

Frequently Asked Questions: Transitioning to a Nonprofit

Lisa, a retail executive with 15 years of experience, was looking for something more meaningful, but wasn't quite sure where to start. Michael, a former senior consultant at a large management consulting firm, found his pro bono work with the public schools so rewarding that he decided to pursue full-time work in the field of education. Jon, a 58-year-old technology executive not quite ready for retirement, wanted to "give back" to the community by applying his skills to a nonprofit organization.

We have heard from hundreds of for-profit leaders looking to make career shifts into the nonprofit sector: some actively pursuing specific jobs, others just beginning to think about making a cross-sector transition. Though each individual has a unique story and set of interests, over time we have heard a common set of concerns and questions. Here are answers to some of bridgers' most frequently asked questions.

Q: I want to find a career where I can make a difference in the world. How do I get started looking at jobs in the nonprofit sector?

A: Many bridgers, especially those just beginning to think about the move, aren't quite sure where to start. You might have a vague sense of looking for work that "touches your soul," as one person described it, but perhaps you haven't fully articulated what that work might be. A good place to start is by asking yourself some questions about what aspects of the nonprofit sector are most interesting to you, and what your motivations are for change.

When you began working in the for-profit sector you probably didn't say to yourself, "I'd really like to work in the for-profit sector." Rather, you likely had a specific industry interest—whether consumer products, or technology, or media; or a functional interest like marketing or product development. Or you might have had ideas about specific organizations with great reputations that you wanted to pursue, or specific "must have" characteristics like an entrepreneurial environment. The nonprofit sector is as complex, if not more, than the for-profit, and you should start your job search by doing a little soul-searching on how you envision yourself working in the sector. Key questions include:

- Is there a specific issue area (or areas) that you are particularly interested in, such as education, or elder care, or the environment?
- What about functional areas? Do you love marketing, or finance, and want to engage in it in the nonprofit sector? Are you a general manager in search of a different culture within which to work?

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- What organizational characteristics appeal to you most? Large or small? Start-up or more established? Product or service-focused? Primarily donor-supported or earned-income supported? Near your current home or in a different geography? Or are there a handful of organizations with strong reputations for which you think you might like to work?

The answers to all of these questions will help shape your list of target organizations and begin the active job search process.

Q: Which for-profit skills tend to translate best to the nonprofit sector? How can I articulate the relevance of my experience for nonprofit work, if I've never worked in the sector?

A: It is often easiest to explain how key functional skills might transfer to nonprofit leadership jobs. Clearly, a finance background will be important for a chief financial officer job, marketing for a chief marketing and communications officer, technology for a chief technology officer, and operations and general management for a chief operating officer. Nonprofits often look for candidates who have experience working in multi-disciplinary ways, or managing the needs of multiple stakeholders, or experience in a resource-constrained environment.

However, most skills can translate, as long as you put in the work to get to know the organization you're approaching and define how what you have done in the past can get you there. We have found that what matters most is getting a thorough understanding of the criteria for the job you're seeking, and lining up your skills against those criteria. One tactic is to literally jot down details of your experience right next to each part of a job description, so you can see where you have strong and translatable skills, and where you do not.

It's also important to think broadly about your experience. Your volunteer roles, both formal and informal, help you develop highly transferable skills. People typically talk about formal positions, such as treasurer of the board of a local nonprofit, but gloss over less formal involvement such as developing brochures to help market your child's preschool, or the fundraising or volunteer recruitment you did for a local political candidate.

Q: How should I customize my resume for a nonprofit job search?

A: There are several things you can do to ensure that your resume encourages nonprofit organizations to consider you for the job:

- Categorize your experiences and skills in a way that emphasizes their transferability to the specific job you are pursuing. For example, highlight functional expertise such as marketing, or technology, or accounting. Or emphasize that you have managed individuals from different backgrounds/departments (e.g., engineering and product development) or across multiple geographies.
- Make sure you highlight not just the tasks you have done, but what results you have achieved—e.g., “increased customer base by 20 percent over three years.”
- Avoid jargon. Remember that the person reading your resume may not be very familiar with the specifics of your current field.
- Finally, make sure to highlight relevant nonprofit experience, whether paid or volunteer (you’d be surprised how many people forget to include volunteer experience on their resume). If your volunteer work is extensive (e.g., you’ve done pro bono consulting work for the same organization for three years, or have been the chair of the board of a nonprofit), you might even list it in the experience section of your resume—similar to how you present full-time jobs—as opposed to a one-phrase reference in a “community involvement” section of the resume.

