



WHITE PAPER SERIES

TSA's and Nonprofits: The story of the "sector-switcher".

Contributor: Michael Fiore, BSE, MBA
© 2007 by The Sierra Group
491 Allendale Rd. Suite 320
King of Prussia, Pennsylvania 19406

Restricted Rights

The information contained in this document is proprietary and confidential to The Sierra Group, Inc.. No part of this document may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, without the express written permission of The Sierra Group, Inc..

This document is subject to change without notice and The Sierra Group does not warrant that the material contained in this document is error-free.

Many career counselors advise job seekers—especially sector switchers and recent graduates—to identify and market their transferable skills. Do organizations really consider these candidates without feeling as if they are taking too great a risk? How open-minded are nonprofits when it comes to looking at candidates that offer skills and experiences gained in other environments?

In a sector of close to 2 million organizations, the answer is: it depends. Organizations that consider themselves entrepreneurial are generally open to hiring talent from other sectors or nontraditional backgrounds. For many organizations, candidates with transferable skills are welcomed in some job functions, such as operations, management, and finance, but not in others, such as fundraising and program management.

Over the past 5 years non-profit organizations have become more focused on the need for executive level business skills, due to the influence of business-oriented boards, significantly increased competition for funding, demands for greater accountability and the need to keep up with technological advancements. As a result search committees are not as concerned with finding candidates with directly related experience, as they are with seeking leaders with solid corporate operations and strategic planning expertise, strong leadership and vision, excellent financial skills, high level contacts in the business community, and

a creative and nibble approach to getting the message out to potential sponsors and donors. It follows that non-profits now have to offer greatly improved salary and benefit packages to attract top talent. While they still hope for a candidate with passionate commitment to the cause, at times this lofty ideal must take a backseat to favoring a candidate that knows how to get the job done.

Cultivating a broadly skilled talent pool is key to developing the next generation of nonprofit talent. In the current climate of explosive organizational growth and the pending retirement of "baby boomer" leaders, there will be a huge need for new talent in every functional area in the very near future. These issues require us to start thinking about what a qualified and skilled nonprofit professional looks like, and to be willing to embrace the potential impact of hiring people with transferable skills.

The Softer Side of Skills

In the nonprofit sector, soft skills play a big role in hiring decisions. For example, in a recent inquiry of a group of 20 nonprofit hiring managers they ranked cultural fit and personality traits above more traditional hiring considerations of experience, skills, and education.

Knowing the soft skills that are most important to your organization allows you to consider candidates based on their personal qualities and abilities, in addition to the positions they have held or where they have worked in the past. Although desired soft skills vary between organizations, we've found that there are some personal qualities that span many nonprofits, including:

- **Being entrepreneurial**
- **Being a self-starter**
- **Having a positive attitude**
- **Being resourceful**
- **Working collaboratively**
- **Being creative, particularly in a resource-constrained environment**

Are Hard Skills Really Transferable?

It's common for nonprofit hiring managers to have a very specific picture of the hard skills required for a given role. A grant writer needs to have written grants before. Someone working in community affairs must have experience with the community being served. But how hard and fast are these rules? What candidates might you be missing out on by not considering candidates with demonstrated success from different work environments or roles?

We mentioned earlier that many nonprofits are open to hiring people who possess hard skills in operations, management, and finance. Whereas skills required for these functional areas easily cross sectors, there are other skills that can also be successfully transferred to nonprofit roles, such as:

- **Sales and Marketing**—Skills learned and honed in the fields of sales and marketing can be easily transferred to the field of nonprofit development and fundraising, which is the area of most need within the sector. Even if a candidate doesn't have direct experience in development (e.g., fundraising, grant writing, event planning, corporate partnerships), don't overlook candidates with hard skills in building high-touch relationships, producing collateral, giving presentations, or "making an ask." People with sales experience, particularly those with a background in identifying prospects and cultivating relationships, can often make a smooth transition into the field of major gifts fundraising. Finally, be open to considering candidates who possess experience in volunteer event planning or other fundraising activities, are members of a nonprofit board, or are strongly networked in philanthropic and/or corporate circles.
- **Writing and Research**—Individuals with experience in journalism, corporate communications, and other fields that require strong writing skills can often leverage their transferable skills into other types of development and fundraising roles. Additionally, recent graduates from master of public administration (MPA) or master of public health (MPH) programs typically possess the research and writing experience needed to break into development.
- **Consulting**—Management consulting experience is sought after in the nonprofit sector because of the analytical, research, project management, and client management skills that people with this kind of experience bring. Consulting experience transfers extremely well to certain roles, such as portfolio manager at a social venture fund or other areas where a nonprofit organization provides professional services to other nonprofits. Corporate partnerships, community outreach, and board relations are other roles in which consulting experience can be valuable.

One challenge of transitioning from a management consulting (or other corporate) background to a nonprofit role is the shift from working for an internal client to an external one. For example, some management consultants work in the trenches of customer research but do not interact with clients face-to-face. When considering these candidates, probe their knowledge of and experience in client-focused environments and be prepared to connect these hires with mentors or other internal staff to support their transition.

- **Information Technology (IT)**—Thinking creatively about IT staff can yield great results for nonprofits. Coined by TechSoup.org as "accidental techies," administrative or operational professionals who have been responsible for technology and systems management in past jobs can easily transfer these skills to a nonprofit environment. Similarly, technology professionals who have been specialists in a large department or corporation, but who are seeking more autonomy and ownership of their work, also transfer well to the nonprofit sector. In addition to technology

skills, look for strong customer service skills and a friendly, patient demeanor.

When it comes down to it, a candidate's past success using a specific set of skills and competencies is the best indicator of how he or she will perform in a new role. Whether a hire is new to a job function or to the sector, remember that this person's ability to call upon his or her soft and hard skills in a new role is what most ensures success. By considering candidates with a variety of transferable skills, you will diversify your staff and increase the impact of your organization.

For more information on resumes and cover letters, contact Michael Fiore at The Sierra Group - 610-992-0288 x 11 or email him at michael.fiore@thesierragroup.com.