

## Invest in Yourself – Go Back to the Classroom

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In the autumn, I always want to go back to the classroom. The yearning is triggered by the memory of getting children off to their first day of school, or the sight of college and university students trying to find their way across campus, and it just seems like the right thing to do.

Many years ago when I started my fundraising career, the only place to get courses or seminars was in the United States. Now in Canada we have a wide variety of university and college courses, audio presentations, one-day seminars, or on-line programs to help you be a better educated and more informed professional.

So why pack up your computer and learn a few new skills? Why should you as a development professional be seeking additional education?

As the sector grows more sophisticated and diverse, there are two increasingly important trends: the need for better educated and trained workers, and greater specialization in the fundraising field.

### The playing field has changed

When organizations in our sector are hunting for new employees, education and special training are figuring larger in the equation. Why? Simply because charities and nonprofits are becoming more complex and challenging. Funding proposals are more complex; budgeting is a bigger part of the picture; and either the addition or reduction of staff puts human resource and project management at the forefront of many administrative job descriptions.

If that weren't sufficient, over the last decade volunteer board members, largely business and industry executives, have come to accept that business principles and methodologies are, and should be, transferable into the management of nonprofits. Finally, both donors and the general public are demanding increased transparency and accountability in charitable activity and the reporting of its results.

A 40-year old direct marketing specialist recently told me he's planning to start work on his MBA. Why is he undertaking such a huge commitment of personal time and financial resources? He has analyzed the nonprofit environment, and has concluded that if he wants to be the director of a large department (and he does), he's going to have to be at the leading edge of his field. To achieve this, he has decided, he will need the detailed knowledge that only an MBA marketing program can deliver.

Whether he's right or wrong about the need for, or value of, the MBA, he's got the basics right. He is definitely going to have to build a program of continual education and retraining into his career. The alternative is to be left in backwater, no-growth positions as the rest of the crew powers past on their way to the top. Whether you want to lead the field or just keep up, your educational program can never be shelved.

### MBA, MA ... whatever

Experience, experience, experience speaks loudest when applying for a job, but clearly education – especially advanced degrees – carries clout. It doesn't really matter whether

it is an MBA or MA. What advanced degrees reflect – apparently – is intellectual capacity. One of the roles of advancement professionals is to articulate an organization's needs eloquently, and the perception – right or wrong – is that someone with a Masters degree can do that.

Don't panic. The good news is that while long-term commitment is still required, you don't have to quit your job to get an advanced degree. There are now many part-time degrees and the newest trend, distance learning, in which you do the work on-line and attend classes either on the weekend or for a number of weeks in the summer, can make that previously near-impossible second diploma much more attainable.

### **Take a hard look at your skill sets; then fill in the blanks**

Not too sure about an advanced degree? Your next step should be to address the areas you need to learn or improve. So many people I see are in a wishful mode in their career. They wish they could get a better job, or they wish they were a director of a department. If this description fits you, your first – perhaps most difficult – step is to take an honest look at your skill sets, decide on your next career move, and then take courses to fill in the areas where you need to improve. Whatever area of specialization you want to build, there is a course to help you out.

### **No time?**

Opportunities abound at conferences and seminars. Every year associations hold national and regional gatherings, with dozens of topics led by the best practitioners. The associations of Healthcare Philanthropy and Fundraising Professionals

both hold audio conferences where you can dial in from your office, addressing specific subjects led by leading experts in the field.

You may want to check out other industries for a new viewpoint on a particular subject. Perhaps you may want to attend seminars offered by the Canadian Marketing Association or the Strategic Planners Association. If you shake in your shoes every time you get up to present to your board, consider an organization such as Toast Masters, Dale Carnegie, or speaking courses at a local college to help you become a powerful presenter.

There is always yet another category of skills improvement. Perhaps you have bombed out in your last five interviews, all of them for jobs for which you were perfectly qualified. You may need some coaching in interviewing or perhaps to work with a résumé writer to polish that c.v. you created in a rush 10 years ago.

### **Who will pay the freight?**

Many organizations have education assistance programs that may be available to help you out, not only financially but also allowing you the time to undertake your studying. But – if they don't – the ultimate responsibility for your career is still yours. Consider your education as an investment in yourself and your career that will have big payoffs for both you and your employers in the future.

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