

The State of Product Management in the Nonprofit Sector

2022 REPORT

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Introduction

Tech companies and vendors aren't the only ones who build technical solutions for nonprofits. But unfortunately, the prevailing myth across the sector is that nonprofits are users of technology, not the ones designing, building, and even distributing products or purpose-built solutions for their teams and similar organizations.

After two years of navigating program and service delivery, distributed teams, and more through digital means, it is even more common that nonprofit staff create technology solutions of their own than pre-pandemic.

With this in mind, NTEN surveyed over 300 nonprofit organizations to illustrate the realities, challenges, and areas of strength with product management for nonprofit staff and teams who are building, customizing, and otherwise supporting technology platforms for their programs and even for other organizations. For the purposes of this research, product management was defined as “the practice of strategically driving the development, market launch, and continual support and improvement of an organization’s products or solutions.”

This survey and report were supported by Schmidt Futures, a philanthropic initiative of Eric and Wendy Schmidt. Together we were eager to surface where there may be trends or commonalities with product management in the sector and where there are divergent experiences. What did we find?

- **Technical teams are mostly small and nascent:** As a whole sector (considering the U.S., Canada, and beyond), most nonprofit organizations are small. Two-thirds of respondents have no technical team or one that is 1–5 people in total. While a diversity of organizations participated in the survey — across all staff and budget sizes — there was no significant relationship between staff or budget size and the technical team size an organization may have.
- **Product management is happening, but often without visibility:** Nearly two-thirds of respondents have someone with specific product management responsibilities; however, in most cases, those duties are part of someone’s job without the explicit title of Product Manager. Moreover, as we have seen with various other technology or data-related duties, nonprofit staff often lead in ways that aren’t recognized in their title or even well-known across an organization.
- **Product management helps move the mission forward:** Ninety percent of respondents who have some level of product management said that they have increased operational or programmatic impact by having an active product management role on the team.

There are, as we suspected, a variety of barriers to hiring and retaining product managers within nonprofits. In

addition to the issue that nonprofits largely can't pay competitive market tech salaries that we've heard about many other tech-related jobs—and even non-tech jobs—in nonprofits before, there are other challenges to recruitment and retention that were notable in the survey results, including the difficulty in finding candidates with experience in the mission-area and the need for more mentoring of junior team members.

For over a decade, NTEN's research has found that certain organizational practices are linked to more effective technology use in organizations of all sizes and kinds. One of those leading practices is the articulation and inclusion of technology in an organization's strategic plan. Looking at some of the key findings above, it's clear that understanding and managing technical solutions as products that require evaluation, intentional investment and development, and long-term maintenance helps connect that technology to an organization's mission.

And when we connect all of our work to the mission, our impact increases, and we get that much closer to a better world.

ABOUT NTEN

We are creating a world where missions and movements are successful through the skillful and equitable use of technology.

We build transformative power by connecting people who are putting technology to work for social change. We build their individual and collective capacity for doing good by offering expert trainings, researching effective approaches, and providing places where relationships can flourish. We relentlessly advocate for the redesign of the systems and structures that maintain inequity.

NTEN's amazing community is made up of nonprofit staff, volunteers, board members, funders, consultants, and vendors from all walks of life.

Join us at nten.org.

ABOUT SCHMIDT FUTURES

Schmidt Futures bets early on exceptional people making the world better. Founded by Eric and Wendy Schmidt, Schmidt Futures is a philanthropic initiative that creates public value from private philanthropy through risk transfer—showing that brilliant people in networks can solve hard problems in science and society by connecting across fields, competing and challenging ideas, bringing multiple types of capital to bear, and applying science and technology thoughtfully through tools such as AI.

Nonprofit Technical Team Structures

To understand how nonprofits approach creating technology solutions, it's helpful to explore what their technical teams look like. No specific definition of "technical team" was provided, allowing respondents to tailor their answers to their organizations.

CHART 1

How big is your technical team?

Two-thirds of respondents have small technical teams (one to five people) or no technical team at all. The next largest group, six to ten people, represents about 17%. There is no significant relationship between overall size or budget and technical team size.

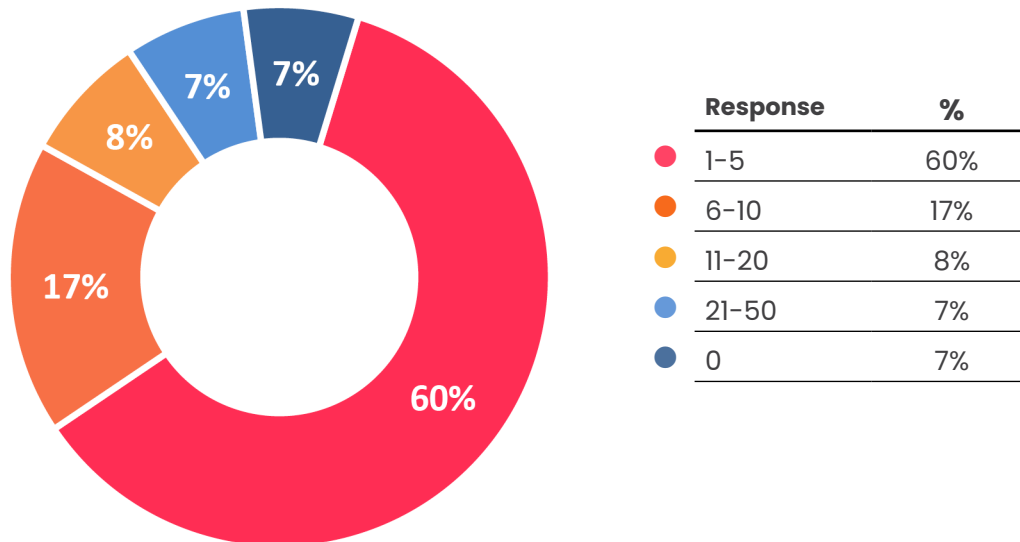
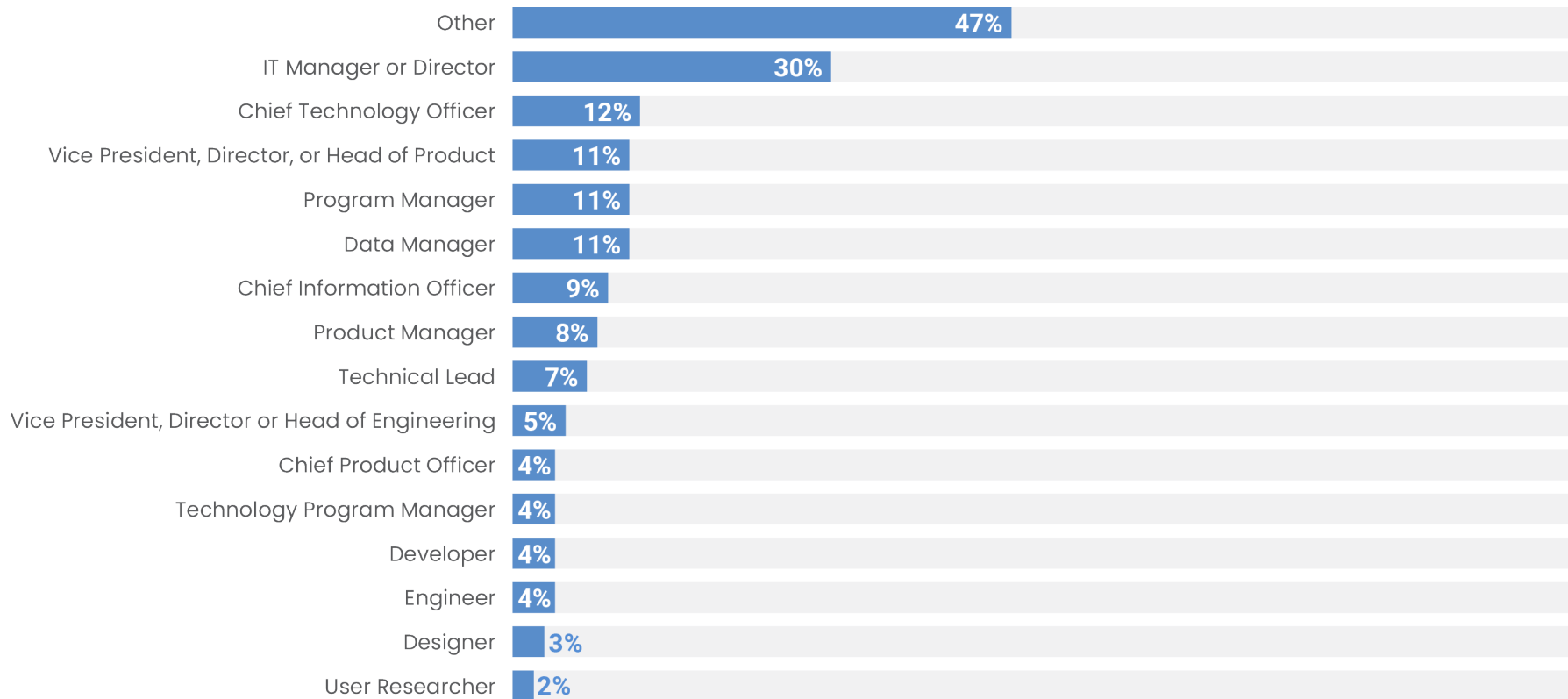


