



AACT Community Theatre Board of Directors Survey

Michael Cochran

Introduction

Dorinda Toner

It has been a great joy engaging in conversation about this board survey with my colleague and collaborator, Michael Cochran. As he explains, this survey highlights the effectiveness of boards in financial management and shares some encouraging numbers about years of service and commitment. But it also points out areas for improvement, including training and onboarding, with only 35% of board members reporting they received any form of orientation.

Another area of concern revealed by the survey is the need for a better understanding of the role and responsibilities of board members in nonprofit organizations, including the need for board members to provide specific expertise and contribute financially. This is one of the challenges many small theatres face in balancing board responsibilities with day-to-day operations. Boards often get involved in hands-on tasks, rather than focusing on strategic roles—underscoring the importance of distinguishing between governance boards and working boards, or exploring hybrid options. Michael encourages us to view board members as consultants who help stabilize operations and provide strategic governance support.

*One of the biggest takeaways from the survey is the importance of board service itself and the need for effective board training. AACT is a great partner in this, offering online resources, roundtables and master classes, the Community Theatre Management Conference (CTMC), the National Directors Conference (NDC), and classes and training offered at our national and international festivals. For an even deeper dive, check out the resources shared at the end of this article, including Twink Lynch's classic book, *Boards in the Spotlight* (newly updated).*

The Survey

Michael Cochran

There were 139 responses to our survey on boards. Respondents identified a range of budgets, with 35% of theatres reporting budgets of under \$100,000, and 39% with budgets between \$100,000-\$250,000. The numbers drop off quickly when we pass the \$500,000 budget level.

Focusing on experience and age, 40% of respondents have been involved in theatre boards for more than 20 years, while 23% have been involved for 10-20 years. On the flip side, 21% have been involved 1-5 years and only 10% have been involved 5-10 years. This suggests a lot of experience with older participants, but a significant gap in people involved in the 5-to-10-year range, moving forward. When it comes to the average age of board members, the largest group is age 45-54, followed by 26% who are ages 55-64. The lowest age range is the 25-to-34-year-old group, with 2%.

When we add experience and age together, we see a gap in getting people with 5-10 years of experience, as well as those in the under-35 age group, who will be critical as boomers retire. The largest group of respondents estimated that 51% of their current board members have served 3-6 years. The second largest

group (21% of respondents) reported service of 7-10 years, while 17% reported terms of less than three years.

Board sizes saw 45% with 6-10 members, and 40% with 11-15 members. Only 7% had more than 15 members, and about 2% had 21 or more board members.

Regarding efficiency, 44% of respondents rated their board as effective, and an additional 11% rated their board as very effective. However, 23% were neutral in rating their board's effectiveness, and 20% rated their boards as ineffective or very ineffective.

While nearly 40% feel their board's communications with their community are effective, a full 59% rated their communication efforts as neutral, poor, or very poor. When it comes to decision making, 58% rated their boards as transparent or very transparent, while 42% rated their process as neutral, opaque, or very opaque.

When an organization seeks new board members, consultants often advise using a matrix to identify the skills you will need (legal, financial, HR, building contractor, etc.) for the next year, the year after that, and so on, depending on your strategic needs and plans. However, the largest number of our respondents reported their board does not use a matrix in this way. Those boards that do say they prioritize financial management (41%) and fundraising (39.5%) as the most important skills. Marketing and community engagement average about 32% of important skills identified. The lowest-ranked skills reported in the survey were event planning and human resources.

Boards seem to be doing a good job with financial management as only 27.8% felt they needed more financial management expertise. The expertise gap not being successfully addressed was fundraising ability (74%) followed by volunteer management. While fundraising and volunteer management were ranked as important as financial management skills in the matrix, this deficiency seems to say that theatres aren't finding people with those skills for boards. One of the solutions to this might be to consider bringing in fundraising and human resource consultants to train board members on developing skills, goals, and best practices in those areas—in other words help develop the talent you need.

When asked if their board members are required to make an individual financial contribution, 60% of respondents said no. Only 29% said yes. There may be a direct connection here to why so many boards report that they need help most with fundraising. (Almost all board consultants recommend that board members make a financial contribution, which displays their own commitment when trying to inspire and motivate others to give, as well.)

Of those theatres that do require board giving, 20.7% reported gifts averaging under \$100, while 12% reported between \$100-\$250. Just 4% of theatre board members gave \$500-\$1,000. Instead of a specific dollar amount, some theatres referenced a policy that asks for an amount that is significant to each individual board member, and many ask that board members put the theatre in the top three of their annual giving while serving on the board.

When it comes to time commitments, 82% of boards meet monthly. Regarding board terms, 37% of respondents reported terms of two years and 39% reported board terms of three years. The largest group of respondents (45%) said their boards have *no* term limits, while 40% reported that they do. (A few respondents reported not knowing if their board had term limits or not.)

With respect to nominating board candidates, 40% of our responding theatres use a nomination committee, while 25% have individual board members nominate new members. It's interesting to note that 11% of responding theatres said they have *no* formal nominating process. The good news is that 65%

of respondents reported they were likely or very likely to recommend others joining their boards. Fully 80% of our responding theatres have elections to choose board members.

On the matter of training and providing the tools for board members to be effective, 65% of our respondents reported there are no training or orientation sessions for new board members. However, most board development consultants regard sessions like these as key in ensuring effective board service. Training outlines expectations in giving and time commitments, and also makes clear how the board helps achieve the mission of the organization.

Resources

How can AACT help boards be more effective? One of the best tools it offers was developed by Twink Lynch, Ph.D.—*Boards in the Spotlight*. In this book (recently updated) Lynch deals with virtually every issue reported in our survey. She identifies the different stages of board development, based on budget size. She explains “auditioning” potential board members, and how to provide clear expectations and training—including having them sign board “contracts,” that state that they understand what is expected before they agree to serve. To order the book, visit aact.org/boards-spotlight.

In his book, *Scene Change 2: The Five REAL Responsibilities of Nonprofit Arts Boards* (Changemakers Books), theatre veteran Alan Harrison tells organizations to think of their board members as being the best consultants available in the community. If you use a rough figure of \$100 an hour for a good consultant, your theatre will “spend” the equivalent thousands of dollars of in-kind expenses each year on your board of directors. For that time and expense, you need to get the most bang for your buck for every hour of board service in order to make your organization the absolute best it can be.

