

Nonprofit Hiring Practices

and the Challenges of the Job Market

UNIT 3, SECTION 1 In this section you will:

- Learn about nonprofit hiring practices and their similarities and differences with those of the public and for-profit sectors.
- Understand five factors that make the nonprofit sector job market challenging.
- Consider five reasons why seeking meaningful work in the nonprofit sector is a challenge worth undertaking.

How nonprofit hiring practices differ from other sectors

Do you have the skills? Do you have the passion?

When it comes to evaluating an applicant for a job opening, nonprofits look to an applicant's resume to answer the same initial question as those hiring in other sectors: Does the applicant have the necessary skill set to do this job? Put another way, they want to see if the person is qualified for the job. After that, there is a question unique to nonprofit hiring practices: Does the applicant demonstrate a passion for the mission of the organization? Keep in mind that if your resume does not clearly show you are *qualified* to do the job, then you likely will not make it to the second question—no matter how well you demonstrate your passion for their work.

Nonprofit employers share the same interest in strong cover letter writing as employers in other sectors. Furthermore, since many nonprofit employees fill several different roles in an organization, they need to have transferable skills. One of the most important of these skills is the ability to write well. Your cover letter is the first place that most nonprofit employers look to see a demonstration of your writing skills. Candidates who take the time to write a non-generic, thoughtful cover letter with clean grammar and spelling will naturally rise to the top of the applicant pile.

During interviews with nonprofit HR professionals conducted by Idealist.org in 2007, all interviewees said they would consider an applicant with all of the skills mentioned in a job description but with limited civic engagement *over* a candidate with ample civic engagement experience who lacks some of the necessary job skills. That said, passion for the mission (demonstrated through volunteering, board service, internships, etc. See [Unit 2, Section 4](#)) will set two otherwise equally talented applicants apart.

What if you cannot demonstrate your passion?

If you are interested in applying for a position with an organization but you lack a track record that clearly demonstrates your passion for the organization's mission, you can refocus the attention of the employer to your other examples of passionate engagement to a cause. Your cover letter is a good place to discuss your passion for one cause and how the experience of, for example, working with homeless teens translates into transferable skills and wisdom when it comes to, say, working with adults with developmental disabilities. Make a case for your commitment to a cause and then connect that cause to the organization's mission, or show why your passion has shifted from your earlier focus to the mission of the organization in which you are now interested (perhaps a change in your family situation, a traumatic experience, or new knowledge sparked this shift).

Two key differences: Decentralized job postings and unusual (or nonexistent) hiring cycles

The logistics of nonprofit hiring differ in two key ways from public and for-profit hiring practices. First, since nonprofits typically have a significantly smaller budget for job postings and job recruitment, nonprofit openings are harder to find. Secondly, many nonprofits don't necessarily follow a hiring calendar. Whereas the for-profit and public sectors often recruit potential employees based on academic calendars, there is often little or no concerted effort (or available budget) on the part of nonprofits to recruit.

While it may be harder to find a consolidated location for nonprofit job postings, it is by no means impossible to stay up-to-date on what is available. Many nonprofits (especially smaller organizations) only post their positions on their own websites or local free job sites, and in local newspapers. Nonprofits with some funding to put toward hiring are more likely to utilize resources like Action Without Borders/Idealist.org, as well as their own organizations' websites and local free job websites. This lack of a centralized job posting location makes knowing the local nonprofit community (organizations, networking contacts, and local resources) all the more vital for job seekers. You will need to know where to find opportunities in your target nonprofit community as they will not come and find you.

While many nonprofits do not follow a hiring calendar per se, there are definitely busier hiring times to keep in mind. According to Daphne Logan, Vice President of Human Resources for America's Second Harvest, some organizations assess their hiring needs toward the end of their fiscal year and then do a wave of hiring once the new fiscal year begins. If you are interested in a particular organization, find out when their fiscal year begins (look at Annual Reports or their IRS 990 forms on GuideStar.org) and keep especially close tabs on them during this period. Other organizations may not hire on a fiscal cycle but may be influenced by other factors. Jenny Estrada, former Director of Human Resources and Security for Planned Parenthood of the Columbia/Willamette, notes that organizations like Planned Parenthood are attractive to professionals who may be between undergraduate and medical school. Hence, there is usually high turnover during the summer as employees depart to pursue further schooling in the fall.