CHART 2

Who manages technical services?

Management of vendors and service providers by the technical teams most often falls to IT managers or directors (nearly 30%). A half dozen job categories – mostly leadership and management – hover near the 10% mark. The only other response with significant results is “other”. These answers frequently include CEO / Executive Director and Operations Directors or Managers.



Management of Technical Duties

Nonprofit work includes a variety of technical duties, managed by employees or outside parties.

CHART 3

Technical responsibilities managed by employees

Employees manage six of the ten categories for over 50% of respondents. The largest categories are project management, database development, and website development, all activities that are connected tightly to organizational mission and critical functions. Those who indicated 'other' generally reported some sort of security or training or job duties specific to the mission of their organization.

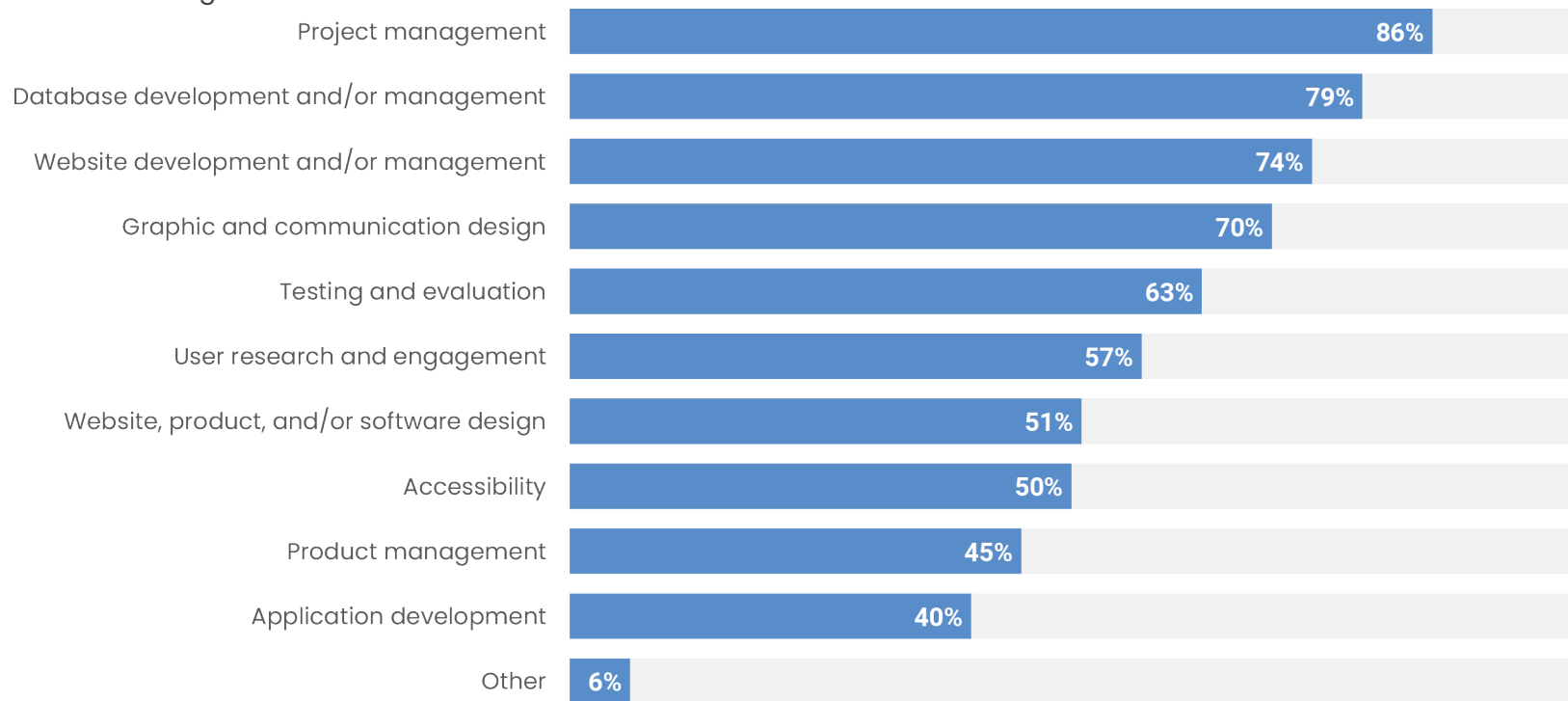
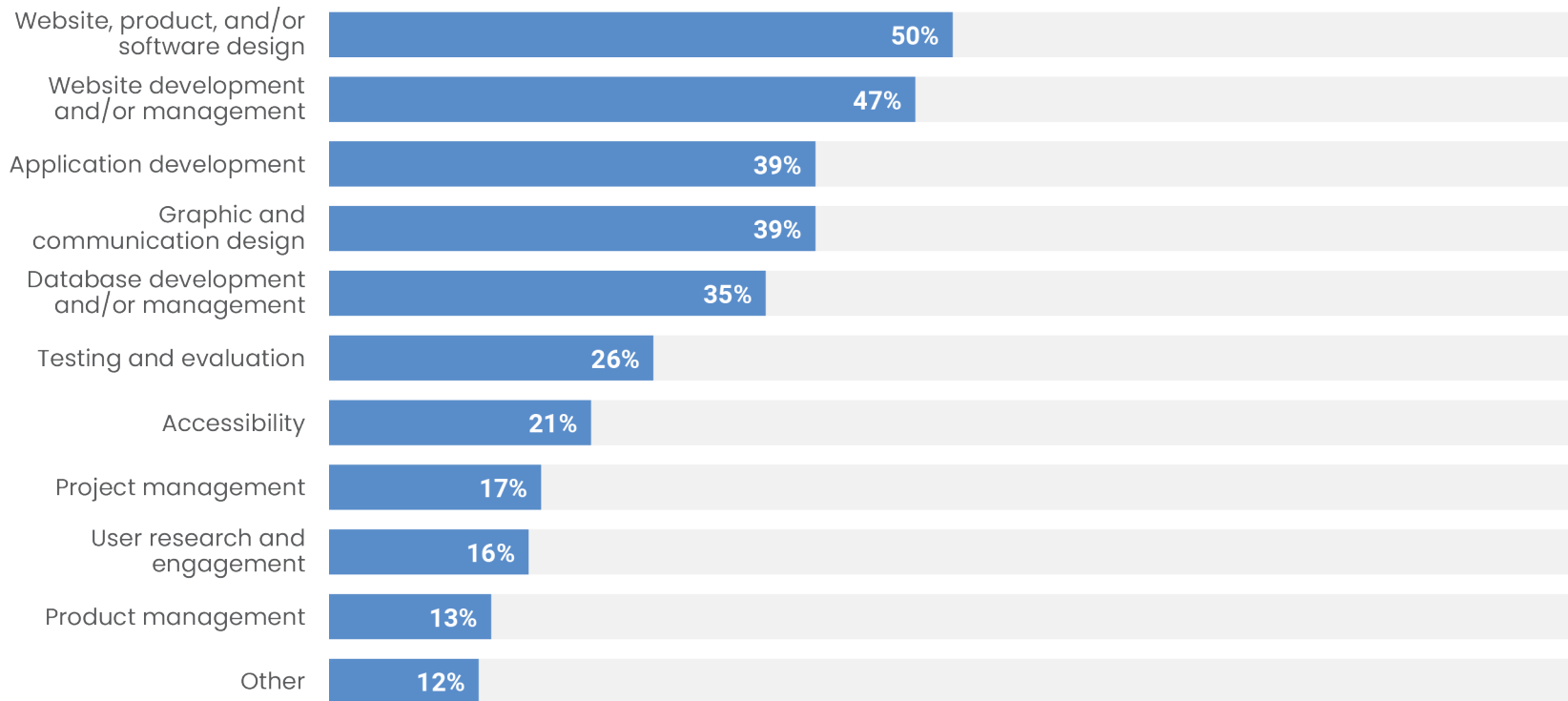


CHART 4

Technical responsibilities managed by outside parties

When compared to the responsibilities and areas of work managed by staff, fewer are managed by volunteers, contractors, or consultants. Only two categories—both related to websites—exceeded 40%.



The biggest difference between employee and outside management is with product management, which is mostly managed by employees. Interestingly, the two website categories have a significant mix of employee and outside management. Application and database development are also blended but lean more toward employee management. Smaller organizations are more likely to use these combined approaches.

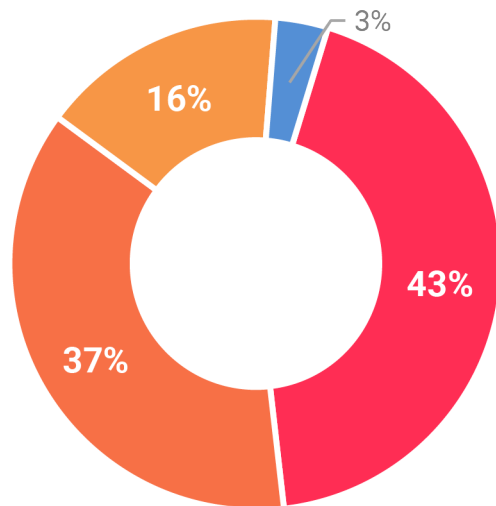
Product Management Approaches

The role of a product manager may include understanding user and market needs, articulating the product vision and what success looks like for the product, and working cross-functionally with a team to bring a product to market.

CHART 5

Nearly two-thirds of respondents have someone with specific product management responsibilities. In most cases, those duties are owned by someone without the explicit title of Product Manager.

