

# How to Find a Career or a Nonprofit That Is Right for You

by **David Schachter**, Assistant Dean for Career Services and Experiential Learning at NYU's Robert W. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service and **Cathy Wasserman**, MSW, Transitions Coach and Counselor

## UNIT 2, SECTION 2 In this section you will:

- Create a realistic picture of where your passion fits into the nonprofit sector through the “Career Tracks Exercise.”
- Use the “Four Lens Framework” to better understand what draws you to the nonprofit sector.
- Learn an exercise to help you rate your interest in applying for a position.

## Career tracks exercise<sup>1</sup>

Whether or not you are sure what you want to do, the following activity is a great way to fully understand your interests and desires while also developing a thorough understanding of the existing opportunities in the nonprofit sector. This activity, developed by David Schachter at NYU Wagner, creates a clear picture of where your passion fits into the nonprofit sector. It stresses both idealism and realism and is a perfect place to get started.

### Collection

Download from online classifieds, or photocopy or cut out of the newspaper, any job posting (a “clip”) that appeals to you either by (A) the type of organization or by (B) the job description.

**A.** You are drawn to this **kind of an organization**. You like its mission. You would like your work to have an impact on this issue, population, or area. You like the agency’s approach to the work and you could see yourself, someday, working for an organization like this. Do not worry about where it’s located or whether you like the job description that’s attached to the organization. Just focus on the agency’s overall purpose. Circle the part you like and put it in a folder.

**B.** You are drawn to this **kind of job description**. You like the way the responsibilities are bundled. You like the skills needed to perform the function of the

<sup>1</sup> Grateful acknowledgment is made to New York University for permission to reprint excerpts from and adapt the “Career Tracks Exercise” by David Schachter, Assistant Dean of Career Services and Experiential Learning at NYU’s Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service © 2007. Reprinted with permission of New York University and David Schachter. <http://wagner.nyu.edu>. Modifications to the original text have been made by the staff at Action Without Borders.

position, and you could see yourself, someday, doing work like this in your day-to-day activities. Do not worry about the agency the description is associated with or whether you have the skills to perform the job. Just focus on the actual job description. Circle the part you like and put it in your folder.

Remember, the only criteria you are using to select clips are either organization or job description. *The location of the organization or job should not be an issue for now.* By broadening your search outside of the area where you live (or plan to live), you get a much fuller sense of the opportunities that are out there. For now, you are not concerned with finding a job with a ten minute commute.

Repeat this activity until you have at least 50 clips. The more you collect, the better. Remember, when collecting, you do not evaluate along the way, you just collect ideas. Once you have a minimum of 50 clips, continue to the **analysis** phase.

## **Analysis**

Take the clips out of your folder and see if you can find any patterns or common themes. Points to look for might include: issue, population to be served, approach to the work, geography, kind of organization, unit or department within an agency, and role and responsibilities.

For example, you might notice that a large number of your clips focus on direct service with homeless teens and adults, and most of the organizations you are drawn to are large organizations located in urban areas.

## **Synthesis**

Using the data gathered from your collection and analysis phases, create at least one and no more than five potential career tracks for yourself. A *career track* is a way to put parameters around and frame your potential career interests, and can include any of the following attributes that have meaning for you:

- Issue or field of interest (homelessness)
- Subcomponents of the issue that are of interest (workforce development that gets people off the street and into paying work)
- Approach to the work (individual training/mentorships, training classes, out-sourced trainings)
- Kinds of organizations that do this work (religious groups, nonprofits with heavy federal funding, local groups that focus on specific neighborhoods)
- Where these organizations are located (urban, rural)
- Size of the organizations (three paid staff, 50 paid staff operating within a larger community organization)
- Potential departments within organizations (Fundraising department, Event Planning department)



- Roles that you aspire to play (curriculum developer, community liaison)
- Requirement of skills, education, experience, and knowledge to fulfill those roles (background in education, mental health, rehabilitation, Master of Social Work)

Take stock of your qualifications and experiences as they relate to your potential career tracks. Your track should inform which groups you join, the people you seek out, the internship/job experiences you look for, and how you present yourself in a resume, cover letter, and interview. Remember to reflect along the way to determine if this track feels like a good fit for you. If it does, continue on this path. If not, seek out additional tracks.