If you have a target career area, think about the connection between current events and cyclical calendars that may influence an organization's hiring practices. A surge in interest about hot topics like school reform or the environment may be a sign that more jobs in these fields are on their way. Connect these trends with a field's annual calendar—jobs in education mostly hire in the spring and summer, jobs that involve a lot of work outside are typically most active in the spring, summer, and fall.



**I'LL
JUST FIND
EVERYTHING
I NEED
ONLINE.**

Given the level of connect-
edness that

our digital age provides, it is easy to overlook the more traditional (and sometimes more effective) methods of collecting job availability information. You should make a point to read all of the print media (dailies and weeklies) that carry job postings; keep tabs on professional associations that are networks for the type of work you want to do; attend any real-time events (career fairs, business card exchanges) in your area; and look at the local membership of the United Way (these organizations are often some of the better funded ones).

2007 research conducted by the Johns Hopkins Nonprofit Listening Project (*Workforce Recruitment and Retention Soundings, 2007*) shows that four of the six most commonly used recruitment techniques are *not* online. Of the 231 organizations polled for the study, organizations used the following recruitment channels:

- Word of mouth (99 percent)
- Current employee referrals (93 percent)
- Local newspapers (80 percent)
- Postings on others' websites (73 percent)
- Recruitment from recent interns (67 percent)
- Postings on organization's website (64 percent)

Considering the fact that word of mouth, referrals (networking), and local newspapers (print media) topped the list, you may want to spend a fair amount of your job search time *offline*.

Start early

Nonprofit human resources professionals overwhelmingly agree that the earlier you start volunteering, interning, and networking with nonprofits that interest you, the better. For college students, this can mean interning with the same organization for several summers in a row. For professionals working in another sector, this can mean making a commitment to volunteer regularly with an organization. The more exposure you can get to an organization, the more chances you have to get a sense of its culture (see [Unit 2, Section 6](#)) and acclimate yourself to its operational style (see [Unit 2, Section 4](#) for more on internships and volunteering).

Early involvement benefits both the volunteer and the organization. For the volunteer or intern, it allows you to get involved with the organization to see if you are a good fit with the culture and that you share a passion for their mission and activities. For the staff at an organization, they can likewise see how well you fit in and how dedicated you are to the work you do with them. The bottom line is that the more experience you have with a particular organization or cause, the more favorably a nonprofit employer will look upon your resume.

For those without the experience of volunteering or interning with the same organization for a significant period of time, there are two possible approaches to bolstering your nonprofit involvement. The first approach is to look back over your volunteer history and find a common trend in your service. Ask yourself:

- What is the greatest commonality in my volunteerism? Is it a particular cause? A certain structure of organization? A specific demographic served?
- Have I served similar functions within different organizations for a long time?
- Is my service mainly with faith-based initiatives? Advocacy organizations? Direct-service opportunities?

By focusing your networking, cover letter, resume, and interview language to reflect these common trends in your volunteer history, you can better demonstrate to employers your commitment to the cause, as well as the clear trajectory of your social and professional choices (even if they did not seem clear at the time!).

The second option is to explore partner organizations that work with organizations with which you have experience. For example, Daphne Logan from America's Second Harvest points out that her organization works with food banks around the country (often affiliated with religious organizations). Logan says a history of volunteerism and interning with these partners shows the kind of dedication and commitment that employers like America's Second Harvest seek. So, while you may not have direct experience working with an organization that interests you, related experience can be the next best thing.

The challenges of the job market

Nobody said that finding your ideal nonprofit job would be easy. In fact, these days there are plenty of factors that may make it a challenging process. However, trends indicate that people of all ages, backgrounds, and professional aspirations are increasingly willing to seek a job that means more than just a paycheck. With these more holistic requirements in mind for their careers, many people begin their job search in the nonprofit sector. While this invariably increases competition for nonprofit jobs, it also strengthens the sector by attracting the highest caliber employees. As you begin your search for a nonprofit career, know that the process may be daunting in some ways, but the rewards are worthwhile.

Five reasons why finding your ideal job in the nonprofit sector may be a complicated process

1. Heavy competition for coveted jobs

As greater numbers of people seek careers that integrate values, ethics, and a tangible contribution to society, hiring for positions in nonprofit organizations is becoming increasingly competitive. Students, mid-career transitioners, and retiring professionals are seeking employers that are socially responsible and careers that allow them to make contributions to society. Within this landscape, there are particular organizations and positions that tend to be more attractive than others. People often seek out well-known or larger organizations, as well as positions in public policy, foundations, or international NGOs. When considering a career in the nonprofit sector, be aware that many applicants vie for the same positions at the well-known organizations. Dig deeper. Find lesser known, new, or local peer organizations. Make sure that you are aware of all of your options; some of the best opportunities may take a bit more searching.

