

## Leading in the Second Half: The Nonprofit Opportunity

### Commentary by David L. Simms, Managing Partner of Bridgestar, for the MetLife Foundation/Civic Ventures New Face of Work Survey.

The demographic trends challenging the whole American workplace are fairly well known. A recent issue of Fortune magazine cites the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projection that between the years 2002 and 2012 the number of 35-44 year-olds in the labor force will decline by 3.8 million, while the number of available 55-64 year olds will increase by 8.3 million.

In fact, Ken Dychtwold, president of Age Wave, figures that businesses must roughly double the number of older employees over the next decade. He says, “The managers trying to move everybody in their fifties out the door are taking their companies off a demographic cliff.”

At the same time, consider the data in the nonprofit sector: Thirty-five percent of California executive directors surveyed in a CompassPoint study indicated that they expected to leave their positions within two years. A United Way of New York City survey found that almost half of executive directors would retire in five years! The implications are staggering. Who will succeed these talented, experienced people?

Bridgestar, a nonprofit organization dedicated to attracting, developing, and connecting senior leadership and board talent into and within the nonprofit sector, is looking for answers. We are committed to bringing the skills and experience of all talented individuals to bear on our pressing social needs and challenges. Most of our talent-sourcing efforts are targeted toward engaging mid-career (as opposed to midlife) leaders and promising “aspiring” leaders. However, we believe that older workers represent a rich talent pool for executive and management roles in U.S. nonprofits. We simply cannot afford to overlook this potential.

On the other hand, if the systems to connect nonprofits seeking senior leaders with any talented people are largely non-existent – and, historically, this has been the case – then individuals in midlife may find it all the more difficult to find their niche without support.

Some ask: Can older people lead organizations effectively? Of course they can. The Bridgespan Group is privileged to work with numerous organizations whose senior leaders are, indeed, “seniors.” It is

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interesting to note that many, if not most, are the founders of the organizations they lead. All are very active – and they're very invested in the success of their organizations, putting in long hours and continuing to work their Rolodexes.

While this may not be all that unusual, the kind of commitment of time and energy involved in founding and leading an organization would not necessarily be attractive to most so-called prospective retirees. In fact, the MetLife Foundation/Civic Ventures New Face of Work Survey shows a significant cohort of seniors with a desire to work in organizations with strong social missions, but with a corresponding desire for flexibility and less-than-full-time work.

For this reason, among others, we are beginning to explore a new kind of work model, whereby organizations that need executive-level talent for specific functions – but not full-time – might be able to take advantage of a pool that could conceivably include men and women 50-plus, as well as women re-entering the workforce and others not interested in working full time. Part-time work is of course not new, but creating an infrastructure to support talent-matching for part-time workers in the nonprofit sector may well be.

With more and more individuals pursuing multiple, or sequential, careers, there may be a unique opportunity before us. We need to pursue it – but at the same time we must be sensitive to the needs of both employees and employers. To do so will require an education process. It will require flexibility and creativity. It may require that we develop new models, and perhaps new ways of defining work, that we have not considered before.

**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.