Hiring in the Social Sector

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INTRODUCTION

Nonprofits, NGOs, philanthropic organizations and social enterprises share a desire to change lives for the better. But it’s all too easy to forget that that work can—and should—begin within our own walls, with our own organizational culture and practices around hiring and supporting staff.

At the same time, more and more young adults are seeking mission-driven work. But with unpredictable recruiting cycles, confounding interviewing processes and few onramps for entry-level employees, the social sector runs the risk of missing out on this potential infusion of energy and innovation.

This series, written by two young staff members, seeks to demystify the process for students bewildered by the social sector job hunt, as well as prompt conversation within organizations that may not be actively considering ways to attract and retain early-career employees. It includes insights and practicable suggestions around a number of questions, including:

• What criteria should I use to search for jobs in the social sector?
• How should I approach the interview process?
• Are there ways that my organization’s interview process conflicts with our values?
• Is my organization investing enough in developing leaders at all levels of our company ladder?

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PART I: THE JOB SEARCH
The Argument for Investing in People
Reflections on my Entry-Level Job Search

Few clear pathways exist for professionals just starting out to enter the social sector. But investing in staff members—at all levels of an organization—to develop effective and skilled leaders is part of the work we must take on as mission-driven organizations, if we hope to achieve lasting change.

I recently made a trip back to my college campus to visit with a professor. As I stepped through wrought iron gates, I was amazed at how easily I could put myself back into the mindset of my final few months as a student. Amidst excitement and nostalgia in the lead up to my graduation day, there was also a heavy undercurrent of unease. For months, I had watched friends and classmates heading for jobs in the private sector slalom through the various preordained phases: the application, the interview, and eventually the sweet pay-off and rush of stability in the form of an offer letter.
I had known from early-on that my finish line would be planted in a place where I was able to “do good.” As my job hunt progressed I determined that, for me, that would likely mean a role in a non-profit, NGO or foundation—what I’ve since learned to refer to more broadly as the “social sector.” But with graduation day looming months then weeks ahead of me, I discovered that there were few clear on-ramps to the kinds of work that I was interested in. Despite the wealth of resources that I was fortunate enough to have access to—from a student career center to on-campus job fairs—it became clear that I couldn't rely on any well-trodden pathways to lead me into entry-level opportunities for the kind of work I was looking for.

Regardless of industry, I'm confident that for anyone early in their career, today's job search can prove an anxiety-ridden roller coaster ride; a bizarre exercise that would have you stifle any uncertainty or self-doubt in favor of mortifying self-promotion and feigned confidence canned into a Mad-Libs-esque cover letter. (Or maybe that was just my impression?) I often felt like I was scouring for jobs in the pinhole-sized overlap between my own skills and experience, my interests, the workplace culture I was looking for and, of course, actual job openings. And for entry-level workers searching for a place in the social sector like I was, there's yet another parameter that narrows the search: mission-fit.

When it comes to finding a job in the social sector, there are a number of steps in the search process that must fall to the seeker: discernment of passions, an investigation of personal values to inform culture-fit, an audit of individual skills. However, in my experience, the variable that was hardest to fit in was on the “supply side”—that is, matching my own skills and (general lack of) professional experience to job openings.

After undergoing this “auditing” process for myself, I had come away with a substantial list of issue areas that I was eager to dive into. And I could see my personal values articulated in the mission statements of countless nonprofits, advocacy groups, foundations and other social good organizations. There was simply no shortage of places doing incredible work—work that I’d be honored and enthused to spend my days in service of. And then I'd look at their job postings and a problem would become readily apparent: they didn't need me.
I'd see fairly frequent openings at the Director and Program Manager level that were obviously not for me. I'd occasionally encounter openings for Coordinators and Officers, with job descriptions that sounded more closely aligned with my abilities, but rarely would a description stipulate anything less than 3 years of experience. And then there were an array of unpaid or stipend-based internships, often geared toward students at the undergraduate or graduate level; but those posts had major financial implications that I couldn't stomach.

I was left with a burning desire to do something meaningful, but it was being increasingly smothered by a disheartening realization: maybe there was no place in the social sector for me, or at the very least, not yet.

