

## Prospective Bridgers: Combating Common Myths

If you are thinking of moving from the for-profit to the nonprofit sector, you may wonder how potential employers view bridgers as candidates. What do hiring managers expect from someone coming from a business background? What concerns or questions might they have about you and your ability to make a transition?

As in any job search, the more you understand the hiring manager's point of view, the better equipped you will be to position your candidacy positively. While the perspectives of potential employers are likely to be as varied as the employers themselves, Bridgestar has encountered several common concerns and misconceptions about bridgers. Knowing how to identify these concerns and misconceptions—and how to address them—can be the key to a successful transition.

In this vein, we share with you some of the information we have gleaned through Bridgestar's extensive experience with bridging—including in-depth interviews with dozens of bridgers, seminars with over a hundred prospective bridgers, and search and advisory work for more than a hundred nonprofit organizations. Given the diversity of perspectives across the sector, this information is just a starting point. You must temper it with the knowledge you gain about the individual organizations and people you meet in your job search.

### The bad news: some in the nonprofit sector are skeptical about hiring bridgers

Some nonprofit employers have reservations about hiring people whose past experience is exclusively in the for-profit sector. These concerns may be shaped by their experience working with people from a business background. But in some cases, the perceptions may be based on little or no direct experience with bridgers. Whether or not these concerns are legitimate—or specifically relevant to you—it is important to understand them and where they may come from. These concerns tend to fall into the following general categories:

**Concerns about skill set.** This is the most straightforward case—when a position requires specific skills or experience that are unique to the nonprofit sector. For example, the National Council on Aging (NCOA) has successfully hired bridgers into a variety of roles, but President and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) James P. Firman said its search for a chief financial officer (CFO) focused on candidates with significant nonprofit experience—specifically in the area of government and foundation grants accounting. At many nonprofits, the CFO role can be a great

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fit for bridgers, but nonprofits with complex funding sources typically face very specific financial reporting requirements that have little in common with for-profit accounting rules.

**Concerns about expectations and cultural fit.** Andrea Silbert, president of the Eos Foundation, had the opportunity to consider many bridger candidates in her nine years as CEO of the Center for Women & Enterprise. She said that when she hired people from the for-profit sector—particularly from large corporations—she looked for people who already had some nonprofit experience to try to ensure a good fit. She commented, “I think it’s very tricky to hire someone and have this be their first [nonprofit] experience... You just don’t have that level of resources and support services. It’s such a sea change from a corporation or big law firm.”

Silbert said some bridgers have difficulty adjusting because of unrealistic expectations and lack of knowledge about the nonprofit world: “I think there’s just a fundamental misunderstanding of what it takes to run a nonprofit, or to work at a nonprofit. That somehow it’s easier—something you might do upon retirement or because you want to cut back. So, I think the issue is to understand the whole culture—that you earn a lot less, you work just as hard, and you’re not going to run it overnight.”

**Concerns that people from the for-profit world have different values and are driven by money rather than mission.** John B. Latchford, president and CEO of Goodwill Industries of the Greater East Bay, who has hired many bridgers, said that some people at his organization—particularly those who are most directly involved with clients—have certain preconceptions about bridgers. “They’ll sit back with a leery eye and say, ‘Okay this person is going to want to come in and drive the profits, or they’re not going to understand the mission, or it’s going to take them a while to see what’s going on.’”

Marshall Chapin, who left the for-profit sector to become chief operating officer (COO) and CFO of Envision Schools<sup>1</sup>, said he was surprised by the level of misunderstanding each sector seems to have of the other. He said he met many people in the nonprofit world who, “just think that profit is an evil, that it’s a bad thing. So there’s this contempt for for-profit folk and this belief that if you’re not doing nonprofit, you’re not a good person. And the counter to that is that the for-profit world believes that the nonprofits have it easy, just don’t work that hard—that it’s just not nearly as intellectually challenging or complex. It’s just fascinating to me because those are both truly

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<sup>1</sup> After three years at Envision, Chapin became senior director of marketing at EnerNOC, a company that provides demand response and energy management solutions.

myths and so far off from reality in my opinion.”

Daniel McLaughlin, president and CEO of Envision Schools, who hired Chapin and is a bridger himself, said that while he looks for passion for Envision’s mission in all candidates, it’s something he looks at particularly carefully with bridgers.

“If we don’t see something about it on the resume, we’re pretty skeptical,” he said. “It can be anything having to do with any kind of altruistic activity. But if someone has been a takeover artist and doing LBOs [leveraged buyouts], and they say, ‘You know what? I woke up on Thursday and realized this is what I want,’ then they’d have to do some serious convincing.”

**Concerns that nonprofit organizations can’t meet bridgers’ salary requirements.** According to Bridgestar Regional Director of Talent and Recruiting Amanda Fernandez, bridgers sometimes have difficulty getting a foot in the door because a nonprofit hiring manager looking at a resume assumes (correctly or incorrectly) that the bridger would have to take a cut in salary to move into the job s/he has applied for and wouldn’t be willing to do so. Silbert said that even when people agree to take a salary cut, they sometimes realize later that they shouldn’t have.

“The first step into the nonprofit sector is tough,” she said. “People are struggling with the pay issue. They make the decision to accept less pay, and then various things come up in the next six months.”

Silbert said that by hiring bridgers who already had experience at another nonprofit, she could be more confident that personal financial stress would not become an issue.

### **The good news: many nonprofit organizations welcome the skills that bridgers bring and do not see major barriers to transitioning them into the sector**

If you are someone with a business background who is interested in entering the nonprofit sector, you may find the above list discouraging. But take heart: many people navigate the transition very successfully. McLaughlin reported that in Envision’s central office, which provides support to the organization’s charter schools, the great majority of the employees are bridgers.

