

Looking for Work in the Nonprofit Sector

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Many business professionals who have been, or expect to be, laid off by their employers, are considering jobs in the nonprofit sector. Some are appropriately interested in casting the broadest net as they look for work. Others, for a variety of personal reasons, are serious about changing careers and exploring options with nonprofit organizations.

Nonprofit organizations have been very interested in recruiting professionals with business skills and experience. These organizations' budgets, number of staff, challenges in delivering services and raising funds, and the sophistication of their volunteer leadership require professionals with diverse training and experience.

However, nonprofits hiring executives often worry about a business executive's sincerity in pursuing a nonprofit option. They wonder if the career changing candidate has the patience to work in an environment with fewer resources, will be comfortable around users of services or donors and volunteer leadership, if they can develop a passion for the work and if they will stay after the market turns and there are new jobs back in the business sector. Many organizations have successfully recruited and integrated business professionals from the fields of finance, accounting, marketing, sales, law, human resources and operations/administration. There are fewer examples of business leaders who have been hired as the CEO of nonprofits.

Here are eight tips that business professionals should consider when applying for positions with nonprofit organizations:

1. Be prepared to explain your motivation and interest in changing careers and working in the nonprofit sector. Are you looking for a job or a career change? It is a threshold conversation in an interview.
2. Do research about the organization and the position and be prepared to discuss the organization's mission, programs, leadership, budget and operations. All of that information is accessible on line.
3. Learn about the challenges of working in your field in the nonprofit sector. Be ready to explain how you have addressed similar challenges in your previous positions. Help the interviewer understand where your experience is directly related to the nonprofit's position and where there are differences.

4. Experience with nonprofit organizations as a volunteer is important. The more active, more responsibilities and leadership you have assumed and the longer your involvement, the more likely that you will be perceived as someone who is personally committed to and familiar with nonprofit organizations and can appreciate the challenges of this career change.
5. Attend seminars and/or take courses on nonprofit management, both to prepare for the career change and to demonstrate your commitment to making the change. Many universities, continuing education programs and professional associations offer them.
6. Prepare a cover letter and resume that use language and experiences that are relevant to the nonprofit position that you are applying for. Relate your experiences from your prior position to the challenges in this nonprofit position. Expressing your interests, passions and volunteer activity may separate your materials from increase your chance to be interviewed.
7. Consider and be ready to discuss how the career change might affect you. Think about questions such as: will you be comfortable at with compensation, how will you feel about working as a paid professional with donors and board members who were have previously been your peers and colleagues, are your family members supportive of the change?
8. A proper attitude matters. Nonprofit organizations will not welcome people who think they can “fix them” by making them more businesslike. Present yourself as prepared to roll up your sleeves, work with fewer resources, open to new co-workers from diverse fields, and anxious to contribute and to learn.

Nonprofit organizations have been affected by the economy and government cutbacks. They are facing the same budget cuts and staff layoffs as the business sector. Nonprofits, just like the businesses, know that recruiting and retaining top professional talent is central to their success. However, different from the business sector, their definition of success is measured by their impact on communities and numbers of people served. There are and will continue to be challenging professional opportunities in the nonprofit sector for professionals who are serious about career change and not just a new job.

For more on this subject see our article, “Leading in Different Worlds”, http://drgnyc.com/List_Serve/Leading%20in%20Different%20Worlds.pdf