

The Power of Networking: Kathy Heagney Williams' Path to the Nonprofit Sector

When Kathy Heagney Williams became chief financial officer (CFO) at Zoo Atlanta, she discovered that zoos around the world had longstanding collaborations in areas such as conservation programs and animal care. But there was no structured way for the various institutions' finance professionals to share benchmarks or other data.

So, Williams, with the help and support of the Woodland Park Zoo Finance Director and Sacramento Zoo Business Manager, started the CFO Roundtable of Zoos and Aquariums, the first industry-wide zoo medium for connecting finance and business professionals. Just seven years later, the group includes more than 50 institutional professionals on two continents who stay connected via a listserv, bimonthly conference calls, and an annual in-person meeting. "I get a tremendous amount of support from the [Roundtable] members," she said.

Making the most of her personal and professional networks has been a hallmark of Williams' career. She was a senior finance professional with 20 years of for-profit experience, including senior roles at Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide, Spherion Corp., and Arthur Anderson LLP, when she decided to explore bridging to the nonprofit sector. "I had a desire to continue my career and to have a family at the same time," said Williams, who had volunteered for years at several nonprofits that worked with children. "I also wanted to be at a place where I had a more personal connection to the work. I felt the nonprofit sector might be more compatible with my own goals."

Williams began networking with former colleagues at Arthur Anderson, seeking connections to nonprofit leaders who would be willing to sit down for informational interviews. She attended nonprofit fundraising events, such as wine tastings, in order to meet people connected with interesting nonprofits. She looked at board member lists to see if she had any contacts within the nonprofits she was targeting. She told everyone in her network the types of opportunities she was looking for.

All her networking paid off: Five different people in her network called her to say they'd heard about a job at Zoo Atlanta that sounded like a perfect fit for her. She applied and was hired within a few months of starting her job search.

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Williams said that while it can still be challenging to balance her work and home lives, her move to Zoo Atlanta was the right one. “It’s not necessarily easier; it’s just that there’s an appreciation for the family here—that’s who we serve,” she said. “So, if I need to leave early sometimes and then finish up after the kids go to bed, that’s okay.”

Not surprisingly, Williams’ advice to other for-profit leaders who are considering bridging is to focus on networking: “Stay open and be out there. People across the community are involved in nonprofits. You never know who can help you find an in.”

Online resources figured prominently in Kathy Heagney Williams’ job search and continue to play a role in her ongoing professional development. Here are some Bridgestar resources found on www.bridgestar.org specifically for CFOs:

1. The Bridgestar CFO LinkedIn Group
An online discussion group where members share ideas, information, and practices. Joining is free for nonprofit leaders with CFO-type responsibilities, regardless of their actual job title.
2. The Nonprofit CFO Learning Center
3. Networking Opportunities for Nonprofit CFOs

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.