of a total of 164,208 English and Welsh charities on its register, which suggests that as many as 54% of charities may not have an online presence. Young people, the so-called ‘digital natives’, take digital communication for granted and expect a multi-media approach from the organisations they interact with. But digital has now crossed the generational divide. According to the regulator Ofcom, there was a nine percentage point increase in the number of over 65s going online between 2012 and 2014, a rise from 33% to 42%.

For boards, getting the most from the new technologies requires a radically different mindset from the traditional approach. One centred on being nimble and responsive to the ever-developing digital landscape. Trustees need to be aware that digital media is about engagement. It’s not a one-way broadcast. Feedback in the digital era is instantaneous. It can harm, as well as benefit, a charity’s brand and reputation. The organisation’s reputation is a chief concern of the board. Trustees need to appreciate the importance of investing in technology.

How digital communication is different

In the digital world, you communicate directly to the public without your message having to be mediated, as it was in the past, by print or broadcasting third parties. Digital media – websites, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest and so on – allow you to speak, potentially, to an audience of millions – or a carefully selected audience of 20. According to the chief executive of Parkinson’s UK, Steve Ford, “being on Twitter is a way for me to connect directly with the wider Parkinson’s community including people with the condition, staff, carers, volunteers, researchers and supporters.”

The British Museum, a registered charity, has seen visits to its website rise by 133% in the past five years, to 34 million, as its digital strategy has rapidly borne fruit. The museum now has a presence on nine social media platforms, and boasts 1.6 million followers. It plans to reach hundreds of millions of people digitally, by 2020.

The British Museum is in a unique position: it is a prestigious and well-known institution which attracts nearly seven million (in person) visitors a year. But the principles of its digital strategy hold true for other, less illustrious compatriots in the charity sector. The place to start is to understand the role of your website. The website is not merely a ‘shop window’ or online leaflet. The site needs to reflect your values and anticipate the needs of stakeholders. And it should welcome and encourage two-way communication. Like other forms of social media, the website can act as a way for the charity to learn about the experience

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of beneficiaries. Trustees should visit their charity's website regularly to keep up to date and identify its strengths and weaknesses.

Giving members a voice

The new technologies can be utilised in a way that directly gives members or the wider public a voice in the formation of charity policies and positions. The National Trust and RSPCA are two household name charities that have decided to live stream their annual general meetings in order to encourage remote participation. Members who are not able to be present in person are still able to vote and ask questions. The Start Network, a consortium of 24 overseas aid charities including Christian Aid and Save the Children, polls its members electronically using voting buttons to get an impression of the feelings of members and compose resolutions. The new digital media have the potential to significantly widen internal charity democracy.

The importance of a social media strategy

Ideally, the board should regularly consider such

digital metrics as the number of website visitors, comments and donors, and which parts of the site are popular. The number of Facebook shares and Twitter followers, and the content of LinkedIn discussion threads, should also be reviewed.

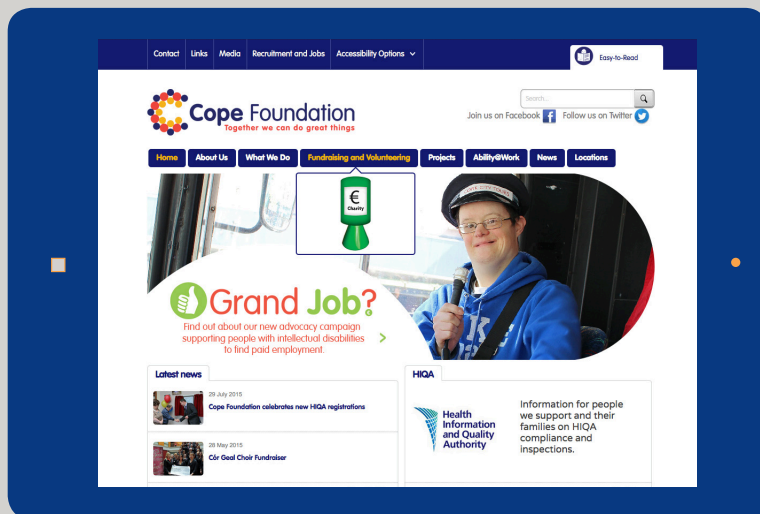
There is a temptation for trustees, who are often not personally at home in the digital world, to leave the development and use of the new technologies to the 'digital natives' among their charity's staff. That temptation should be resisted. The board, in partnership with the chief executive and executive team, needs to develop a digital and social media strategy for their organisation.

The strategy, akin to the British Museum's digital strategy, needs to set the overall purpose and goals, establish the tools to achieve them, and agree implementation and evaluation. The board needs to consider the new technologies in the round – their opportunities, challenges and threats.

Digital threats, as well as digital opportunities, should not be underestimated. It is to the threats we now turn.

CASE STUDY

The Cope Foundation



The charity, based in Cork in Ireland, provides a range of services and support to people with intellectual disabilities and autism. It made a far-reaching decision to make its website completely accessible to service users. The charity resolved that even the parts of its website aimed primarily at social workers or policy makers, should nevertheless be understandable to service users. This meant using

sans serif typefaces and cutting out unnecessary verbiage in favour of accessible language. In addition, easy-read symbols were employed in conjunction with lots of images. The charity worked hard to ensure that the site was simple to navigate around. The result was an appealing, well-structured website which symbolises the charity's commitment to equality and diversity.

Potential uses of digital presence

The potential uses of a diverse and regularly updated digital presence are growing all the time. Multi-media uploading and sharing platforms, such as YouTube, iTunes, SoundCloud and RSS, allow meetings, guest lectures or fundraising events to be recorded or even streamed live, in video or audio form. Campaign messages or beneficiary stories can be shared with an unlimited audience through specially commissioned films that supporters and clients can access through the website. Regular podcasting and setting up a YouTube channel will augment your ability to share richer content with beneficiaries and the public, at minimal cost.

Social media is an invaluable, and inexpensive, tool for campaigning and advocacy. For small charities which lack a specialist public policy staff, it may be the main tool. Social media can also be used to glean opinions and feedback from users and beneficiaries. The board should be given reports on beneficiary feedback obtained through digital channels as this is an important way to monitor performance, inform planning and improve the quality of services. Contributions to consultations in which charities are taking part can also be radically widened and democratised using digital communication.