References

Twink Lynch: AACT Boards in the Spotlight

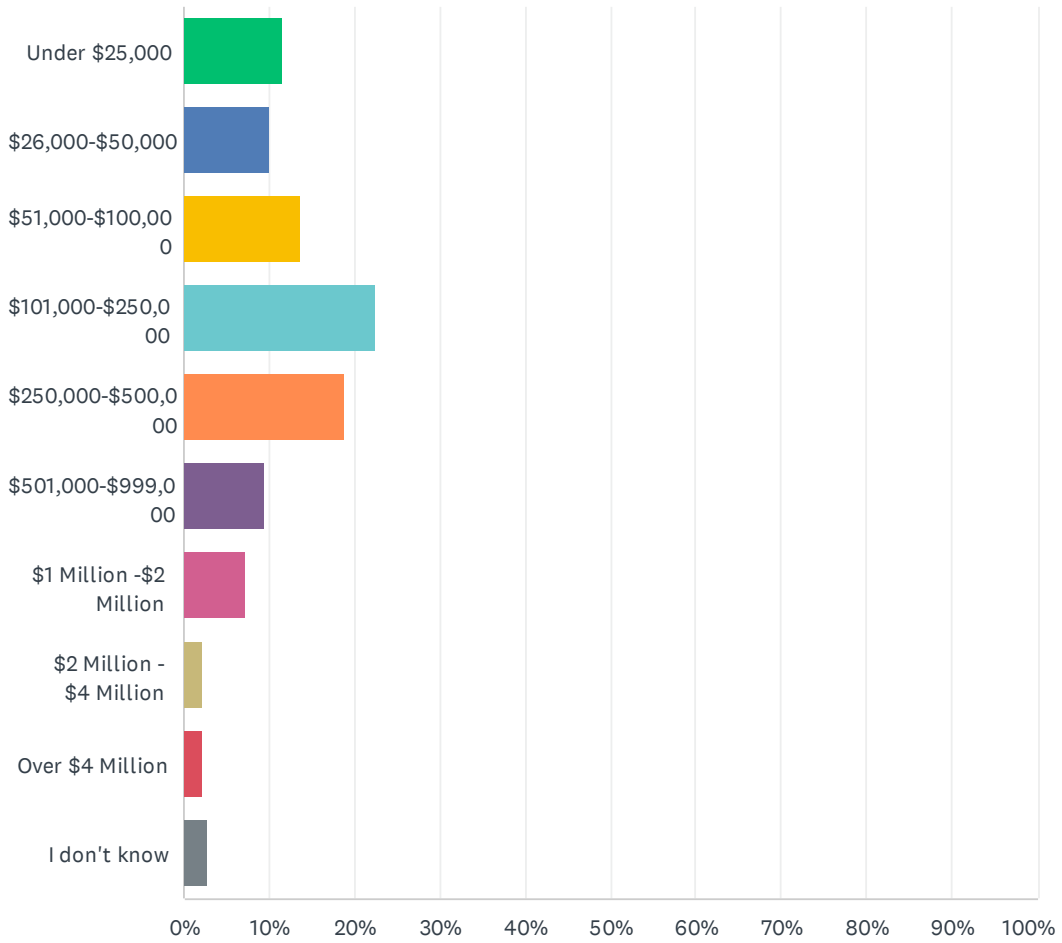
Alan Harrison: The Five Responsibilities of a Nonprofit Arts Board

Joan Gary Consulting

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Q1 What is the budget size of your organization

Answered: 139 Skipped: 0

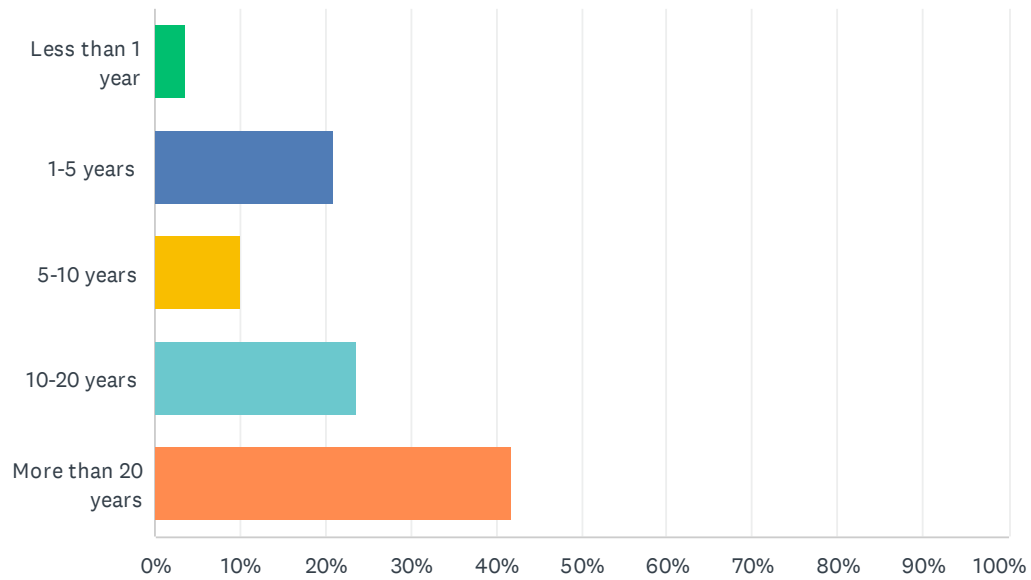


AACT Survey of Community Theatre Board of Directors

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Under \$25,000	11.51%	16
\$26,000-\$50,000	10.07%	14
\$51,000-\$100,000	13.67%	19
\$101,000-\$250,000	22.30%	31
\$250,000-\$500,000	18.71%	26
\$501,000-\$999,000	9.35%	13
\$1 Million -\$2 Million	7.19%	10
\$2 Million - \$4 Million	2.16%	3
Over \$4 Million	2.16%	3
I don't know	2.88%	4
TOTAL		139

Q2 How long have you been involved with your community theatre?

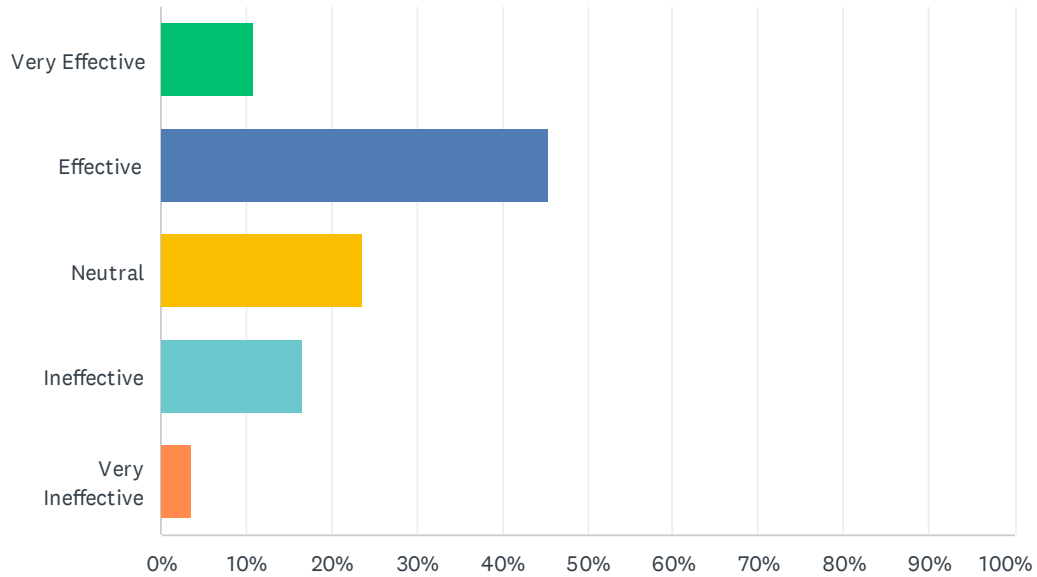
Answered: 139 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Less than 1 year	3.60%	5
1-5 years	20.86%	29
5-10 years	10.07%	14
10-20 years	23.74%	33
More than 20 years	41.73%	58
TOTAL		139

Q3 How would you rate the overall effectiveness of your board of directors?

