

Board Portal Software

Purchase Evaluation Guide

Introduction

The startling truth is more than half of board members do not feel their board is currently structured for maximum effectiveness.

Effective boards drive organizational vision, serve as internal and community leaders, and act as vehicles of change. But the complexities of board management—from scheduling meetings and tracking RSVPs to creating agendas and compiling meeting materials—place a challenging and time-consuming burden on staff. More and more organizations are turning to board portals to streamline communication, centralize institutional memory and evaluate performance. But how do you choose a solution that fits your organization’s mission, board and budget?

This interactive guide walks through the steps necessary to assess your board’s technology needs and includes a comparison guide so you can evaluate board portal solutions. If you are considering a board portal for your organization, here’s the first step.

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Step One: What You Need

Board portals are growing in popularity, but that doesn't mean they are interchangeable. They differ by sector, organization size, functionality and price.

One of the most difficult aspects of a new technology investment is finding a solution that satisfies your organizational needs and wants. As each organization differs from the next, processes and necessary outputs are unique from one to another. Your selected technology must supplement weaknesses and be adaptable to your board's needs.

Board Management and Communication

How Do You Spot Low Board Engagement?

- Low meeting attendance
- Poor punctuality
- High turnover
- Low productivity

According to [our survey results](#), **nearly one in four board members aren't fully engaged with the mission of the organization.** And contrary to instinct, low board engagement is usually not because you're asking too much of board members, but too little. More than eight out of 10 board members think expectations are reasonable. So why the disconnect?

Low board member engagement stems from misalignment of mission, passively managed expectations, communication silos and untapped talent. Finding the right board portal solution will help your organization recruit and engage the right board members, break down communication silos, and actively manage progress and performance. But it starts with mapping your current processes.

Process mapping is the exercise of documenting your current processes in order to better understand shortcomings and identify specific steps that can be taken to improve. It will prevent getting distracted by shiny technology features and steer you toward technology that is [compatible with your organizational needs](#).

In the space on the next page, record your current processes for board management and communication, considering committees as well. Write each step in the process on a separate line, and include notes on related documents, responsible parties/key stakeholders, and current methods of communication (e.g., email, online calendar, internal server, paper files).

Consider the following:

- How are you scheduling meetings and sending meeting reminders?
- How are board communications and information distributed?
- What do board and committee members use to communicate with one another?
- Where are you housing necessary compliance documents, such as 990s, conflict of interest policies and procedures and independent director requirements?
- How are you tracking board member expectations and performance?

Current Board Management and Communication Processes			
Activity	Associated Documents / Location	Responsible Parties	Communication Method(s)
Quarterly board meeting	Board packet "2014_Q1_Board-Packet.docx" on server (2014 > Board > Q1)	Sarah K., Lisa R.	Email, Word document on internal server, print and compile internally

Not sure how to map your process?

Schedule a BoardMax demo to have a StreamLink Software team member walk you through it.

Compliance and Engagement: Align Board Portal Goals

After you see your current system on paper, you may notice redundancies, inefficiencies or opportunities for automation. In addition to solving for weaknesses, it's important to align board portal goals with board member expectations.

Write board member expectations in the worksheet below. If your nonprofit bylaws don't currently have performance expectations for board members, it's critical to discuss these as an organization to ensure you purchase a solution that helps you track and report on performance.

Common Causes of Low Board Engagement

- Misalignment of mission: Does everyone share the same goal?
- Passively managed expectations: Are objectives clear, acted upon and evolving?
- Communication silos: Is transparency expected and engagement easy?
- Untapped talent: Is full potential being realized?

Write board member goals and expectations in the space below.

Board Member Minimum Expectations
1. <i>Prepare for and participate in at least 75% of board and committee meetings annually.</i>
2.
3.
4.
5.

Evaluate the goals you identified above. Are they focused on attendance? Committee leadership? Annual giving and fundraising? How will you track progress and performance? The type of expectations you set for your board will influence the board portal features that are right for you.

