The Idealist Guide to Nonprofit Careers for First-time Job Seekers

by Meg Busse

with Steven Joiner
# The Idealist Guide to Nonprofit Careers for First-time Job Seekers

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Opening thoughts

Why do you want to work in the nonprofit sector anyway?

In this introduction you will:

• Get an overview of the purpose of The Idealist Guide.
• Learn about the thematic “threads” woven through the chapters.
• Meet the authors and learn about the organizations behind this book.
• Learn about the summary and “you are here” information on the last page of each section.

A brave new nonprofit world

Nonprofit. Charity. Nongovernmental organization. Nonprofits have historically been defined by what they are not (profit-making) or by what they give away. These terms can conjure up images of soup kitchens run out of church basements, people collecting signatures on street corners, and organizations of “do-gooders” striving to compensate for a lack of funds by working long hours and relying on volunteers. Yet this image of the nonprofit sector is far from complete.

In the United States, today’s nonprofits make up a vibrant, innovative, multi-trillion dollar sector that is continually evolving and adapting to society’s needs and constraints. The list of nonprofits in the United States and in your community will probably surprise you: private universities like Harvard or public ones like Texas A&M; multi-billion dollar area hospitals; international relief organizations like Doctors Without Borders; religious organizations ranging from local congregations to national groups like Focus on the Family or the American Friends Service Committee; organizations spanning the length of the left-right, liberal-conservative political spectrum; and membership organizations like the American Bar Association, the American Civil Liberties Union, and the National Rifle Association. Additionally, the traditionally clear lines delineating nonprofit, for-profit, and government sectors are dissolving into porous borders where corporations are stepping up to be responsible social stewards, government agencies are contracting out much of their work to nonprofits, and nonprofits are becoming more lean and efficient in the face of limited funding and, yes, competition. Given these shifting borders of responsibility and focus, nonprofits are actively looking for entrepreneurial, innovative, and visionary people with the skills to take on a variety of roles.
Recent graduates who are interested in finding “work with meaning” and a way to give back to society while also earning a paycheck can find a plethora of opportunities in the nonprofit sector. This book will help you understand the vibrancy and breadth of the sector, as well as assist you in your journey along a meaningful career path to nonprofit work. Nonprofits are no longer a place where you work for a few years after college or in transition between “real jobs.” Today, nonprofits are a place where you can lead a challenging and fulfilling lifelong career.

As you explore nonprofit opportunities with this book, set aside your notions of “what a nonprofit is” and prepare to discover a sector that will, we think, surprise you.

**Advantages and disadvantages of working in nonprofits**

There is no question that nonprofits tend to attract people with certain shared values. A typical profile of nonprofit professionals would include their desire to wed their passion for the issues that inspire them with their paid work; a focus on the bottom line of positive social change; and a real interest in making a tangible difference in the communities they serve. This merging of passion, purpose, and paycheck can be a strong pull for people seeking to find meaning in their daily lives.

This genuine appeal of meaningful work, combined with the traditional (and still often accurate) perception of nonprofits as more laid back and less formal, attracts many people to the sector. In recent interviews with nonprofit human resource professionals conducted by Idealist.org, several respondents spoke of individuals simply wanting to work in a nonprofit environment regardless of the organization’s mission or structure, or the role that they would play. In other words, professionals are drawn to the nonprofit sector by a variety of perceived advantages that the work holds over careers in the private/for-profit or public/government sectors. Yet, while many of these advantages do exist, one must be careful to not blissfully overlook the challenges of nonprofit work.

**The advantages**

There are many reasons why nonprofit work is appealing. Some of the generalizations of nonprofits—laid back, friendly, mission-driven—are based in a reality that appeals to various types of personalities. Some advantages of nonprofit work can include:

- The ability to do **meaningful work** that focuses less on results benefiting the employer and more on creating positive change in the community at large. What that “positive change” entails is the prerogative of the nonprofit organization. A nonprofit career also allows you to do the kind of work that you might otherwise only be able to do on your own (unpaid) time.

- More “**hands-on** opportunities” that allow you to directly experience the positive outcomes of your work.
• A greater **flexibility** in how the work is carried out, how benchmarks are met, and which alternative strategies to employ in order to accomplish the mission of an organization.