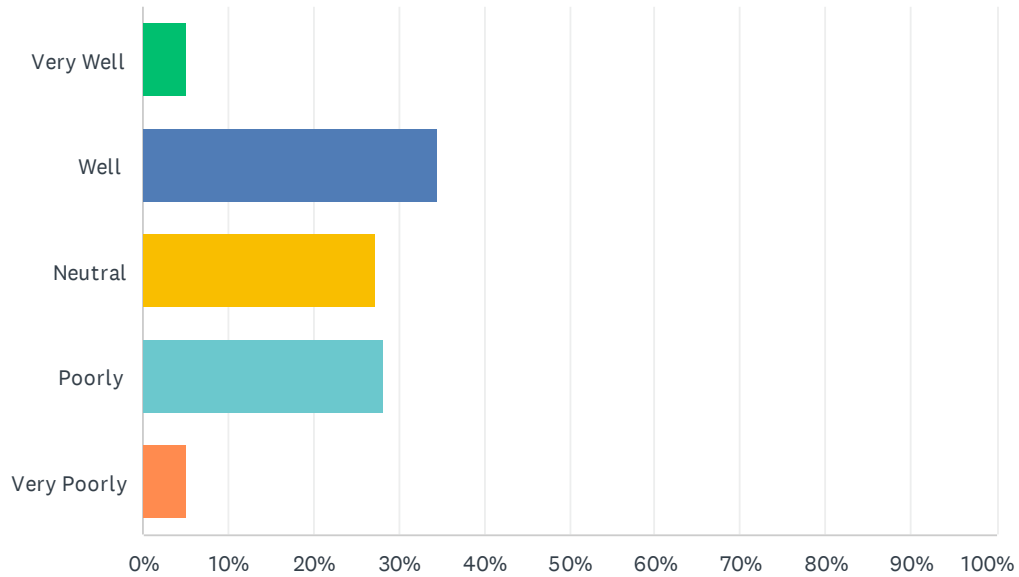
Answered: 139 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Very Effective	10.79%	15
Effective	45.32%	63
Neutral	23.74%	33
Ineffective	16.55%	23
Very Ineffective	3.60%	5
TOTAL		139

Q4 How well do you think your board communicates its decisions to the community?

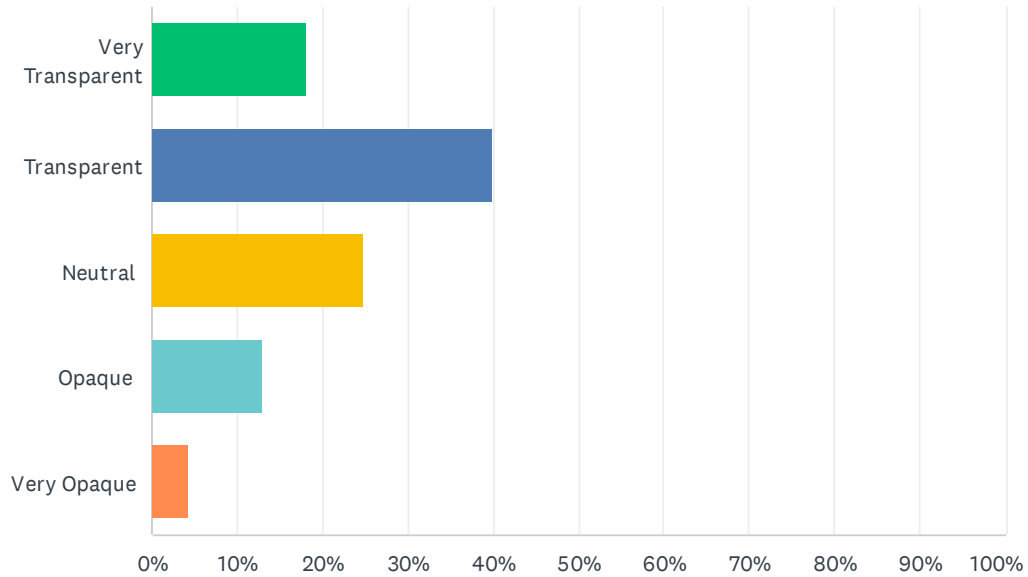
Answered: 139 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Very Well	5.04%	7
Well	34.53%	48
Neutral	27.34%	38
Poorly	28.06%	39
Very Poorly	5.04%	7
TOTAL		139

Q5 How transparent do you feel the board is in its decision-making processes?

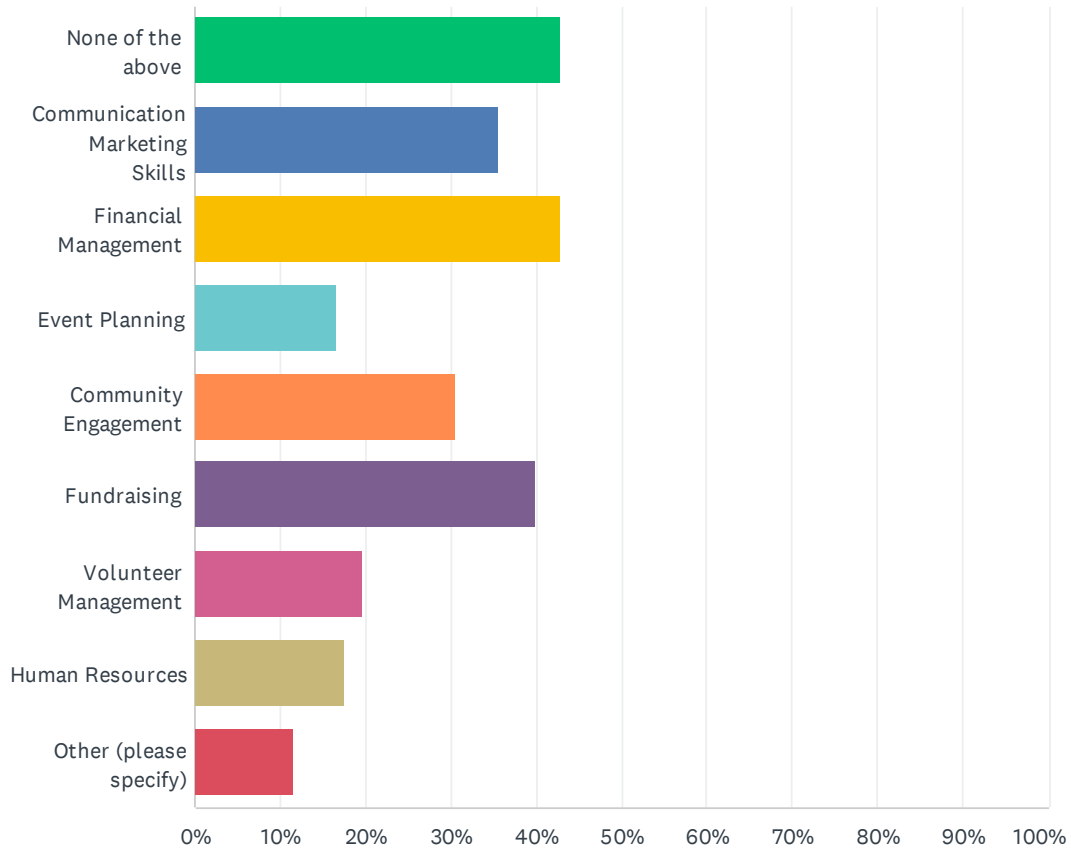
Answered: 138 Skipped: 1



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Very Transparent	18.12%	25
Transparent	39.86%	55
Neutral	24.64%	34
Opaque	13.04%	18
Very Opaque	4.35%	6
TOTAL		138

Q6 Do your nominations have a matrix seeking members to fill certain specific skill sets?