2. When nonprofits recruit...

Actually, they usually don't. Nonprofit organizations rarely have the budget or staff to recruit. Because of this, organizations need to employ other strategies for finding qualified, reliable employees. Since nonprofits often have volunteers and/or interns, they already have an ideal pool of ready-made job candidates. When a position opens up, volunteers or interns are often the first people considered because it's already apparent whether they will fit well, have a good work ethic, and meet the qualifications of the job. This practice is evident from the findings of a 2003 Idealist.org survey of over 400 nonprofit staffing professionals, which revealed that, when seeking new staff:

- 33 percent of organizations recruit their volunteers.
- 50 percent of organizations recruit their interns.
- 40 percent of organizations recruit through consultants.

3. Nonprofit hiring differs from public and for-profit sector hiring

Nonprofit hiring differs from public and for-profit sector hiring in two key ways: it usually does not follow a regular calendar, and nonprofit job postings are often decentralized. The discussion of nonprofit hiring practices earlier in this section elaborates on these two key issues, and it is important to be aware of them because of the impact they can have on your job search. First, know that while some organizations have busier hiring times, it is hard to predict when positions will open up within organizations. Compounding this situation, when positions do become available, there is often no budget for advertising the opening. If an organization has a hiring budget, it can utilize online resources like Idealist.org's job posting site. However, without funding (or time), most organizations will simply post openings on their own website or on free, community-based job sites. The lack of predictable hiring schedules and centralized job posting sites can make knowing when and where to look difficult.

4. The importance of networking and personal connections

Networking is the main way that nonprofit organizations hire. In a 2003 Idealist.org survey of nonprofit staffing professionals, it was found that, when hiring recent graduates, 66 percent of organizations find out about candidates through networking, while half of the surveyed nonprofits stated that they don't even try to recruit on college campuses. An earlier section on networking ([Unit 2, Section 3](#)) highlighted the importance of personal contacts in finding qualified candidates; this point cannot be overemphasized. To increase your chances of being hired by a nonprofit, get out and meet people! Schedule informational interviews. Ask friends and family if they know anyone who works in the nonprofit sector. Volunteer or intern with an organization. Find out where people who have jobs with your target organizations congregate; attend those networking events and join their professional associations (if you are in school, many of these have student rates). Talk to people in your community. Sending a resume and cover letter may work, but to increase your chances and decrease your search time, networking is key.

5. A candidate needs to be able to hit the ground running

Nonprofit hiring managers want candidates who can show the relevance of their qualifications and skill sets quickly. Many organizations often don't have a lot of time to train a new hire so you need to show that you are the candidate who has the skills, experience, and passion for the job. While passion is undoubtedly important, candidates often focus on this quality while neglecting to demonstrate the experience they have that enables them to do the job. The first opportunity to show relevant experience is through your resume and cover letter. When con-

sidering wording, make it clear how your skills fit with the position description. The section on resumes, cover letters, and marketing your distinct skills ([Unit 2, Section 7](#)) gives you guidance on how to do this.

The demand for nonprofit jobs is high, the hiring practices are complex, and it's often about who you know in the sector. Not a great outlook for nonprofit employment. However, the evidence in favor of pursuing a career with a nonprofit easily outweighs the challenges. There are a plethora of reasons people seek nonprofit careers; below are just a few to motivate you for your search.

Five reasons it is worth the effort to pursue a nonprofit career

1. The future is bright

While competition for nonprofit positions is tough, the projected employment outlook is heartening. According to a 2005 article by Lester M. Salamon and S. Wojciech Sokolowski, “nonprofit employment increased by an average of nearly 30 percent in the five jurisdictions for which we currently have time-series data (Maryland, the District of Columbia, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Virginia). By comparison, total private employment in these same areas increased by 11 percent, or slightly more than one-third as much.”¹ While this limited data points toward an upward trend in nonprofit job creation, demographic shifts coupled with the sector’s increasing scope of activities signal an imminent boom in nonprofit hiring. According to The Bridgespan Group, “over the decade from 2007 to 2016, organizations [with annual revenues over \$250,000] will need to attract and develop some 640,000 new senior managers.”² This growing leadership deficit is due to retiring baby boomers and overall sector growth. This means that in the near future there will be more opportunities available, particularly in the areas of management and leadership. Now is a great time to begin your career in the sector!