• A more **casual work environment**. This can include a more relaxed dress code, flexible schedules, and an open physical work environment.

• The opportunity to **“wear several hats.”** Since many nonprofits are under-staffed, nonprofit professionals have the chance to perform many different job functions and move outside of a strict set of job responsibilities. This allows for a greater opportunity to learn new skills and further develop pre-existing abilities on the job.

• Greater levels of **responsibility**. Professionals in nonprofits are often allowed or required to take on more responsibilities than professionals in other sectors where there may be more resources to hire additional staff. Examples include: managing staff and volunteers, working on projects outside of their expertise, and collaborating with outside individuals and organizations in a meaningful capacity.

• The potential for rapid **job advancement**. While advancement may be limited within a specific organization, it is often possible to move between organizations while also advancing up the responsibility ladder. Nonprofits see quality managers as a much sought-after commodity, allowing emerging professionals a chance to advance quickly.

• A greater organizational **culture of like-minded people**, inspiring teamwork and collaboration instead of internal competition. Often, nonprofit professionals are strongly invested in their work and this dedication can be contagious.

• More **generous benefits**. Nonprofits often offer lower wages than other sectors. However, many organizations make up for this possible salary gap by offering excellent health benefits for the employee and their family, retirement plans, more vacation time, and other “perks” that can help balance out a smaller paycheck.

• Nonprofits can sometimes **act more quickly** than government or for-profit organizations to fill a niche, meet a need, or be entrepreneurial.

Just as when you talk about working in a “business culture” or “government culture”, working in a “nonprofit culture” can have many positive attributes. However, these advantages, like anything you say about the nonprofit sector, are not universal truths. They will vary depending on factors such as organizational culture, budgetary limitations, your personality and the personalities of your colleagues, and the type of work involved.

**The disadvantages**

A job at a nonprofit does not necessarily mean that you have found your workplace nirvana. It takes a particular set of skills and priorities to find success and happiness in the nonprofit sector. Whether or not you can deal with the following disadvantages is a crucial litmus test for your potential success in the sector.
• **Lower wages.** Nonprofits usually pay less than comparable for-profit and public positions. Usually, Mid- to upper-level nonprofit managers, especially in large organizations, often have similar salary ranges to comparable positions in other sectors. However, people fresh out of college can often adjust to this pay disparity more readily than professionals with some level of paid experience.

• **Burnout** is a common reality in the nonprofit world. Part of the personal and professional investment in a nonprofit's cause means often blurring the line that should divide your work and home life balance. Nonprofit work is commonly more than a 40-hour-a-week commitment, and this can mean anything from working long hours to attending evening and weekend obligations (fundraisers, community events, etc.). When you consistently “take your work home” or have work responsibilities seep into your personal time, you are more likely to burn out. Furthermore, many of the issues that nonprofits deal with on a daily basis have **no tangible solution.** This lack of an achievable goal (like ending poverty) coupled with an inability to objectively measure the impact of a nonprofit’s efforts can also lead to frustration and potential burnout.

• **Turnover** can be high in nonprofit organizations for a variety of reasons. People move on to better paying jobs or higher level positions in other organizations, make the decision to go back to school, or decide to switch sectors. Turnover can also be more prevalent in the sector because of the large number of younger people working in nonprofits who tend to change jobs more frequently. On an organizational level, many nonprofits lack the infrastructural tools (professional development, leadership training, and so on) to retain their employees. Turnover can be especially difficult in the nonprofit sector since the nature of the work often inspires camaraderie and closeness between colleagues, and because in smaller organizations, a single person’s departure can mean the loss of a good deal of institutional memory and community connections.

• Nonprofits can have **different (or fewer) structures** than other sectors. Professionals who need hierarchies with clear benchmarks, deliverables, and tasks may find nonprofit work frustrating. A nonprofit’s goal is to fulfill their mission, in whatever way they see fit. In working toward meeting their mission, efficiency has not always been a priority. However, with the increasingly higher standards of accountability and the fierce competition for funding, efficiency and organization are becoming watchwords for the sector.