Generally speaking, organizations with larger technical teams (10 or more members) are more likely to have specific product management responsibilities and to have staff with product management in their title.



Response	%
Yes, the responsibilities are included in someone's job that does NOT have the title Product Manager	43%
No, this is not a title or area of responsibility we have in the organization today	37%
Yes, the responsibilities are included in someone's job that does have the title Product Manager	16%
Yes, the responsibilities are provided by a consultant or contractor	3%

Product Manager Areas of Responsibility

Respondents identified a variety of responsibilities for the person in charge of product management. In their open-ended replies, many noted that the definition provided above accurately reflects their approach. Other representative examples include:

"Defining requirements for new development of features in the product, managing product vision and roadmap, supporting client adoption when needed, assisting with business model of the organization from product development perspective."

"Gathering and understanding stakeholder needs. Building a product development plan based on stakeholder needs, data analytics, current capacity etc. Executing a product plan with technical and non-technical cross-functional team. Managing user acceptance testing of a product. Executing a product launch. Post-launch monitoring and reporting of product performance."

"Market research, internal data analysis, consolidating and interpreting user problem statements, identifying opportunities from education research, meeting regularly with internal and external stakeholders, conducting design sprints, collaborating with engineers on possible solutions, shaping proposals and writing requirements, identifying success metrics, planning for instrumentation, creating prototypes and wireframes, user testing, considering edge

cases and risks in development, planning for project scope and timelines, working directly with developers during the build phase, performing user acceptance testing/ QA, coordinating launch, monitoring success, tracking opportunities for iterative improvements."