The dynamics at play made perfect sense to me. Non-profits and other social sector organizations are working to maximize their impact with limited resources. Young, untried employees can be a risky investment; at best, a time-intensive one. On the other hand, a mid-level professional who brings some experience should be able to start contributing real value to the organization from day one. My habitual stalking of job-boards suggested that the costs of investing in developing young talent were a disincentive to bringing on entry-level employees in the first place, regardless of how passionate or committed to the work they may be.

I wonder whether the hesitancy to invest in young leaders at the outset of their careers—to commit the time and resources necessary to grow their skills—isn't emblematic of the broader pattern of how we do, or don't, approach the work of leadership development in the social sector. The challenges associated with systematically high turnover and lack of succession planning at the highest levels of nonprofit organizations has been documented by non-profit consultancy Bridgespan; they've been ringing the warning bells on this for a decade now.

In their surveys of executive-level leaders who have left their organizations, consistently cited were insufficient opportunities to develop new skills and lack of mentorship. Many respondents said they felt their organizations simply didn't prioritize staff development. And organizations pay a heavy toll for failing to build these leadership pipelines internally, according to Bridgespan. It comes in the form of
steep recruitment and training costs, dips in productivity and ultimately, a limit on their ability to create the positive change that they want to see in the world.

The takeaway for me is that for many non-profit organizations, investments in leadership development among staff members are seen as a "nice to have," ancillary to rather than a necessary foundation for the day-to-day work of the organization. Perhaps these are two sides to the same coin.

If so, I fear that this blind spot in intentional leadership development — up and down the organizational hierarchy — comes at the expense of attracting and retaining much-needed talent. The problems that we've set out to solve are deep-rooted, and we've got work cut out for us for generations. Human capital may well be our greatest resource for driving long-term, lasting change. The responsibility to invest in that resource — including both developing existing staff members and building bridges to engage more early-stage professionals in the work — is embedded in our mission statements as social change organizations.

But how often is the work that that entails made explicit? How is it resourced, and how is it measured? Those rough indicators are often a pretty surefire way to assess the extent to which something is or isn't being prioritized.

This is just my experience. But it's been informed by my own role, now, within an organization that does think intentionally about how we develop leadership capacity in every seat in the office. And I can't help but think that there are other young people like me, eager for an opportunity to contribute but unsure where to plug in. In fact, I know there are. I don't think we can afford not to invest in them.

Maybe that describes you, or my experience has been reminiscent of your own. Maybe your job hunt looked entirely different, or your role in the recruitment and hiring process has granted you another perspective on this issue. Tell us about it! Sharing your experience will not only help us gain insight into how this challenge shows up in the field, it's also a meaningful step toward a more open dialogue about how we work to develop leaders.
This post originally appeared on Living Cities’ blog on April 19, 2017. We welcome any questions, comments, or feedback you may have, and encourage you to follow our series on Hiring in the Social Sector. Stay tuned for the next post!
Searching for Jobs in the Social Sector
6 Tips for Students

Knowing where to start when looking for an entry-level job in the social sector can be tough. Keeping these six simple considerations in mind can help ease stress and aid in the job search process.

1. It’s not too late!

The notion that you need to have a full-time job the moment you set foot outside the bounds of your college campus is completely a construct. This pressure is in place partially because of the way the consulting and finance industries do their recruiting; many students interested in those fields have received decisions during the fall semester. But most nonprofit and philanthropic organizations don’t hire in “cycles” that way. Instead, headhunts happen whenever there is an opening that needs to be filled. This can be stressful as it’s less
predictable and linear. But the huge benefit is that a position that you haven’t heard anything about today could pop up as soon as tomorrow!

**My story:** I started to apply for jobs in earnest during the spring semester of my senior year. I knew that positions I found in the fall probably wouldn’t be able to wait for me to start working until the following summer, so I held off until spring break to start looking. I was still undecided on where I would be working a week before graduation. I had my first call with Living Cities on May 3, and two interviews later, was offered a position with a start date of June 13. After a long wait, things fell quickly into place at the last minute, which is a common rhythm that many of my peers at nonprofits have also experienced.

