

Top 10 Nonprofit Job Hunting Tips for 2011

It's the beginning of a new year, and many people are setting goals, making plans, and considering changes. If a job change is on your horizon, especially one within the nonprofit sector, it's important not only to consider where you might find an open position (see [Nonprofit Job Search Resources](#) for some direction), but also to take a step back to understand what your motivations are for seeking a new nonprofit role, where your skills and experiences might be most beneficial, and which roles might suit you best.

To help you jumpstart your job search—and self reflection—we spoke with Tom Friel, the retired chairman and chief executive officer of [Heidrick & Struggles International, Inc.](#) Friel is a senior advisor to Bridgestar and the Bridgespan Group, and a longtime nonprofit board member. Here are his top 10 nonprofit job hunting tips.

1. Do a thorough and honest assessment of your own motivations, skills, and capabilities, and record them.

“It's one thing to have aspirations because you care about the work, but it's not sufficient if you're not qualified to do what you want to do,” Friel said. A self-assessment provides a cornerstone to a successful job search; it's the starting point for clarifying what you want to do and for understanding how your qualifications match up with the role you seek (and what you might need to do in order to prepare for that role).

Resources for self assessments include books on the topic, [online tools](#), and performance reviews and assessments from past supervisors. Friends and co-workers, and even professional coaches and mentors, also can offer valuable feedback. “At some point, it is helpful to test your self assessment against an objective person or a standard and ask: ‘Am I right about this assessment?’” said Friel. “The key value in someone who will objectively comment on your self assessment is honesty,” he added.

2. Decide very specifically what you want to do and make sure your qualifications match the job requirements.

“I urge people to think specifically about the exact job at the exact place they'd like to work as the center of the bull's eye and then encourage them to move out as necessary,” Friel said. Having that specific goal can help you focus on your qualifications. For example, your goal might be to become the chief financial officer (CFO) of the Red Cross. If your assessment shows that your qualifications fall a little short, you

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might consider targeting the number two finance role at the organization or the top job at a smaller nonprofit organization.

3. Learn who the key players are at your target organizations and find a way to get in front of them.

If you want to be a CFO at an organization, learn who makes the hiring decision for that role. Is it the chief executive? Head of human resources? Is it a recruiter? “It’s probably one of those three people,” Friel said. “So if I want to be the CFO of the YMCA, I need to get in front of one of those three people or perhaps all of them together and maybe others.” He stressed that it’s not enough to just get in front of anybody at your target organizations. Rather, you need to reach either the people directly in charge of hiring or the handful of people who are one step removed (i.e., a key player who could recommend or endorse your candidacy). Friel said a majority of your job search should be focused on getting a quality interaction with as many people as possible on this short list. “At the end of the day, it’s the only thing that really matters,” he concluded.

4. Consider an interim path to your goal if necessary, such as consulting, temporary assignments, internships, or volunteering.

“If you are convinced that there are only five places you want to work for the rest of your life, you should be willing to find a way to get into one of those places,” said Friel. Don’t dismiss the longer term paths that could ultimately help you get to those places, even if there isn’t an immediate opportunity for the specific job you want.

5. Use your personal network smartly and efficiently. It likely is much larger than you think it is.

Who are the key players with whom you need to meet? And who are the people who can help you get in front of them? Friel noted that your network really is anybody you’ve met, worked with, gone to school with, etc., plus the people they know. Social networks are effective and enormous, and with the Internet it’s really easy to research your peers’ networks and determine who might be able to introduce you to a potential key player.

6. Recognize that most people will want to help you, but they won’t do your homework for you.

Just knowing whom you want to reach out to is not enough. Friel said most job hunters will find that many people are willing to help in a job search, but only if you are clear about what you want from them. Your requests should be specific, actionable, and relevant.

For instance, a vague question to one of your contacts about whether s/he knows anyone at the Red Cross and whether s/he can get you in touch with that person might not inspire your contact to take action on your behalf. But a question such as: “Would you introduce me to Joe Smith and see if you could get him to agree to meeting with me for a half an hour?” suggests (a) that you’ve done your homework and know whom you need to reach out to, and (b) gives your contact, the intermediary in this case, some detail—the amount of time you’re asking for, in this case—with which to reach out to Joe Smith.

“Doing your homework is key to every level of contact,” Friel said. “It makes it so easy to get through the labyrinth and set yourself off as someone who is different and special.” Know the organizations you want to work for, what they do, who works there, who are their grant recipients, who are on their boards, and who are their major donors, he suggested. Today, these answers are incredibly easy to find on the Internet, and it’s a job seeker’s responsibility to be armed with this information.

7. Get connected with recruiters and other intermediaries who are specifically involved in the searches that fit your capabilities and objectives.

This will be a small and easily identifiable group of people. “If you look at, for example, an executive director (ED) role of a \$3-million nonprofit, how many recruiters in the country are doing these kinds of searches?” Friel said. “Probably less than 20.” These are the recruiters and the search firms you want to be targeting, he said.

“So many job seekers spend a lot of time and effort trying to get in front of people who can’t ever help them because they’re not in the deal flow that [the job seeker] is interested in,” Friel explained. He suggested calling relevant search firms and asking them who in their organizations handle the searches for the roles you’re seeking. “With a little research and some targeted questioning, it’s usually very easy to make a list of 10 or so people you really want to get to know,” he added.

8. When preparing for a meeting, think about the needs of the person you’re meeting with. Over time if you help your contacts, they will help you.

Friel said that if you’ve determined someone is a key player for your job search, then you really want to find a way to get in front of him or her and make yourself part of his or her world. Think about how you can help this person. If there is someone in your personal network who might be beneficial to him or her, you could offer to arrange an introduction. However, Friel cautioned that you should always be clear about your own job-seeking objectives and don’t use your offer of help as a guise under which to gain a meeting for yourself. “People don’t like false pretenses and will see through that,” Friel said. “If you fit what they are normally seeking, they will usually be happy to get to know you!”

9. When given an interview, prepare thoroughly and ask thoughtful questions.

At the interview stage of your search, you should be sufficiently armed with information about the organization and be able to confidently engage the person with whom you are meeting. “There’s nothing more effective than a couple of really good, quality questions over the course of an interview,” said Friel. “Questions are so much more powerful than statements and can convey to the person you’re meeting with that you know what they’re dealing with.” In addition, be realistic in your expectations. If you’ve done your homework, you’ll understand the organization’s boundaries. For instance, “Don’t go into a job with a salary requirement of \$250,000 when the ED makes \$125,000,” Friel warned.

10. When your search is completed, thank the people who helped you.

Send a personal thank-you note. And stay in touch with your contacts by passing along information you think they’d find helpful or by connecting them with people who could help them or their organizations. As Friel noted, you will likely both need each other again.

Bridgestar (www.bridgestar.org), an initiative of the Bridgespan Group, provides a nonprofit management job board, content, and tools designed to help nonprofit organizations build strong leadership teams and individuals pursue career paths as nonprofit leaders.