"Product Management is responsible for the overall success of technology products created and implemented. Product Management lives in the intersection of business needs, technology, and end user needs - translating between and integrating with each other."

"Supporting training, onboarding, and education of staff members on new technology products. Maintaining software and product updates for existing technical products/ platforms used by the organization. Providing support to users and donors for existing technical products/platforms (mostly around fundraising/event registration)."

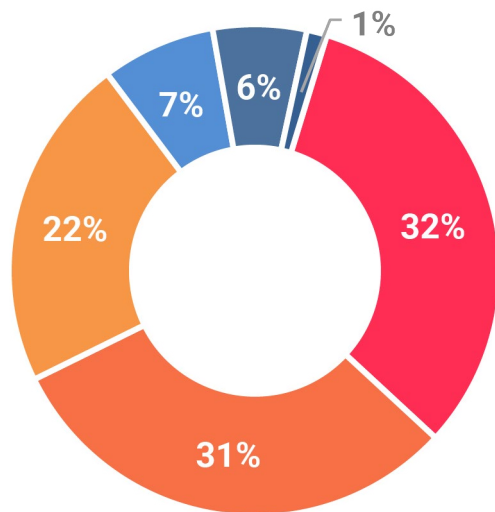
Technical Team Hiring and Recruitment

Regardless of their formal approach to product management, nonprofits use a variety of strategies to find, hire, and retain the members of their technical teams.

CHART 6

Where do you look to hire for your technical teams?

Nonprofits have two primary sources for finding people to staff their technical teams. About one-third indicated that they look for team members with nonprofit experience. Just under one-fourth turn to the technology sector for these employees. None of the other three options provided came in at even 10%. Those who indicated “other” fit into three categories, fairly evenly divided: a blend of experience, the use of volunteers or consultants instead of paid staff, and the lack of a technical team altogether.



Response	%
The nonprofit sector	32%
Other	31%
The tech sector	22%
Recent graduates from BA and Masters programs	7%
The corporate sector	6%
Government	1%

CHART 7

What challenges do you face in technical team hiring?

The second biggest challenge reported was the ability to find candidates with both technical and mission-related experience, with 20% of respondents indicating this is always an issue and a total of 87% indicating it as at least sometimes an issue. Planning for the hiring of technical team members was reported as less of an issue compared to the other categories, with 25% of respondents indicating it as never an issue.

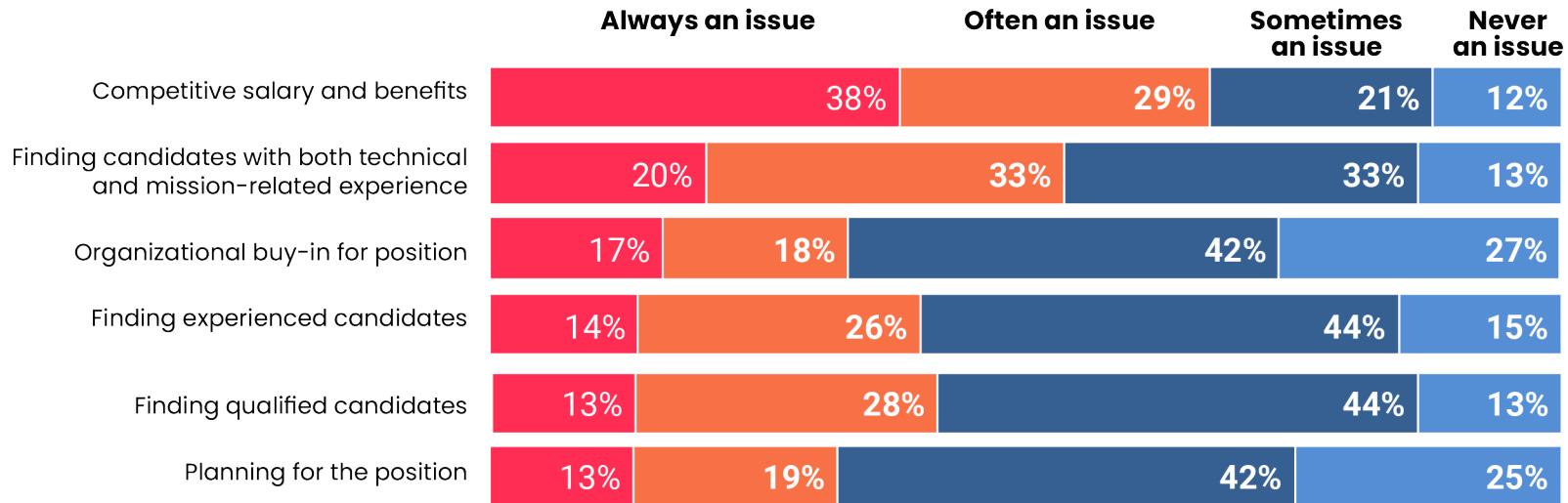
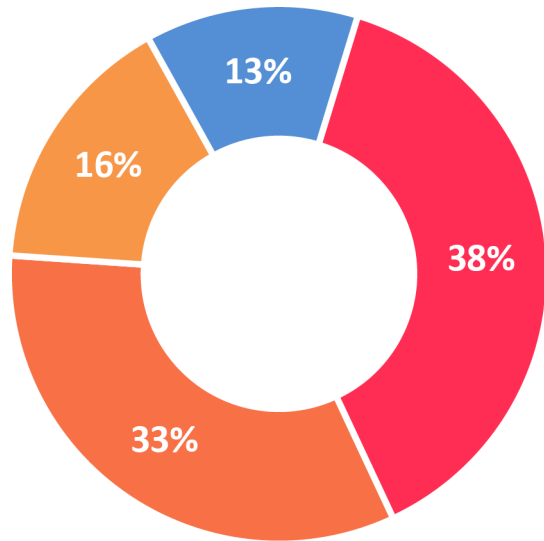


CHART 8

Is technical team retention a challenge for you?

Retention is an issue for over half of the survey respondents. Just under 40% indicated that it was “sometimes” an issue, while one-third indicated that it was “never” a problem. Thirteen per cent of respondents found it to be a consistent challenge. Those that indicated “other” – as with the previous staffing questions – mostly do not hire for these positions or rely on contractors.



Response	%
Yes, sometimes	38%
No, rarely	33%
Other	16%
Yes, usually	13%

Making the Most of Product Management

For the two-thirds of respondents who have some form of product management, there are a variety of benefits and a mix of plans for making the most of that role.

CHART 9

What are the benefits of Product Management for your organization?