2. **Talk to everyone you know.**

Someone who knows you personally is better equipped to make recommendations on organizations where she could see you working than any database could ever be! Start to ask your friends, colleagues, professors, and former supervisors the following: “I’m in the process of a job search and would appreciate if you could keep me in mind, in case you see any opportunities that seem like a good fit for me.” This is a light ask, in that it’s not a major burden to the receiver and you’re not asking for any explicit favors; you’ve merely asked her to think of you as she moves through her personal and professional life. But imagine the organic network that can emerge if 10 people keep you in mind in this way. If each person talks to a few people she knows about a job or two that you could be suitable for, that’s powerful!

**My story:** I submitted applications to 118 job postings that I found on my college’s career database, but the two most exciting offers at the end of my search both arose through personal connections I had kept up with throughout college (a friend of a friend I had met at a conference in Korea, and the woman who had hired me for an internship the summer before). Because I knew both of these individuals personally, they were very open-minded and helpful in thinking of opportunities that would truly be suited to my passions and skills.

3. **Never turn down an offer you haven’t received.**

That is, don’t rule out industries or issue areas that you feel you could be even remotely interested in, even if you may not know much about them. One of the best ways to learn about an organization, or even an
entire sector, is through an early-stage job interview. Moreover, sectors continue to emerge as the field of social change evolves. So you may end up working in a sector that didn't even have a name 10 years ago! Don't let the fact that you haven't heard of a way of thinking dissuade you from exploring it further.

**My story:** My friends kept asking me what I was actually interested in, but I knew that wherever I ended up would combine different parts of the social sector in a new and innovative way that I couldn't yet articulate. So I cast a wide net and waited to see which organizations would get back to me, and to whose mission my skills could best contribute. In the end, I applied to 120 jobs across 10 different sectors including economic development, environmental protection, government, health, human rights, international business, journalism, law, microfinance, and research.

After getting an interview, I would do a far deeper research dive on the firm than I had done while applying. In the process of preparing for interviews, I got to learn about entirely new fields that I had known very little about before but was interested in exploring. And go figure—the position I ended up getting was with an organization that cuts across my interests and skills, and combines a number of the sectors I knew I was interested in! Had I narrowed my search at the outset, I may not have been as open to exploring organizational models I had not heard of before. And there couldn't have been a better way to gain such a rich overview of how different industries interact with one another in the world.

4. **Determine which factors are non-negotiable for you.**

In jobs, as in relationships, knowing what you absolutely can’t compromise on is greatly helpful in narrowing your focus and making decisions easier. It can be challenging to find a position at the entry-level which fulfills every parameter for your perfect career—organizational mission, job description, position salary, office location, work hours, office culture, etc.—but ranking these criteria and determining which factors are most important for you as an individual can help to make the job search less dizzying and more focused.

**My story:** What I prioritized in the job hunt was finding an organization with a mission that aligned with my personal values where I could feel like I was making a difference, a position within that organization that would allow me to enjoy the work I was doing day-to-day, and a work culture that
made me feel positive and motivated at the office. I had interned in the past at an organization with an inspiring mission, but where the office environment was toxic and stressful, and the realization that I was not happy in that position allowed me to narrow my priorities further. Realizing that corporate culture was a major motivator of my career decisions at this stage was hugely helpful in narrowing down the types of firms I should be looking at.

5. Remember that you’re looking for A job; not THE job.

Thinking that you need to find the “perfect” job, especially early in your career, can greatly increase the stress of the job hunt process. Recall that the world of today does not require you to stay at one organization, or even in one industry, for your whole career, and it’s becoming easier and easier to pivot as you gain more experience and learn more about your professional passions. Looking for organizations that will best equip you to gain experience and skills that are broadly applicable across issue areas is a great starting point for an entry-level job hunt. We all need to start somewhere. So dive in and explore!

6. Don’t be afraid of apprenticeships.

There are many reasons to be keen to jump into a full-time job directly post-graduation, particularly given the financial constraints faced by students after college. That being said, internships and apprenticeships can be a wonderful opportunity to gain experience and demonstrate your value-add to an organization, while searching for other opportunities, or as a way to work up to a full-time position.

