

How people profit in volunteer sector

Making a difference is just one of the reasons people are crossing over from the corporate to the charitable world

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When Neville Kirchmann lost his wife to cancer, he was so touched by the care she had received at Princess Margaret Hospital in Toronto that he decided to support the organization in some way.

He was invited to sit on the foundation's board in 1998 and through that learned about the hospital's programs. He became an enthusiastic board member and helped write the foundation's first five-year strategic plan.

Later, when given the opportunity to take on the role of foundation president, the former executive with Coca-Cola in Canada accepted readily.

This kind of scenario is becoming increasingly common as people look to cross the bridge from the corporate to the charitable world.

Why the surge in interest? Reasons vary, and include the belief that working for a charity or a cause could make a career more rewarding. People are often yearning for a career that "makes a difference." Many downsized executives and survivors of post-acquisition corporate purges see non-profit organizations as an attractive alternative.

Other reasons for the crossover include the knowledge that the nonprofit sector is one of the fastest growing areas to work in, and opportunities for employment that value excellent business and people skills are numerous.

Susan Delisle had a successful and progressive sales career in packaged goods, electronic services and telecommunications, but decided she wanted to move into a career where she could not only continue to employ her sales and relationship skills, but also become an "agent of change."

A job posting in the Charity Village Web site led her to her current position as major gifts officer for the Mount Sinai Hospital Foundation in Toronto. But she noticed during her job search that there are many charities looking for executive directors, direct marketers, accountants, investment managers, public relations experts and information technologists.

In contrast to Ms. Delisle, who sought out the sector, others arrive at a non-profit career as though by kismet. "The profession chose me," says Mr. Kirchmann, adding that he had no doubt about the potential rewards of his choice. He knew he could make a difference, as the cause had become his passion.

If you're thinking about entering that nonprofit sector, first, identify the transferable skills you already have, such as business, sales and communication expertise. Mr. Kirchmann, for example, who was a 30-year veteran at Coca-Cola, says he has applied all of his business skills to his new position.

Next, be prepared to fill in the gaps with professional development and formal education specifically geared for the sector.

Take the time to research the field and the different opportunities available. Set up informational interviews to meet people in the sector, ask questions, and decide what area interests you the most. It may be that a health issue has touched you personally. You may be concerned about social services, such as affordable housing, or some aspect of the environment. Perhaps your interest is in early childhood education, or camping, sporting activities or seniors support programs. Whatever your focus, remember that a career in this sector is more than a job. You must have a passion for your cause, and you need to believe in your organization.

The ultimate goal of the for-profit corporation is to increase shareholder value and profit. For a nonprofit, the mission is to realize a dream, which may be anything from finding a cure for esophageal cancer or sending handicapped children to summer camp, to providing immigrant support services or funding a ballet school. These are dreams that, for the right person at the right time, literally can create a life's work. Ms. Delisle, for example, says that working right in the hospital environment motivates her. She can see directly how the money she helps to raise makes a difference.

Both Mr. Kirchmann and Ms. Delisle agree that working with the donors is the best part of the job. While the sales cycles are similar between the corporate and voluntary sectors, selling the intangible takes longer, and requires an understanding and appreciation of donor needs. Their biggest thrill: finalizing a large donation that will be used for a specific program.

Common transferable skills valued in the nonprofit sector include: excellent business practices and communications skills, knowledge of human resources and financial management, and the ability to envisage where an organization is going and help realize that vision.

The differences between sectors, however, call for an additional set of skills.

Success in the nonprofit field demands a demonstrated passion for the cause you represent. And you can't fake it. Further, because teamwork and consensus building are centrally important mechanisms in this field, you must be able to manage a diverse set of relationships with staff, volunteers, clients, donors, external partners such as businesses or governments, the general public and the boards and committees of the organization. You will need skill in demonstrating empathy and inclusiveness, and in appreciating the interests and the emotional contributions of your staff and volunteers. In short, you must be a "people person."

You will also need an understanding of governance in the nonprofit sector. Decision making, given the importance of consensus building, certainly requires more patience and generally takes longer. Small and medium-sized organizations often have to operate within strict guidelines in order to protect their special corporate status.

The voluntary sector is growing at warp speed, and spinning off exciting new opportunities that are challenging the universities and colleges to keep up. No matter where you

are in your career, you need look no further for some of the hottest career choices available in Canada.

WEB RESOURCES:

*Association of Fundraising Professionals – www.afpnet.org
Association of Healthcare Philanthropy – www.ahp.org
Canadian Association of Gift Planners – www.cagp-acpdp.org
Canadian Centre for Philanthropy – www.ccp.ca
Charity Village – www.charityvillage.ca
Canadian FundRaiser – www.canadianfundraiser.com
Coalition of National Voluntary Organizations – www.nvo-onb.ca
Georgian College – www.georgianc.on.ca/fundraising
*The Globe & Mail, July 5, 2002**

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