Three of the four benefits offered were mentioned by 50% or more of respondents. An overwhelming 90% indicated that their overall impact is improved by having an active product management role. Even the smallest category – revenue increase – was noted by over one-fourth of the nonprofits. Those who indicated “other” had a wide range of suggestions; the most common themes included improved efficiency, transparency, and versatility.

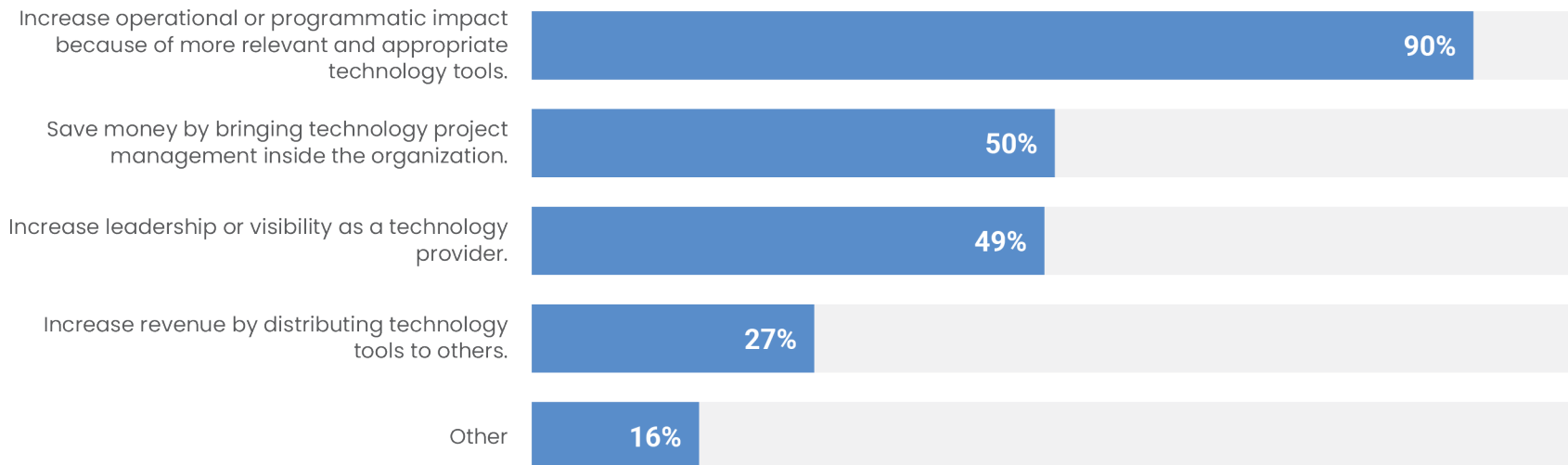


CHART 10

Who uses the products you manage?

Nonprofits develop products for use by diverse constituencies. Nearly two-thirds of respondents have products for community members and program participants; this includes most of those who indicated client or customer groups in their “other” responses. A nearly identical number have products for internal use, serving staff and teams.

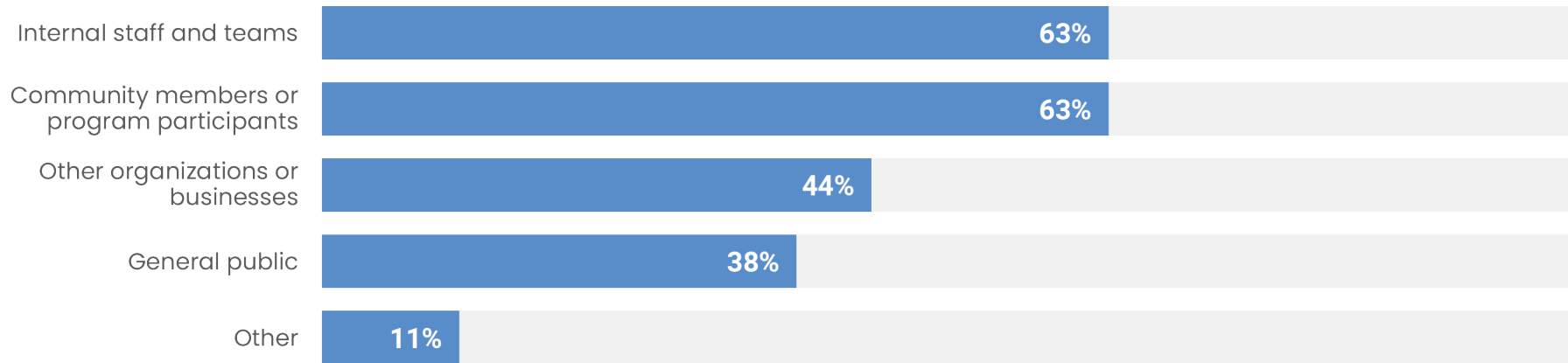
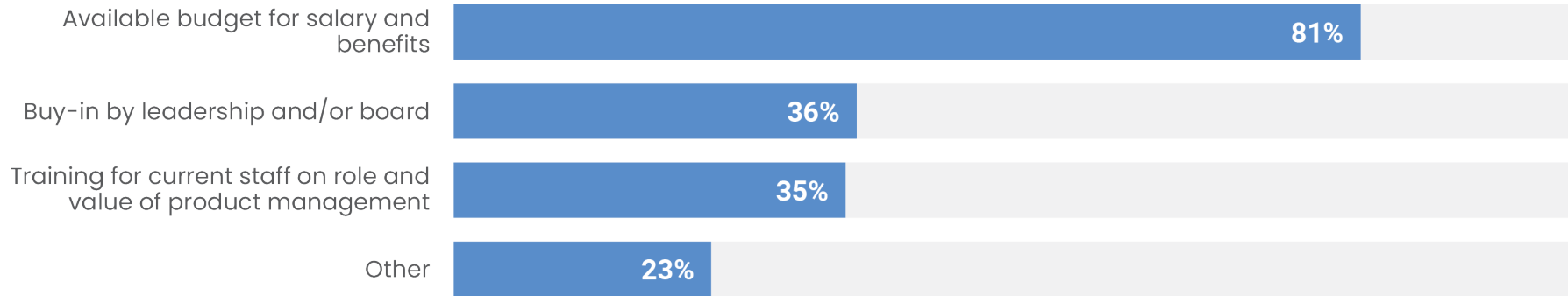


CHART 11

What would enable you to expand your product management activities?

The most significant barrier to increasing the staffing for product management is money. Over 80% of respondents selected this challenge, including several of those who listed financial constraints in “other”. Staff training and leadership buy-in had very similar response rates, but both came in at less than half the level of response seen for financial constraints.