My story: Both Megan and I joined Living Cities as paid summer interns. Taking part in the summer internship program gave us a chance to show our team members how we could contribute to the work that the organization does while assessing whether Living Cities was a good fit for us in terms of culture and mission.

This post originally appeared on Living Cities’ blog on April 19, 2017. We welcome any questions, comments, or feedback you may have, and encourage you to follow our publication Hiring in the Social Sector. Stay tuned for the next post!
Strengthening On-Ramps for Entry-Level Talent
4 Tips for Social Sector Organizations

Increasingly, young adults are interested in work that drives positive impact. It's a major opportunity for social sector organizations to attract new talent, but only if we are intentional about building pathways for early-career professionals to enter the field.

There’s growing hunger among young people to engage in meaningful work. I hear it in the tenor of conversations with friends and peers, and a quick Google search of “millennial” and “mission-driven” turns up an almost comical amount of buzz (for millennials who hadn’t heard the news that we’re all about impact, get on board—the media says it’s a veritable trend!)

For employers in the social sector, which many argue has been inhibited by a talent shortage, there’s huge potential embedded in this shift: an influx of young adults in search of job opportunities that will be vehicles for creating positive impact. But it’s no guarantee that nonprofits and philanthropy will reap the benefits. In fact, as lines between sectors blur and new models like impact investing and social enterprise gain serious traction, these young and mission-driven individuals entering the workforce are faced with a broader array of paths to fulfill their desire to drive social change.
As I described in my last post, inroads to social sector organizations for entry-level workers may not be ready to accommodate the surge of traffic. Without intentional efforts to attract and develop staff members, nonprofits and philanthropy may end up being left behind by this wave of talent—and all of the energy, innovative potential, and collaborative problem-solving skills that they bring with them.

As a recent college graduate who experienced these dynamics first hand, here are a few considerations that could help strengthen those pathways:

1. Explore the in-betweens of full employment.

Programs like Americorps VISTA, and Teach for America allow early-career individuals to dive into hands-on, substantive work for a set period of time. They attract thousands of young adults each year who are committed to creating positive impact, eager to develop skills and learn more about an issue area, and often still unsure about their long-term plans.

But I'm confident there are hundreds of thousands more young people today who fit that exact description. Many millennials are open to nonlinear career paths, and want to use their own skills and interests as guideposts rather than relying on the rungs of a preordained ladder. I
see this as an opportunity. Organizations that face hiring constraints, but still hope to attract and engage young people in their mission, can provide alternate, time-bound work arrangements instead—such as apprenticeship programs.

**Apprenticeships could also help address the Catch 22 of the social sector “skills gap”** (organizations need workers with experience, but there aren’t sufficient opportunities for young people to gain it) by equipping entry-level employees with the kind of on-the-job knowledge that they lack, but without the often prohibitive commitment of a long-term contract. And for organizations that do have some hiring flexibility, it can be a great way for both parties to ensure that it’s a good match.

Certainly, many students still feel the pressure to secure a full-time job come graduation day—whether driven by social stigma or by financial necessity. But the more that apprenticeship programs are designed to be substantive and respected learning opportunities, the more young people will, I suspect, be amenable to accepting more modest income and a shorter-term stint right out of school in order to gain relevant, hands-on experience in an issue area they’re passionate about.

**2. Go straight to the source: colleges and universities.**

Many college students view their on-campus career services center as a valuable resource during their final years. But potential employers should see them as resources too—partners in the work of activating a pipeline of talent, whether as future employees or simply advocates with an understanding of the social sector. Whether or not your organization has available entry-level positions, opening the lines of communication with the local career counselors who provide direct support to job-seekers can help young people understand the field, and what kind of experience they’ll need to access opportunities down the road.

It was information that I found, to my frustration, to be somewhat lacking at a career services center that wasn’t as well-oriented to nonprofits and philanthropy.
Additionally, some universities (including my own alma mater) have experimented with community-based courses that bake experiential learning opportunities into the curriculum. Partnerships with social sector organizations and social ventures—where there’s always work to be done—enable students to pair classroom theory with real-world practice. And they’re fantastic opportunities for students who may not be able to take on an internship or apprenticeship on top of a full course load.

