

MANAGEMENT

Nonprofits are undergoing a ‘great re-evaluation’ and it’s bolstering both people and purpose

By Victoria Silverman, Cook Silverman Search

The much-touted “Great Resignation” has held a steady spot in the news cycle since early 2021, when following the initial effects of the Coronavirus pandemic, including significant layoffs and furloughs, people decided to voluntarily leave their jobs “en masse.” While the great resignation may be a catchy phrase, it may not accurately depict what has happened. I would argue that it incorrectly labels what has transpired in the nonprofit sector. Many nonprofit workers also left their jobs, and the rationale behind why is more accurately described as a “re-evaluation.”

In an industry long known for “far-too-modest” salaries, tireless work and the perceived requirement of on-site presence, the time and space at home during the COVID-19 shutdown afforded nonprofit employees the opportunity to step back and take stock of their lives. The result was the collective realization that while the work might be fulfilling in many ways, it severely lacked in other areas, including flexibility, community, autonomy, and compensation to name a few. By the time recruitment picked up again, nonprofit professionals were demanding an entirely new set of job criteria.

While challenging for the industry to navigate, this re-evaluation has been a positive shift for the nonprofit sector, and one that’s been a long time coming. The collective demand of the workforce has pressured large nonprofit organizations to raise the bar in more ways than one. As an executive recruiter in the nonprofit sector, an industry I’ve served for more than thirty years, my counsel to clients during this time has been to focus on the following three areas to be both competitive and desirable in an employee’s market.

Compensation and benefits

It may be the most obvious place to start, but the newfound inflation of the salary market in our industry was overdue and necessary. Nonprofit organizations need to pay their employees properly, so they can earn a wage that allows them to live and work in some of the most expensive cities in the world. Interestingly, 2020 and 2021 showed many nonprofit organizations that their constituents and donors rallied to increase their support during the pandemic. Between these generous and timely donations, and the help of Paycheck Protection Program and

Economic Injury Disaster Loans, many organizations fared far better than expected.

Beyond compensation, I’m seeing the overwhelming majority of quality candidates looking for positions that allow them flexibility to work remotely a few days a week. Nonprofit organizations often rely on their executive directors and fundraisers to be on site to demonstrate the direct impact of gifts from their donors. This includes direct service organizations such as hospitals, food banks and the like. This remains a challenge, however, the COVID-19 lockdown proved that these jobs can still be done very effectively from home most of the time. Employers will need to acquiesce to these demands to compete for quality talent.

Realistic job descriptions and responsibilities

By no means a new revelation coming out of the pandemic, but never have realistic job descriptions and responsibilities been so important. In an increasingly competitive applicant pool, candidates are no longer willing to “do it all.” In the nonprofit sector, we often see organizations that have multiple lines of business under one umbrella—for example, a housing shelter that also offers a food kitchen and a youth program. Asking a single person to serve as executive director, effectively running the organization, managing teams that are often far too small to be effective, all being paid low salaries for the “good of the cause” has traditionally been the way. This approach should no longer be acceptable under the guise of “the nonprofit” sector. Instead, nonprofit executives need to step back and take time to strategically plan the future of the organization. They need to “right-size” salaries and job responsibilities. Re-evaluating both short- and long-term plans helps significantly in prioritizing the most important staffing needs to reach the organization’s goals. And nonprofit board members need to help realize these needs. It has been proven that job satisfaction has everything to do with realistic expectations and generous salaries and benefits to match.

Real DEJI education and initiatives

Last, and most importantly, the nonprofit sector, like so many others, needs to make real, concerted efforts to

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educate and act on diversity, equity, justice, and inclusion initiatives (DEJI) to better reflect the communities they serve. While spurred by the civil unrest our country has seen over the last couple years, a renewed focus on fighting racism and bias—both unconscious and conscious—has been needed for some time now and it all starts internally. More often than not, clients are adamant about our delivering a diverse candidate pool. I ask my clients a series of important questions to begin: have you done the anti-bias, anti-racist, inclusion work in the office? Is there any diversity in the senior most positions? How about your board? Has everybody gone through formal training? I make it clear to my clients that I cannot recruit people of color to work in an environment where there is no community. Instead, for clients who have not done this work, I recommend tools and resources to make the progress needed to get to the next step.

The topic of DEJI goes hand in hand with the goal of democratizing philanthropy. Board members and major donors, often wealthy white men and women, have dominated the philanthropic landscape and often feel they have the power to dictate how, when and what donations are used for, bringing their privilege to bear. It’s a culture that’s long existed and it is time for change. Nonprofit organizations need to be more inclusive and consider how they can reinvent philanthropy. This isn’t about excluding white donors, but about having a staff, board and donor

population that reflects the community they serve. This former nonprofit executive turned executive recruiter for the nonprofit world says, “it’s about damn time!” ■

For more information

Victoria Silverman is co-founder of Cook Silverman Search, a California-based firm specializing in nonprofit executive recruitment and counseling. Cook Silverman’s services span all aspects of development, advancement, communications, and executive management. Its team includes individuals who have served as executive directors, development and marketing directors and other senior positions in nonprofits, and therefore have unique knowledge and abilities to evaluate skill sets of nonprofit executives. *For more information, visit <https://www.cooksilverman.com>.*

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retirees compared to current employees. Retirees offer an often-untapped source of cash and volunteer support for corporate philanthropy programs, a mistake that the Blackbaud report makes clear. In 2021, the average annual donation amount for retirees was \$2,599, more than three times that of current employees. Also, they volunteer at a much higher rate as well, logging an average of 88 hours of service in 2021 compared to the 14 hours of current employees.

For more information or to access the report in full, visit <https://www.blackbaud.com>. ■

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