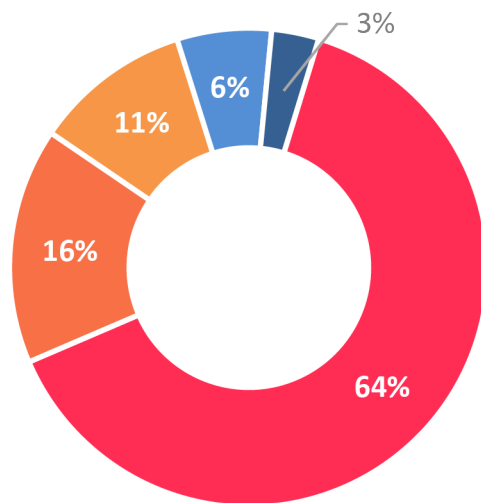
Nonprofits Without Product Management

The one-third of respondents who do not have product management in place have a variety of reasons and strategies for their decisions.

CHART 12

Why have you decided not to have a product management strategy or team?

Some nonprofits have made a conscious decision not to include product management in their organization. The most common reason for not having a product manager or product management strategy is that these nonprofits do not identify any of their services as “products”. Nearly two-thirds of respondents listed this as their primary reason. About one-sixth feel that product management is not something that requires dedicated staff. Only 10% are constrained by budget. Those who selected “other” mostly indicated variations on these themes.



Response	%
● We do not consider any of our technical projects to be products.	64%
● We do not consider product management a necessary job responsibility for our team.	16%
● We would like to have a product manager but do not currently have the budget to hire more staff.	11%
● Other	6%
● I do not know what product management means.	3%

CHART 13

Who handles product management at your organization?

Even without a formal product management role or strategy, many respondents indicated some responsibility in place for this function. Almost 40% indicated that some part of the leadership team is responsible, and one-fourth put these duties with their IT group. Those who indicated “other” reported either a blended approach of the options listed or that they have no products or product management.

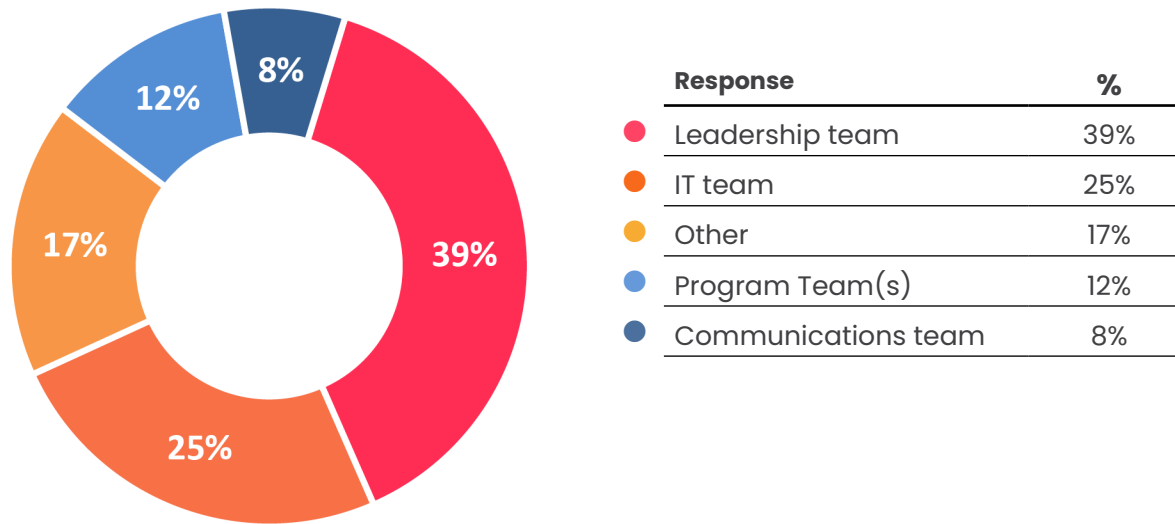


CHART 14

What would make hiring a product manager possible for you?

Most respondents indicated a mix of factors that would be needed before they would create a specific product management role. Over 60% responded that budget is a constraint, and a similar number noted the need for leadership buy-in. Almost half of respondents selected both of these reasons. Just under half selected the need for product management training as a barrier. Significantly, just under one-third of all respondents selected all three reasons. Most of those who indicated “other” reported some version of “no need” or “no products”.

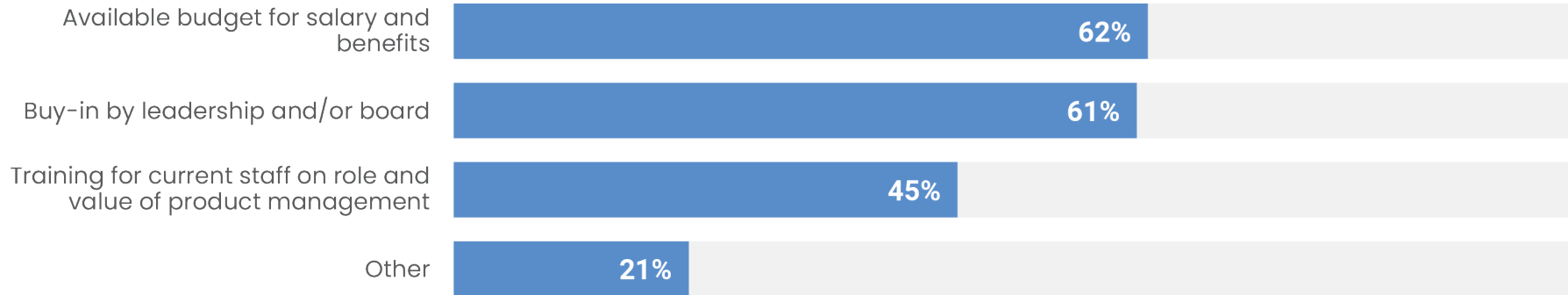
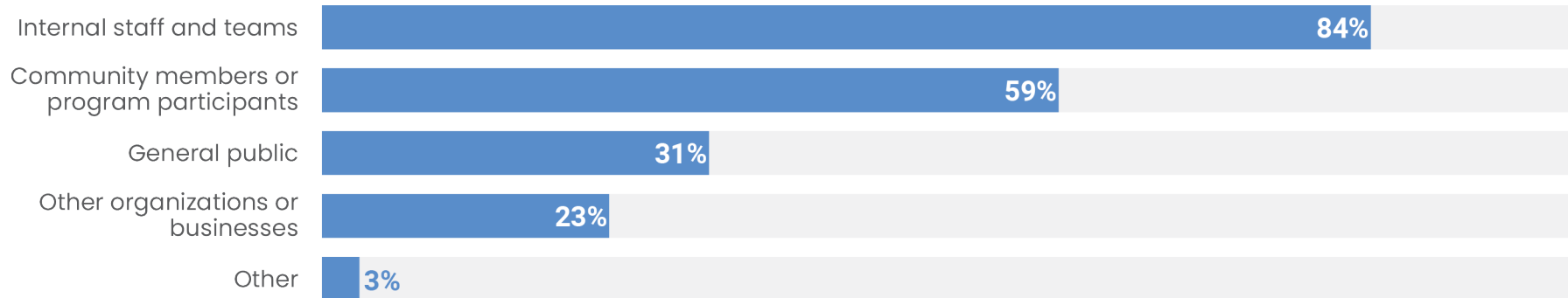


CHART 15

Who uses your products and solutions?

