

How to Market Yourself in the Nonprofit Sector

Despite signs that the economy is improving, the nonprofit job market remains extremely competitive. In this buyers' market, simply being a talented candidate is oftentimes not enough to land a senior leadership role, so job seekers need to get out and sell themselves to prospective nonprofit employers. The idea of coming up with a personal marketing plan may be intimidating, but the following six steps will help nonprofit job seekers put their best foot forward during a nonprofit job search. Throughout this article, you'll find links to other Bridgestar articles that offer more in-depth information about each topic covered in the six steps, as well as advice from individuals with experience in the areas of self-assessment, resume and cover-letter writing, interviewing, and social networking.

Step 1. Determine what you want—and what you have to offer

To market yourself effectively, it is important to know what you want from your next job. Just as a company must clearly define a role and its responsibilities before starting to interview candidates, an individual job seeker should start by defining the characteristics of his or her ideal position. Ask yourself what you liked best about your most recent job, what you found most frustrating, and what you would change to turn it into your ideal job. Gaining clarity on your motivations, preferred work environment, the aspects of jobs that are most appealing to you, and the set of transferable skills you have and enjoy using will help you articulate why you are the right person for the job when you find an interesting opportunity. (To learn more, see [Self-Exploration: The First Step in the Job Search](#) and [Guide to Selected Self-Assessment Tools](#).)

Job seekers who are able to clearly convey the specific skills and experiences they have to offer to a potential employer can make themselves stand out from other qualified job candidates. This is true regardless of whether you are a sector switcher or a veteran of the nonprofit sector. For example, when Nancy Lewis decided to move out of the nonprofit performing arts arena after a successful 30-year career there, she zeroed in on the managerial and finance skills she had developed that were transferable to a new part of the sector. When she saw a job posting for a chief financial officer position (CFO) at the Girl Scouts of Eastern Massachusetts, Lewis was intrigued by the organization's mission of empowering girls and felt the job was a great match for her skills and interests. She was able to explain to the hiring team how her finance and operations skills would benefit the organization and was hired. Her advice to nonprofit job seekers: "Really think about the organization and why you want to be there. Go into the interview process with that fully formed in your mind and then convince the organization that you have the skills needed." (To learn more, see [Nancy Lewis: Moving within the Nonprofit Sector](#) and [Transferable Skills](#).)

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Brenna Copeland, chief operating officer of Center City Public Charter Schools, says that nonprofit job seekers should focus on their “value-add,” meaning that they should highlight specific accomplishments or skills obtained in previous jobs that could add value to the nonprofit they are targeting. “It certainly impresses me when I interview folks and they can say, ‘Here’s what I’ve done. I know you’re facing a similar challenge and here are some of the things I would bring to the table to help you with that challenge,’” she said. (To learn more, see [Brenna Copeland: Staying Focused on Your Value-Add and Recruiting and Job Hunting in Tough Economic Times.](#))

Step 2. Maximize key resources

Nonprofit job seekers can make their candidacy stand out by taking a creative approach to the many job hunting resources that are available. For example, regularly checking online job boards that specialize in nonprofit job listings is a given for most job seekers. But Karen DeMay, senior director, executive search at the Bridgespan Group, says job boards can offer far more than just specific job leads. A careful reading of the listings can provide a broad overview of the needs of the nonprofit sector, as well as a picture of which organizations are hiring and for which positions. It can also show how well a candidate’s qualifications match up with the listed requirements for the types of jobs he or she is targeting. Candidates who uncover a critical area where they fall short can still put their best foot forward in interviews by stressing their other strengths or by explaining how they plan to get the support they need to offset that lack of expertise. (For more information, see [Hiring a Bridger: Interview Guide.](#))

Similarly, DeMay says recruiters also can help job seekers fine-tune their message. When you find a position in which you are interested, DeMay said it is perfectly reasonable to ask the recruiter what types of candidates are being considered for the job in terms of experience, education levels, and other factors. “Just be candid and say, ‘I’m trying to assess how my background aligns with the ideal profile and I’m sure you and your client are looking for a range of people,’” DeMay said. “You can then use that information to underscore your strengths relative to the opportunity.”

