

Making the Move: Transitioning to the Nonprofit Sector

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When people want to leave a for-profit career and begin one in the nonprofit sector, their motivations range from a commitment to “give back to the community” to a desire to “enter a less stressful environment.” Some have extensive volunteer experience they want to leverage into a career. Others simply need a new position and have seen nonprofit openings listed.

While search firms are seeing a large number of applicants trying to transition from the corporate to nonprofit sector, only a handful of these candidates are actually hired by nonprofits.

Furthermore, those who do join the nonprofit world often face challenges. Nonprofit hiring managers note that career changers frequently underestimate the importance of inclusive, collaborative decision making and

are impatient in working with boards and other volunteers. They do not fully understand the differences between the nonprofit and for-profit world or why some strategies that are effective in the corporate world do not work in nonprofits. Some find it difficult to promote a mission rather than a product.

Nevertheless, many candidates do succeed in making the transition. If you are considering a transition, what can you do to increase your chances of success in your search and on the job?

1. Determine whether or not you are committed to making the transition. Nonprofits require employees to be committed to the organization’s mission. This commitment cannot just be stated—it needs to be demonstrated. If you cannot demonstrate commitment to the nonprofit sector, it becomes difficult to demonstrate commitment to a specific organization. Commitment can involve volunteering, researching the sector and learning how to speak the language. Be realistic about how much work you are willing to undertake to be competitive.

2. Talk to others who have moved from corporations to nonprofits. Ask these individuals how they made the transition. Find out what they find most rewarding and most challenging about their jobs. Seek their advice on which aspects of their previous experience they have found most applicable and how to position your experience.

3. Have realistic expectations of the work environment in the sector. Nonprofits support a mission and they work hard to reduce overhead. You will likely find smaller staff, reduced budgets, less office space and older technology. Understand the constraints and be confident that you can work within them.

While an organization may have inspiring goals that you support, your day-to-day activities will vary from mundane to stressful. If you work for an organization seeking cures for childhood cancers, you are unlikely to discover the cures yourself. Furthermore,

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you often may find yourself working in emotionally difficult situations.

4. Determine which sectors excite you. Reflect on the kinds of organizations in which you would like to work and identify those where you already are involved and committed as a volunteer or donor. Do you spend your free time going to the symphony or dramatic productions? Are you a volunteer for your child's school? Do you read every news report about a particular health issue? Do you organize beach cleanup days?

If you already work in a for-profit industry related to nonprofits, such as healthcare or education, you may find your experience more valued than it would be if you entered a new field.

5. Think about the size and organization of a nonprofit in which you would like to work. Have you had success in large organizations with multiple layers of authority or do you thrive in small organizations? The nonprofit sector encompasses large organizations, such as universities and hospitals, as well as founder-led agencies with a handful of paid employees. Nonprofits can be hierarchical or flat. Some want specialists and others seek people who are versatile. There are new models in venture philanthropy and revenue-generating subsidiaries that might lend themselves to individuals with business backgrounds. Focus on the kind of organization that best suits your style.

6. Obtain experience in the nonprofit sector. Volunteer, serve on a board, raise money for your alma mater or take on a project pro bono. Do everything you can to understand the nonprofit sector and build your skills, experience and connections. By volunteering, you will obtain actual nonprofit experience to list on your résumé. More importantly, you will demonstrate commitment and gain a better understanding of whether you really want to work in the nonprofit sector or would rather support the sector as a volunteer and donor.

7. Evaluate your experience and your transferable skills for the job you are seeking. There are many different po-

sitions in nonprofits, divided primarily between programs and administration. In administration, positions can include executive, development, finance, communications, marketing and human resources. Within development, you may be able to specialize in corporations, foundations, annual giving, special events, major gifts, planned gifts or research. Think about the kind of role that matches your skills and experience most closely and focus on those positions.

8. Determine the appropriate salary level for the positions you are seeking. Conduct research on compensation for specific positions within organizations on Guidestar (www.guidestar.org). Review salary surveys and look at salaries posted in ads. After that, determine what salary range you are willing to accept at a nonprofit. Do not expect to be compensated at a higher level than previous incumbents because of your corporate experience.

9. Do your homework. Every organization wants you to have a clear understanding of its mission and goals. Review the nonprofit's website and make sure that you can embrace what it does. Understand the sources of revenue and the staff structure. Use Guidestar to research the organization's finances (see the Form 990).

10. Network. Nonprofits have many networking organizations where you can meet professionals in the field, improve your skills, and even volunteer. In development, look to the Association of Fundraising Professionals (www.afpnet.org) and the Foundation Center (<http://foundationcenter.org>). In other sectors, ask people who work in the area about other groups that may be helpful.

Have informational interviews with individuals who hold positions that interest you. People in nonprofits are frequently generous with their time and excited about what they do.

Talk to your colleagues in the business world. Many people have links to nonprofits and may have ideas on people you should meet.

11. Increase your skills. If you are committed to a transition, remember

that while you may have done similar kinds of work, you have not used the same nonprofit tools, language or governance structures. Take courses in your areas of interest and read books, articles and blogs about the sector. Many universities now offer courses in nonprofit management, and there are conferences and meetings that take place around the world.

12. Be proactive and explore this option before you leave your current position. As with any job search, it is easier to find the next position when you are still employed. With a switch to the nonprofit sector, it is likely to take even longer, so give yourself enough time.

13. Be prepared to start at a lower level. For high-level positions in nonprofits, you will be competing with individuals who have direct experience. If you are truly committed to making a move, you may need to accept a job at a lower level than the one you currently hold.

14. Take advantage of resources. There are many books and websites that can help you understand how to make a transition, including the following:

- Bridgestar (www.bridgestar.org)
- *Change Your Career: Transitioning to the Nonprofit Sector* by Laura Gassner Otting (Kaplan Publishing, 2007), paperback, 270 pages
- *From Making a Profit to Making a Difference: How to Launch Your New Career in Nonprofits* by Richard King (Planning Communications, 2000), hardcover, 178 pages
- *The Nonprofit Career Guide: How to Land a Job That Makes a Difference* by Shelly Cryer (Fieldstone Alliance, 2008), paperback, 300 pages
- *Search: Winning Strategies to Get Your Next Job in the Nonprofit World* by Larry Schlesinger (Piemonte Press, 2004), paperback, 104 pages

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