Not surprisingly, respondents who don't have formal product management overwhelmingly indicated that the primary users of their technology solutions are internal staff and teams. This response accounts for over 80% of replies. The next largest category – Community members or program participants – was selected by nearly 60%. Over one-third indicated both of these groups. The two more general categories – General public and Other businesses or organizations – were selected one-third and one-fourth of the time respectively.



Survey Respondents

Over 300 nonprofits responded to the survey, representing organizations in many service areas, sizes, budgets, and ages. This diversity helps ensure the overall utility and value of the results.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS

What sector do these nonprofits represent?

Response	%
Education	19%
Human Services	15%
Public/Social Benefit	12%
Environment / Animal Welfare	11%
Health	10%
Civil Rights/Advocacy	8%
Youth	6%
Arts/Culture	5%
International	4%
Housing	3%
Legal	2%
Faith-Based	2%
Employment	1%

The respondents represent organizations that varied in size, both in terms of staff and budget.

Staff Size	%
Fewer than 5	18%
6 - 10	11%
11 - 25	18%
26 - 50	15%
51 - 100	10%
101 - 250	11%
251 - 500	8%
501 - 1,000	5%
Over 1,000	4%

Budget	%
None - all volunteer	2%
Below \$100,000	7%
\$100,001 - \$250,000	4%
\$250,001 - \$500,000	7%
\$500,001 - \$1 Million	6%
\$1 Million - \$5 Million	30%
\$5 Million - \$10 Million	11%
Over \$10 Million	28%

They've also been in operation for a wide range of durations.

Response	%
Less than one year	1%
1 - 5 years	14%
6 - 10 years	10%
11 - 20 years	18%
21 - 40 years	26%
41 - 75 years	22%
76+ years	12%

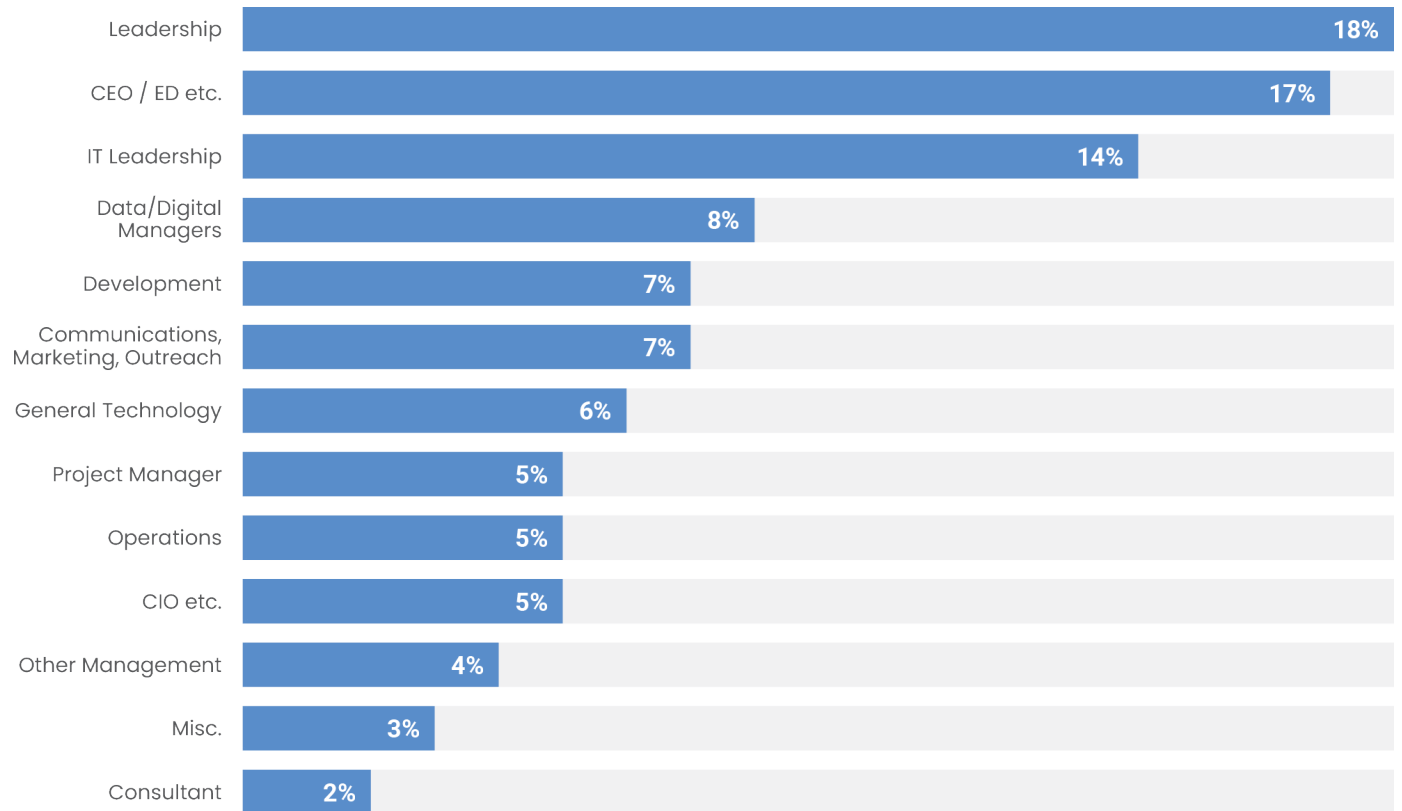
ABOUT THE INDIVIDUALS

Survey respondents represent a wide variety of jobs, responsibilities, and experience.

CHART 16

What is your job title?

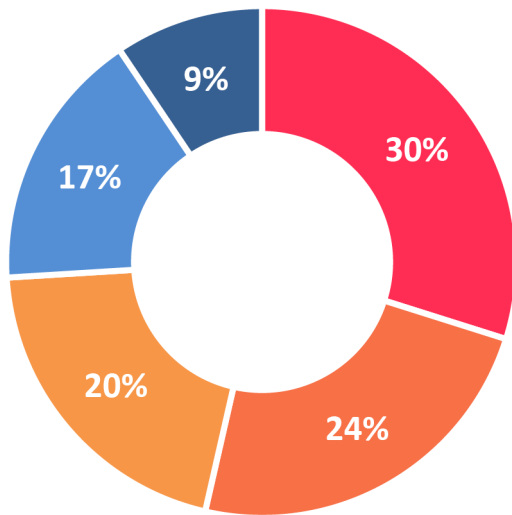
The majority of job responsibilities represented in the survey are people in leadership positions, with technology duties, or both. Over one-third identified as CEOs, Executive Directors, or some other top-level leadership position (Directors, Chief Financial Officers, and the like). Another third have technology-related job titles, including data, digital, IT, and other descriptors; almost half of these were Chief Information Officers. The remaining third have a wide variety of duties.