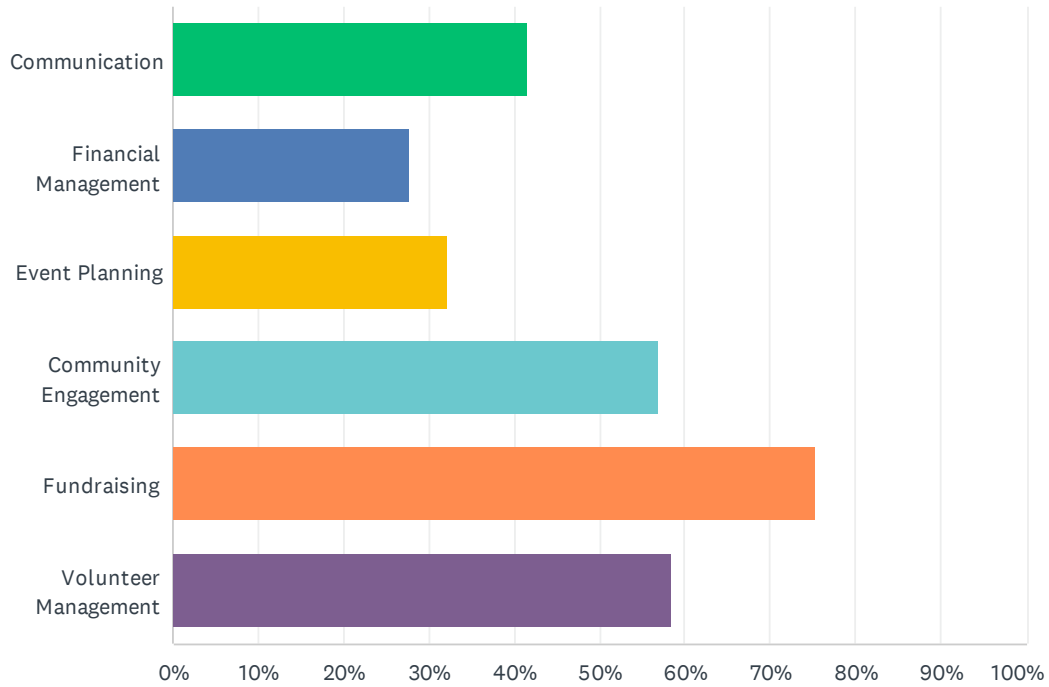
Answered: 138 Skipped: 1



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
None of the above	42.75%	59
Communication Marketing Skills	35.51%	49
Financial Management	42.75%	59
Event Planning	16.67%	23
Community Engagement	30.43%	42
Fundraising	39.86%	55
Volunteer Management	19.57%	27
Human Resources	17.39%	24
Other (please specify)	11.59%	16
Total Respondents: 138		

Q7 Which areas do you think the board needs to improve? (Select all that apply)

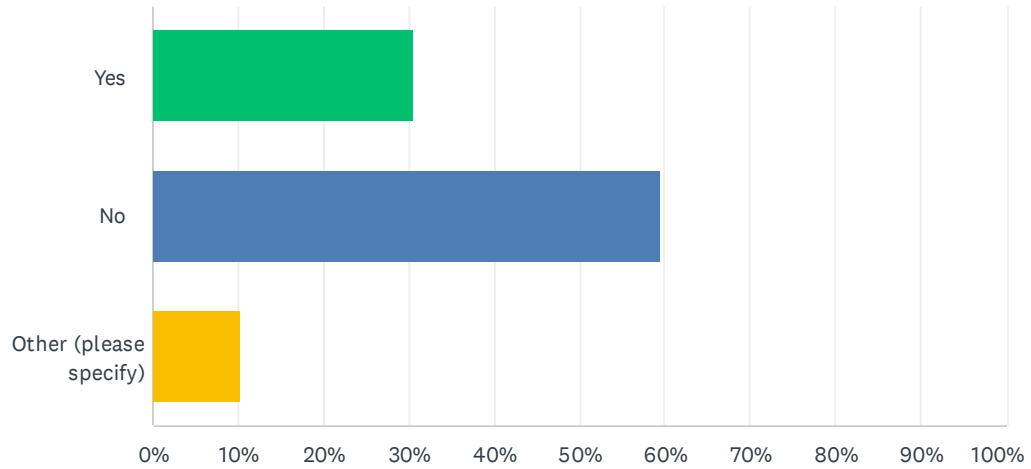
Answered: 137 Skipped: 2



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Communication	41.61%	57
Financial Management	27.74%	38
Event Planning	32.12%	44
Community Engagement	56.93%	78
Fundraising	75.18%	103
Volunteer Management	58.39%	80
Total Respondents: 137		

Q8 Are your board members required to make an individual financial contribution each year?

