

Self-Exploration: The First Step in the Job Search

“I think I’d like to work in the nonprofit sector, but I’m not sure where to start,” is a common sentiment among those contemplating a major career change. A great way to start any new job search—especially one that involves a significant shift in focus, such as moving from one sector to another—is to dedicate substantial time to self-exploration.

While this article focuses on self-assessment and exploration, it is important to put this process into the context of the broader career transition. We have found it helpful to think about career transitions as a five-step process, with key questions to ask at each stage:

1. **Self-assessment and exploration:** Why do I want to move into the nonprofit sector? Do I feel a personal connection to a particular mission? What skills do I have that will be transferable from the for-profit to the nonprofit sector? What do I expect from this transition?
2. **Research and networking:** What do I need to learn about the sector, organizations, and/or available jobs? Who can I ask to help me in my search?
3. **Outreach and interviews:** How do I best position myself in my resume, cover letters, and interviews?
4. **Offer negotiation and decision-making:** Is this the right fit culturally? Can I make it work financially?
5. **Transition to new role:** What should I do to make the transition as smooth as possible?

The initial step—the focus of this article—is critical, yet people often skip it and go directly to more concrete activities such as searching for job postings or updating resumes. However, just as a company must clearly define a role and its responsibilities before starting to interview candidates, an individual job seeker should start by defining the characteristics of his or her ideal position.

Gaining clarity on your motivations, aspects of jobs that are most appealing to you (e.g., sector, function, work environment), and the set of transferable skills you have and enjoy using will help you focus your job search. This will enable you to avoid pursuing opportunities that are not a great fit, and will help you articulate why you are right for the job when you do pursue an interesting opportunity.

In addition, taking time to explore what you are really passionate about is critical to the nonprofit transition. One senior nonprofit leader who has hired a number of bridgers noted: “The issue of passion really matters... if the passion’s not there, ultimately the cultural fit’s not there.” An individual in the

Boston

535 Boylston St., 10th Floor

Boston, MA 02116

P 617 572-2833

F 617 572-2834

New York

3 Times Sq., 25th Floor

New York, NY 10036

P 646 562-8900

F 646 562-8901

San Francisco

465 California St., 11th Floor

San Francisco, CA 94104

P 415 627-1100

F 415 627-4575

process of a transition to the nonprofit sector added, “I thought about moving into the nonprofit sector a few years ago when presented with an interesting opportunity. But I wasn’t really ready, and I ended up taking another job in the for-profit sector. Now I know I’m ready because I feel so strongly about education that I’m not looking at anything else.”

Questions to ask

There are many questions that all professionals considering a career move—whether within a field or cross-sector—should ask themselves as part of the self-assessment process:

What did you like most about your current (or most recent) job?

What did you find most frustrating?

What aspects of your current job would you change to turn it into your ideal job?

What skills do you enjoy using that could be transferred to a new job?

What characteristics of your current workplace (e.g., size of organization, start-up vs. established, decision-making style and approach, formal vs. casual culture) and work colleagues are most appealing to you?

What is important to you at this point in your life, and what “rewards” would you like to get out of your next role (e.g., financial gain, work-life balance, intellectual stimulation, giving back)?

If you are thinking of making a career shift into the nonprofit sector for the first time, there are several additional questions you should ask to assess both whether the sector shift will be right for you and what types of opportunities to pursue:

Why do you want to move into the sector? Is it just a feeling, or have you had specific experiences with nonprofits that have led you to think this way?

What particular issues are you passionate about? Is there a particular population you are most interested in serving? How much direct engagement with that group do you want to have in your work?

Which of your volunteer experiences have been most fulfilling? Most frustrating? Why? What does this tell you about potential jobs in the sector? (If you haven’t already been involved with a nonprofit, try volunteering for an organization that interests you, to get a better sense of the sector.)

What are the characteristics of your ideal nonprofit job (both specific types of responsibilities and work environment)? At what types of organizations (e.g., small/large, start-up/established, specific field, intermediary/direct-service) are you most likely to find them?

What do you believe that work in the nonprofit sector will give you that you're not receiving through your work in the for-profit sector? Could you meet this need by serving on a nonprofit board or in some other volunteer capacity, rather than shifting your career entirely?

Have you crunched the numbers to determine how much income you need? Will the rewards of working for a nonprofit outweigh the financial opportunity cost of leaving your for-profit job?

What are your expectations about how work in the nonprofit sector will be similar to or different from your past for-profit experience? Will you be comfortable in a resource-constrained environment (e.g., will you be comfortable working without administrative support or the latest in technology)?

How flexible are you? Do you already have the collaborative working style favored by many nonprofits or are you willing to modify your style and approach to work for a cause about which you are passionate?

What specific skills/capabilities do you bring to the table that will be transferable to the nonprofit sector? How will you articulate this in conversations with potential employers?

Taking the next step

These questions are only a starting point, to help you assess why and how strongly you are drawn to the nonprofit sector and to help you start to define the types of opportunities you would most like to pursue. Once you begin to target particular opportunities, you will start to ask more specific questions about roles, responsibilities, and fit with the organizations you are considering. There are also a number of self-assessment tests available for either individual use or for use with a career coach. These tools—cover areas such as interests, skills, personality, and behavioral characteristics—won't necessarily give you a precise list of which jobs to pursue, but they will help you better articulate your interests and values as well as characteristics of jobs or organizations that might be a good fit for you.

While self-exploration certainly includes a fair bit of quiet contemplation, it should not be done in a vacuum. It is important to include others in the process. That can be done in a variety of ways, including having informal conversations with friends or mentors who know you well; holding informational interviews with nonprofit managers in roles you think you might enjoy; or meeting with a career coach. One bridger noted, "I found it extremely helpful to listen to others' career path stories, to give me mental models of what my own path might look like."

At the end of the day, this collaborative process will not only give you important insights as you consider the next stage in your career, it will also help you start building the network of contacts that will be invaluable to you later in the job search.

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.