What is your job experience?

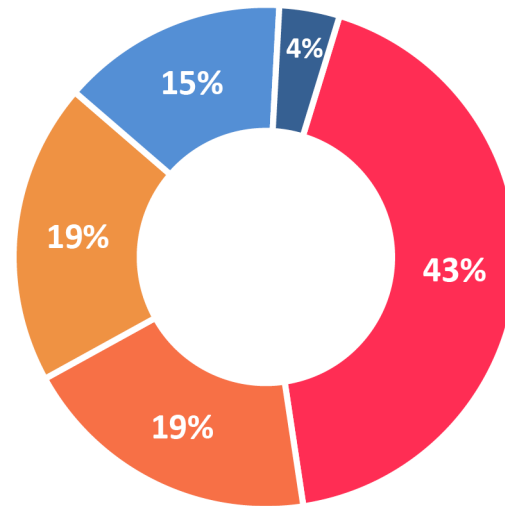
Most respondents have extensive experience both in their overall roles and at their current organizations. Nearly half have been with their current employer for over six years. Significantly more (over 60%) have been in their current role – wherever they worked – for a similar period of time.

How long have you been employed by your organization?



Response	%
More than 10 years	30%
1 - 3 years	24%
4 - 6 years	20%
7 - 10 years	17%
Less than 1 year	9%

How long have you had the type of job you have today, including at previous organizations?



Response	%
More than 10 years	43%
1 - 3 years	19%
7 - 10 years	19%
4 - 6 years	15%
Less than 1 year	4%

APPENDIX:

Data Tables

The following tables are provided to increase the accessibility of this report for readers with disabilities. Each table corresponds to the chart with the same number in the narrative of this report.

Table 1: How big is your technical team?

Response	%
0	7%
1-5	60%
6-10	17%
11-20	8%
21-50	7%
51-100	1%
101+	0%

Table 2: Who manages technical services?

Response	%
Chief Information Officer	9%
Chief Product Officer	4%
Vice President, Director, or Head of Product	11%
Chief Technology Officer	12%
Data Manager	11%
Designer	3%
Developer	4%
Vice President, Director or Head of Engineering	5%
Engineer	4%
IT Manager or Director	30%
Product Manager	8%
Technology Program Manager	4%
Program Manager	11%
Technical Lead	7%
User Researcher	2%
Other	47%

Table 3: Technical responsibilities managed by employees

Response	%
Accessibility	50%
Application development	40%
Database development and/or management	79%
Graphic and communication design	70%
Project management	86%
Product management	45%
Testing and evaluation	63%
User research and engagement	57%
Website development and/or management	74%
Website, product, and/or software design	51%
Other	6%

Table 4: Technical responsibilities managed by outside parties

Response	%
Accessibility	21%
Application development	39%
Database development and/or management	35%
Graphic and communication design	39%
Project management	17%
Product management	13%
Testing and evaluation	26%
User research and engagement	16%
Website development and/or management	47%
Website, product, and/or software design	50%
Other	12%

Table 5: Do you have a Project Manager

Response	%
Yes, the responsibilities are included in someone's job that does NOT have the title Product Manager	43%
No, this is not a title or area of responsibility we have in the organization today	37%
Yes, the responsibilities are included in someone's job that does have the title Product Manager	16%
Yes, the responsibilities are provided by a consultant or contractor	3%

Table 6: Where do you look to hire for your technical team?

Response	%
The nonprofit sector	32%
Other	31%
The tech sector	22%
Recent graduates from BA and Masters programs	7%
The corporate sector	6%
Government	1%

Table 7: What challenges do you face in technical team hiring?

Response	Never An Issue	Sometimes An Issue	Often An Issue	Always An Issue
Finding candidates with both technical and mission-related experience	13%	33%	33%	20%
Finding experienced candidates	15%	44%	26%	14%
Finding qualified candidates	13%	44%	28%	13%
Competitive salary and benefits	12%	21%	29%	38%
Planning for the position	25%	42%	19%	13%
Organizational buy-in for position	27%	42%	18%	17%

Table 8: Is technical team retention a challenge for you?

Response	%
Yes, sometimes	38%
No, rarely	33%
Other	16%
Yes, usually	13%

Table 9: What are the benefits of Product Management for your organization?

Response	%
Increase operational or programmatic impact because of more relevant and appropriate technology tools.	90%
Save money by bringing technology project management inside the organization.	50%
Increase leadership or visibility as a technology provider.	49%
Increase revenue by distributing technology tools to others.	27%
Other	16%

Table 10: Who uses the products you manage?

Response	%
Internal staff and teams	63%
Community members or program participants	63%
Other organizations or businesses	44%
General public	38%
Other	11%

Table 11: What would enable you to expand your product management activities?

Response	%
Available budget for salary and benefits	81%
Buy-in by leadership and/or board	36%
Training for current staff on role and value of product management	35%
Other	23%

Table 12: Why have you decided not to have a product management strategy or team?

Response	%
We do not consider any of our technical projects to be products.	64%
We do not consider product management a necessary job responsibility for our team.	16%
We would like to have a product manager but do not currently have the budget to hire more staff.	11%
Other	6%
I do not know what product management means.	3%

Table 13: Who handles product management at your organization?

Response	%
Leadership team	39%
IT team	25%
Other	17%
Program Team(s)	12%
Communications team	8%

Table 14: What would make hiring a product manager possible for you?

Response	%
Available budget for salary and benefits	62%
Buy-in by leadership and/or board	61%
Training for current staff on role and value of product management	45%
Other	21%

Table 15: Who uses your products and solutions?

Response	%
Internal staff and teams	84%
Community members or program participants	59%
General public	31%
Other organizations or businesses	23%
Other	3%

Table 16: What is your job title?

Category	%
Leadership	18%
CEO/ED	17%
IT Leadership	14%
Data/Digital Managers	8%
Development	7%
Communications, Marketing, Outreach	7%
General Technology	6%
Project Manager	5%
Operations	5%
CIO etc.	5%
Other Management	4%
Misc.	3%
Consultant	2%

Table 17: How long have you been employed by your organization?

Response	%
Less than 1 year	9%
1 - 3 years	24%
7 - 10 years	17%
4 - 6 years	20%
More than 10 years	30%

Table 18: How long have you had the type of job you have today, including at previous organizations?

Response	%
Less than 1 year	4%
1 - 3 years	19%
4 - 6 years	15%
7 - 10 years	19%
More than 10 years	43%