3. Tout your networks.

One barrier preventing young people from taking on an internship or apprenticeship is that they don’t see it as a clear stepping stone to longer-term work. Plenty of organizations—especially smaller nonprofits—just don’t have capacity to bring on more full-time staff at a given moment, particularly at an entry level.

But nonprofit organizations don’t operate in a vacuum. Most are already plugged into the ecosystem of other organizations—nonprofits, advocacy groups, private sector actors or public agencies—that have a hand in similar or tangential social issues. Building a network of social-change organizations within a city or across an issue area that’s united in supporting the pipeline of young talent could help mitigate the challenge that most nonprofits don’t approach hiring in set “cycles,” but rather as needs arise. Members of the network could support each other in surfacing opportunities for full-time work, to help ensure that students who are committed to social change work are supported in finding ways to stay engaged.

This could be as bare-bones as a Google Group to share new openings and opportunities in real-time. But it rests on the powerful assumption that the social sector is operating as a team, with the shared mission of developing human resources.

The more that such networks are strengthened and formalized, the more confident a young person can feel accepting an internship or an apprenticeship—in other words, a shorter-term posting or position with lower pay. Rather than a last resort or a way to bide time, they can enter into the arrangement feeling that it’s an intentional and meaningful step toward finding a full-time opportunity.
4. Commit to inclusion.

All my talk of building networks and reinforcing college pipelines means that these proposed solutions are susceptible to reinforcing another problem: being unintentionally exclusionary. When fielding and selecting candidates is predicated on networks and personal relationships, the question that we’ve got to ask is: who’s cut off from the opportunities to forge those connections in the first place? That can mean low-income and first-generation college students, who may not have the financial luxury of taking on unpaid internships, and who may be at a disadvantage when it comes to professional networks. Or students of color, who often don’t see themselves represented amongst the hiring managers or leadership teams of the organizations that they’re applying to. That’s just a start.

The good news is that it’s a question that I’ve heard posed many times—beginning with the college application process and into the professional realm across sectors. But I’d argue that for people just starting out in their careers, with little of their own experience to speak for them, the power of personal and professional networks plays an outsized impact in early success. Whether as high-touch as a mentor or as simple as a good word on your behalf from a distant connection, those networks can make all the difference between a student landing the critical first job and starting to build their own track record of competency, or being faced with a stack of rejections and forced to reevaluate their path.

I don’t mean to suggest that this is wrong or malicious; on the contrary, a word of recommendation from a colleague is an invaluable data point for a hiring manager trying to discriminate between a dizzying pile of nearly-identical resumes. But that doesn’t exempt us from searching for ways to ensure that this doesn’t systematically and unduly restrict certain students from having their resumes rise to the top of the stack based on their race, gender, socioeconomic status, etc.

I won’t pretend that I fully know how to address this challenge. Plenty of people are grappling with this challenge, including the organization that I work for. Nonetheless, if social sector organizations are committed to challenging the status quo and overcoming the tendencies that reinforce the divides we’re trying to bridge, then this is surely the place to think intentionally about entry-level hiring, and experiment with ways to level the playing field.
One recommendation I would make is broadening our understanding of experience and expertise. This is certainly not a novel idea, but it’s a lens that we should ensure we’re applying to young people as well, many of whom won’t have the privilege to accept unpaid internships during their college career or be able to afford to pursue stipend-based apprenticeship programs like Americorps.

But there are other ways to gain important experience, not the least of which is first-hand expertise on the challenges that a particular organization is working to solve. That qualification could give them a leg-up on other candidates who would have to work to immerse themselves in that context while on the job. But I don’t know where that might show up on a resume. Or whether young people would feel empowered to speak to first-hand, experiential knowledge in a cover letter or an interview.

There is so much good work to be done in the world, with nonprofits, philanthropy and other social sector organizations continuing to play a huge role in driving it. And there’s a surge of talent eager to contribute. It should–and can–be a powerful match, if organizations are intentional about bridging the divides between supply and demand.