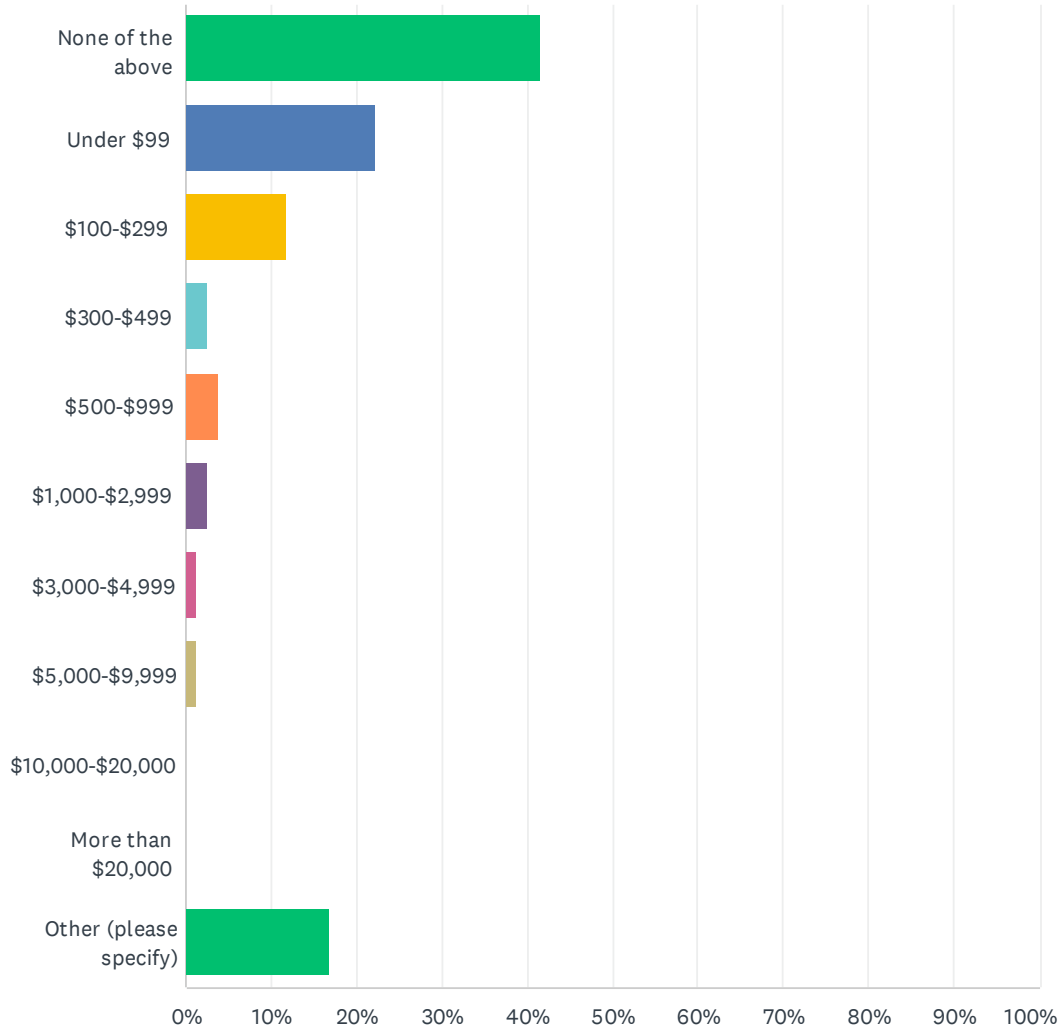
Answered: 138 Skipped: 1



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	30.43%	42
No	59.42%	82
Other (please specify)	10.14%	14
TOTAL		138

Q9 If you answered yes to Question 8- What amount is your board required to contribute each year?

Answered: 77 Skipped: 62

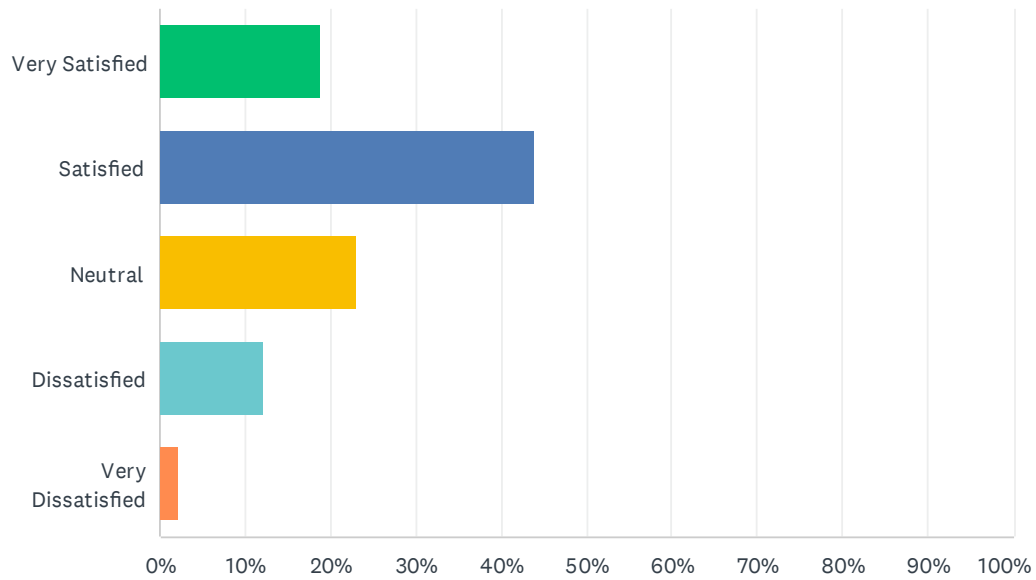


AACT Survey of Community Theatre Board of Directors

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
None of the above	41.56%	32
Under \$99	22.08%	17
\$100-\$299	11.69%	9
\$300-\$499	2.60%	2
\$500-\$999	3.90%	3
\$1,000-\$2,999	2.60%	2
\$3,000-\$4,999	1.30%	1
\$5,000-\$9,999	1.30%	1
\$10,000-\$20,000	0.00%	0
More than \$20,000	0.00%	0
Other (please specify)	16.88%	13
Total Respondents: 77		

Q10 How satisfied are you with the board's financial management?

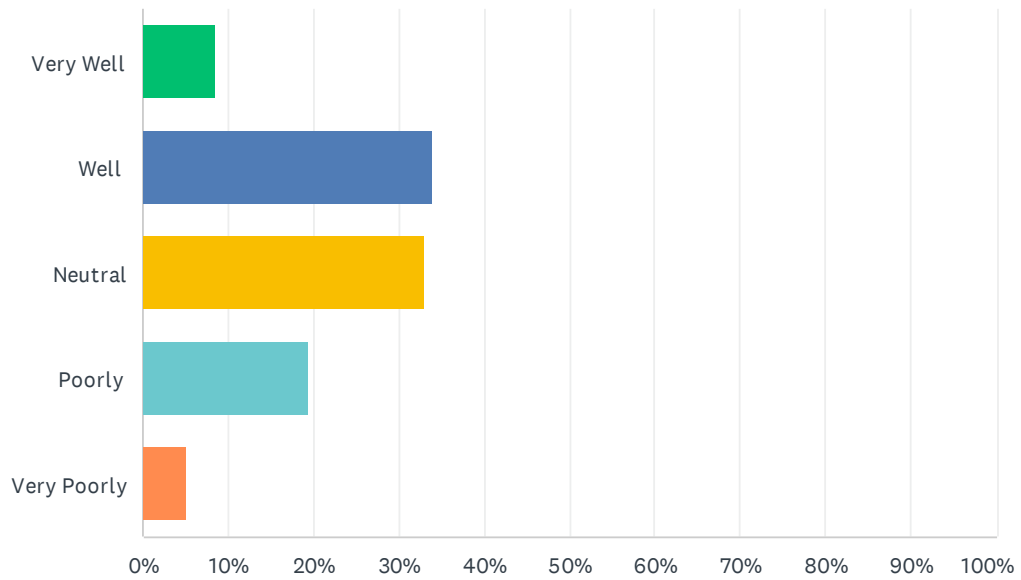
Answered: 139 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Very Satisfied	18.71%	26
Satisfied	43.88%	61
Neutral	23.02%	32
Dissatisfied	12.23%	17
Very Dissatisfied	2.16%	3
TOTAL		139

Q11 How well does the board engage with the community?

