



The Key to Job Seeking in the Nonprofit Sector: Networking and Informational Interviewing

What is networking?

It's a buzz-word that's a bit overused and rubs some people the wrong way, but you can think of it as a fairly simple two-step process - first getting access to organizations and individuals who can help you on your job search, and then building your network by gaining access to more contacts for each individual you meet.

Why is it so important?

It will help you gain valuable insight into your job search and desired career path from people who are already doing the work. More importantly, the majority of jobs are **not** advertised - therefore the best way to get into an organization is through using personal connections. Networking creates those connections that will help you find out about new openings before others do, or even lead you to create a job for yourself in a given organization.

How do I get started?

Nonprofits can be less visible than businesses, and networking is often not a common practice, where supposedly the larger mission is more important than one person's individual goals. But this can be an advantage if you are willing to do the work, because most of your fellow job seekers will not be networking. There are essentially two ways to network in the nonprofit sector: volunteering and informational interviewing.

Volunteering

Volunteering not only enables you to serve, but is also a wonderful networking opportunity. As a volunteer, you will meet people who work for the organization itself, as well as other volunteers who share your interests. Try to get a sense of the key players both inside the organization and in the larger community, and talk to them for a few minutes about why they're doing what they're doing, what they would recommend for someone just starting out in the same field, and people they know who are doing similar work.

Think about volunteer coordinators. These people belong to some kind of national or regional association relating to their work, know about local networks and other organizations doing similar work, and have personal contacts and friends in the field. All of this information is of tremendous potential value to you.

Do not ask for contacts on your first day of volunteering. It is important to display competency, credibility, and a commitment to the work before asking for contacts to support your job search.

If starting these conversations seems intimidating to you, remember this – these people had to work to get to where they are today - most likely they will be flattered at your interest, and be more open to speaking with you since you are volunteering for/with them. All it takes is the nerve to walk up to someone and ask for 5-10 minutes of their time.

Informational Interviewing

While volunteering may lend itself to casual conversations that help build your network, informational interviews are a more focused attempt at gaining contacts.

What is informational interviewing?

Quite simply, it is when you seek out someone whose job interests you, and arrange an “interview” in which **you** ask the questions. This conversation is not about getting you a job, rather this is a way for you to learn more about fields that interest you, and for you to expand your pool of contacts with which to network.

How do find someone to contact for an informational interview?

If you do not already have some organizations or people in mind, your first step is to do some focused research based on your interests. Idealist.org, fdncenter.org, guidestar.org, state and local professional associations, and local United Ways can all help you locate potential organizations doing work that interests you.

Most organizations’ web sites list the staff with titles and email addresses. Your plan will be to contact someone whose job title or their work as it is described online interests you. . . perhaps a junior program staff member, volunteer coordinator, or fundraising associate. Avoid writing to an info@ address and contacting the Executive Director or Human Resources Department, as you are much less likely to get a timely response!

How do I set up an informational interview?

Email is the easiest communication method for setting up an informational interview. The more personalized you can make the email the better. If the recipient of your note can sense that you send the same note to dozens of people, you are less likely to get a response. Here is a sample email you can adapt:

Dear Name,

I recently learned about your organization, and am very impressed with the work you have done with immigrant youth, an issue I am passionate about. Your job title, outreach counselor, sounds most interesting to me because I too am attracted to a direct-service career.

I would like to arrange a brief informational interview with you, either by phone or in person, sometime this month. As a young person eager to break into the field, it would be a great help to learn why you chose this field, how you got to where you are today, and what advice you may have for someone contemplating a similar career. I have attached my resume to give you some sense of my background.

I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,
Eager Student

A phone call that covers similar information can also work, but email is preferred because it is less intrusive and the recipient can reply at their convenience. You can always call an organization to request an individual's email address.

Will people really get back to me?

Talking to someone about how they got to be where they are today, can be greatly flattering for that person. Most people love to talk about themselves. You are both getting something out of this exchange - you can gain valuable connections and insight into how to advance in your chosen field, and the interviewee can enjoy the knowledge that there are young people interested in doing similar work. In the daily grind, it is easy to forget that many people desire their job. Since the nonprofit sector can often be less visible than other sectors, there can be a feeling of isolation, and a lack of connection with those just entering the workforce.

For all these reasons, most people should get back to you within a reasonable amount of time, but of course some won't. Don't stress out too much about those who don't. Focus on those who are interested in setting up interviews, and prepare some questions to ask them.

What do I talk about at an informational interview?

The beauty of an informational interview is that the pressure and dynamics of a traditional interview are removed from the situation - or at least left unspoken for the time being. Be prepared to talk briefly about yourself – what have you been doing, what are you hoping to do, and why do you want to do this kind of work. Giving at least some sense of your interests will greatly help this person connect you with people who may have similar interests.

You should also come prepared to ask a number of questions. Here are some to get you started:

Why do you do this work?

How did you find your present job?

What do you enjoy most about the work and what do you find most challenging?

What do you do in a typical week?

What regional and national networks do they belong to?

What could you see yourself doing after this job?

And the most important question of all:

At the end of the meeting, ask if they know people doing similar work who you could contact. Ask if you can use their name as a point of introduction. This step is essential to building your base of contacts. If you meet with just a couple people who each give you 2-3 more names, all of a sudden you have a large network of people to approach.

YOU HOPE THEY WILL KEEP YOU IN MIND

Repeat this process with each person you meet.

Don't forget to send a quick thank-you e-mail to each person you meet, both after the meeting and when you land a job!

What is the point of getting all these names?

Pretty soon, you will have more names to contact than you can handle. This is a good thing! The idea is that you will have a strong sense of the players within a given field in the nonprofit sector in your community - people should start telling you the same names. By keeping in regular contact with these people – letting them know how your search is going – you are likely to hear about those hidden job opportunities that arise.