Now you’re ready to define your future state. Your future state is what board management and communication could look like. What will you have accomplished? Focus on a goal and not on a software feature or functionality.

Write your board portal goals in the spaces below.

Board Portal Goals
1. <i>Make board member meeting attendance easy to track and easily accessible by board and nonprofit leadership.</i>
2.
3.

Stakeholders, Decision Makers and Systems

As you might uncover during process mapping, board management influences people and processes outside the board. Other stakeholders and ancillary systems are necessary for successful board management, and play a role in technology purchasing decisions. It’s important to identify these components of your system in order to understand how and why they will be affected by a technology change.

In the space on the next page, list any stakeholders or ancillary systems that are required to interface with the board portal and note the reason why.

Board Portal Software Stakeholders		
Stakeholder	System	Dependency
Administrative assistant		Schedule meetings, send reminders, print and compile board packets
	Outlook and Gmail email and calendar	Board members must be able to sync meetings with personal email and calendar systems

Questions to Ask Potential Vendors:

- How does your software interface with _____?
- How flexible is the software?
- Can it be configured to work around _____?
- How often are updates available? Is there a list of upcoming updates?

Your Implementation Timeline

Once you've identified what you want to achieve and who will be impacted, you're ready to outline an ideal implementation timeline. Important factors to consider include:

- Number and complexity of integration with other necessary systems.
- Number of staff, board and committee members that need to be trained on the new software.
- Typical board meeting calendar; logical timing for board member rollout.

Questions to Ask Potential Vendors:

- Is there a typical timeline for implementation?
- Does integration with other systems require additional configuration, or is it turnkey?

In the chart below, list the necessary steps under each section. Estimate the time (either in days, weeks or months) to complete, as well as dependencies that might alter timelines.

Board Portal Implementation Timeline		
Implementation	Estimated Time to Complete	Dependencies
Platform Selection <i>Research available software solutions</i>	<i>4 hours</i>	<i>Supervisor/board approval</i>
Staff Training		
Board Member Rollout & Training		
Other Steps		
Total Estimated Implementation Time		

Budgeting for a Board Portal

Budgeting for a board portal is essential in determining the return on investment (ROI) of the transition to software, and in gaining buy-in from your board or other key decision makers.

One way to overcome this is by calculating the amount of time spent on administrative tasks that would be alleviated by board portal software, and converting that into an estimated cost savings. [Paper, printing, binding and shipping costs of board and committee materials](#) should also be taken into account.

In Section 1 of the workspace on the next page, record the estimated amount of time spent on administrative tasks. From this, you can calculate the estimated cost (in wages) spent on such activities. In Section 2, calculate annual paper expenses, and in Section 3, tally the potential for savings through the adoption of a board portal.

Section 1: Labor Costs		
Board Meetings Per Year		
Activity	Average Time Spent	Annual Board Meeting Investment (time spent per meeting x meetings per year)
Committee Meetings Per Year		
Activity	Average Time Spent	Annual Committee Meeting Investment (time spent per meeting x meetings per year)
Total Administrative Time		
Cost (total time x hourly wage)		
Subtotal		

Section 2: Paper Costs		
Board Packet Pages	No. Board Meetings Per Year	Total Board Packet Pages Per Year
Committee Packet Pages	No. Committee Meetings Per Year	Total Committee Packet Pages Per Year
Total Pages Per Year		
Cost Per Page*		
Total Paper Costs		
Section 3: Total Expenses		
Labor Costs – Subtotal		
Paper Costs – Subtotal		
Total Board Communication Expenses		

**If you are unsure of paper costs, [our research](#) has found \$0.1007 per page to be a good estimate.*

Take the time to calculate your annual spend—both in time and labor—on board management. In doing so, you will be able to articulate the full ROI of a board portal, both in fixed costs and intangibles like a [more efficient board](#), [better management and engagement of individual members](#) and [more effective board meetings](#).

Step Two: Compare Platforms

Once you’ve identified your desired goals for board portal software, stakeholders and other systems, required timeline for implementation and budget, you’re ready to begin researching and comparing board portals.

