

# Small but Mighty: Recruiting Top Fundraisers Over Big Competition

Deborah Legrove, CFRE, President of *crawfordconnect*



It's tough out there. Competition for qualified, capable fundraising professionals is intense.

So what's a charity or nonprofit to do when you're not one of the big players or you aren't located in a major centre where many of these pros work?

In today's competitive environment, recruiting – and keeping – first-rate fundraisers is tough. It's even tougher for small nonprofits and charities and for those located in small communities. Typically, you may have fewer qualified fundraising professionals to choose from and cannot offer the scale of compensation a larger organization may offer.

So you need to be innovative with opportunities and solutions that will attract the right professionals to your organization. Here are some ideas to consider.

## Integrate retention strategies into your recruitment strategies

First of all, you don't want to invest many thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours attracting someone who leaves only a few months after arriving. You want to attract candidates who will be a good fit with your organizational culture so they are likely to stay longer.

Devise a recruitment process that integrates strategies not only to attract, but equally to keep, these valued employees. These strategies should address onboarding, engaging, managing and developing these employees.

## Adopt a team approach to recruitment

Small and mid-size nonprofits may not have the advantage of a human resources department that can dedicate staff to the recruiting and hiring process. So consider a collaborative approach involving everyone in the organization.

Fundraising, after all, is a team effort. The fundraising professionals your organization hires are part of a holistic team encompassing the board, management, support staff and volunteers. Involving all of these people fosters team spirit: pride in contributing to the organization's mission and feeling valued in being included. Since current staff and volunteers understand the culture and operations of your organization, they are also more likely to introduce fitting candidates.

Ask team members to leverage their networks to come up with referrals. Establish a recruitment incentive program to encourage participation. For example, if your organization hires someone referred by a staff member, offer a financial reward if the new fundraising professional stays with the organization for a specified period of time.

One of our clients, for example, a small health charity, was experiencing constant turnover on the major gift team. To address this problem we helped management conduct a pilot program that offered a financial incentive to staff members who recruited qualified (clearly defined) candidates. The program

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proved to be exactly what the charity needed. One staff member referred an individual who was selected for the position of major gift officer. The referrer received half of a financial incentive at the start date of the new hire and the remainder at the one-year mark. Invested in the success of the new officer, this staff member also contributed to helping the new hire fit comfortably and confidently into the organization.

## Small community? Devise an appealing geographic strategy

For organizations that are not in large urban centres, consider whether you prefer to recruit beyond your community or to "grow your own" fundraisers.

This requires identifying the unique features and benefits your organization and your community can offer. Consider what might be appealing to candidates. Perhaps your location offers attractive lifestyle benefits. Or maybe opportunities to establish close working relationships with a variety of staff members. Or to take on more responsibility and quickly expand the scope of professional experience.

Once you have a good understanding of what you can offer candidates, consider whether you may be able to recruit an experienced professional from beyond your community or whether you may need to hire a junior fundraiser and provide on-the-job development.

**Recruit experienced professionals:** It can be challenging to motivate someone to leave a large urban centre where there are more opportunities for career advancement. Appealing inducements, however, can encourage people to make the move.

In addition to salary, consider financial incentives such as extra benefits or bonus pay for performance. Or maybe you could offer job and career rewards, for example, a two or three-year contract positioned as a way for pros to build their experience? Small organizations often have the ability to offer more breadth in responsibilities than larger ones.

Or could you offer opportunities for an individual to make a meaningful contribution or to have independence and autonomy? Maybe the fundraising position enables the acquisition of certain valued skills, for example, managing an advancement team or a specialized campaign or developing annual budgets. Work-life balance, flexible vacation, sabbaticals, an enjoyable workplace or an employee recognition program are other appealing incentives.

**"Grow your own:"** Another option is bringing in junior or mid-level professionals and helping them develop the skills needed to advance your organization's mission and vision. Newly accredited CFREs (Certified Fund Raising Executives), for example, may be open to new experiences.

Shaping the capabilities of a fundraising professional to meet the needs of your nonprofit or charity requires creating a career ladder in your organization. This ladder should provide opportunities for both internal and external training and mentoring that will advance the fundraiser's experience and skills.

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Mentoring can provide guidance on specific job responsibilities as well as helping to strengthen team and organizational effectiveness. There are many different ways to provide mentoring today, which can be adapted to an individual's preference: virtual mentors, group or network mentoring, coaching from external experts.

Training support also comes in many different versions, which can also be customized. For example, travelling to conferences or attending online courses offered by professional associations; shadowing senior executives or board members to learn leadership, management or financial skills; participating in "stretch" assignments beyond the usual scope of responsibility.

## Determine what's important to candidates

Once you've decided your preferred recruiting strategy and have started creating a pool of candidates, identify their priorities and interests to help you determine whether they will fit with your organization and your community.

If your nonprofit or charity is located in a small city or town, invite short-listed candidates for face-to-face interviews and tours. This will ensure they have a clear understanding of both the advantages, and challenges, of the position.

If the job involves moving other family members into the community, scheduling a second visit for top candidates and their families might be merited. You want to be sure the entire family will be comfortable in your locale.

Prepare your selling points about your nonprofit or charity, the position and the location, and be prepared for candidates' questions and concerns. If you need assistance or an objective perspective, an experienced executive search consultant can help to identify, package and also market these types of opportunities.

When it comes to attracting fundraising professionals who will meet the needs of your organization, identifying and selling your key differentiators can give your small organization or community a big edge in the candidate marketplace.

*For ideas regarding how to keep the star fundraiser you've recruited engaged and productive, read the next article in this two-part series: [Small but mighty: retaining top fundraisers over big competition](#).*

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