

3 Questions Every Fundraising Professional Should ask a Prospective Employer

"Do you think I'll be successful with this organization?"

As an executive recruiter in the nonprofit sector I frequently hear this from candidates who are seeking positions as executives or fundraisers.

When interviewing with a prospective employer, most job candidates have a list of at least a few questions to help them determine whether they are likely to be successful. These questions typically range from inquiries about work hours to the strengths and weaknesses of the donor management system and database.

There are three questions in particular, however, that every candidate seeking a management or development position with a nonprofit should ask the prospective employer. The responses can provide valuable insights in determining your compatibility with the organization, reducing the risk of regret and increasing your chances of success.

1. Can you tell me about your strategic plan and key goals?

Knowing an organization's future path helps you visualize how your role and expertise will fit and how you will personally be able to contribute. Having this conversation also creates an opportunity to explore the organization's expectations for you and gives you the opportunity to consider whether you're confident that you can meet these expectations within the allotted timeframe.

Sometimes nonprofits have unrealistically ambitious financial goals for development professionals. There's nothing worse for your

confidence than starting a new job with no hope of realizing expected outcomes. When a nonprofit is a client, I will counsel the board of directors regarding unreasonable assumptions. If an organization is conducting a search without the support of a recruiting firm, however, job candidates need to carefully assess goals and the feasibility of achieving them.

So picture yourself as a contributor to the strategic plan. Ask about the organization's objectives, priorities, challenges and successes. What do you expect me to accomplish this year? Next year? What achievements mean success to you? Gain a clear understanding of how you would fit into the plans for the future.

2. What are the roles of senior executives, the board and other volunteers with respect to the strategic plan and fundraising?

You need to know what support you would have to help you achieve goals - which people, what expertise and the amount of time they will contribute.

Inquire about the organization's leadership and fundraising philosophies. Asking about the roles of the CEO/ED and the board is especially important if you are interviewing with a large nonprofit. Leaders of these organizations are sometimes involved only at a high level or with the most significant donors. If this is the case, the organization will rely more on you. Determine what percentage of time the CEO/ED will spend on fundraising activities including prospect calls.

The role of the board of directors also impacts your success. What experience and skills do they have? How are they recruited? What are the fundraising roles of the board and of individual directors or members of the fundraising committee if there is one? How involved in fundraising activities are they? Will they accompany you on calls?

It's also important to enquire about other volunteer support for development initiatives. For example, if there is an established group of volunteers involved in fundraising, what's the specific role of this team? What expertise and time do members contribute? Would you be responsible for recruiting and training these volunteers? You need to consider the answers when assessing your ability to succeed in this role.

3. Can you describe your organizational culture and values?

Cultural fit is a fundamental consideration for success in a position. You need to ensure your personality, work style and values are in sync with those of your employer. If you don't feel as though you belong, you won't be as successful as you'd like to be.

One fundraiser who joined a nonprofit a few years ago, for example, invited several of her new colleagues to lunch during her first week with the organization. This way of building relationships and establishing rapport was important to her. Unfortunately, all of her invitations were declined. This was her first clue that her colleagues worked competitively rather than cooperatively. As time went on, she felt increasingly isolated and ineffectual. Had she inquired about the organization's culture during her initial interviews, she might have avoided years of frustration.

So ask interviewers why they like working for their organization. Have them describe the work environment and how they spend a

typical day. How does management demonstrate the organization's values on a daily basis? How are employees expected to commit to them? What parts of the current culture is management working to strengthen? What are the organization's communication style and preferences? What management approach do leaders use to encourage best efforts? What are the characteristics of the organization's most valued employees? How is staff performance evaluated? What is the turnover rate and what are the reasons that employees departed?

You can also gather insight into the culture of an organization by observing the office and workers during a job interview. For example, what's your impression of the reception area? How is the office space organized: open plan or small, enclosed rooms? What's the mood in the office - subdued? Chaotic? What's the state of office equipment and furniture? How do employees interact with each other? How do they dress? Does the office style feel awkward or comfortable to you?

All of us want to work in a supportive environment where we can be successful. This requires asking questions about the organization's plans, leadership style and culture. Before you say "yes" to the job, be sure you're comfortable with the answers.

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