2. So much potential for change

Working for a nonprofit is a great way of effecting change in local, national, and international communities on a range of issues. According to a 2002 Brookings Institution survey³, 66 percent of nonprofit workers were “very satisfied” with their opportunity to accomplish something worthwhile, compared to 41 percent of for-profit employees and 47 percent of government employees who were asked the same question. For an opportunity to have a lasting positive effect on society, the nonprofit sector is an obvious choice.

¹ Salamon, Lester M. and Sokolowski, S. Wojciech. “Nonprofit Organizations: New Insights From QCEW Data” *Monthly Labor Review*, September 2005. Available at www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2005/09/art3full.pdf

² Tierney, Thomas J. “The Nonprofit Sector’s Leadership Deficit”. The Bridgespan Group, March 2006. Available at www.bridgespangroup.org/kno_articles_leadershipdeficit.html

³ Brookings Institute. *Final Topline Report: Health of the Nonprofit, For-profit, and Public Service Sectors*. February 2002. Available at www.brookings.edu/views/papers/light/NonprofitTopline.PDF

3. There's a mission for everyone

The diversity of the nonprofit sector ensures that if you want to work to protect picas in the Mountain West, advocate for arts education for students in inner city schools, or raise awareness of melting ice caps in the Andes, there is a nonprofit organization (or two!) that aligns with your passion. Nonprofit missions run the gamut from conservative to liberal, and focus on concerns affecting the global community as well as issues facing a single neighborhood. With the range of missions and causes, there is an opportunity for everyone to effect change. However, it is important to go beyond a cursory search for an organization that fits with your personal mission. In many cases, there are several organizations that will match your passion, but you'll have to do the research to find them. For example, if you want to teach in an inner city school for a year, Teach for America is a great program, but it's not the only one offering that opportunity. Similarly, Habitat for Humanity is an excellent way to help people afford to own their own home, but there are other organizations that do this kind of work. The best known, most easily researched organizations may be a great fit for you, but be sure to dig a bit deeper to discover all of your options.

4. Nonprofit salaries can hold their own...

"According to a survey by Abbott, Langer, and Associates, the median income of chief executive officers in the nonprofit sector was \$88,006 in 2005, but some of the highest paid executives made over \$700,000."⁴ In industries such as health care and education, where for-profits and nonprofits compete for skilled employees, nonprofit salaries are identical to or outpace for-profit pay rates by as much as 30 percent.⁵ While earning a top salary is not the priority for many people who enter the nonprofit sector, it is important to know that it is still possible to earn a great living while serving in a wide range of roles and working toward a variety of missions.

5. It's about more than the bottom line

As statistics show, many people are realizing that their career choice is about more than a paycheck; more people than ever are transitioning from other sectors to nonprofit work. These days, people don't expect to be with one organization for their entire career, and there is a growing awareness of the importance of finding positions that provide more than a salary. With this in mind, people are seeking creative solutions that enable them to make meaningful work a part of their everyday lives.

⁴ Abbott, Langer, and Associates survey data cited by U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2006-7 Edition*. "Top Executives: Nonprofit Organizations." Available at www.bls.gov/oco/ocos012.htm#earnings

⁵ Salamon, Lester M. and Sokolowski, S. Wojciech. "Nonprofit Organizations: New Insights From QCEW Data" *Monthly Labor Review*, September 2005. Available at www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2005/09/art3full.pdf

Further reading on the nonprofit job market outlook

To find out more about the status of the nonprofit sector in your area, have a look at the *State Nonprofit Employment Bulletins* from the Johns Hopkins Institute for Policy Study, Center for Civil Society Studies, available at:

www.jhu.edu/ccss/research/ned/ned_bulletins.htm

For more general information on national and state nonprofits with summaries and comprehensive reports for both, go to the *U.S. and State Profiles* at the National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS) website:

<http://nccsdataweb.urban.org/PubApps/profileStateList.htm>

There are plenty of articles about nonprofit careers, salaries, and employment statistics, as well as analysis of the future of the sector. We've selected some key articles for you to review below. Most are based on similar statistics (like those in this section) but the conclusions vary greatly. As you read these forecasts and analyses, remember that the predictions and findings are sector-wide and may not impact your individual job search.

