

Transitioning from the Corporate to the Nonprofit Sector

As an executive placement professional working exclusively for the nonprofit sector, I receive numerous calls each week from people seeking information on how to cross the bridge from the corporate to the voluntary, charitable or nonprofit workforce. If you've decided to make the journey, here are some suggestions on how to begin, and how to make the trip a success.

Know the Territory

Like all workplaces, nonprofits vary significantly from one another. The availability of financial resources, the style of the working environment and the organizational culture are just a few things to consider when you're thinking about the changes that are to come. If you decide to make the transition, be prepared: nonprofits may not necessarily be the more relaxed, compassionate places you may think they are. With their own set of pressures and demands, nonprofits can be equally, if not, more challenging.

The diversity of positions available in nonprofit organizations is abundant. Ranging from high-level senior positions such as Executive Director or President to Fundraisers, there is a variety of employment opportunities available to you, including Planned Giving Officers, Marketing and Public Relations Managers, Accountants, IT specialists, Direct Marketing Specialists, Special Events Managers, Human Resources Consultants, lawyers/legal experts, Executive Assistants and Administrative Assistants.

At this point in your journey, ask and think. Why do you want to make a change? What are you willing to do to get there? Where do you want your career to go in the next five to ten years? Talk it over with your spouse, parents, children and/or friends.

Mapping the journey

If you've decided to make the journey, here are some steps that you can take to ensure that your transition is successful:

- Network – Nonprofit organizations, whether they are hospitals, universities, disease/health organizations or arts groups are about people. Connect with employees or volunteers working in nonprofit organizations and make contact with professional associations.
- Be In the Know – Once you've connected with individuals working in the nonprofit sector, learn how their organization works, the challenges they face, and the positions available within. This will provide a better understanding of the various jobs and organizations that are out there and the type of nonprofit and job that best suits you. The Internet is also an excellent source of information. Some useful websites are listed below.
- Show your commitment – Nonprofit organizations are about commitment to a cause. Donating your time and expertise to a nonprofit will not only help you to make connections with other professionals and demonstrate your commitment to prospective employers, but it will also help you decide if the non-profit world is the right place for you.
- Build your skill set – Like most people contemplating a change to the nonprofit world, you probably already hold one or more degrees. Depending on your particular situation and the type of job you are applying for, you may need to acquire additional credentials to insure that you are competitive in this labour market. Upgrading your education with a Certified Fund Raising Executive (CFRE) designation or courses at a

community college, for example, will give you the knowledge and skills you need toward attaining that position you desire.

- Look critically – Once you've decided on the type of job and organization you want and you've updated your skills and education, you are nearly ready to commence your job search. At this stage, take a critical look at your resume and cover letter, consider enlisting a friend or professional resume writer to help you. In my practice, I see many resumes from individuals of all levels of positions that do not address the employer's needs as are outlined in the job ad. This is a critical flaw that may land your resume in the rejection pile, even if you have the necessary qualifications for the job. Nonprofits are busy organizations, and the people leading the recruiting will likely have little time to review your resume. Ensure that your resume is organized, to the point and highlights the skills and experience you have that are relevant to the position you are applying for.
- Keep learning – This is a time of challenge and change for Canadian nonprofits, with increasing competition for resources and higher expectations for openness, professionalism and clear financial management. Make a commitment to invest in your professional development. Take courses, read industry and business publications and join applicable professional associations to keep your knowledge and skills up-to-date.

Selected Resources

Resume Writers

Ross McPherson at www.yourcareerquest.com

Martin Buckland at www.AnEliteResume.com

Websites

Association of Fundraising Professionals www.afpnet.org

Association of Healthcare Philanthropy www.ahp.org

Canadian Association of Gift Planners www.cagp-acpdp.org

Imagine Canada www.imaginecanada.ca

Canadian Society of Association Executives www.csae.com

Charity Village www.charityvillage.ca

Canadian Fundraiser News
www.canadianfundraiser.com/

Research Site of Imagine Canada www.Nonprofitscan.ca

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