

Hands-on Paths to Full-time Nonprofit Work

There are many paths that can lead to a senior staff position in the nonprofit sector. We have found that for bridgers—people moving from the for-profit to the nonprofit sector for the first time—one effective route is through volunteerism.

Volunteer jobs typically will not lead directly to a senior leadership position in the same nonprofit organization, but a relevant nonprofit board or volunteer experience can, nonetheless, be invaluable for someone bridging from the private sector to a nonprofit. Volunteering can give bridgers insight into whether the nonprofit sector is the right career path for them and guidance on what sort of work they want to do in the sector. Working as a nonprofit volunteer also can serve as a good introduction to the myriad cultural differences between the nonprofit and for-profit sectors. Furthermore, the experience will help bridgers begin to build a network of nonprofit peers and colleagues, will introduce them to nonprofit sector vocabulary, and will boost their credibility with potential nonprofit employers by demonstrating their commitment to nonprofit work.

What follows are the stories of three senior nonprofit executives who got their starts in the sector as volunteers. Each one said their volunteer experiences led them—either directly or indirectly—to their current nonprofit roles. While their motivations and experiences are uniquely their own, there are lessons to be learned from each.

Board membership develops into senior management role

In late 2005, Keith Weaver took an early retirement package from Manulife Financial, a leading Canadian-based insurance services company. He and his wife moved back to their native Canada from Asia, where he had been senior vice president and chief financial officer for Manulife. Financially secure and barred from working for a competing firm for two years by his separation agreement, Weaver planned to devote his time to volunteering. Through a series of contacts, he lined up several nonprofit board roles, including one at Micro Insurance Agency Holdings LLC (MIA), a Christian organization that provides impoverished people in Africa and Asia with affordable life, credit, health, and crop insurance products.

When Weaver joined the MIA board in early 2007, the organization was small and struggling financially. But it had just gotten word that it was being considered for a major grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Because of his multinational insurance experience, Weaver became a key participant in special board sessions held to review the Gates proposal and to develop MIA's growth strategy. As time passed and the Gates grant became a certainty, Weaver said he felt "called" to play a more direct, formal

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role in MIA's future. "I felt like a consultant who helps a client with a project, but then isn't asked to see it through or asked to follow up," he said. "I kept thinking, 'I could help more here.'"

Weaver said that prior to joining the MIA board, he had never considered working full-time for a nonprofit, but he was captivated by MIA, its Christian mission, and the growth challenges it faced. "MIA was on the cusp of a major ramp-up with a pretty slim management team," Weaver said. "It was really starting from scratch. They were going to need significant management experience to make it work. I felt quite aligned with the objectives of MIA, and I wanted it to succeed."

Weaver said he and the organization's leaders came to the realization that he would be a valuable addition to the senior staff at virtually the same time. He became MIA's chief financial and administrative officer in September 2007, just two months before the organization was formally awarded a \$24.2 million grant by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. "No question, this was the right thing for me to do," Weaver said. "To see the effect this work has is very gratifying."

Weekly volunteer work opens the door to senior leadership position

Throughout his 20-year career in the high-tech sector, Paul Heggarty often had volunteered at soup kitchens and other direct-service providers, performing hands-on tasks as his schedule permitted. When he was laid off by his for-profit employer, Viant, after it was acquired by another company in 2003, Heggarty began investigating careers in the nonprofit sector. Heggarty said his experience working in start-up environments was a positive for many potential nonprofit employers, but his lack of a history within one nonprofit domain was often a stumbling block. "I wasn't aligned to any one nonprofit field," he said. "I hadn't really thought about it that way."

After several months of searching without success, Heggarty took a position at Watchfire, another for-profit, high-tech firm. But he resolved to make volunteering a regular part of his life. He contacted the Essex County Community Foundation to find a list of nonprofits that could use a one-day-a-week volunteer with his finance and business planning skills. As it turned out, the foundation's grants committee needed someone to help review grant requests. "It was a great introduction for me into the world of philanthropy," Heggarty said. "It helped educate me about the nonprofit sector."

As he worked with the grants committee and performed other business analysis work for the foundation, Heggarty met many people for whom philanthropy was a major part of their lives. He began thinking about how his skills could translate into a nonprofit job that would offer not only a paycheck but also a social purpose.

When he heard in 2007 through Bridgestar that the nonprofit Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) was looking for a vice president of finance and administration to oversee the infrastructure and systems needed to support its rapid growth, Heggarty knew he had finally found the right fit. The timing was also perfect. Watchfire had recently been acquired by IBM and, following a transition period, Heggarty would be available to join CEP.

Heggarty said that while his volunteer work did not lead directly to his getting the CEP job in October 2007, it helped him to demonstrate his commitment to the nonprofit sector. “The volunteer experience does help,” he said. “It gives you credibility. It shows you’re doing your homework and that this is not just a fleeting desire for a job. It shows you’re making a thoughtful transition.”

Heggarty continues to volunteer at the Essex County Community Foundation and also for the Massachusetts Department of Social Services as a community representative for foster care reviews. He advised anyone considering bridging into the nonprofit sector to begin by volunteering—and to be patient. “It takes time, and you need to do some thinking about what you really want,” he said.

Longtime commitment to girls and families enables sector switch

During her for-profit career, Ruth Bramson oversaw the human resources and diversity issues that arose from large corporate mergers and acquisitions. She served as executive vice president of human resources for National Grid US and as chief human resources officer and chief diversity officer for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

But throughout her 25-year career, she also volunteered extensively at numerous nonprofit organizations that worked to improve the lives of girls, women, and families. Bramson developed her passion for the mission through her personal experiences as a single mother. “I realized how difficult it was for me and my three girls, and how much harder it would be for someone with fewer resources,” she said.

Bramson has donated her time to many groups over the years, including the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women, the Massachusetts Coalition for Equal Pay, One Family, United Way, and Junior Achievement. Most of her appointments to nonprofit boards and commissions came as a result of paid positions she held or through people she knew who were already on the boards. She said one of her most rewarding volunteer projects was her founding in 1997 of Suited for Success, a nonprofit that prepared women leaving welfare to move into the business world. As founder, Bramson lined up funding, oversaw the largely volunteer workforce, and set up the terms of governance from scratch.

In February 2008, Bramson became the first chief executive officer of the nonprofit Girl Scouts of Eastern Massachusetts. Her volunteer experiences—particularly at Suited for Success—were a perfect training ground for her nonprofit staff role. “Working on boards, doing the fundraising, events, and development of the curriculum for each week’s program, getting guest presenters and trainers...all were very helpful and transferable skills for my new role,” Bramson said. “I did all of that while working full-time at my paid job, so I also learned to juggle lots of projects.”

Her volunteer efforts also demonstrated her commitment to a mission and showed potential nonprofit employers that she was willing to devote herself to the community, knew how to work with nonprofit boards and volunteers, and understood the constraints under which nonprofits operate.

Bramson, who still volunteers at a number of nonprofits in addition to her paid job with Girl Scouts, said that working full-time in the sector is “harder work, more time, more commitment, and more fun than any for-profit job I have ever had.” She advised bridgers to do their homework on the sector and on the individual nonprofits in which they are interested. “As with any job search, the best resources are your network and letting folks know you are transitioning,” she said.

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.