

Hiring a Bridger

The number of nonprofit organizations has tripled over the last 20 years, with the highest rate of growth among the largest organizations. As nonprofits have grown and matured, the demand has increased for people with the skills and experience required to build and manage large and complex organizations.

At the same time, many accomplished business executives—baby boomers and others—are looking for opportunities to apply their skills to make an impact on social justice issues that are important to them. Some among them aspire to do this work not just on a part-time or volunteer basis, but as a full-time career.

As a result of these forces working together, many nonprofit organizations seeking to fill key leadership positions are considering one or more candidates whose experience is primarily in the for-profit sector—candidates known as bridgers.

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—we have seen some excellent matches between organizations looking for particular skill sets and bridgers looking to work in mission-oriented environments. We have also witnessed some of the very real challenges organizations can encounter when they hire bridgers. Not every organization will experience these challenges, of course. But by informing themselves about such challenges, organizations can position themselves better to negotiate them, or even to avoid them altogether. In addition, we have identified some practices that have helped organizations to make successful matches and to help bridgers make successful transitions into their organizations.

Potential challenges in hiring bridgers

For bridgers, making a sector switch can involve a big shift in organizational culture, which may be difficult for both the bridger and the organization. Some of the elements that bridgers most commonly pointed to were: less availability of support staff, more resource constraints, more collaborative decision-making processes, the need to do a greater proportion of management through motivation and persuasion (as opposed to formal power or financial incentives), and the difficulty of defining and measuring success.

Of course, the level of adjustment required will depend a great deal on the culture of the specific organization into which a bridger is moving and the environments in which s/he has worked in the past.

Boston

535 Boylston St., 10th Floor
Boston, MA 02116
P 617 572-2833
F 617 572-2834

New York

3 Times Sq., 25th Floor
New York, NY 10036
P 646 562-8900
F 646 562-8901

San Francisco

465 California St., 11th Floor
San Francisco, CA 94104
P 415 627-1100
F 415 627-4575

However, it is important to understand that some bridgers will experience the change as a major shift and to try to anticipate these issues.

For those who do experience a big culture change, the adjustment can be difficult. John B. Latchford, president and chief executive officer (CEO) of Goodwill Industries of the Greater East Bay, who is a bridger and who has hired a number of bridgers (some of whom did not last a year with the organization), commented, “Core [support] services are always limited. I find that bridgers from large companies are particularly susceptible to wondering why they have to perform certain tasks and responsibilities, because they had expected a support staff to do it. Here in our organization, while we’re fairly large by nonprofit standards, we don’t have an IT [information technology] department. We outsource it. So we can’t always come down there and fix your problem. That’s frustrating, particularly for people who are used to having the support services.”

Marshall Chapin, who transitioned from financial services and high tech to Envision Schools, a nonprofit charter-school management organization, encountered differences similar to those Latchford described. He explained that working in the nonprofit world is different because resources are always tight: “I think the culture shock comes in many forms. For example, stuff isn’t always clean and doesn’t always work. When your computer breaks, there isn’t necessarily a huge help desk IT group to call, and you do a little bit of everything.” However, he found that being mentally prepared for such changes was quite helpful, because, “You quickly realize that everyone does a little bit of everything because that’s just how life has to be and no one is above doing the dirty work. That wasn’t culture shock for me because I sort of welcomed it and knew it was coming, but it’s definitely a mark of the shift.”

These differences in organizational culture between the sectors are real, and a few nonprofit leaders with whom we have spoken are so concerned about bridgers’ ability to navigate them that for the most senior positions, they only consider candidates who have already worked successfully in another nonprofit organization. However, it is important to recognize that sometimes transition problems reflect the fact that the bridger is experiencing multiple culture shifts at once. Some of the bridgers who described the most jarring transitions had moved not only from for-profit to nonprofit, but from a large organization to a small one or from a mature, established company to a startup.

Beyond differences in organizational culture, bridgers may also encounter a clash between expectations and reality. Some bridgers move into the nonprofit sector at periods in their lives when they want to scale back their time spent at work. They expect that the schedule will be less demanding than what they were accustomed to in their previous jobs, but find that is not the case.

