

Insider Tips to Nonprofit Interviewing Success

By Sue Dahling Sullivan
Chief of Staff, Citi Performing Arts Center

WANTED: Candidates who can adapt their business skills to a results-oriented nonprofit position. Successful applicants should have experience in/with the nonprofit sector and the ability to balance hands-on management with strategic responsibilities. Cover letter a plus; follow-up a must. Passion and drive for mission-driven success is essential.

In the last several months, I have interviewed countless candidates for several different jobs across Citi Performing Arts Center, from director-level to junior positions. Bleary-eyed from scanning hundreds of resumes and weary from scores of disappointing interviews, I realized that the most outstanding candidates shared one common trait – they understood the nuances of interviewing for jobs in the nonprofit sector.

While nonprofit job searches in the 21st century are decidedly more high tech, strategies to becoming a standout candidate are neither complicated nor expensive. Yet somehow mastering the nonprofit interview process seems to elude even the best intentioned. So, with a nod to nonprofit transparency, I'm sharing six simple time-tested essentials that should provide you with an edge over the competition:

1. **Connect the dots.** With the ease of one-click application websites, I've received too many resumes that fail to highlight a discernible connection to the posted nonprofit position (transferrable skills, experience, or knowledge). The goal should be to quickly eliminate the mystery for the hiring manager on how your experience directly relates to the job. If you're moving from the for-profit sector, referencing volunteer work, board service, and civic engagement can provide critical connections between a corporate past and nonprofit future. Candidates who make these links obvious are noteworthy exceptions and indisputably better positioned early in the process.
2. **Do your homework.** It is easy to spot strong applicants – both online and offline - who have researched the organization. Before even applying for a job, take the time to explore a company's website and conduct an online news search. Integrate this knowledge into both the cover letter and interviews, and illustrate how you can uniquely contribute to the organization's overall mission-driven success. For example, I recently interviewed an impressive young candidate for a position outside my department who

Boston
535 Boylston St., 10th Floor
Boston, MA 02116
T. 617.572.2833
F. 617.572.2834

New York
112 West 34th St., Suite 1510
New York, NY 10120
T. 646.562.8900
F. 646.562.8901

San Francisco
465 California St., 11th Floor
San Francisco, CA 94104
T. 415.627.1100
F. 415.627.4575

had thoroughly prepared for our meeting. While she wasn't offered that job, I happily hired her shortly afterwards to fill an opening in my own department because I knew she'd be a strong organizational contributor.

3. **Write a great cover letter.** This is one of the single most effective strategies (and the most overlooked) in moving a candidate from applicant to interviewee. Leveraged correctly, a cover letter provides a critical opportunity in making the case of "Why me?" Going beyond resume facts, it can draw detailed links between your skills and those of the nonprofit position, explain transitions, and give a voice to your passion for the organization's mission. Particularly for individuals transitioning into the nonprofit sector, a great cover letter can make the difference between "delete" and "save."
4. **Preview the interview roster.** It's surprising how many candidates approach their interview schedules naively unprepared in regard to whom they're meeting with and why. A little due diligence about the interview roster can yield big results. The practice at our organization is to have candidates interview with supervisors, departmental colleagues, and other key staff. This helps identify "fit compatibility" within our strong team-oriented culture by integrating different organizational perspectives. Good candidates are prepared, asking targeted questions based on the interviewer's position and/or background. Memorable candidates translate how their past skills can drive nonprofit impact, customizing that message for each listener.
5. **The key to closing.** So many candidates fail to take advantage of this simple opportunity to make a lasting impression. Most interviews are short and tightly scheduled. The savvy candidate will prepare several strategic questions in advance that illustrate an appreciation of how the organization works. Don't be afraid to ask questions about salary or resource limitations; these will both play into your final decision if you are offered the job. Remember to craft a strong closing statement that reinforces your ability and commitment to making a measurable and mission-driven difference. And yes, seal it with a solid handshake.
6. **The secret deal breaker.** In the nonprofit sector, saying thank you is a critical strategy in recognizing board and building donor relationships, so don't overlook this final but essential component. Sending a prompt handwritten thank-you note was standard operating procedure in the "old days." Today, a thoughtful and personalized email can be timely and effective, so don't forget to ask for a business card or email address after each interview. Poorly executed follow-up (spelling and grammar mistakes, duplicated prose to multiple individuals, or lackadaisical timing) can raise serious red flags about an otherwise compelling candidate; a complete lack of follow-up can mean the end of the interviewing journey. So take a minute and seal the deal with a simple thank you.

Following these six simple strategies might seem both fundamental and common sense, but a surprising number of job candidates overlook them. So, if it is your mission to find a new nonprofit job or work in the nonprofit sector, start by making it your job to interview successfully.

Three Tips for Presenting Yourself

When interviewing, your presentation—your attire, your enthusiasm, and your thoughtfulness when answering questions—can play an important part in helping you land the job. Use these three tips to represent yourself professionally and to exude a genuine interest in the role and the organization.

1. **Dress for (nonprofit) success.** Interview attire can provide important visual cues about a candidate, especially in the less corporate environment of a nonprofit. While the typical blue suit may be too formal, a neat and professional appearance makes a positive first impression. Recently, an applicant made the fateful mistake of dressing too casually, but it was also reflective of her work style. On the other hand, one of my new hires had the good sense to ask about the dress code before he started. Recognizing how his interviewers dressed, he quickly realized that the jeans-approved dress code from his previous employer was too casual for his new nonprofit position. Either way, dress for success.
2. **Be passionate!** Even after a long day of meetings, the last interview has to be as good as the first. When the energy level of the candidate is low, I can't help but question his or her ability to survive a long and hectic nonprofit work day. More so than in other sectors, having energy and enthusiasm are essential ingredients in mission-driven organizations that rely on their employees to do more with less. So perk up in the interview if making a difference is what really motivates you!
3. **Be thoughtful.** During a memorable interview years ago, a candidate exclaimed "I'm not worried about making the transition. I ate 'nails for breakfast' at my last (for-profit) job – this should be easy." While I found this proclamation a bit misguided, there are undoubtedly differences to working in a nonprofit, or for that matter, differences between nonprofit organizations. Be prepared to thoughtfully answer interview questions like "Why are you making this switch?" and "What do you see as the key changes in taking this position both personally and professionally?" Think about it - your answers could lead to a life-changing opportunity.