## Application

After you identify your possible career tracks, draft a different resume for each position you identify that fits into each of the tracks. This can be an entry-level position or a “dream job”; the point of drafting a mock resume is to get a clear view of the skills, experiences, and qualifications (which can include certifications or licenses) you will need in that particular job.

Now, fill in the resume with the skills, experiences, and qualifications that you already have for the position. Look at any areas that are blank.

*Your task now is to fill in those blanks.*

- If you need more **management experience**, try to lead a project team at work or with a student group.
- If you need more **direct service experience**, volunteer to tutor adults, mentor children, or reach out to families in need.
- If you need more **fundraising experience**, organize a campaign through your network of friends, your church, or your workplace to raise money for a cause that is important to you. You can even participate in an endurance event (walks, half-marathons, triathlons) and raise money through your training.
- If you need to demonstrate more **commitment to an issue area**, find organizations in your area that work in the area you care about. Intern. Participate in a year of service. Volunteer and strive to become a volunteer leader that takes initiative and gains the trust of the staff working in the organization.
- If you need more **professional experience**, find out what national professional associations exist in your area of interest and become a member. Attend the annual conference. Membership organizations are great for networking and they look good on your resume. They show commitment to an issue area and demonstrate to employers that you are up-to-date on the trends and issues affecting their profession.



Use the space below to jot down one to five potential career tracks that you can explore.



- Take courses at the local college in **finance** or **administration**. Get a certification online through a reputable organization. Attend workshops held by local nonprofits and businesses.

Whatever the blanks are on your resume, you can find a time and place to fill them.

While it is unrealistic to fill all the blanks in all of your resumes in a relatively short amount of time, many of the skills you wish to have should be transferable between resumes.

Ideally, you will have *at least 12 months* for the Career Tracks process. Realistically, you will only have three to six months. Here is how to schedule your tracking for each of the given time constraints:

	12 month timeline	6 month timeline	3 month timeline
<b>Part One:</b> Collection	First to third months	First month	First two weeks
<b>Part Two:</b> Analysis & <b>Part Three:</b> Synthesis	Fourth month	Second month	Second two weeks
<b>Part Four:</b> Application	Fifth to twelfth months	Third to sixth months	Second and third months

## **What if I need a job right NOW?!?**

If you are looking to find a new job immediately, don't expect to step into your ideal job. You may need more time to research available positions, develop transferable skills, network through professional associations, and gain experience you will need to make your materials stand out in a pool of applications for your ideal work.

Instead of trying to find your ideal work *today* (and frustrating yourself in the process), your focus should be on finding interim work: a job that meets your basic needs and makes sure you can cover the monthly bills. This interim position should last no more than 18 months. While doing your interim job, start the Career Tracks exercise and stick with it. If you do it right and stay committed, your next job shift will be a lot more meaningful.

Successful job searches—especially job searches that cross sectors—almost never happen overnight. The more you put into the search, including *time* and *energy*, the more you stand to gain.



# The four lens framework<sup>2</sup>

To say simply, “I want to work in nonprofits” is not enough. People don’t enter the for-profit or public sectors without a specific job, organization, or specialization in mind. An education major knows they want to teach tenth grade math, a business major knows they want to work in print advertising, and a political science major knows they want to work as a policy analyst in the State Department. Approaching the wonderfully diverse nonprofit sector means understanding what draws you to the work.