James P. Firman, president and CEO of the National Council on Aging (NCOA), reported encountering “bridgers coming to the nonprofit sector because they don’t want to work as hard, and my own experience, at least in high-functioning nonprofits, is people work harder.”

In addition, bridgers may overestimate the proportion of their skills that will translate and expect to move directly into an executive position, even when they have little or no experience in the sector. According to Andrea Silbert, president of the Eos Foundation and former CEO of the Center for Women & Enterprise, bridgers can experience a rude awakening when they encounter the reality, “that you earn a lot less, you work just as hard, and you’re not going to run it overnight.”

Compensation can be a challenging issue as well. Silbert said that some bridgers she hired who accepted a lower salary than they had made previously discovered only later that they couldn’t make the economics work and had to leave. In her experience, this issue compounded the other expectation and culture clash challenges bridgers encountered and made her wary of people new to the sector, no matter how good their intentions. In Silbert’s words, “The first step into the nonprofit sector is tough. 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, and they say, ‘Wait a minute. I took a pay cut, and I don’t have the responsibility I thought I would have.’ I think it just all adds up.”

Practices that can help organizations find the right candidate

As challenging as the transition can be for some bridgers and the organizations that hire them, many of the nonprofit leaders we have interviewed and worked with have successfully hired bridgers and greatly value their contributions. Indeed some, like Silbert, are bridgers themselves.

How can an organization considering one or more bridger candidates with attractive skill sets avoid the common pitfalls and find the right candidates? There are no guarantees, but the experiences of the organizations we have learned from offer some important lessons, all of which can be summarized by the general advice we would offer in any hiring process: think through the position and what you need, be self-aware and candid about your own organization, and be thorough in your assessment of the candidates.

Determine what specific skills and experience you need, and look first for candidates who have them, without regard to where those skills were acquired. Try to separate the skills and experience from the work environment. You may find that someone who has never worked in an organization like yours has all the necessary transferable skills to fill a role in your organization.

By the same token, if you're looking for skills that you think are more commonly found in the for-profit sector, don't assume that all bridgers have them.

If you decide to hire a bridger, consider how to mesh that person's transferable skills with those of existing staff who know your field. Firman has given a great deal of thought to how best to combine the skills of his bridger hires with the in-sector experience of his other staff. "We tend to hire people who have skills in certain business processes, and integrate them with people who have either domain knowledge or specific knowledge of aspects of our field, like advocacy....It doesn't matter if they know the field of aging. It's people who can complement, strengthen, and support the experts who have been working in the field of aging for the last 30 years."

In determining cultural fit, look for real experience with and knowledge of a comparable organization—and resulting realistic expectations of what it will be like to work in your organization. Most of the nonprofit leaders we spoke with felt that bridgers who had board or other volunteer experience at a similar organization had more realistic expectations. But don't assume that such experience is enough or that another nonprofit has a similar culture to yours. Ask questions about candidates' experience in the sector and expectations for working in the sector, and show and tell them as much as you can about your organizational culture (managerial and communication style, decision-making processes, workload, hours, etc.). Ensure that final candidates have an opportunity to tour your organization's facilities, meet with future peers, and spend ample time with the hiring manager.

Look for experience in an organization of similar size and stage, regardless of sector.

Silbert said that some of the struggling bridgers she saw were actually suffering as much from the change from a large organization to a small one as from the sector shift. She said people working in small businesses experience some of the same resource constraints and the need to perform a wide variety of functions that are common in small nonprofits.

Marshall Chapin, who has made more than one move between sectors, described the similarities in culture between two of his employers in different sectors. Both were in the late start-up stages and had about 90 employees: "There is a sense of fraternity among all the employees and an excitement about things. The best environments are ones in which people take their jobs very seriously but don't take themselves too seriously."

Daniel McLaughlin, president and CEO of Envision Schools, concurred. McLaughlin, who is a

bridger and has hired numerous bridgers, explained that at Envision, sector experience is less of a factor in defining fit than other issues: “More than the for-profit and nonprofit worlds is the issue of being a startup. Whether people can handle ambiguity and risk is more of a distinguishing characteristic when we’re hiring people.”

