

Nonprofit Job Seekers: Finding the Right Fit for You

“How can I assess if a job is a good fit for my personality and work style?” This is a question we often hear from job seekers. Ideally, before you start an active job search, you should do some self-assessment about what interests you, what sectors or issues you want to be involved in, and which specific roles are a good fit for your skills and experience. But if you’ve already reached the stage where you are actively pursuing specific senior management opportunities, the following article can help you figure out which nonprofit organization is the right fit for your personality and work style.

Job seekers often make the mistake of assuming that determining whether or not a particular job is a good fit for them is largely the responsibility of the potential employer. As a candidate, you have an important role in assessing fit, particularly at the senior leadership level. Through our talent matching work and a set of in-depth interviews with senior nonprofit managers, including both long-time sector leaders and those who have recently bridged from the for-profit into the nonprofit sector, we have identified some practices that consistently seem to increase the chances of finding the right job fit. These practices can be applied in two categories: learning about yourself and learning about your potential employer.

Learning about yourself

The starting point for finding the right fit is to figure out what you are looking for in a job beyond the specific responsibilities and tasks listed in the job description. Kathleen Yazbak, a partner at The Bridgespan Group, emphasized that “personal style and fit with organizational culture must be carefully evaluated in the job search process.” To do this, you need to think about everything you want in your next job, and then think further about which of those things are must-haves, which are negotiable, and in what areas you are willing to make trade-offs. “Asking yourself what things you can’t live with is another helpful way to make sure you’re covering all the bases,” added Yazbak.

Creating a complete and specific inventory of what you want in an ideal nonprofit senior leadership position and in a nonprofit organization can be immensely helpful in finding the right fit for you. One job seeker created a list of the 27 ideal characteristics of her next senior management position and used this to evaluate each job opportunity. These items ranged from job-specific items such as: “I want to manage a team of people;” to collegial dynamics: “I want to work with smart, passionate, fun people;” to the mundane: “I’d like to commute less than 15 minutes from my home;” to the aesthetic: “Ideally, I’d like an office environment that has a lot of natural sunlight.” Prioritizing this list helped her identify whether a

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particular opportunity was likely to be a good fit. While most people will not have 27 items, this exercise—whether it yields five, 10, or 27 criteria—is a useful one.

Some categories of questions you might want to consider in developing your list include:

Organization type and work styles

- What types of organizational missions are you most passionate about?
- Within a particular mission focus, are you more interested in organizations that are engaged in direct service, capacity-building, field-building, or policy/advocacy-related activities?
- Do you want to work in a small, medium, or large organization?
- Do you want to work for a local, national, or international organization?
- Are you more interested in a start-up, growth phase, or mature organization?
- Do you prefer working in collaborative work teams or in more hierarchical reporting structures?

Colleagues

- What types of people and personalities do you prefer to work with? To manage? To report to?
- Are you interested in keeping relationships with colleagues strictly professional or are you looking to expand your social life through work?

Professional development

- Do you want to develop new skills or refine old ones? What skills do you want to develop?
- Are you looking for the next step in your career development or do you want this job to be the landing place for the foreseeable future?

Work hours and commitment to work

- How many hours a week on average do you want to or are you willing to work?
- Do you want flexibility in terms of your work schedule or do you prefer guaranteed, set hours?
- Are you willing to travel for work? If so, how often?
- Are you looking for a job you can leave behind at the end of the day or one that keeps you thinking about work when you're home?

Distance, architecture, and aesthetics

- How far are you willing to commute to work?
- Are you willing to relocate for a job?
- What kind of physical office environment do you like to work in?

“Sometimes simply thinking about what you liked about your favorite job or disliked the most about your least favorite job can be really helpful,” advised Yazbak. Once you’ve made your list of ideal characteristics, you can then compare each job opportunity against the list and objectively assess how well each job and potential organization fits with you.

Learning about your potential employer

Obviously, you need to calculate whether the salary, healthcare package, and other financial benefits associated with a specific job are to your satisfaction. But simply tallying up the financial package will not tell you whether a job is right for you. Every nonprofit organization also has its own personality and culture. It is vitally important to consider these intangibles as you evaluate specific jobs. Following are some ways you can gain insight into the culture of your prospective employer.

Research how the community views the organization

Try to find out how other organizations in the same field view the organization and research opinions that clients or customers have of the organization. Conducting informational interviews with leaders of organizations in a field of interest can be very elucidating and may point you to pursue job opportunities with one organization over another.

Check out the organization’s website to see how the organization presents itself and interacts with the outside world. The manner in which staff names are listed on the website can give clues as to how hierarchical or approachable the organization might be in reality. You can also learn a lot about an organization by reading its annual report and its IRS Form 990, which includes information on the organization’s mission, programs, and finances. If you are able to connect with former employees of the organization, ask them what they think of the organization and its culture. Ascertain why they left and what advice or concerns they would have for someone joining the organization.