DeMay says the Web is full of information that can allow job seekers to zero in on what may be important to a particular organization. As part of your research, she recommends looking up online biographies of people who are in your targeted organizations so you can highlight the ways that your background either aligns with or complements the overall leadership team. “If you look at the bios of the management team at an educational nonprofit and all of those biographies list that the people are serving on boards, then you’re probably going to need that board experience, as well,” DeMay said. (For more information, see [What Nonprofit Employers are Looking for Today.](#))

Traditional networking is an essential tool for a successful job search, and job seekers can dramatically expand their networks with some effort and creativity. DeMay says that scrutinizing an organization's staff, board, and even donor lists can often turn up connections, as can involvement with professional groups, alumni associations, and other networking groups. (For more information, see [Networking](#) and [The Power of Networking: Kathy Heagney Williams' Path to the Nonprofit Sector](#).)

Online social networking also can be an important tool, especially for nonprofit job seekers who are conducting a regional or national job hunt. In fact, social networking guru Beth Kanter of Beth's Blog, says social networking can "put old-fashioned networking on steroids" by allowing job seekers to market themselves far beyond the reach of their own Rolodexes. In addition to making it easier to connect with people at target organizations, sites like LinkedIn also allow job seekers to broadcast their qualifications to a broader audience than they could reach through traditional means. Judy Ozbun, vice president of strategic partnerships for New England Healthcare Institute, says she uses LinkedIn to check job candidates' work history and affiliations and to preview recommendations from managers as well as team members. "Most employers now are also searching for additional information online about candidates," she said. (For more information, see [Leveraging Social Media in a Nonprofit Job Search: Q&A with Beth Kanter](#).)

Step 3. Set goals

Many nonprofits have experienced staff cuts because of the tough economy. As a result, nonprofit executives are busier than ever and truly appreciate job seekers who are efficient and organized, says Bridgespan's DeMay. "The time that executives are giving you for informational interviews or other networking meetings is really precious time," DeMay said. "So it is important to be concise and very pointed in how you communicate your background and what you're looking for." She says a good way to keep your personal marketing campaign on track is to plan out in advance the specific goals that you would like to achieve during each job seeking activity.

For example, if you're a job seeker who has lined up a 30-minute *informational* interview with a senior executive at an intriguing nonprofit, according to DeMay, you could reasonably accomplish these three goals:

- Get a sense of the organization and its strategy, and whether the organization's strategy includes any plans for growth and hiring;

- Establish a connection with the executive, learn about his or her role in developing or implementing the organization’s strategy, and offer ways you might be able to help him or her; and
- Convey your background, experience, what you’re looking for in your career, and how your qualifications align with the organization’s strategic goals.

For a first interview for an actual position, DeMay says your goals would be slightly different. First, you would want to learn about critical strategic issues the organization is facing and to address any questions you might have about the organization’s funding model. Second, you would want to come away knowing the ideal candidate profile that the organization is looking for (including the “must-haves” and the “nice-to-haves”) and the short-, medium-, and long-term goals of the position and how the person would be evaluated against those goals. (For more information, see the video “Common Interview Questions” on the [Insights on Bridging](#) page.)

Step 4. Prepare your “marketing” materials

Your resume and cover letter are often your first chance to make a good impression on a potential employer, so both should be personalized for each job opportunity and together they should tell a compelling story about who you are, what you have accomplished, and why the potential employer should want to meet you. (For an example of an effective cover letter, see: [Sample Cover Letter](#).) Judy Ozbun says job candidates who stand out to her are those who send a thoughtfully written cover letter and well-constructed resume that together answer the question of why they are interested in her organization’s mission and why their background is compelling and relevant to the position for which they are applying. “In particular, I’m looking for someone who really wants *this* job, not just a job,” Ozbun said.

If you are switching from the for-profit sector to the nonprofit sector, your cover letter can be your most valuable marketing tool, according to Kym Luqman, who left the for-profit sector to become executive director of the nonprofit Rebuilding Together Oakland. “When you are switching sectors, it is probably safe to say your resume will not be the most effective tool to present yourself,” she said. “I found it more effective to spend my time understanding the organization I was interested in; how my skills could be leveraged for the most impact; and tailoring my cover letter to highlight those points.” (For more information, see [Writing Effective Resumes and Cover Letters](#) and [Adapting Your Resume for a Nonprofit Job Search](#).)