• Social change is slow and unpredictable. The **length of the struggle** can frustrate organizations that address social change issues. Consider how long it took for women to be allowed to vote in the United States or how long it took for the civil rights struggle or the environmental movement to start effecting real change. The unpredictability of government policy (which can change whenever new lawmakers take office); shifting priorities in social,
economic, and cultural movements; and natural disasters and other crises can derail years of work invested by nonprofits.

- Nonprofits, true to their name, are often lacking in resources. Many nonprofits are chronically underfunded and rely largely on volunteers who, while critical to the success of the sector, may or may not be as available or reliable as paid staff. This can mean that already overworked staff members must pick up the slack.

- Many nonprofits suffer from what is called “Founders’ Syndrome”, the propensity of an organization’s founders (be it one person or a group) to have a deep sense of ownership over and responsibility for the organization. Those who have been there from the start are often reluctant to leave or to change how things have always been done. This can have several effects on subsequent staff, including limited decision-making power in matters of organizational change; a lack of succession planning within the nonprofit (few or no internal mechanisms to prepare the new generations of leaders); and a lack of clear hierarchy below the founders that makes it hard for staff to grasp the necessary steps to becoming a future manager or leader. The resulting limited potential for advancement within some nonprofit organizations means you may be less likely to become the supervisor of coworkers than in other sectors. This, along with the irreplaceable skill sets (at least internally) of many nonprofit leaders, often forces nonprofits to look externally when filling an upper management position.

- There is still an all-too-common misconception of nonprofits as a place for unfocused do-gooders to get together and complain about the status quo before they have to go out and “get a real job”. Ironically, the nonprofit sector, despite being the backbone of much of the social change that has taken place throughout U.S. history, is still emerging as a credible sector. Thus, as a professional interested in nonprofit work, you will often face questions from family and friends—your support network—who may not understand why you are involved in nonprofit work, why you would “waste your talent”, or why you would choose nonprofit work over a more financially rewarding career.

As with the advantages of nonprofit work, the disadvantages and drawbacks vary based on the organization. Finding organizations that are proactively looking to make these challenges a thing of the nonprofit past should be a key part of your search for meaningful work in the sector. But be aware that many of these drawbacks, to some degree, will exist. Deciding whether these kinds of disadvantages would prohibit you from finding fulfilling work is an important consideration when exploring the nonprofit sector.
The nonlinear career path

Gone are the days of 40 years of service to the company for a gold watch and a retirement dinner. The baby boomers began nonlinear career paths in earnest decades ago and subsequent generations have reinforced and built upon this current workplace reality. Members of today’s workforce know that they are moving through a series of positions and responsibilities and few, if any, are settling down in one job without (at least occasionally) looking to see what else is out there.

This mobility of professionals lends itself well to building transferable skill sets. Many for-profits are looking for ways to be good stewards to all aspects of their supply chain: the employees, the customers, even the planet itself. Most for-profits are also looking to be more transparent in their dealings and to garner the trust of skeptics. At the same time, nonprofits are looking to an increasingly competitive funding market and are developing ways to both serve their mission and stay afloat. Government agencies, too, are looking to shed their image of being ineffective and unresponsive bureaucracies. As these three sectors apply techniques and best practices borrowed from other sectors, each is looking for professionals with the transferable skills that are needed to stay current, relevant, competitive, and innovative.

The nonprofit sector, being so vast in both the kinds of organizations it encompasses and the range of social missions it promotes, is an excellent place to lead a nonlinear career path. It is especially true in nonprofit work that people in leadership roles like Executive Director, Chief Program Officer, or HR Director often come to their position through a winding and indirect route. As nonprofit professionals navigate this nonlinear career path, they pick up skill sets from the various positions they fill. This accumulation of expertise—fundraising, volunteer management, community development, project management, etc.—is becoming more and more the norm for nonprofit leaders. In other words, nonprofits are both looking for and encouraging people who follow nonlinear careers.

Who are you? Where do you want to go? How can this book help?