Look for humility, self-awareness, and adaptability. Silbert, among many others, pointed to humility as a defining characteristic among those who are able to successfully learn the ropes in a new sector when they are already somewhat advanced in their careers. Firman said he looks for people who understand themselves and what they need to be successful because the candidates themselves can play an important role in determining whether the organization and the role are a fit for them. Latchford said he looks for “the ability to think critically and to adapt to different situations.”

Look for evidence of the candidate’s understanding of and passion for your organization’s mission, even if it’s not in the job history. Most—if not all—of the nonprofit leaders with whom we have had experience feel that deep commitment to the organization’s mission is an essential criterion for hiring, particularly at the executive level. In the ideal case, the candidate can point to experience on his or her resume that demonstrates that commitment, although lack of such a history should not automatically rule out a candidate. According to McLaughlin, “Our assessments for the passion piece are very personal and intuitive and conversational. We don’t have a battery of tests. But it hasn’t been hard to figure out....It just seems to burble out of people when they have it. I wouldn’t say it’s a prohibition not to have it on your resume, but you’re going to have to do some really convincing talking.”

Chapin, whom McLaughlin hired as chief operating officer, explained how he overcame concerns that he had no education experience: “I think what bridged that for them is that my father was a high school English teacher who grew increasingly frustrated over the course of his career with the bureaucracy of traditional public schools and not being able to try new things. He was frustrated with the lack of education reform, and this was a job about education reform. So they understood that I deeply believed in the core mission and I was passionate about change.”

Have frank conversations with candidates. Ask as many questions as you can to get a sense of whether candidates truly understand the nature of the transition and that their expectations are aligned with yours. Firman said he tries to be as clear as possible with bridgers about expectations on both sides and to make sure that candidates have thoroughly thought through their own motivations and professional choices. “I guess I push a lot harder with people on why

do you want to be a bridger. The reality of being a bridger is probably different than what you might think it is. And I would just counsel people up front that not everyone can successfully make this transition. What are your assumptions about being a bridger? I just really try to help them think this through up front, before either we or they make a mistake.” Bridgestar Regional Director of Talent and Recruiting Karen DeMay says she urges client organizations to openly probe qualified candidates’ expectations around compensation, workload, and other sensitive issues.

Run a thorough and transparent hiring process. Because they come from outside the sector, some bridgers face more credibility questions than an in-sector hire might. Running a good hiring process is critical to the eventual hire’s credibility with co-workers, board members, key partners, and other constituencies.

One bridger we interviewed talked about being “plucked” from a banking job to become head of a small foundation by a colleague who was president of the foundation’s board. Initially, he was pleased to get the job without having to go through a formal process. But once he was in the position, he faced so many questions from staff and board members about how he got the job, and whether he was qualified for it, that he wished there had been a more formal process with key stakeholders involved. Defining the process and criteria for hiring is important in any search, but it is especially so when top candidates come from the for-profit sector or other nontraditional backgrounds.

Firman said that despite some of the challenges his organization and others have encountered in hiring bridgers, he believes bridgers have a lot to offer NCOA and the sector as a whole. He said he has seen the benefit of marrying bridgers’ business skills and experience with in-sector leaders’ knowledge of the field of aging. He pointed to the growing group of baby boomers who are willing to bring their skills to the nonprofit sector, often for a lower salary than they were making previously.

To take advantage of this pool of talent, organizations should be aware of the challenges some bridgers encounter and utilize the lessons learned by organizations that have hired bridgers in the past. Hiring a bridger can bring up some questions and challenges that wouldn’t necessarily arise with a candidate from within the nonprofit sector, and organizations considering bridgers must make sure to choose carefully and find the right fit. However, best practices in hiring bridgers differ little from the practices that make for a good process in considering any candidate. The lessons enumerated above serve as a good reminder that in any search it’s important to understand each candidate’s skills, experience, work style, and passions, and how they match up with the position and your organization.

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), 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.