This post originally appeared on Living Cities’ blog on April 26, 2017. We welcome any questions, comments, or feedback you may have, and encourage you to follow our publication Hiring in the Social Sector. Stay tuned for the next post!
PART II: THE INTERVIEW
What Nonprofits Need to Learn About Interviewing Candidates

When social sector organizations aren’t intentional about their interview process, they fail to leverage their greatest recruitment asset: their mission.

As a college senior last spring, I commenced a long and arduous job hunt, searching for the “perfect” job for me in the social sector. My most important criteria were that I wanted to work for an organization:

1. Whose mission aligned with my personal values, and where I could make a difference.

2. Where my position would allow me to enjoy the work I was doing day-to-day.

3. Whose work culture made me feel positive and motivated at the office.
My goal was to do good, and to enjoy doing it. But while I was working hard and felt I had done the best I could do in college to pursue my passions and perform highly, the job interview process at many points made me feel unintelligent and disrespected. I found myself wondering if I hadn’t done “enough” in college, and really struggling to find balance between two seemingly conflicting interests. On the one hand, I wanted to come across as “serious” and “professional” about the work of the organizations I was interviewing with. On the other hand, I didn’t want to fully hold back from channeling the genuine care, fear, and passion I feel toward working on social issues like poverty, environmental justice, and racial equity.

The Interview Experience

I believe this is because many of the questions that interviewers asked me felt like they were designed to “stump” me rather than learn about me (e.g. “Okay, we’ve heard your whole spiel about how environmental protection and public health are related, but it seems like you have a really environment-focused resume that you’re trying to shove into a public health mold. Convince me that this isn’t true.”). Honesty and vulnerability certainly seemed to be punished rather than rewarded (e.g. “We read your personal blog and it says that you’re stressed and you’ve applied to 120 jobs. Why should we believe you want this one, and that you can handle the stress of working here if you’re so stressed about the job search?”). At many points during my 50+ interviews I found myself thinking, “I just want to create social good in the world—why is it so hard to find a place that will allow me to harness my passions to do that?” And perhaps most problematically, I found myself thinking that the problem was with me. Maybe I wasn’t being stiff or polished or professional enough. Even though this was the social sector, maybe I shouldn’t open up as much about my passions or the experiences and connections that led me to care about this work.

It wasn’t until an advisor in my dorm overheard me recounting one of the above interviews to a friend and literally intervened to say, “I’m sorry but I couldn’t help eavesdropping—you do realize that the problem is with your interviewers and not with you, right?!?” that I took a moment to pause my reactions of self-doubt and step back and analyze the behavior of the individuals interviewing me.

I think part of the problem was that my interviewers were trying to mimic their counterparts in the private sector in a few ways. The
interview processes for consulting and finance, for example, are known for being cut-throat and intense. But that type of interview structure and questions at many points weren't appropriate for the type of work that the organizations I was interviewing for were doing. They simply didn't match the tone of the mission of the organizations, and at times weren't even relevant to what I would be doing day-to-day in the roles I was interviewing for. In my process, the impact on me was that I found myself much less excited about the prospect of working at firms that interviewed this way.

What social sector organizations have to remember is that the private sector firms that set up their interview processes this way also offer other huge benefits to candidates, like higher salaries, and a clearly structured job application cycle with recruiting happening at predictable times. In the absence of being able to offer these perks, it is all the more critical for social sector organizations not to fall into the trap of echoing the tone of these private sector interview processes.

In fact, by designing an interview process that does not align with its values, a social sector organization loses the opportunity to leverage one of the greatest recruitment assets it has—the values-alignment that brings many people to the social sector in the first place.