Brookings Institute, *Final Topline Report: Health of the Nonprofit, For-profit, and Public Service Sectors*. February 2002.

www.brookings.edu/views/papers/light/NonprofitTopline.PDF

Brookings Institute, "Winning the Talent War: New Brookings Survey Finds the Nonprofit Sector Has the Most Dedicated Workforce [Press release]".

October 2002.

www.brookings.edu/comm/news/20021003nonprofit.htm

The Chronicle of Philanthropy, "Facts and Figures on Salary Surveys".

www.philanthropy.com/stats/managing/salariesurveys.htm

Monster.com, "Myths, Motivations and the Future of Nonprofits". Excerpted from Ron and Caryl Krannich, *Jobs and Careers with Non-Profit Organizations* (Impact Publications, 1999).

<http://content.comcast.monster.com/articles/3472/16755/1/home.aspx>

OMB Watch, *Recent Trends in Nonprofit Employment, Earnings 1990-2004*. August 2004.

www.ombwatch.org/budget/pdf/nonprofit_employment_Aug04.pdf

Salamon, Lester M. "What Nonprofit Wage Deficit?" *The Nonprofit Quarterly*, Winter 2002.

www.jhu.edu/ccss/research/pdf/What_Nonprofit_Wage_Deficit.pdf

Salamon, Lester M. and Sokolowski, S. Wojciech. *Employment in America's Charities: A Profile*. Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies, Nonprofit Employment Data Project. 2006.

www.jhu.edu/ccss/research/pdf/Employment%20in%20Americas%20Charities.pdf

Salamon, Lester M. and Sokolowski, S. Wojciech. "Nonprofit Organizations: New Insights From QCEW Data" *Monthly Labor Review*, September 2005.

www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2005/09/art3abs.htm

Urban Institute, "Nonprofits' Decade of Growth Outpaces Economy". October 2006.

www.urban.org/publications/901011.html

Urban Institute, *The Nonprofit Sector in Brief: Facts and Figures from the Nonprofit Almanac 2007*. 2006.

www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311373_nonprofit_sector.pdf

U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Career Guide to Industries, 2006-7 Edition*. "Advocacy, Grantmaking, and Civic Organizations: Outlook".

www.bls.gov/oco/cg/cgs054.htm#outlook

SUMMARY

One key to your success in a nonprofit job search is to fully understand the playing field. It is essential that you know the hiring practices and challenges that you will encounter during your search, as well as reasons why a nonprofit career may be perfect for you. Some factors to keep in mind include:

Nonprofit employers, like their counterparts in the public and for-profit sectors, look first to make sure you have **the necessary skills** to do the job. Next, they look to a key characteristic that is unique to the nonprofit sector: a demonstrated **passion for the work** and the mission of the organization (page 1).

Unlike job openings in other sectors, nonprofit jobs **lack a centralized job posting location**, making the local nonprofit networks and resources in your area all the more important to know. Furthermore, most nonprofits lack the time and resources to recruit to the same degree as government agencies and for-profit companies (page 2).

Nonprofits often have an **unusual (or erratic) hiring cycle**. This makes knowing a particular nonprofit's fiscal calendar and organizational needs all the more important during your search (for example, do a lot of staff leave at the end of summer to return to school?) (page 2).

Starting as early as possible in your job search is key. Nonprofits frequently hire from their intern or volunteer pool, or look for recommendations from colleagues in the sector. **The earlier you get involved** in nonprofit work (through volunteering, interning, consulting) the more visible you will be to organizations that interest you (page 3).

Nonprofit positions are **becoming more and more competitive**. Factors like competition for coveted jobs, a lack of recruiting, overworked nonprofit HR staff, a limited nonprofit network, and the need to demonstrate that you can “hit the ground running” if you are hired all make the process of landing the ideal nonprofit job more difficult (pages 4–6).

Even with the unique challenges you must face in order to find a great nonprofit job, there are **a variety of reasons to make the effort**. Projected employment that outpaces other sectors, the chance to create real change, the abundance of organizational missions to suit most interests, salaries and compensation that can hold their own against other sectors, and the ability to do work “beyond the bottom line” all point toward a fulfilling career in the nonprofit sector (pages 6–7).

You are here

- This is the **Unit 3, Section 1**. The entire book is available free of charge at www.idealists.org/en/career/guide/index.html.
- The next section is [Unit 3, Section 2 “Dispelling Some Common Misconceptions About Nonprofit Work”](#).

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, 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.

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