With the Four Lens Framework you can start from where you are right now and figure out where you want to go next. People typically enter the nonprofit career conversation from one of four lenses:

1. An **issue** (and/or **value**): a matter of public or personal concern
2. An **organization**: a structure through which individuals cooperate systematically to conduct business
3. A **role**: a function or part performed
4. A **system**: a group of interacting, interrelated, or interdependent elements forming a complex whole (this will make more sense in a moment)

If you enter the nonprofit sector through the lens of an **issue** or **value**, you may be passionate about and want a career concerning a specific cause; for example, education, the environment, public health, or anti-racism.

If you enter the nonprofit sector through the lens of an **organization**, you might really want to work for a specific organization like Doctors Without Borders, the United Nations, or Habitat for Humanity.

If you enter through the lens of a **role**, you may have decided that you would like to have a specific position like a grantwriter, a program manager, or a volunteer coordinator.

If you enter through the lens of a **system**, you might be interested in the context; for example, working for a small grassroots organization on the cutting edge of the field, or working for a large, well-established national nonprofit with a high profile.

## Activity

---

How are you thinking about your professional next steps? On the next page you’ll find some questions to ask yourself:

### Consider organizations in the orbit of your target employer

If you are interested in working with a larger, well-known organization—like the Gates Foundation—research small organizations that they fund, contract out to, or collaborate with, and explore working with those smaller organizations first.

<sup>2</sup> Grateful acknowledgment is made to New York University for permission to reprint excerpts from and adapt the “Four Lens Framework” by David Schachter, Assistant Dean of Career Services and Experiential Learning at NYU’s Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service © 2007. Reprinted with permission of New York University and David Schachter. <http://wagner.nyu.edu>. Modifications to the original text have been made by the staff at Action Without Borders.



## Issue/value

1. Why is this issue a matter of public concern? Why should anyone care about this issue? How can this issue be broken down?
2. Which of these issue areas am I interested in? Which do I want to find out more about?

## Organization

1. Which organizations am I particularly drawn to?
2. What is it about these organizations that appeals to me?
3. What other organizations exist that share these qualities? (You can search [www.idealists.org](http://www.idealists.org) to explore other organizations.)

## Role

1. Do I have a role in mind that I'd like to take on?
2. What are some common roles with organizations that work on issues I care about?

## System

1. Do I want to be in a very established organization or a start-up? Do I want to be in an agency that already has a lot of influence in the field, or with an agency that can afford to push an agenda firmly? Which well-funded organizations are very established and in the mainstream? Which radical grassroots organizations are on the fringe? Where do I want to have influence?
2. Do I want the scope of my work to be local, national, or international?
3. What are some approaches to doing this work? (For example: direct service, philanthropy, capacity building, policy, research/analysis, marketing, advocacy.)

After contemplating the four lenses and their related questions, you should be able to formulate a statement reflecting your specific aims and approaches in your non-profit career search. This will be a lot more focused than simply saying, "I want to work in nonprofits." For example:

*I am passionate about learning and education (issue/value). Since my issue area is broad, I need to look at organizations that are doing educational outreach that interests me. I want to work with an organization that embraces the train-the-trainer model since I want to help teachers and trainers become better at their work, thus impacting a larger number of students than I could impact in a single classroom. Therefore, my role would be that of a trainer, curriculum developer, or education program manager. I've worked in several types of nonprofits from well-established and financially secure to new, unknown, and unfunded, and I like the stature afforded to well-established agencies within the system.*



# Rate your interest in applying for a position<sup>3</sup>

Job applications take a lot of time and effort so it is crucial to assess whether each job of interest is worth the effort of actually applying. If you find yourself really struggling to explain why you want the job when crafting a resume and cover letter for that position, you may want to reconsider applying. Moreover, it is helpful to formally rate your level of interest in the job, the organization, and its fit with your skills and experience. This exercise will help you do that.

## Step one

First, rate your level of interest and **passion for the position** on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being most passionate. Then, make a note about why you gave it the rating that you did. If you rate a job as less than a 7, then it might not be the right position for you.