**Aligning the Way You Interview with Your Organization’s Values**

I might not even have known that a different interview paradigm could exist, but for my interview process at Living Cities. During my first round, I apologized off the bat for a technological difficulty that caused my interview to be delayed, and the staff member interviewing me immediately normalized the blip for me: “It’s your senior spring—I am sure you are so stressed, and if this small technical difficulty is the biggest issue you’ve had this semester, you seem to be doing pretty well.” It was a simple statement but it completely reset how I viewed the firm and myself, for the remainder of the interview process. The simple humanity of this interviewer demonstrated to me, through actions, the basic humanity and human dignity that Living Cities so fiercely believes in, of our staff as well as the populations we serve. My other interviewers at Living Cities were sure to comment on the importance of the passion they heard in what I was saying, how open I was to learning what I didn't already know, and the value of the breadth of real-world experiences informing my interest in Living
Cities. Above all, they were kind, warm, and gracious. I noticed these things during the interview process, and once I joined the organization as a summer intern, the philosophy was articulated to me explicitly:

“Our job is to make the lives of low-income people easier, and we can’t do that unless we are taking care of ourselves as well,” a colleague said to me during my first week here. Again, the notion was so simple, but I feel as though we in the social sector internalize an obligation to personally sacrifice our time, money, or wellness to be making a difference for people on the ground. And many times we do (I’m not saying working in the social sector is easy)—we make less money and we often work long hours—but in the areas where we don’t have to create stress for ourselves, it’s important that we remember not to.

Personal wellness, work-life balance, and being kind are emphasized as parts of the culture of Living Cities, and vulnerability is (on the whole) accepted rather than punished. At the end of the day, working on behalf of marginalized communities can be taxing, tiring work, and if we are not able to support one another and be gentle and kind to ourselves, working on issues of social justice is not sustainable.

A New Paradigm for Job Interviews in the Social Sector

Which leads me to my recommendation: a little bit of strategic thinking about how we design the interview process can go a long way. While we may not be able to “woo” candidates by flying them out to cocktail hours to meet with our partners, being kind doesn’t cost anything. Projecting the culture that your organization embodies (or is working to embody) can be a very powerful tool for social sector organizations to attract and retain the rich talent they want.

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Being Interviewed for Social Sector Jobs

5 Tips for Students

The structure and content of job interviews in the social sector can be confusing. Follow these five tips to determine whether an organization’s culture is right for you.

In the last post in this series, we looked at some of the reasons that interviewing for entry-level jobs in the social sector can be challenging. Due to lack of a predictable recruiting “cycle” and attempts to mimic private sector interview practices, the job interview process in the social change space often feels more stressful than it needs to. This piece provides a list of tips for candidates to keep in mind while navigating the interview process and using it to determine whether an organization would be a good professional and personal fit.
Five Tips for Interviewing for Entry-Level Jobs in the Social Sector

1. Hold your power.

Any job interview is as much an opportunity for you to decide whether you want to work for a company as it is a time for the company to determine whether they want to hire you. Remember that YOU have a lot of power and authority in the interview process as well, and the process should be a two-way interaction. Allow this knowledge to equip you with confidence. In an earlier post in this series, we shared some tips for candidates to prioritize the factors that are non-negotiable for them in a first job. If the culture of an organization is an important factor for you to enjoy job satisfaction, remember that you have the right to learn as much about a company’s culture as you can!

2. Interview the interviewer.

When an interviewer asks, “Any other questions?” have a list prepared of things you genuinely want to know about their corporate culture. Picture your ideal office. Does the staff eat lunch together? Do colleagues hang out outside of work? The answers you receive to these questions, and the confidence with which your interviewer answers them, can tell you a lot about whether the firm is the type of place where you want to be. Sometimes it can feel like you are being too picky, and of course a first job doesn’t have to be the perfect job for you, but also remember that you have time. The idea that a student should have found full-time employment the moment she steps off her college campus is a pernicious construct. By putting in a bit more time at the front end doing research on the culture of the company you’re interviewing with, you may end up much more satisfied with your first job.

3. Quiz your networks.

Chances are that the people who know you and your personality well will have a good idea of the type of organization that would be a good fit for you. If you’re interviewing for a company, ask folks who know about the issues you are interested in if they have heard of it, and what impressions they have of its corporate culture.