“We don’t see there being any issues in moving back and forth [between sectors],” McLaughlin said. “On our operations and finance side of the house...everybody is a bridger.” When asked whether these bridgers experienced challenges in negotiating the organizational culture when they came to Envision, McLaughlin answered with a simple “no.”

There are many nonprofit managers like McLaughlin who take a sector-blind approach, focusing on finding candidates with the skill sets they need, regardless of where those skills were attained. Other nonprofit leaders said they may even favor bridgers for certain roles. Said Firman, “For [one] particular position, which involves leading the development of business processes and a new core competency, I’d be surprised if we don’t hire a bridger, because I don’t see that skill set very often in nonprofit organizations. So it does depend a lot on the specific job.”

### **More good news: you can deflect some skepticism by countering stereotypes with specific information**

Even when you do encounter people in the nonprofit sector who are skeptical about hiring bridgers, you may be able to address their concerns by providing information about yourself and your background. Here are some tips on how to do so, based on conversations with successful bridgers and nonprofit hiring managers:

**Highlight your nonprofit experience, even if it isn’t part of your work history.** If you have had a significant board or other volunteer role in a nonprofit, make sure you showcase that experience in your resume and cover letter. On your resume and in interviews, offer concrete examples and accomplishments from your volunteer experience, just as you would from your professional experience. If you are considering bridging and you have had little or no exposure to the nonprofit sector, consider putting off your job search until you have gained some experience on an informal or volunteer basis. Many of the bridgers we interviewed told us that despite successful careers in business, they had to earn their credibility when they moved into the nonprofit sector.

**Focus on organizations whose missions you are passionate about, and convey your passion to them, connecting it to your own experiences whenever possible.** Firman of the NCOA commented, “We’re very clear: if the passion for our mission isn’t there—if they’re just looking for a nonprofit job, and they don’t care if it’s with kids or old people or education—ultimately the cultural fit isn’t there. It matters that they really care about the cause.”

When Marshall Chapin interviewed for the COO job at Envision, he had no professional background in the education field, but he spoke with great passion about the drive for education reform that he developed watching his father’s frustrations as a teacher in what he felt was a broken education system.

Amy Asin, who spent 15 years as a strategy and operations consultant at Booz, Allen & Hamilton before becoming assistant director of the Experiment in Congregational Education, had difficulty persuading prospective employers that she was serious about making a transition to the nonprofit sector. After focusing her job search in an area—the Jewish community—where she already had nonprofit board experience and could credibly convey her passion and commitment, she received three good offers.

**Network and use your personal relationships.** Donn Waage, director of the Central Partnership Office at the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, who has moved between the nonprofit and for-profit sectors a number of times, said he did feel there are some general negative perceptions about bridgers in the nonprofit sector. But he did not see them as a barrier in his personal career path.

“Every time I’ve moved from one sector to another, it’s always been because I’ve known the people,” Waage said. “Any kind of prejudice just breaks down if you know the people. This mild prejudice between the sectors—if you know the people, then it’s not a big deal.”

**Be as honest as you can, with yourself and with organizations you are considering joining, about what you need to be successful...and what you don’t.** Some bridgers may not be able to take a significant pay cut—and as Andrea Silbert pointed out, it’s important to think through and be realistic about your own needs. But others may be at a stage in their lives where their financial needs are decreasing. For example, Firman said he has noticed some baby boomers entering the sector who have taken the financial independence of their children as an opportunity to make a career change. If you can afford to work for less than you could make in the private sector, you should make that clear from the start. If you don’t, you risk having your resume put aside because of a hiring manager’s incorrect assumptions about what you need or expect.

Signaling your compensation expectations early in the process is tricky, but Bridgestar Regional Director of Talent and Recruiting Karen DeMay describes how it can be done: “As a recruiter, I welcome information in a cover letter that indicates a bridger’s openness to a lower salary. For example, a sentence in a cover letter such as: ‘While I’ve benefited from a robust compensation package in my for-profit career, I am able and prepared to be flexible regarding compensation,’ would alert me that this applicant understands that his or her current compensation is comparatively high for the sector. And if the cover letter convincingly conveys the applicant’s passion for the organization’s mission and commitment to making an impact in the sector, then I have a compelling reason to interview the applicant.”

**Point out to potential employers the similarities between your past positions and the nonprofit job(s) you are pursuing.** Because some people perceive great differences between the sectors, think through ahead of time the aspects of your work history that you see as relevant to the organizations and positions in which you are interested. Then point out those strengths in your communications with potential employers. Highlight your transferable skills in your resume and cover letter. Tell about a situation in which you achieved success with constrained resources. Point out similarities in organizational size, stage, and culture. Create and then practice saying a short “elevator speech” that clearly explains why you want to bridge and why you feel that you can make the transition.

Andrea Silbert said that when she ran the Center for Women and Enterprise she was more inclined to hire someone from a small business than from a large company because she felt the adjustment would be easier. Similarly, Daniel McLaughlin of Envision said he experienced fewer challenges with new hires if they had previously worked for a startup, regardless of whether they had any nonprofit experience.

Better understanding the hiring manager’s point of view and some of the myths and stereotypes that exist in the nonprofit sector may help bridgers strategize about how to present themselves in their resumes, cover letters, and interviews. Like anyone searching for a job, bridgers should ask as many questions as possible to try to ascertain the manager’s perceptions, expectations, and concerns. Frank conversations are the best way to cut through the myths and stereotypes and find the right fit.

*Note: Envision Schools is a Bridgespan consulting client. The National Council on Aging is a Bridgespan consulting client and a Bridgestar client.*

**Bridgestar** ([www.bridgestar.org](http://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.