## Step two

Next, rate your level of interest and **passion for the organization** itself on a scale of 1-10. Again, if your rating is less than a 7 (even if the position itself looks really great), and if you do not see a fit between yourself and the organization's mission and culture, it may not be the right fit for you.

## Step three

Now go through the job announcement and note whether you meet the **job requirements**. If you meet at least 80 percent of the requirements, then it is probably a good fit (assuming the last 20 percent is not a major component of the position).

## Step four

Lastly, go back through all of your ratings and take a "**big picture view**" in making your final assessment. For example, you might have rated the position a 7, but the organization as 8, and your skill match at 85 percent. Taken together, this is a pretty strong fit and probably worth the effort of applying.



Use the space below to assess your interest in a job opening using the activity at left.

<sup>3</sup> This activity was developed by Cathy Wasserman. Through her business, Self-Leadership Strategies, Cathy Wasserman provides career/executive coaching and counseling to a wide range of individuals seeking to increase their personal and professional success, actively direct their life, and realize their one-of-a-kind core strengths and goals. She has 16 years of experience in the nonprofit sector and beyond including work as a training director, a recruiter, and an organization development consultant. Additionally, she has served as career coaching expert with her column, *Ask Cathy*, on Idealist.org. *Working Mother* magazine also featured her as expert of the month on switching from corporate to nonprofit work. She began her career as an advocate for youth and women and she is published in the book *Front-line Feminism*. Cathy holds an MSW in Clinical Social Work from Smith College and a B.A. in Psychology from Wesleyan University. You can contact Cathy at [cathy@self-leadershipstrategies.com](mailto:cathy@self-leadershipstrategies.com) or visit her website, [www.self-leadershipstrategies.com](http://www.self-leadershipstrategies.com).



## SUMMARY

**Finding a nonprofit career path that is right for you** is a logical and vital step to take in the process of locating work in the nonprofit sector. The **Career Tracks** exercise and The **Four Lens** framework can help you to identify your passion for the work and to understand the realistic opportunities available to you.

**Career Tracks** (page 1). By collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing nonprofit job postings (regardless of geographic location) you can better apply your energies toward seeking fulfilling nonprofit career paths.

**The Four Lenses** (page 5). People tend to view possible nonprofit careers through the lens of issue, organization, role, or system.

**Issue** (pages 5-6) refers to the issue area(s) that appeals to you, like homelessness, education, or the environment.

**Organization** (pages 5-6) speaks to the organization(s) that you may want to be associated with, like Doctors Without Borders, the Humane Society, or the Sierra Club.

**Role** (pages 5-6) addresses the specific function that you would like to serve in an organization, like counselor, administrator, or program developer.

**System** (pages 5-6) involves thinking of your place within the greater context of the nonprofit sector and addresses questions about the size of an organization that you would like to work for, the scope of the work (local, national, or international), and the types of approaches you would like to take in doing the work (direct service, policy, research).

**Rating your interest in a position** (page 7) is an analytical method that can help you decide whether it's worth the effort to apply for a job you are considering.

## You are here

- This is **Unit 2, Section 2**. The entire book is available free of charge at [www.idealists.org/en/career/guide/index.html](http://www.idealists.org/en/career/guide/index.html).
- The next section is [Unit 2, Section 3 “Networking: Is It Really All About Who You Know? Yes”](#).

### 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](http://Idealist.org), a project of Action Without Borders, is an interactive site where people and organizations can exchange resources and ideas, locate opportunities and supporters, and take steps toward building a world where all people can lead free and dignified lives.

*The Idealist Guide to Nonprofit Careers* is a product of Action Without Borders' Nonprofit Careers Program (NPCP) based in Portland, OR. The NPCP team works to connect individuals and organizations with graduate education options; HR and volunteer management resources; and job, internship, and volunteer opportunities.

© 2007 Action Without Borders, except where noted otherwise. This section contains copyrighted content reprinted with permission of New York University and David Schachter. See page 1.