4. Observe how you feel.
Are you able to be yourself when you are in conversation with members of the organization interviewing you? Apart from the nervousness that is normal as a part of any interview process, are you comfortable, excited, and fired up about the work while talking to the employee interviewing you? How you feel during an interview is valid and important, and if some of these things aren’t true, maybe you should reconsider whether you would want to work day-to-day with people who won’t be able to support you in sustaining your excitement for social change.

5. Be the change you want to see.

Despite asking all the questions you can in an interview, what if you end up at a company whose culture and values don’t quite align with yours? It’s important to be intentional about where you end up working, but at the end of the day, being able to take all of these factors into account is a huge privilege. New staff members can provide the perfect mirror to reflect a fresh and honest assessment of what an organization is doing right and wrong, especially from a cultural perspective. Remember that a company’s culture is the aggregate of the values of each of its individual employees. It can be scary, but taking that fearless first step of raising opportunities to strengthen your company’s culture can pay dividends for employees long after your time, and play a part in transforming your firm’s values from the inside out.

What do you wish the interviewer did differently at your last interview? Share your story here, or email it to rgill@livingcities.org!

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Interviewing Candidates for Social Sector Jobs

4 Tips for Interviewers

Embodying your company’s culture is crucial in recruiting. These four tips are designed to help interviewers in the social sector attract young talent.

In an earlier post in this series, we described the importance of embodying your organization’s culture and values while interviewing candidates for entry-level jobs at your company. This piece provides four actionable tips for interviewers to keep in mind to reflect their organizations as faithfully as possible in order to attract young talent.

Four Tips for Interviewing Candidates for Entry-Level Jobs in the Social Sector

1. Be compassionate.
The interview process is as much for the candidate to determine whether she chooses you as for you to decide whether you choose her. The organizational culture that you project in an interview (and that exists at your company) can have a huge impact on the talent that you are able to attract and retain. The objective of all social sector firms, at their core, should be to produce human wellbeing and success. Despite deadlines, budgets, and capacity constraints, it's important not to lose sight of that core goal during the interview process.

And while there is nothing wrong with being nice for the sake of being nice—especially since we as a sector understand a broad array of challenges that humans may be facing—it's also important to consider the impact that a lack of empathy during the interview process can have on how a candidate perceives the credibility of your organization.

2. Rethink your concept of “professional.”

Remember that “professionalism” is a construct that can be counterproductive when it unintentionally embeds inequity in your interview process. There is a cultural component to many of the behaviors that we think of as “professional” in a society pervaded by white culture, and it's important to check your biases around this as an interviewer.

*Could the candidate who joins a phone call late and surrounded by background noise be babysitting her younger siblings because her single mother is working? Does the candidate whom you can't seem to get ahold of have to share one cell phone with his father?*

These are two abstract examples, but it is important that—especially as actors in the social sector—we remain cognizant of the micro-instances of implicit bias that we all are subject to. It's also important to remember that experience and expertise come in a host of different forms; they speak in different ways and they attend a wide array of alma maters.

3. Remember that “wooing” a candidate doesn't have to cost anything.

In our last post, we discussed the luxuries that many private sector firms have in their arsenal, and can use to complement the often
harsh and competitive tone of their interview process. Remember that while you may not be able to treat candidates to “fancy things” in the same way that private sector firms often do, kindness is a tool you possess that can set your firm apart from other companies. And it doesn’t cost you anything! So as an interviewer, don’t be afraid of being genuine and vulnerable, describing what brought you to the work you do in the first place, and giving your candidate a full flavor of the culture of your company.

4. Promptly notify candidates who will not be hired.

Letting someone know that they weren’t selected to a position is just common courtesy, and not doing so is rude. Think about the personal agony of waiting for any individual or firm that you’re excited about to “text you back.” All too often, the trend (particularly in the private sector) is that a candidate knows she didn’t make it to a position if she doesn’t hear back at all. Life is busy and folks at social sector firms can be especially overworked, but that’s no excuse for not sending an email, even if it’s a stock email notifying candidates who were not selected to the position that they can stop waiting.

Do you have interview tips for students interested in social change? Share them here, or email your story to rgill@livingcities.org!

This post originally appeared on Living Cities’ blog on May 5, 2017. We encourage you to follow our publication Hiring in the Social Sector.