

Practical Advice for Switching into the Nonprofit Sector

The following pieces of advice have been drawn from 48 in-depth interviews Bridgestar has conducted with senior leaders who have transitioned from the for-profit and government sectors to the nonprofit sector.

1. **Get some experience and exposure in the nonprofit sector before diving into a full-time position.**

If you are truly interested in seeking full-time employment in the nonprofit sector, first seek out relevant nonprofit Board or volunteering experience. This will give you further insight into a few critical questions such as: is the nonprofit sector the right career path for you? What sort of work do you want to do in the sector? Furthermore, this experience will grant you a budding network of peers and colleagues in the sector and credibility in your nonprofit job search, demonstrating your commitment to the sector.

2. **Have realistic expectations about what the nonprofit world will offer you.**

Be realistic about what you are getting yourself into and be honest with yourself as to why you want to make the transition. Do not expect that a position in the nonprofit sector will necessarily bring an easier lifestyle or less stress. Similar to positions within the for-profit sector, there is a range of jobs and a range of experiences. Some have found that their positions in the nonprofit sector are more stressful and time-intensive than their previous for-profit position.

3. **Bring your business skills but be thoughtful about their translation into the nonprofit sector.**

There are many important things you can bring to bear from your for-profit experience and training. However, you must realize that some of these skills and experiences may necessitate translation into nonprofit applications and a certain degree of thoughtfulness in order to create impact. Be thoughtful about the changes in your work environment and what it will mean for your working and leadership style. Be conscious of even the minor changes you may experience in making this transition—even the language can be different. Invest the time to learn and use the lingo.

4. **Overinvest early in listening and communications.**

Be conscious and aware of any possible fears or misperceptions those in your new organization may have regarding your for-profit background. Ensure that in your language and your actions you address these fears, and be thoughtful as to how you convey your previous experience. Listen to your staff, your Board, and others in the sector. Take the time early to learn and ask thoughtful questions.

5. **Seek peers and allies, especially in the beginning.**

Find an ally or an outlet to voice concerns to in your first few months. Find someone (or several people) who can be a sounding board, an outlet and a supporter; this person can be within or outside of the organization.