

What Nonprofit Employers are Looking for Today

Seeking a nonprofit position in a difficult economy presents a particular challenge to job seekers. At the same time many nonprofits are seeing an increase in demand for services, they are also tightening their belts to weather the uncertain economy.

To help job seekers better understand the particular issues facing nonprofit hiring organizations, we talked with Karen DeMay, a senior director on the Bridgespan Group's executive search team. Karen, who has worked closely with dozens of nonprofits as they navigate the hiring process, explained how these organizations' approach to hiring has changed in recent months and what they are now looking for in job candidates.

Despite the poor economy, is hiring continuing in the nonprofit sector?

Karen DeMay: Yes, hiring continues. We're seeing a lot of finance and development opportunities because of the heightened focus on cash flow and budgets, but also positions for executive directors and some for program people. Hiring has not stopped—the work still has to get done. In those unfortunate cases where organizations really have to look at all of their people and perhaps let the lowest performers go, they may have capacity to bring on more bench strength.

We've seen hiring freezes. For example, some organizations say, 'Okay, we're freezing hiring for six months.' But they then realize they really do need to bring people on board, so they resume their recruiting. So, I guess the message to the job seeker is: An organization may say it has a hiring freeze, but don't necessarily write it off for six months. There might be an opportunity sooner than you think.

How competitive is the job market now compared to a year ago?

KD: There's more competition, particularly in finance and development, and for the executive director and chief executive officer roles. Not only are there more people looking for jobs, but the challenges that senior managers will need to tackle in this economic environment are more complicated. This makes finding the right candidate even more critical for a nonprofit and increases demands on candidates to demonstrate their management expertise in the application and interview process.

How can job candidates make themselves stand out from the crowd?

KD: All of the things that make a senior manager successful in a nonprofit—being able to manage through influence; being able to work with a variety of disparate stakeholders; managing with minimal resources; and the ability to work in a consensus-driven environment—all of those things become even more important in this environment because of the pressure and uncertainty that nonprofits are facing.

You need to go back to basics and be really clear about what you bring to the organization, your strengths, and your achievements. Be clear about metrics around those achievements—that really helps you to get noticed. For example,

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

if you oversaw a cost-cutting program, give the details of what you did and how much it saved the organization. You also need to recognize that organizations conducting searches have to look at many more applicants, so the labor involved in their searches is much higher, and you should focus on distinguishing yourself in your job search. Look at those jobs where you have a compelling interest in the mission of the organization, where your background really meets the needs of the job, and where you know you can serve the organization and its mission.

How long is it taking organizations to make hiring decisions today?

KD: Generally, decision-making does take longer within nonprofit organizations these days because of the crunch on senior executives' time. The interview process may drag on a little longer. It's really important as a candidate to be understanding with the organization, knowing that they are dealing with a lot of decisions that may need their attention. And that perhaps the recruiting process is second on their list of priorities, or even third.

You mentioned that senior nonprofit executives are crunched for time, which can lengthen the hiring process. How else does that time crunch affect job seekers?

KD: People need to be sensitive to senior leaders because their time and resources are much tighter in this environment. For example, keep in mind the volume of resumes that nonprofit leaders are going to be looking at. Be succinct in your resume. This is probably not the time for a resume that is three pages long with lots of details. Use metrics to quantify your achievements. Make it easy for the reader to understand what you've accomplished and what your responsibilities have been. You could say something like, 'Revised budget over a three-month period, resulting in a \$3 million savings for the organization.' Say specifically where you started with costs, the time frame over which you worked on the budget, and where it ended up.

Another important way to be conscious of senior leaders' time is to be direct in your cover letter. For bridgers in particular—people moving from the for-profit to the nonprofit sector for the first time—it is important to be clear about your expectations around compensation. Particularly if you are coming from a corporate setting where you had a very senior role, you should acknowledge in your cover letter that you have had large compensation packages in the past; however, you understand that in the nonprofit sector you will likely take a pay cut and that you're comfortable with that. It's important to explicitly acknowledge this.

What if you're already working in the nonprofit sector and are looking for a more senior position, but getting a larger salary is not your prime objective? Instead, your main motivation is that you're trying to build a career.

KD: If you're moving within the sector, and your primary motivation is the career opportunity, I would frame it that you are looking to leverage your skills to serve the organization and focus on what you would bring to the organization. I've seen nonprofit leaders recoil at the thought of a person coming on board to further his or her own career. The job seeker might want to state it like this: 'I'm looking for another opportunity because I want to advance my career and here's what I would bring to your organization that would serve you and help advance your mission.' But I wouldn't make career advancement a key motivator for joining the organization—recognize that CEOs and EDs of nonprofits

are very focused on their missions and advancing their missions.

Informational interviews can be a great way to gather information as part of a job search. With all the new time demands on EDs and other senior leaders, what approach should job seekers take to get people to sit down with them?

KD: I think it's being creative in how to make contacts with people. You could be at a fundraising event of the organization and make personal contact with someone. Then, you can request something more in terms of an informational interview. But I would tread lightly on making requests of senior managers' time. They may be amenable to sitting down and having a cup of coffee, so, it's worth a try. But I wouldn't hammer at it. Just be sensitive about their time constraints.