Q: I have a pretty clear sense of what I want to do, but how do I go about finding opportunities?

A: Two of the most critical things you can do are research and networking. Research the field and/or organizations you are interested in to round out your target list and prepare yourself for both informational and job-specific interviews. The better you understand both an organization and the field within which it operates, the more prepared you will be for these conversations. GuideStar, an Internet-based organization, is a good starting point to research specific organizations because it provides overviews and the 990 tax forms of over 1.5 million nonprofits. Basic information on organizations and their tax returns is free; more detailed search and reporting capabilities are available for a fee.

You can also research existing job opportunities by browsing selected job posting sites, such as Bridgestar (www.bridgestar.org), Philanthropy Careers (www.philanthropycareers.com), or execSearches (www.execsearches.com). At the same time, start networking. Nearly 80 percent of senior-level bridgers we interviewed found their positions through personal networks, with the balance identifying an opportunity through classified ads or executive search firms. Similarly, a separate Bridgestar survey found that using personal networks of boards of directors was the most common recruitment method.

If you have spent the bulk of your career in one sector or domain, you will likely have networks focused deeply in that area (and often will have gaps in the area to which you want to move). But be creative. Use your networks—colleagues, fellow board members, friends, your college and/or graduate alumni

networks, for example—to identify connections to the organizations on your target list, and set up informational interviews. Work in the other direction as well; ask people you know about their involvement on nonprofit boards or in volunteer capacities, and/or ask if they can think of others who have accomplished a similar cross-sector transition.

When you are granted an interview for an open position, make sure you are prepared. Practice your story of why you are making this transition and what you can bring to the organization. Do your research about the organization, the field, and even the senior staff's backgrounds, to ensure that you'll be ready for any detailed questions about how you might tackle key challenges of the job.

The need for research doesn't end when you are offered a job. Due diligence at this point can help you make sure that you have found an organization and role in which you will feel comfortable, be appropriately challenged, and see opportunities for ongoing growth and learning. For example, you might probe the culture of the organization, whether or not others in the organization have come from business backgrounds, and the level of investment in professional development and growth.

Q: How do I go from frequent short-list candidate to getting the job? I'm starting to feel like I'm “always the bridesmaid, never the bride.”

A: It's frustrating to go through several rounds of interviews only to hear “We really enjoyed meeting you, but” But of course, it happens. Shifting fields is hard, and it will naturally take a bit longer to find the right opportunity and to change how people see you. A good approach is to try to learn all you can from each experience. If you felt well-matched for a specific position, and “clicked” with the executive director or recruiter even though you weren't selected for the job, ask for feedback. To avoid putting the director or recruiter on the defensive, you might want to ask, “what can I do, in terms of additional experience or positioning (e.g., on my resume, in my interviews) that will help me get a similar job?”

Q: What should I expect in regard to salary and work hours?

A: The organization you join and the role you take on will greatly determine your salary and hours. Regarding salary, almost universally you can expect to take a pay cut from a for-profit job with similar responsibility level. That said, salaries in the sector vary (e.g., a large organization usually has a greater range of compensation than a small one), and while they may be lower than the average in the for-profit sector, you may be pleasantly surprised at the compensation level in some organizations. To begin to gain an idea of the salary levels, you can take a look at salary surveys published by GuideStar, the Chronicle of Philanthropy, The Nonprofit Times, and Abbott Langer & Associates (among others). To understand the compensation structure at a specific nonprofit, you can download its 990 tax form from the

GuideStar website (www.guidestar.org), which lists salary information for the top-paid employees of the organization.

Hours too will vary greatly by role and by organization, but don't expect to work less than you did in the for-profit world. In many instances, nonprofit leaders work longer hours than their for-profit counterparts, driven both by the demands and complexity of the job, and by the passion and commitment they have for the cause.

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.