Beth Kanter notes that applying for jobs online and posting resumes on online job boards can dramatically broaden job seekers’ reach and boost their efficiency, but she says job seekers who go

beyond simply entering their information into a job board's database can reap even greater rewards. For those willing to invest a little time, various Web tools allow job seekers to display their full portfolio, including work samples, testimonials, white papers, speaking engagements, blog posts, and other professional information and to easily keep the information updated. Kanter recommends the use of an online tool called a wiki. Wikis are perhaps best known as collaborative projects (with the most famous example being Wikipedia), but Kanter says the format is ideal for creating a personal portfolio and can include pointers to other online documents that you'd like potential employers to see. "It's a one-stop place where people can see my work and learn what others are saying about my work," she said of her own wiki. (See Beth's wiki at <http://bethkanter.wikispaces.com>.)

Of course, the downside to the free flow of information on the Web is that no job seeker can control all of the information that appears about him/her. Unprofessional photos, snarky comments about a former employer, or the details of a contentious court battle all live forever once they've been posted on the Internet. Karen DeMay notes that most recruiters routinely do online searches on job candidates and recommends that all job seekers be aware of the information that such a search might turn up. If you discover that a search will reveal damaging or incorrect information about you, you should plan on addressing the issue as quickly as makes sense for your situation.

Step 5. Establish your value within your organization

DeMay says she is currently seeing a trend among nonprofits toward recruiting senior executives who are what she described as "mini executive directors," i.e., people who not only possess content expertise but also have experience in team management, financial management, and experience managing external relationships with stakeholders. She says those job seekers who already have that type of cross-functional experience should highlight that prominently in their job search materials and during interviews. Those who don't have that experience—especially those who want to move up in their current organizations—should make it a priority to begin developing cross-functional skills by strengthening their work relationships. The key, according to DeMay, is to think about the people in your organization whom you would like to know more about your abilities and figure out how your work can complement theirs. One approach is to volunteer for cross-functional teams and company-wide task forces where you can bring some value to the team.

"There's a lot of importance in relationship building, in getting to know people not immediately in your area and helping them to understand the work that you're doing and talking about the work that they're doing, and then finding ways you might be able to support their projects," DeMay said. Sharing ideas and trend information with others in your organization and soliciting advice from them also can help build

relationships and increase your value to the organization. (For more information, see [How to Develop Yourself as a Nonprofit Leader](#).)

As you search for opportunities to develop and publicize your cross-functional skill set, DeMay says you should always keep in mind this question: How does what I'm doing apply to other initiatives in the organization and how can my work help others achieve their goals?

Step 6. Establish your value beyond your organization

One of the best ways for job seekers—especially those from outside the nonprofit sector—to showcase their readiness for a senior nonprofit management position is to point to their service on a nonprofit board. “Board service indicates a level of commitment to the nonprofit sector,” DeMay said. “Think about the issues your board has dealt with and be able to speak about those in some depth.” (For more information, see [What Should I Know Before Joining a Nonprofit Board?](#) and visit the [Bridgestar Job Board](#) for listings of board openings.)

Another way to establish your value beyond your organization—and improve your overall marketability—is to get out there and share what you know. If you have special subject expertise, volunteer to write articles for your organization's newsletter or for industry publications. DeMay says well-written articles that have been peer-reviewed are especially impressive to recruiters and hiring managers. In her own work, DeMay looks at any speaking engagements that job candidates have done and makes note of who else served on the panel of speakers. “I look at the other people they're linked with,” she said. “For example, if they've sat on a panel with other sector experts, it's a good indicator.”

Professional organizations should also be part of your personal marketing campaign. These organizations often sponsor sector- or field-specific conferences and continuing education programs that can increase both your knowledge and your network of contacts beyond your employer. Taking on a leadership or a committee role in a professional organization can be a fulfilling way to add to your skill set while also raising your public profile.

Job candidates also can broaden their reach by joining online networking groups that cater to their specialty. Kanter recommends just listening first, then joining in when your comments can add value to the online discussion. (For more information, please see [Bridgestar's Nonprofit Networking](#).) If you're a good writer, you could consider blogging or tweeting about developments in your area of expertise to help establish yourself as an authority. However, DeMay cautions that job seekers should be judicious in their online communication to avoid appearing to have too much time on their hands.

Summary

The Bridgespan Group's research, [Finding Leaders for America's Nonprofits](#), and [The Nonprofit Sector's Leadership Deficit](#) have shown that the nonprofit sector has a continuing need for talented senior managers. But in this tough economy, even the most talented candidates need to find a way to stand out from the crowd of potential hires. Marketing yourself effectively can be the key to getting a hiring manager's attention and convincing him or her that you're the right person for the job.

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.