

# On the Right Path

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It is not uncommon for people to work at a nonprofit, then switch to the public sector and to corporations and vice versa. There are positions that span sectors, including corporate social responsibility, impact and angel investments and B-corporations. Some people simply want to switch from one nonprofit sector to another, while others just want to consider their options. Perhaps you are in this position or you know someone who is. (According to the *2016 AFP Compensation and Benefits Study*, 68 percent of respondents said they have thought about leaving their jobs in the last year.) Or maybe you know a young person who is considering a career in the nonprofit sector who has come to you for advice. What do you say?



**1. Do your homework** and tell that young person to learn as much as possible. There are many sectors that you never may have considered. If you want to live in a specific geographic region, you should explore sectors that have a concentration of jobs (e.g., finance or fashion in New York, government in Washington, D.C., entertainment in Los Angeles and technology in the San Francisco Bay Area).

Familiarize yourself with different roles. Scour websites of major employers using keywords relevant to your skills. Learn buzzwords within different sectors. If you are in the private sector and want to consider alumni relations in the education sector, the most transferable skills are in marketing, events, communications, business development and sales. If you are already working in a nonprofit and want a corporate foundation role, knowledge of the nonprofit sector, public speaking, management and analysis are required.

If you are considering working at a nonprofit, learn what stewardship means, who or what prospects are and what an annual giving team may do. If you are going to a meeting with someone at a corporation, understand how to read financial statements and how to define return on investment, and know what a quantifiable metric is.

You can find positions in nonprofit development in most regions of the United States, as well as in major cities around the world. Learn about the sector before you apply for jobs. There are many trade and networking associations, including the Association of Fundraising Professionals, the Council for Advancement and Support of Education, the Association of Healthcare Philanthropy and the Foundation Center. Attend their meetings, search their websites and read their blogs.

**2. Conduct informational interviews.** Informational interviews are key to sector-switching, and for young people exploring opportunities, such interviews are invaluable. While reaching out for informational interviews can be daunting, you are more likely to land your next job through a person than through a job posting. Human resources departments receive hundreds of applications, so being recommended and “vouched for” by someone within an organization can be very helpful in obtaining a job interview.

Approach an informational interview as though you are an anthropologist or a journalist. Ask thoughtful questions that demonstrate that you did your homework. Avoid boasting about your accomplishments. With humility, share your background and experience and ask how you can be useful to the sector or organization.

Titles vary by sector and sometimes even within sectors. Explore with your informational interviewer the appropriate level for someone with your background. If there is no appropriate role, ask what you should do to make your skills more useful. Follow up with a thank-you email and a handwritten note within 24 hours of the meeting. Carefully consider any advice or leads, and stay in touch.

**3. Volunteer.** Make yourself relevant to your desired sector. If you are interested in positions in nonprofit development, the easiest way to learn is by volunteering. Volunteering will provide a better understanding of the mechanics and nuances of the nonprofit sector and will demonstrate your genuine interest.

Consider volunteering with your school or university's alumni association or a cause that appeals to you. Host an event, serve on a reunion committee or join a board. Later, cite your volunteer experience in cover letters and your résumé.

**4. Attend networking meetings.** If you find it difficult to obtain informational interviews, a good way to meet professionals in the field is to attend networking events. Almost every industry has trade meetings, meet-ups or mixers. You also can attend an organization's public events (most large organizations have them). Find out how to register and attend. Muster up the courage to circulate the room. Hand out your business cards. (If you do not have them, design and print them!) Make connections, and ask if they would be willing to meet over coffee or lunch. Follow up within 24 hours to schedule. Make notes after each meeting, recording with whom you spoke and specific follow-up points. Attend the same meeting group frequently, and consider volunteering to organize the meetings to build familiarity and rapport and to demonstrate commitment.

**5. Take advantage of social media.** Virtual networking can be almost as effective as face-to-face networking. Join LinkedIn and craft your profile to be appealing and

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understandable to your target audience. Your LinkedIn headline could emphasize your expertise relevant to the sector you are targeting, rather than your current title. Don't forget about LinkedIn groups and frequent chat rooms, forums or discussions relevant to the sector you are exploring. Ask questions, and if you have knowledge about the topic, answer them. Establish your presence, without being a nuisance. If you seem to be in accord with someone in the forum, invite him or her to connect with you online or for a brief phone call.

Interested in more? Read *Youility* by Jay Baer (Portfolio, 2013), which describes some interesting ways that companies leverage social media to engage constituents. You can apply many of these techniques in your job search.

**6. Be prepared to describe your goals, why you want to work in a particular sector or make a change and what you can bring to the table.** Be clear and concise, and if you are considering leaving your current sector, be positive. Practice what you want to say with someone in the industry.

**7. Tell trusted colleagues and friends what you are seeking.** Your success in an informational interview will often hinge on your chemistry with an interviewer. Hint: Some of your best potential resources are friends and friends of friends. Share your goals and plans with people you know and respect, even at nonwork-related social gatherings. Reach out first to friends who are well-connected. Ask them for introductions to people in your desired industry.

That said, be very careful about what you share with colleagues, especially if you want to stay in your current position before you make a change.

**8. Most jobs will come from direct connections, but continue to review selected sites that list positions.** Leads can come from unexpected sources. While you are most likely going to get your first job or a position in a new sector through an advocate, do not hesitate to search for and apply for jobs that seem interesting and a good fit for you. Many advertising sites post new listings frequently, so review the sites daily.

Also, clearly translate your relevant skills on your résumé. Acknowledge in your cover letter that you are interested in applying specific, transferable skills from your current position to your desired sector.

**9. Be prepared to do two “jobs” during this period.** Looking for a new position does take time, but do not neglect your current job responsibilities.

Sometimes, switching to a new sector requires extra education or volunteer or contract work. If you need the income from your current job, make sure you are succeeding there. You are usually more desirable in a job search if you are already employed. Glowing references from professionals in your current sector will also strengthen your case. Moreover, leaving the comfort of a long-standing career is a challenging decision, and you want to keep the door open in case you want to return.

If you are new to the nonprofit sector, think about ways you can build skills in your current job or industry that will clearly translate to and bolster your candidacy in your dream job.

**10. Take your time.** You want your next position to be one that you can stay in for at least three to five years, so do not leap too quickly.

Changing your career path is a serious endeavor, so make sure you are making a thoughtful choice. Engage your mentors throughout the process to ensure that your decisions are sound. Check with people in your new industry to help clarify the challenges inherent to a position before you accept it. Know how you will be trained and how success will be measured.

Finally, remember that being a resource is a two-way street. Be available to assist your friends and colleagues. And once you land your new position, help the next person who asks you. Pay it forward. 

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