Simply put, it is not enough to know that you want to work in the nonprofit sector. The first step you should take on your journey into the sector is to do a self-assessment of your interests. This first step can lead to a deeper knowledge of self. Your second step is to gain a thorough knowledge of the sector. This means making sure you have a clear understanding of the nonprofit landscape both in your geographic area and your areas of focus. This also implies understanding the opportunities for the kind of work you want to do within your community or a community where you
would like to (or have to) live. There is a clear difference between professionals who want a job in a nonprofit and professionals who are looking for a specific position or role. Nonprofit employers want professionals interested in the job they are trying to fill (i.e., event planner at a mental health agency), and not just interested in the kind of work environment that nonprofits offer. They want people who understand themselves and therefore understand why they will be a good fit for particular roles within an organization. The way you will truly stand out in your nonprofit career search is to make sure you have a strong sense of what you are looking for and then make sure you know how to look for it.

Chapter One offers an overview of the nonprofit sector, giving a brief discussion of the diverse historical and legal space occupied by nonprofits as well as the societal benefits that accrue from these organizations. Chapter Two discusses the psychological swings of the job search and ways to stay motivated during your transition. Chapter Three takes you through the process of assessing your needs and understanding the current nonprofit environment.

From here, the third step is to find the synergy between what you want and what is available. Chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven are all about getting out and involved in your career search. Covering activities like networking, volunteering, furthering your education, and conducting research, these chapters can guide you as you move along the career continuum in search of new opportunities.

Chapters Eight and Nine focus on how you present yourself to potential employers—from resume and cover letter basics to interview preparation and advice on making the right first impression. Chapter Ten will help you understand compensation packages and whether to accept a job offer, while Chapter Eleven provides reasons for and tips on continuing your job search even after getting an offer.

In the Reality Check section, Chapter Twelve outlines pros and cons of nonprofit hiring practices and Chapter Thirteen tackles some of the misconceptions and somber realities of the nonprofit sector as a whole. The intent of these chapters is not to discourage you from considering nonprofit work. Rather, they are meant to ensure that you have all the information you need, both positive and negative, to make the best decisions during your career exploration. And if you are considering starting your own nonprofit organization, Chapter Fourteen is essential reading.

It is our pleasure to support you as you begin this exciting journey of discovery. We hope that you will find the information, activities, and advice in the book helpful as you explore both where you are in your career right now and where you want to go within the wonderfully vibrant slice of society known as the nonprofit sector.
An explanation of this book’s “threads”

This book contains text boxes with information that falls under common themes. The themed text boxes, or “threads,” are explained on this page and the next. Some “threads” don’t appear in every section of the book, but every section features some.

**IMAGINE, CONNECT, ACT**

Self-assessment is an essential component to finding a fulfilling career path. Therefore, it is best if you can regularly block out short periods of time in your schedule for self-assessment. This three-pronged thread helps you break this task into manageable parts.

- First, the Imagine boxes ask you basic questions about yourself, where you’re starting, and what you want. These activities will help you answer the question, “What is my ideal?”
- Next, the Connect boxes will help you frame your research and set goals to fill in any gaps you discovered in the Imagine stage. At this point, you should start connecting your ideal with real opportunities in your community. These activities will help you answer the question, “Where does my ideal meet reality?”
- Finally, the Act boxes will give suggestions and opportunities for you to take action in the community and connect with other people. These activities will help you answer the question, “How can I take action?”

These three stages should be completed in conjunction with each other; however, if you’re short on time or if a particular section doesn’t fit your stage in the job search, feel free to take these components à la carte.

**THE GREAT DEBATE**

Finding total consensus on aspects of the job search process is like getting a unanimous vote on the greatest movie ever made. Is a one-page resume always best? Should you ever ask about salary during the interview process? How do you best research an organization before an interview? What is the best way to get a job in the nonprofit sector? Since there are no universal answers to these questions (and many others), you’ll see The Great Debate text boxes whenever an issue arises for which there are multiple perspectives. Sometimes there will be anecdotal evidence, sometimes data will be available, but for the most part, it will be up to you to make a choice based on your personality, your search, your potential employer, and your unique situation.