Board Portal Software Matrix

Use the Board Portal Software Matrix on the next page to compare platforms, customizing the list to the desired capabilities you’ve uncovered so far.

Also Consider:

- Simplicity of the user interface
- Flexibility
- Pricing structure (by user vs. by subscription license; first-year cost vs. recurring costs)

Board Portal Software Matrix			
	BoardMax	Option Two	Option Three
Upload board and committee contact information			
Designate access levels for staff and board			
Share board and committee meetings/events calendar			
Create interactive meeting agendas including topics and documents			
Synchronize meetings to board members' personal calendars			
Automate email communication to be sent at regular intervals			
Manage board documents in one centralized location			
Assign tasks to board members and staff			
Manage board and committee RSVPs and attendance			
Post meeting minutes and notes			
Access board and committee rosters			
Build and edit custom email templates			
Manage and track member expectations and performance			
Measure and report member performance			
Track member skills, demographics and detailed profile information			

Manage and track board member terms			
Store 990s, conflict of interest policies and procedures, and independent director requirements			
Create ballots and polls			
Offline access to meeting packet			
Collaborative workspaces			
Customizable meeting agenda formats			
Leadership volunteers and organization users	Unlimited		
Boards and committees	Unlimited		
Document storage	Unlimited		
Cloud-based or on-premise solution	Cloud-based SaaS solution		

Step Three: Choose the Right Vendor

The final step in purchasing a board portal is selecting the right vendor. Even an ideal platform won't work if you don't choose the right partner for your organization.

Factors to consider at this stage:

- Financial stability
- Reputation
- Hosting specifications
- Training, maintenance and support
- Industry expertise

Questions to Ask Potential Vendors:

- Do you have data back-up and recovery systems in place?
How often is data backed up?
- Do you have any customer case studies, testimonials or references you could share?
- How many other customers do you serve?

Setup and Training

As you narrow in on your preferred vendor, you should evaluate the setup and training process. Make sure that both are compatible with the level of complexity your organization requires, and the size and skills of your board members and staff. As a benchmark, it often takes a few weeks for installation and several hours of staff training before a full product rollout.

Understanding the learning curve upfront will also help you encourage buy-in and adoption of board members. Provide them with information on the processes that will be changing, the amount of time it will take to get comfortable, and tips on developing new habits.

The Ronald McDonald House of Cleveland [used a phased approach to board portal adoption](#). First, board members were recommended to register for the portal, but outside requests were still accommodated. Then a final deadline was established, after which all communications and documents were transferred only through the board portal.

Need help?

Read more about encouraging board portal adoption.

Maintenance and Customer Support

Before choosing a software solution, it's also important to understand the level of ongoing maintenance, troubleshooting and customer support you will receive from the software vendor. Will staff be available for questions and bugs?

To that end, does the company understand your organization's needs? Are employees knowledgeable about the challenges your organization and board face? You want a product that suits your needs, as well as a software partner that will help guide you along the way.

Questions to Ask Potential Vendors:

- Is training available? What about long-term support?
- How long will it take to get our system set up and running?
- How are updates and upgrades managed?
- What kind of support is available?

If you've completed this entire process, you can be confident that you've done due diligence on behalf of your organization, and that you will select the right portal for your board.

About StreamLink Software

[StreamLink Software](#) offers grant and board management platforms that connect disparate systems and processes creating dynamic ecosystems that drive performance and compliance. StreamLink Software's products, [AmpliFund](#) and [BoardMax](#), enable nonprofit and public sector institutions to systemize complex tasks, secure additional revenue, and increase efficiency to better serve their communities.

AmpliFund and BoardMax provide accurate, immediate, and accessible reporting to ensure public trust and protect the reputation of the organization to the board and other stakeholders. Founded in 2008, StreamLink Software helps solve different management challenges including board member and leadership volunteer management.

Connect with StreamLink Software on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#), [YouTube](#) and on [our blog](#).

Demo BoardMax today!