



# Closing thoughts

## Know yourself, the sector, and the points of synergy

### In the conclusion you will:

- Review the importance of understanding yourself, the nonprofit sector, and the synergies between the two.
- Recognize the importance of keeping your job search in perspective and staying positive.

Today's nonprofit sector is arguably the most diverse employment sector in our society. Because of this, many of the preconceived notions, generalizations, and myths about nonprofit organizations simply don't hold up sector-wide. From the mission statements that drive nonprofit work to the organizational structures of 2- to 2,000-person nonprofits, there are few universal truths in the sector. To help direct your search for a career in such diverse organizations, Idealist.org created this guide to illustrate the size and scope of the sector, point out commonalities, highlight distinctions, dispel some of the myths, and help you assess where to find your perfect opportunity.

By this point, you've probably realized that working for a nonprofit means serving as a catalyst and connector in a way that transcends any single organization's work. The communal nature of this effort is one of the few sector-wide commonalities: in a simple sense, nonprofit organizations are aligned around the goal of working toward a better world—but how *you* define a better world may differ dramatically from the views of other people and organizations in the sector. The specific missions, strategies, and points of focus for nonprofits vary widely, and finding a group whose efforts mesh with your vision for positive change is crucial as you figure out your role.

Your search should start with a process of **self-discovery**: knowing your skills, experiences, passions, and workplace needs. Next, use this self-knowledge as a framework while you **explore the sector** and your particular areas of interest. Your goal is to **find the points of intersection** between your skills and passions, and the available opportunities.

While the end goal of a successful nonprofit career search is rewarding, the process can be complex, time consuming, and stressful. If you are entering the sector for the first time, you have the added element of transitioning into a new work world where

you need to be aware of different vocabulary, positions, and expectations. Searching for a job in any sector can demoralize and frustrate you at a time when you are supposed to be your most proactive and social. It is important to recognize how the psychology of the job search ([Chapter Two](#)) affects you and your career decisions. Uncertainty about money, self-doubt about your strength as an applicant, and the challenges of your quest to find the right opportunity can coincide with negative interactions with employers either through outright rejection or the quiet “torture” of not knowing whether your resume was received or where they are in the hiring process. It can be difficult to remain optimistic and upbeat. However, being deliberate in your search by taking the time to get to know yourself and understand the sector, and then finding the synergy between the two, is key to ultimately finding the right job.

## Know yourself

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Any job search begins with knowing what will make you happy to wake up to on a Monday morning. It is an antiquated notion that your only goals should be to get to Friday afternoon and eventually to earn a bigger paycheck. Taking the time to explore your own interests and motivations and then connecting this knowledge to a job search can help you find the meaningful work that you seek. As you look for your first job, a solid sense of self-awareness is essential to find that place where you can both do your best work and have the greatest impact (see [Chapter Three](#)).

Since you spend so much time with yourself (a bit of an understatement!), it is difficult to step back and get the necessary perspective on your skills and abilities without making time for deliberate self-exploration. This integral element of the job search process allows you to make well-informed choices and, with the right perspective, can also afford you a bit more patience. This patience derives from having a strong sense of what you want and recognizing that it is worth waiting until you find it. You will probably not find the perfect fit immediately, which is why a job search is an ongoing, evolving process. If you are currently not in an ideal position, or if you need to take a less-than-perfect, “hold it together” job to sustain yourself, don’t assume that you’re “settling.” In fact, you are building new skills and experiences that will make you a stronger candidate in your next search. Furthermore, you can continue the search even after you accept a position. And even if you find and accept a great opportunity, keep checking in with yourself regularly to ensure that you are getting what you need from the job to make it more rewarding than just a paycheck. You need to make sure your job is a meaningful, challenging, and sustainable opportunity for you.

The best way to find a tenable and fulfilling position is to be sure that you know your needs and wants. Much of the work that is done in the nonprofit sector is demand-

### **You are *not* your job search**

The most important message you can tell yourself is that you are not your job search. Yes, you are marketing yourself and your skills, but that does not mean that you should take rejection personally. Try to consider the perspective of the employer when you are feeling frustrated. Employers need to make tough hiring decisions and have to weigh the pros and cons of many well-qualified candidates. The “sorry, but we can’t offer you a position” response is based on a myriad of factors—skills, experience, and organizational fit, to name a few—and the rejection of a candidate is most often not personal. The reality of the hiring process is that there are always more candidates than available positions.

When you pick yourself up and brush yourself off after a rejection (or two), try to remember that it happened for a number of reasons (most of them not in your control) and there will always be more opportunities, possibly even better ones, in the future.

ing, and the chance of burnout is real. While you'll need to find ways to make whatever job you choose sustainable, knowing your priorities in terms of organizational culture, benefits, responsibilities, and other factors can help you find a job where you can continually do meaningful work.

## Know the sector

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By beginning with self-knowledge, you can start a targeted job search. Follow this exploration by studying the nonprofit sector to help you see where you best fit into such a diverse employment landscape. This sector analysis involves understanding the lens through which you view the work and recognizing the available opportunities (see [Chapter Three](#)), and then conducting informational interviews, creating networking opportunities, and taking other deliberate steps to strengthen both your connections to and knowledge of nonprofits (see [Chapters Four](#) and [Five](#)).

