

AI Basics: What Charity Staff Actually Need to Know.

A quick, practical introduction to using generative AI at work.

You don't need to become an AI expert to use these tools well.

But if you're going to use tools like ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, Google Gemini or Claude at work, there are a few things worth understanding first.

1. What is generative AI?

Generative AI is technology that can create new content, including text, images, audio and video.

Tools like ChatGPT work by identifying patterns in huge amounts of information and using those patterns to generate a response to what you ask.

That means an AI response can sound incredibly convincing without necessarily being correct.

It isn't a person. It doesn't understand your organisation, your community or the people you work with in the way you do. And it doesn't automatically know whether something is true just because it can produce a confident answer.

2. What can it be useful for?

There are lots of relatively low-risk ways AI can support everyday work.

For example, you might use it to:

- get started when you're staring at a blank page
- organise rough notes or ideas
- turn a large task into manageable steps
- prepare questions for a meeting
- summarise information you've provided
- make complicated information easier to understand
- improve the clarity of something you've written
- explore different ways of approaching a problem

- review a draft and identify things you may have missed

The important word is support.

AI can help you do your work. That doesn't mean handing the work, or your judgement, over to AI.

3. Why can AI get things wrong?

Generative AI is designed to produce a useful response, not to guarantee that every answer is true.

It can:

- invent facts, quotations, references or statistics
- misunderstand what you've asked
- make assumptions because it doesn't have enough context
- give you incomplete or outdated information
- reproduce biases contained in its training data or your prompt
- sound certain when the answer is actually uncertain

So don't use confidence, detail or polished writing as evidence that something is correct.

If it matters, check it.

4. Think before you put information into AI.

Before pasting something into an AI tool, ask yourself what information it contains.

Be particularly careful with:

- personal information
- confidential information
- information about beneficiaries or service users
- safeguarding information
- health information
- HR or employment matters
- financial information
- commercially sensitive information
- anything somebody has trusted your organisation to keep private

Your organisation should have clear guidance about which AI tools are approved and what information can be used with them.

If you're unsure, don't put it in until you've checked.

5. Keep humans involved where it matters

Some work needs more than a good AI answer.

Be especially careful when the work involves:

- decisions about people
- safeguarding
- legal or financial matters
- recruitment or employment
- funding decisions
- complaints
- people's rights or access to services
- sensitive external communications
- lived experience
- significant organisational decisions

AI might help you organise information, explore questions or prepare a first draft.

The decision and responsibility stay with people.

6. Four habits that will take you a long way.

You don't need hundreds of AI rules to get started.

Give it context

Tell the AI what you're trying to achieve, who it's for and what information it should work from.

Question the answer

Don't assume the first response is the best one. Ask what it has assumed, what might be missing and where it's uncertain.

Check what matters

Verify important facts, figures, quotations, sources and claims independently.

Keep the judgement human

You know your organisation, relationships, community and responsibilities. AI doesn't.

One last question.

Before using AI for a piece of work, ask:

Should AI be doing this at all?

Sometimes it will save you time or help you think.

Sometimes another tool would be better.

And sometimes the right answer is simply no.

Ready to try it?

Use our Practical Prompt Pack for Non-Profits for ten useful ways to get started on our resources page.

And if you want to understand where your organisation is with AI more broadly, try the free AI for Non-Profits Governance Checker for a quick picture and three practical next steps.