

Resource: What is data governance?

What is data governance, and what is its relationship to an organization's overall governance? Erin Kang and Neemarie Alam, ONN's Director of Network Engagement and Data Strategy Manager, get together to chat about data, governance, and how these critical components of a nonprofit's infrastructure work together to drive forward its purpose and values.



[LINK TO FULL VIDEO](#)

What is data, and what is data governance?

Data is simply raw, disorganized facts that have been collected together. It can be quantitative (aka numbers) or qualitative (aka interviews, conversations, art, etc.). It does not have any real meaning until we assign it meaning.

All organizations collect data, and to different degrees - they may manage, store, analyze, and use it. This could look like tracking expenses, keeping registration forms in a drawer, or checking out the popularity of tweets and blog posts. Data can be nebulous and open to interpretation.

ONN's [framework for nonprofit data strategies](#) describes data governance as the approach to your organization's data. This can encompass policies, practices, tools, standards, and metrics around your data.

As an organization, when you build a data governance plan or framework, it makes sure that everyone is on the same page about how to handle your data. Data governance can be key to an organization establishing a very different relationship to their data- one of ownership, control, and greater accountability.

Examples in action: data governance in OFIFC and the Black Health Equity Working Group

- [Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres' USAI Research framework](#) - created as a guide for all Indigenous research projects conducted by the OFIFC and urban Indigenous communities, in which the OFIFC is involved.
- [Black Health Equity Working Group's Data Governance Framework for Health Data Collected from Black Communities in Ontario](#) - developed to guide health data collected from Black communities in Ontario, addressing concerns from Black communities about the continued extraction of data from them without the return of tangible benefits.

What are the connections between data and governance?

Data and governance are both nonprofit infrastructure tools. They can both be used to help an organization fulfill its mission and mandate. Neither data nor governance has to be the core function or purpose of the organization (though there are exceptions, of course!) but they can be used alongside other nonprofit tools to help an organization bring their purpose to fruition.

In addition, there is increasingly more data collection happening *about* governance. We're seeing so many reports, research, and initiatives underway that are exploring different governance models, connecting governance and equity more broadly, and are demonstrating how effective governance can support good work.

What trends or patterns exist in the nonprofit sector right now?

There may be some missed opportunities for nonprofits to delve more deeply into their relationships with data and to build out the systems that they need for their data as a whole instead of piecemealing/developing it for only one specific project. The same goes for nonprofits delving more deeply into how their governance is defined and interpreted, so that it can inform how their governance systems are built out. Often, organizations may have data or governance systems in place that are actually a combination of years or culture and habits, varying definitions, and mixed understandings that result in employing cookie-cutter models.

Shifting how we think about both data and governance helps us create and imagine new connections and relationships for the board and others to get involved in governance and data.

What's a key takeaway around data governance?

Data governance is important because it encourages nonprofit organizations to closely examine the data they collect and determine how to handle it so they can use it appropriately and better. If we think about the potential of data to help us pinpoint future problems or map out solutions to internal or external issues, we need our data to be good- to be collected ethically, stored properly, be standardized, and to be reviewed contextually. Data is interesting because it carries the significance that we allocate to it; we're limited in its usage if it is not relevant, consistent, and reliable.

Data governance also helps us protect vulnerable data - data about the populations we may serve or our donors or our staff. It can help us think about what protections we need, and who has access to what levels of information. It can tell us where to invest our limited resources- is it towards better data management or protection? Does the organization need to incorporate data capacity into their professional development program or planning?

Lastly, developing a data governance plan allows organizations to pause and reflect on its data, which organizations sometimes cannot do! It requires people to come together and have conversations about complex topics like ownership and privacy, and to decide how to proceed together. Data can then shift from something organizations do because they are required to by external forces like funders or other stakeholders to it being an



internal tool- a friend even- that is useful and resonates with *their* mission, values, and culture.

The [Reimagining Governance Lab](#) has a number of tools and resources to support nonprofits in thinking more intentionally about their organizational governance. The spirit of those questions - asking why we have the structures we have, inquiring how those structures can be improved to align better with values and purpose - can be applied to nonprofits looking to build out their data strategies.