Maximize interactions during the interview process

During the formal interview process, “it is immensely helpful to have a 360-degree view,” said Kieran McGrath, associate director, executive search for The Bridgespan Group. “This means not only interacting with the people you will report to, but people who will be your peers, and the people who will report to you.” If this is not part of the formal interview process, you can request these types of interviews or seek out informal opportunities to interact with various levels of staff within the organization. As a senior level hire, you are also likely to interview with board members, who can offer yet another perspective on the organization.

Ask a lot of good questions

The interview process should be as much about you interviewing them as it is the other way around. Yazbak recommended that candidates “get out of sell mode” as early as possible and ask as many questions as they can about the position and the organization. It is always good to ask why the position you are interviewing for is open. If the opening is not a new position, be sure to ask why the previous person left the position and what made them successful or hindered their performance in the position. In order to assess your own fit, ask questions such as “What do you love about working here? What do you not love?” and “What are you looking for in a colleague or co-worker?” and “When people leave the organization or position, why have they left?” and “How much after-work socializing do people do?”

One senior nonprofit manager described how her organization often presented social activities as optional to candidates, when in reality they weren't. Asking good questions (e.g., “Do most people attend these optional social activities?”) can help bring to light the hidden cultural expectations of an organization. In addition, Yazbak stated, “It is critical to ask different people to describe the organizational culture. This will be especially informative if you get many different answers to the same question during the process!” Overall, the types of answers you hear to all these various questions will help inform how well your colleagues' experiences match up with the kind of environment in which you want to work.

Observe everything at the organization for cultural clues

In the course of the on-site interview process, there are myriad opportunities to assess the organizational culture of the organization. “You can pick up a lot of vibe by looking at the art on the walls, seeing how people dress, and listening to the volume in the hallways,” advised McGrath. “Look at how people treat the receptionist,” she added. “It can tell you a lot about the culture of the organization.” Some organizations are more hierarchical, others are more flat (e.g., are senior leaders on the staff kitchen cleanup list?). Some places are really quiet, others are very loud. Some offices are decorated with personal and organizational information (e.g., photos of recent social events or children's artwork), others are devoid of decoration. Keep your eyes and ears open for any of these clues to organizational culture.

Seek out informal interaction opportunities with people from the organization

If possible, try to find ways to spend time with people from the organization outside of the formal interview process. As a candidate for a senior position, it is perfectly appropriate to ask if you can attend a staff meeting or an upcoming fundraising event. In each of these situations, you can learn a lot about the organization.

In a staff meeting, pay attention to how the leadership runs things from a process perspective. Does the meeting start on time and is there a formal agenda? Are people making eye contact with each other, interacting with each other, or joking around? Do staff members seem to be jostling for air time or posturing with each other? Who runs the meeting and what types of issues are brought before the entire staff and what types are not? What kinds of topics are announced versus discussed in the staff meeting? Are any decisions made in the meeting and how consensus-driven are the deliberations?

If you are able to attend a fundraising event for the organization, it will give you a window into how the senior leadership pitches the organization to donors and the public. At the same time, it will afford you the opportunity to see the organization in action and interact with all different levels of staff. What kind of an event is it? How do they talk about the organization and its mission and impact? What kind of donors does the organization have and how does the staff relate to its donors? How does the organization market itself? All of these are important clues to the culture of the organization.

Listen to your gut instincts

Finally, when you've done your research and looked at how a given job opportunity or organization stacks up against your fit criteria, step back and pay attention to your gut. Sometimes an opportunity seems perfect on paper, and yet you have a nagging feeling that something just isn't right. In these cases, take another look at the inventory you made of the criteria you wanted in your next job, taking particular note of the factors you considered most important. Ask yourself whether you are so excited about some aspects of this new organization that you have set aside some of your important fit criteria. Think long and hard about whether those criteria are still important to you and whether this job offers sufficient trade-offs to warrant putting them aside. Once you have done your research and weighed all your options, it is okay to let your gut feeling be the deciding factor.

Summary

Finding the right fit in a job can be a very challenging task that requires insight into your own personality and preferred work style and keen observation of the culture at potential employer organizations. By proactively developing a list of ideal job characteristics that go beyond the job description, and maximizing opportunities to learn more about organizations through formal and informal interactions, you can be successful in finding the right fit for you.

Bridgestar (www.bridgestar.org), an initiative of the Bridgespan Group, provides a nonprofit management job board, content, and tools designed to help nonprofit organizations build strong leadership teams and individuals pursue career paths as nonprofit leaders.