You also could look at the people who are working in your functional area. If you're in finance, see if you have any connections with the chief financial officer. Or someone you know might know a board member, and that might be a good way to start learning about the organization. Try to use your network to generate leads. That's always going to be much better than going in cold. Networking is really important. Cultivate your network and leverage it, but also be prepared to give back. This is a time to build relationships and be helpful to others so that you lay the groundwork for a fruitful job search.

How should you prepare for an informational interview?

KD: I would really A) be clear about what you're looking for out of the meeting. Go back to the fundamentals of your job search: What are your goals? What are you trying to achieve? And B) do research about the organization and about the sector. Be sure you have a strong sense of what's happening in that organization's domain, regionally if it's a regional organization or nationally. Do your research on the organization and practice active listening in that meeting. Ask good questions about how the downturn is affecting the organization and then listen. Try to get a sense of what the organization is dealing with and what the challenges are. Demonstrate that you're sensitive to the challenges.

However, I'd avoid going into problem-solving mode. Brainstorming with them without knowing the full picture could be seen as naïve—especially if you're a bridger. It's more listening and asking them questions about their operating plan. Have they seen an increase in demand for services? Have they had opportunities to collaborate with other nonprofits? There's been a lot of discussion about mergers; what are their views? Try to get in their heads about how they're managing their nonprofit and share with them why you're meeting with them. Nonprofits are going to look for strong reasons for a person's interest around their mission. If you're just looking at the nonprofit sector because there might be stimulus money in this part of the economy, nonprofit leaders will see through that. So, really be thoughtful about why you're seeking their advice.

What really jumps off the page of a resume for nonprofit employers in these economic times?

KD: If you're a bridger, you certainly want to highlight any nonprofit board experience you have, making clear if it was volunteer experience. If you've been on a fundraising committee of a board, that would be important to highlight. Executive directors and CEOs are thinking about their cash flow and their revenue projections. Demonstrating that you have capability around fundraising will get you noticed.

Another skill to highlight is the ability to reduce costs. If you come in from another organization where you were tasked with tightening a budget, saying that very clearly will get you noticed. If you have had the experience of reorganizing staff, reorganizing processes, or reorganizing programs, or any type of reorganizing with an eye toward cost-cutting, you should point that out, too.

An ability to focus on core programs is another skill that leaders will notice. They're going to be looking at 'What is central and core to our mission and what are the extra things we are doing?' Past experience in tightening an organization, from finding out the cost of human resources programs to budgeting...all of those things should be highlighted.

Another thing to underscore in your experience is if you had situations where an environment changed quickly and you've been able to respond to an unusual market force by successfully moving in a different direction. Show an example where you have demonstrated nimbleness. Given the uncertainty of the economic environment, some organizations may be looking for a person who has more of a risk tolerance at this point: someone who is accustomed to working in an ambiguous situation and even embraces ambiguity and challenge. If you have been in an entrepreneurial environment previously and have been successful—whether it's a for-profit or a nonprofit—you should point that out. The experience could be a start-up or starting a new program within an organization.

Is there anything else that might make you stand out in a crowd of talented applicants?

KD: We're seeing a lack of interest in relocating because of the poor housing market. If you can relocate, then that could work to your advantage. You would have to meet the requirements of the job, but if you can relocate, you may have an edge.

Do you think the current nonprofit job market is even more challenging for bridgers?

KD: I think [in-sector experience] makes a difference, particularly on the finance side because of the reporting involved and with grants. There's always scrutiny about reporting to foundations, the government, and corporations. Chief financial officer experience in a nonprofit setting could be critical, coupled with great performance at a past organization. On the other hand, there might be some valuable experience that bridgers offer in terms of cost-cutting and rigorous operational procedures, and strategies focusing on the core operations and reengineering of process. They can add a lot of value to organizations.

How can bridgers present ideas they might have for cost-cutting, reengineering, or improving operations in a way that EDs will be receptive to during the interview process?

KD: I would frame what you're going to say very carefully. Acknowledge that, based on what you know now and recognizing that you would have a learning curve, your impressions are that these types of activities might address some of the organization's immediate concerns. But be humble. That's something many nonprofit CEOs look for: somebody who's humble and who recognizes they're not coming in with all the answers. Framing your ideas is really important. Admit that you have a limited set of information, that you need to learn more, but here are some ideas that might be worth considering. Be sure to temper your enthusiasm with the reality that you would need to learn more, and that things change quickly.

Should job candidates ask how the economy has affected the financial health of the organizations with which they are interviewing?

KD: It's fair during an interview if you're a finalist candidate to ask detailed questions about the organization's operating plan for the downturn. For instance, what's the organization's contingency plan? How do the financials look? You may need to say you're willing to sign a non-disclosure form, but it's really important to be clear about the organization's cash position and its operating contingencies. However, this should not be a first interview discussion. You first need to see: if the chemistry is right; if you meet the requirements of the job; and if you're going to fit culturally. But as you come under serious consideration, you should discuss dollars and downturn planning.

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.