One of the best ways to get a better understanding of both the sector as a whole and your local nonprofit community in particular is by talking to people who are already involved in this work. As you begin your nonprofit job search (see [Chapter Six](#)), find ways to strengthen and expand your network (see [Chapter Four](#)). While networking is vital to any career search, its importance in the nonprofit sector cannot be emphasized enough. When hiring, nonprofit employers seek out referrals from their employees, volunteers, and interns, as well as leads from colleagues and coworkers. Local nonprofits are often connected and the sooner you become a visible, positive part of their community, the sooner you can start taking advantage of your nonprofit network.

While the job search process has certain universals across all employment sectors—knowing your goals, understanding the sector, and connecting with people—there are several unique aspects to a nonprofit job search that you need to keep in mind:

- The unique language of the sector
- An emphasis on collaborating with colleagues and other organizations
- The value of having a passion for the mission

After you've put the incredibly diverse scope of the nonprofit sector into perspective, begin to do some research on nonprofits in your local or target area. Conduct informational interviews (see [Chapter Four](#)), look for organizations doing work that interests you, and explore issue areas that fit your skills and experiences. Do all of this with the understanding that any information you find is a piece of the puzzle; keep asking, researching, and digging for the myriad other pieces that will give you a more holistic perspective of the nonprofit sector.



**You must study the nonprofit sector to see where you best fit into such a diverse employment landscape.”**

## Find the synergy

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With an awareness of what you can contribute and what you need, as well as an understanding of the sector, you can begin to find the points of overlap amid all of the variables in your search. There isn't *one* ideal job for you; there are many ideal ones. But be aware that these opportunities may be elusive, and that you will need to have a strong sense of what you are looking for in order to recognize and pursue them.

As you find and apply for positions, ask yourself if *each position* connects with your priorities. Some questions to ask include:

- Does this position utilize my strongest skill sets?
- Will I be able to strengthen other areas of my knowledge and expertise?
- Can I use my preexisting network to connect and expand the reach of this position?
- What is most exciting for me about this opportunity: the responsibilities of the position, the organization and its mission, the potential for creating change, or the possible career trajectories?
- Does this position look like it will be as challenging as I need/want my work to be? (Finding the range of what challenges you is vital in order to avoid boredom or burnout.)
- Does the size of this organization match what I am looking for?
- Is the compensation package for this position satisfactory? Will I need/be able to negotiate my offer?
- Does this position's work environment (office space, commute time, dress code, etc.) have the attributes that are most important to me?
- Where do I see myself in two to five years if I take this position?

Ultimately, you are the only one who knows all the questions you need to ask to make sure that you have found a great, if not perfect, fit. By asking these questions, you will be well on your way to finding the starting point to a meaningful and fulfilling career, rather than "just another job." This distinction is important because while a career is made up of a series of connected and deliberately chosen jobs, a job does not necessarily lead to a career. You don't need to plot your whole path at the beginning, but deliberately choosing a job with the potential to lead to other exciting professional opportunities can be the first step in creating a career that is as meaningful as the work that you will be doing.



**There isn't one ideal job for you; there are many."**

## Final thoughts (really!)

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Whatever stage your nonprofit career search is in, keep in mind that there is not *one* right way to find meaningful work. Because of this, throughout this book we've offered a variety of exercises, options, opinions, and pieces of advice that fit a range of approaches and steps in a nonprofit job search. However, within these steps, remember the three essentials that you should customize to your unique situation:

- Know yourself and your needs
- Know the sector and the people in it
- Find the synergy between what you want and what opportunities are available

While we'd love to convince you that the nonprofit sector is an amazing place to work (we certainly think so), we know it's not for everyone. If you are unsure, spend some time volunteering, talking with people in the sector, and exploring available opportunities. Even if you decide that you don't want a career in the nonprofit sector, there are other ways to effect change such as getting involved with a company's corporate social responsibility department, engaging in board service or philanthropy, or volunteering regularly.

However, if you are looking for opportunities to do meaningful work every day, with remarkable people in a countless array of issue areas, locations, and organizations, we encourage you to explore the full range of opportunities to participate in and contribute to society through a career in the nonprofit sector. After all, the nonprofit sector continues to address issues of great importance, with innovative flair grounded in necessity. We think there is no better time to take advantage of the incredible potential to make the world a better place—however you choose to define “better.” You don't have to be an idealist, you just have to want to make a difference.

## SUMMARY

The **steps of the nonprofit job search** resemble the steps you should take any time you are looking for meaningful work, regardless of the sector.

The process of **self-knowledge** involves taking time to consciously reflect on your skill and abilities, wants and needs, and the level of challenge that will keep you invigorated without burning you out (pages 218-219).

Once you understand what you bring to and want out of a job, **explore the nonprofit sector** to see where opportunities in the sector connect with your own interests (page 219).

**Finding this synergy** is vital to career happiness (page 220).

Recognize that **the job search process can be difficult**, time consuming, and frustrating. Keeping a clear idea of what is important to you as well as a perspective on the reality of the job market (i.e., not taking rejection personally) is vital to your job search peace of mind (sidebar, page 218).

## You are here

- This is the **Conclusion**. The entire book is available free of charge at [www.idealists.org/beginacareer](http://www.idealists.org/beginacareer).

### About Action Without Borders, Idealist.org, and this book

**Action Without Borders** is a nonprofit organization founded in 1995 with offices in the United States and Argentina. **Idealist.org**, a project of Action Without Borders, is an interactive site where people and organizations can exchange resources and ideas, find opportunities and supporters, and turn their good intentions into action.

*The Idealist Guide to Nonprofit Careers for First-time Job Seekers* is a product of Action Without Borders' Nonprofit Careers Program based in Portland, OR. This team works to support individuals and organizations with graduate education options; HR and volunteer management resources; and job, internship, and volunteer opportunities.

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