**COMMON MISTAKES**

Ask any hiring manager what common mistakes they see in job applications, and you’re likely to get much more than a quick, one sentence answer. The Common Mistakes text boxes cover many of the widespread errors that are found in all stages of the job search process.

These issues range from basics like not proofreading or following directions, to more subtle but similarly off-putting mistakes like not turning off “Track Changes” before emailing a cover letter or resume. Hiring professionals have very little time to select candidates from a pile of resumes and, when you factor in the intense competition for many positions, you can see why even the slightest mistake can cause your application to be placed in the recycling bin without a second thought.

**Jot your thoughts**

This symbol indicates a spot where it can be helpful for you to record some of your own thoughts on a given section of the text.

**Gray text boxes**

Similar to yellow sidebars, these gray text boxes appear throughout the book, interspersed in the main text column. They serve to highlight particularly important or exemplary cases and points, or to list useful resources.

**Yellow sidebars**

Yellow sidebars appear throughout the book. Technically, these aren’t thematic threads. Instead, these sidebars provide useful clarifications, insightful anecdotes, and other supplementary materials in order to offer you more perspective on the topic of a particular section of the main text.
The chapters in this book cover many aspects of the job search, but depending on your interests, focus, or experience, you may need more in-depth information on particular topics. The Learn More threads will point you in the direction of resources that deal with many of the topics discussed in the book in much more detail. Resources listed in the Learn More thread may be a page on Idealist.org or another website, a PDF you can download, or books and other materials that you can find at a library or book shop. All the resources were carefully selected to broaden your understanding of points discussed in this book.

The organizations behind this book

**Action Without Borders** is a nonprofit organization founded in 1995 with offices in the United States and Argentina. **Idealist.org**, a project of Action Without Borders, is an interactive site where people and organizations can exchange resources and ideas, find opportunities and supporters, and turn their good intentions into action.

**The Idealist Guide to Nonprofit Careers for First-time Job Seekers** is a product of Action Without Borders’ Nonprofit Careers Program based in Portland, OR. This team works to support individuals and organizations with graduate education options; HR and volunteer management resources; and job, internship, and volunteer opportunities.

This book was made possible by a grant from the **Lumina Foundation**, a private, independent foundation that strives to help people achieve their potential by expanding access and success in education beyond high school. In particular, we’d like to thank **Gloria Ackerson**, Grants Manager, and **Caroline Altman Smith**, Program Officer, for their incredible support.
About the authors

Meg Busse
Meg is a native (and ardent fan) of New Jersey. However, she’s also enjoyed living in Philly, Boston, Washington DC, San Francisco, NW Connecticut, and Seattle. Currently, Meg resides in Portland, OR with her best friend, Ian, Rufus the puppy, and Boris the grumpy cat. In just the few years she’s been in Portland, Meg’s fallen in love with its outdoor adventures, incredible bridges, amazing wine, and food carts. In her pre-Idealist years, Meg was a middle school reading and writing teacher, a coach, and a writer and editor. In her free time, she has been a white water rafting guide, pet pig owner, competitive board game player, dark chocoholic, and long distance runner. Some of these labels still apply. She has one of the best interview stories ever, dreams of being Ira Glass someday, and is continually floored by Tom Waits, Edward Abbey, Bill Moyers, and Calvin & Hobbes. As for her work at Idealist, the best thing about her job is her colleagues—a continually surprising, engaging, awe-inspiring, passionate bunch of folks.

Steven Joiner
Steven joined the Action Without Borders/Idealist Nonprofit Careers and Partnerships Team in February 2007 after his second stint in Japan. He was born on the U.S. East Coast and spent the first 12 years of his life in seven different cities before stopping for a while in North Carolina. After finishing a B.A. in Secondary English Education at North Carolina State University, he left for three years of life in Japan. Upon returning to the United States, he drove across the country three times during his “Reorientation Tour of America,” fell in love with San Francisco, and went on to finish an M.A. in International Adult Educational Development at San Francisco State University. After two more years in Japan, he returned to wonderful Portland, OR to settle down… for now at least. Steve loves learning, cooking, reading sci-fi, watching movies, writing, and his super-cool black cat Fortuna. He is an avid fan of sumo wrestling and baseball, though he completely understands—yet also completely disagrees—when people think either or both are boring.