Answered: 139 Skipped: 0



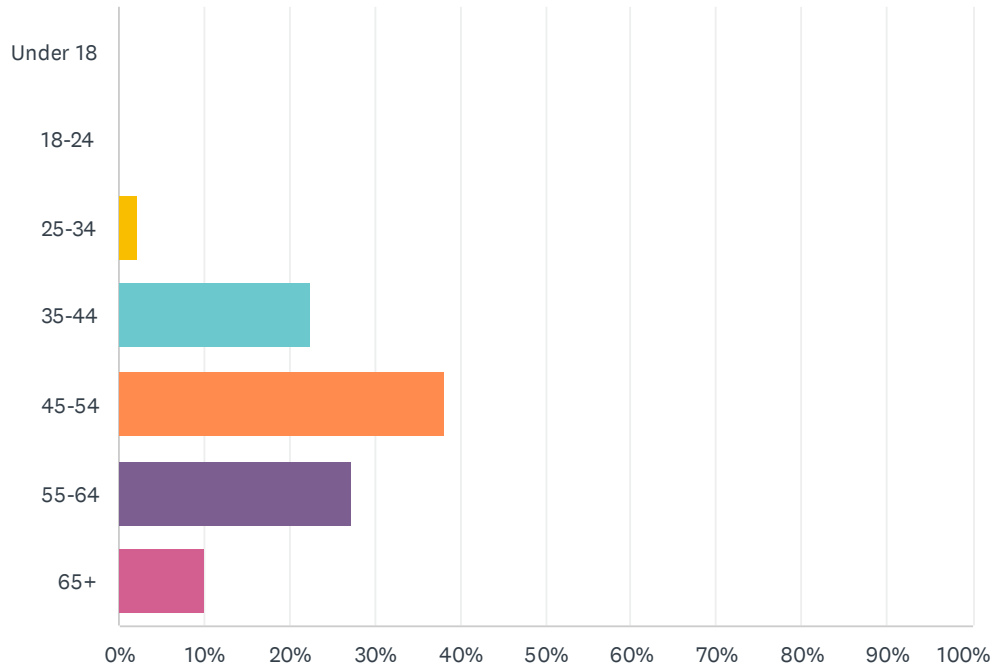
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Very Well	8.63%	12
Well	33.81%	47
Neutral	33.09%	46
Poorly	19.42%	27
Very Poorly	5.04%	7
TOTAL		139

Q12 What do you think is the biggest single challenge facing your board of directors?

Answered: 126 Skipped: 13

Q13 What is the average age of your board members?

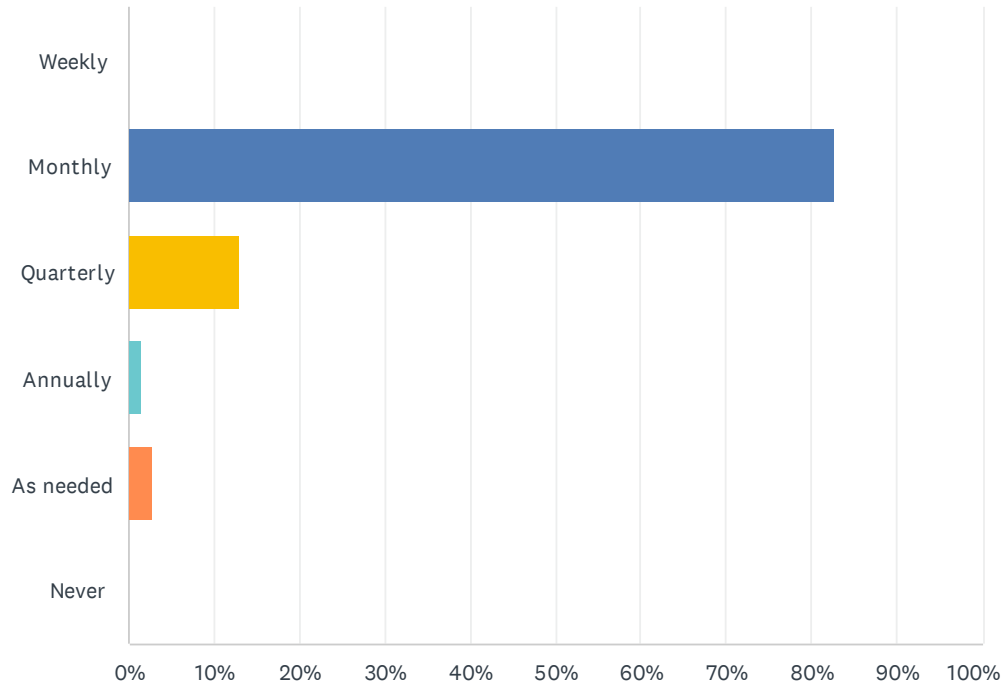
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ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Under 18	0.00%	0
18-24	0.00%	0
25-34	2.16%	3
35-44	22.30%	31
45-54	38.13%	53
55-64	27.34%	38
65+	10.07%	14
TOTAL		139

Q14 How frequently does your board meet?

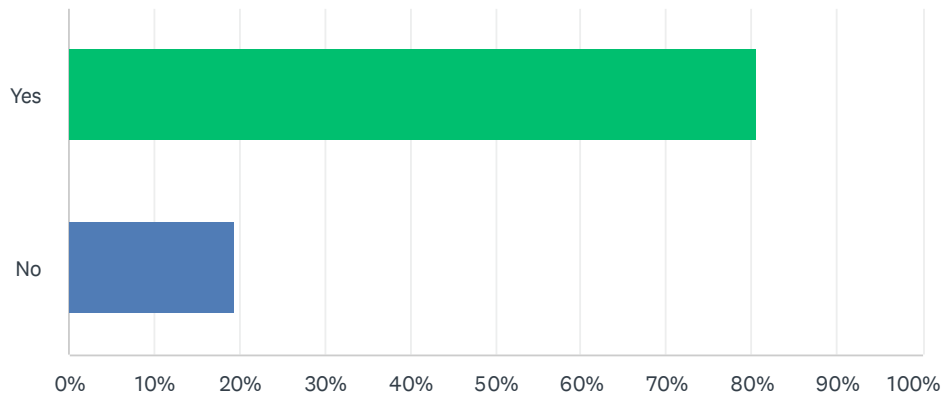
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ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Weekly	0.00%	0
Monthly	82.73%	115
Quarterly	12.95%	18
Annually	1.44%	2
As needed	2.88%	4
Never	0.00%	0
TOTAL		139

Q15 Does your board have elections?

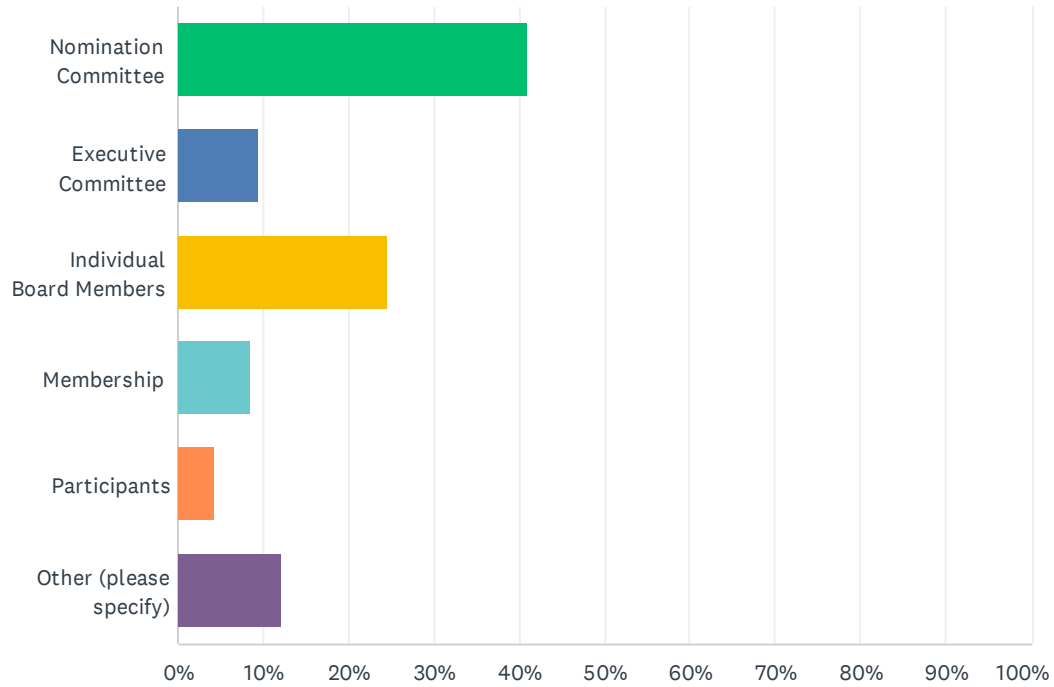
Answered: 134 Skipped: 5



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	80.60%	108
No	19.40%	26
TOTAL		134

Q16 Who decides who is nominated to the board?

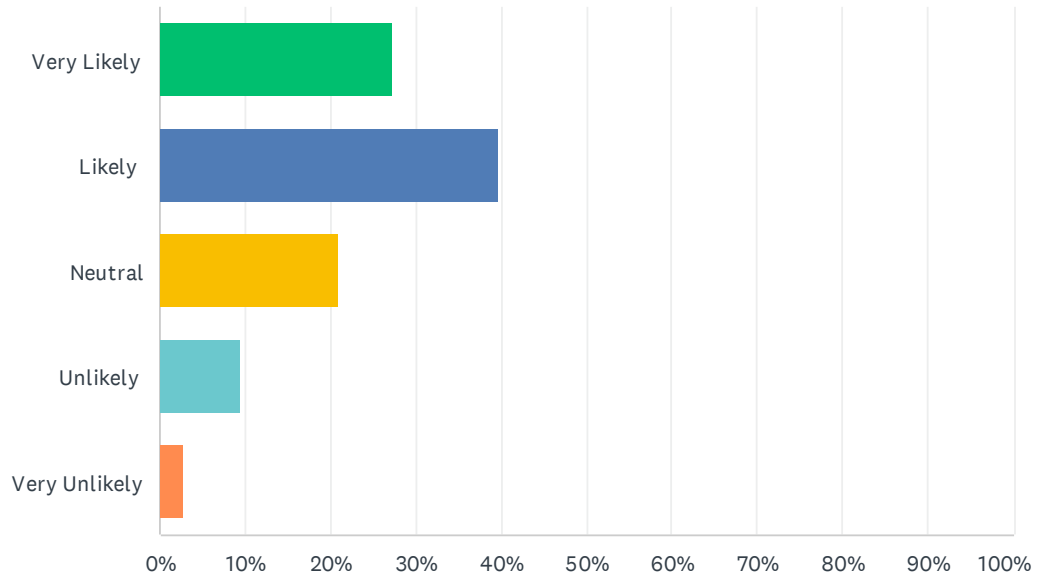
Answered: 139 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Nomination Committee	41.01%	57
Executive Committee	9.35%	13
Individual Board Members	24.46%	34
Membership	8.63%	12
Participants	4.32%	6
Other (please specify)	12.23%	17
TOTAL		139

Q17 How likely are you to recommend joining the board to others?

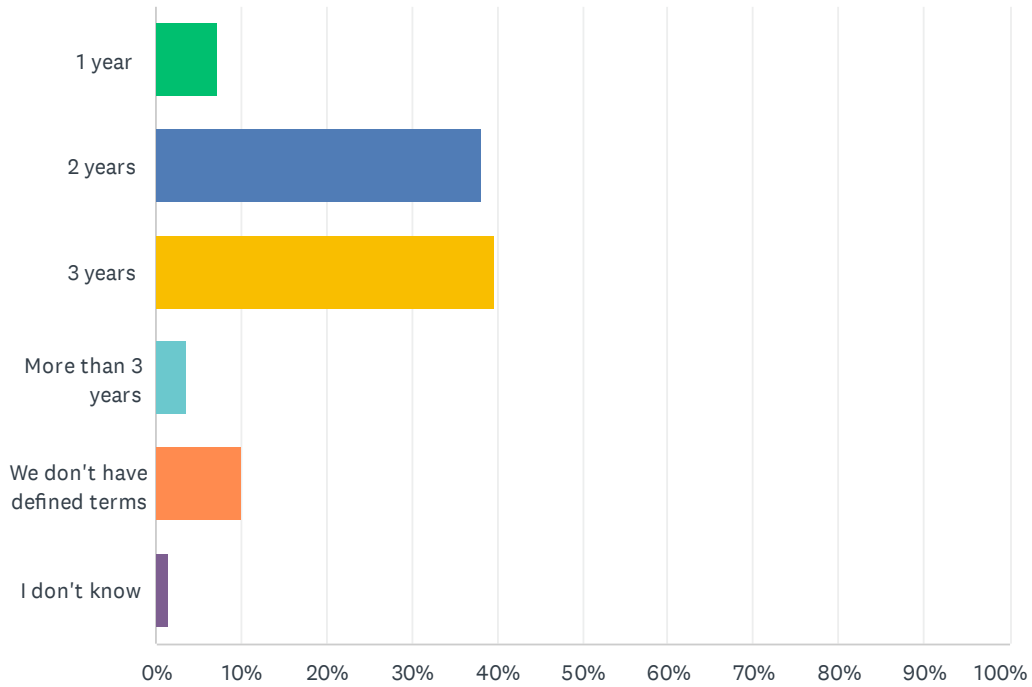
Answered: 139 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Very Likely	27.34%	38
Likely	39.57%	55
Neutral	20.86%	29
Unlikely	9.35%	13
Very Unlikely	2.88%	4
TOTAL		139

Q18 How long are your board terms

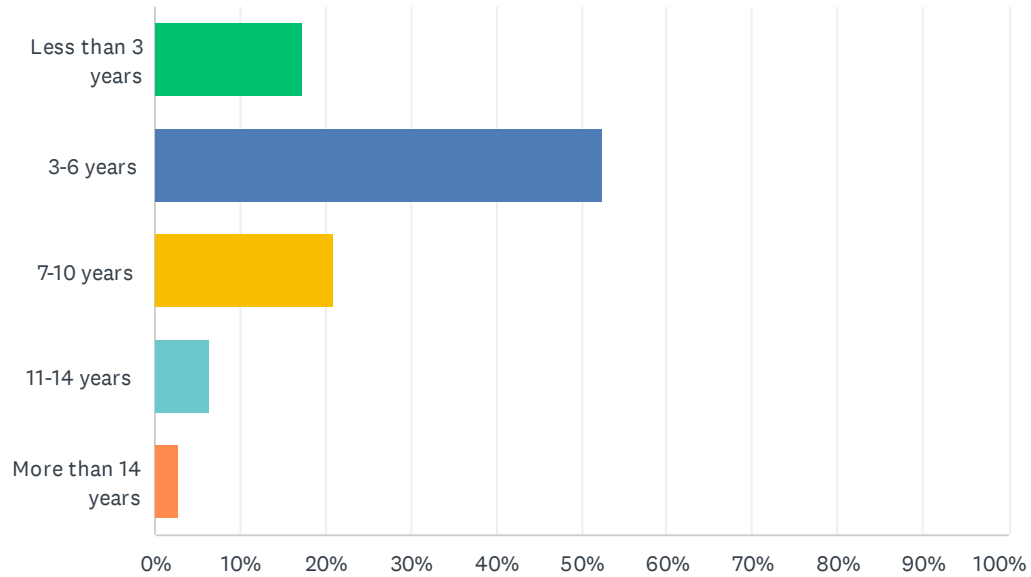
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ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
1 year	7.19%	10
2 years	38.13%	53
3 years	39.57%	55
More than 3 years	3.60%	5
We don't have defined terms	10.07%	14
I don't know	1.44%	2
TOTAL		139

Q19 What is your estimate of the length of time your average current board members have served.