Featured contributors

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Put Barber joined Idealist.org in October of 2004 when the Nonprofit FAQ was added to the website. He has been the editor of the FAQ since its earliest years and worked with Cliff Landesmann (founder of the Internet Nonprofit Center) and Michael Gilbert (of The Gilbert Center) to design the user interface and add content. He founded The Evergreen State Society in Seattle to build strong nonprofits and strong communities in his home state of Washington and continues that work as a Senior Consultant to Executive Alliance. He serves on the editorial board for Non-
David Schachter is the Assistant Dean for Student Affairs at the NYU Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. David has more than 20 years of hands-on experience in nonprofit staff and volunteer management. He has offered training, consulting, and facilitation nationally in the areas of leadership, staff development, supervision, team building, training of the trainer, and career planning. David received the 2006 NACE/Chevron Outstanding Achievement Award for Innovative Programs in Career Services for his partnership with Action Without Borders/Idealist.org on the creation of the Institute on Public Service Careers, a series of conferences designed to educate college career services professionals from across the country on how to increase the visibility and accessibility of public service careers to their students. David received his Master’s Degree in Public Administration from NYU’s Wagner School and a Bachelor of Fine Arts from NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts. He is a member of the Idealist Mid-Career Transitions Advisory Board.

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Cathy Wasserman provides career, executive, and depth coaching to a wide range of individuals seeking to increase their personal and professional success, actively direct their life, and realize their one-of-a-kind core strengths and goals through her business, Self-Leadership Strategies. She has 16 years of experience in the nonprofit sector and beyond including work as a training director, a recruiter, and an organization development consultant. Additionally, she has served as career coaching expert with her column, Ask Cathy, on Idealist.org. Working Mother magazine also featured her as expert of the month on switching from corporate to nonprofit work. She began her career as an advocate for youth and women and she is published in the book Front-line Feminism. Cathy holds an MSW in Clinical Social Work from Smith College and a B.A. in Psychology from Wesleyan University. You can contact Cathy at cathy@self-leadershipstrategies.com or visit her website www.self-leadershipstrategies.com.
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Kelley Carmichael Casey is the Education and Community Engagement Director for Life by Design NW in Portland, OR. In her private practice, she provides personal career counseling to mid-career transitioners seeking their passion and purpose in work and community engagement. Kelley has more than 20 years of experience in counseling and nonprofit work. Kelley has researched, written, and presented in numerous venues on midlife women and mentoring, baby boomers and volunteerism, and work with meaning over 50. She is a member of the Idealist.org Volunteer Management Advisory Board and serves as Vice Chair of the Board of Directors of the School & Community Reuse Action Project. Kelley has a Doctor of Psychology from George Fox University and an M.S. in Counseling from University of Portland.

Valinda Lee
Valinda Lee is a Career Counselor at Scripps College, the women's college of The Claremont Colleges. After changing her major three times during her first year at La Sierra University in Riverside, CA, she earned a B.A. in Psychology and decided to make a career of helping other people navigate their own career decision making. Her graduate training at California State University, Northridge in Career Counseling has given her the opportunity to work in community colleges, graduate schools, and liberal arts colleges counseling students who want to change the world. At Scripps, Valinda works individually with students to help them pursue internship or post-college plans, organizes events to bring alumnae to campus to share their experiences, and is currently working on creating a podcast series to provide students with more ways to interact with her office. You may contact Valinda through her LinkedIn profile at www.linkedin.com/in/valindalee.

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About Action Without Borders, Idealist.org, and this book

Action Without Borders is a nonprofit organization founded in 1995 with offices in the United States and Argentina. Idealist.org, a project of Action Without Borders, is an interactive site where people and organizations can exchange resources and ideas, find opportunities and supporters, and turn their good intentions into action.

The Idealist Guide to Nonprofit Careers for First-time Job Seekers is a product of Action Without Borders' Nonprofit Careers Program based in Portland, OR. This team works to support individuals and organizations with graduate education options; HR and volunteer management resources; and job, internship, and volunteer opportunities.

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