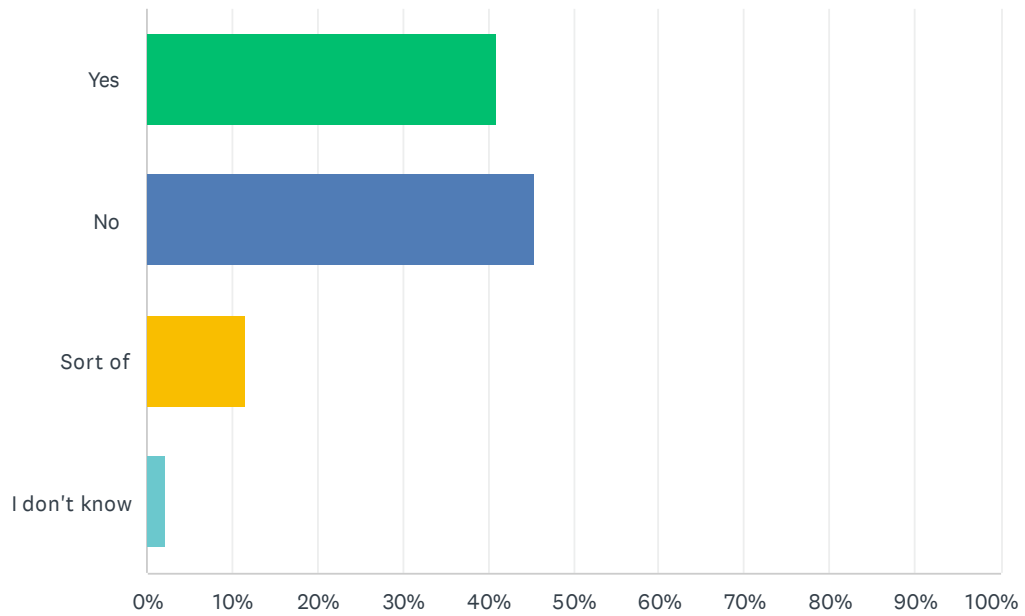
Answered: 139 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Less than 3 years	17.27%	24
3-6 years	52.52%	73
7-10 years	20.86%	29
11-14 years	6.47%	9
More than 14 years	2.88%	4
TOTAL		139

Q20 Does your board have term limits?

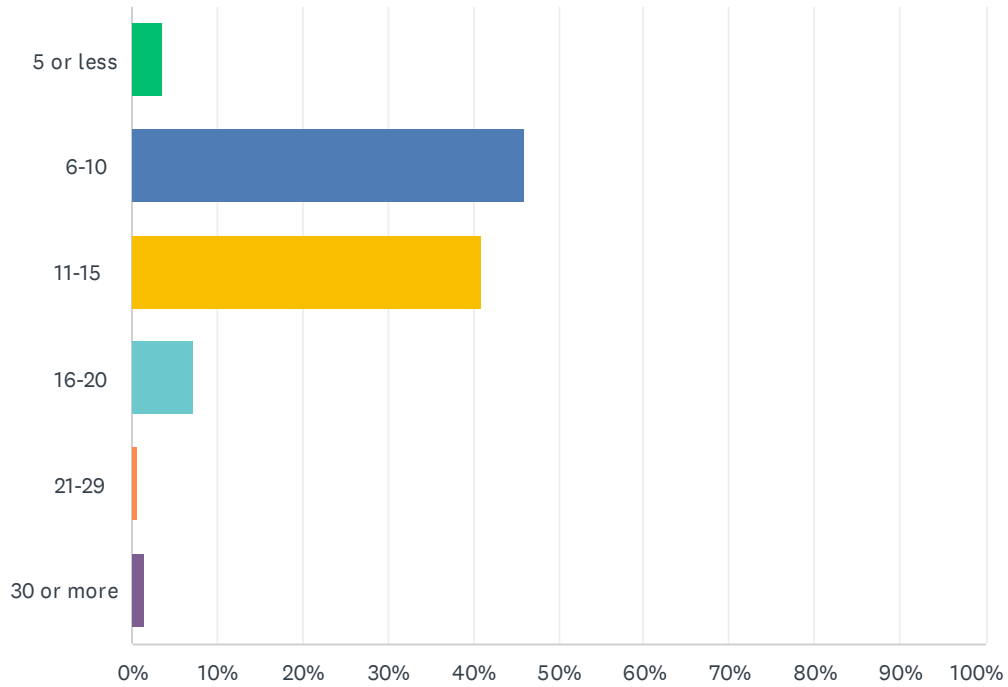
Answered: 139 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	41.01%	57
No	45.32%	63
Sort of	11.51%	16
I don't know	2.16%	3
TOTAL		139

Q21 How many board members does your organization have?

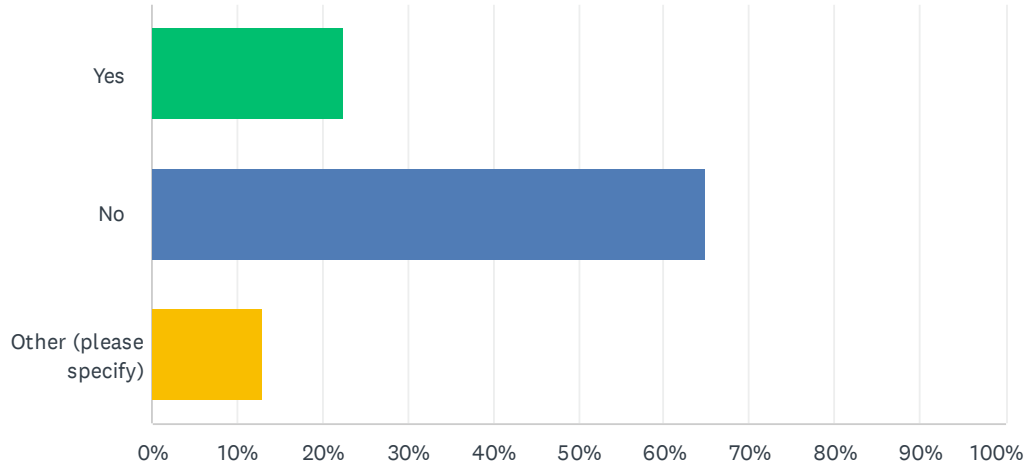
Answered: 139 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
5 or less	3.60% 5
6-10	46.04% 64
11-15	41.01% 57
16-20	7.19% 10
21-29	0.72% 1
30 or more	1.44% 2
TOTAL	139

Q22 Does your board conduct training/orientation sessions for new members?

Answered: 139 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	22.30%	31
No	64.75%	90
Other (please specify)	12.95%	18
TOTAL		139