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# THE TOOL KIT

News, Advice, and Resources for Nonprofit Workers

## Vetting Job Seekers to Gauge Who Will Stay Put—and Who Won't

By Scott Westcott

IT WAS DURING the second interview with the job candidate that Robert Stack, chief executive officer of Community Options, started to have serious doubts. The candidate he was vetting was certainly well qualified: a former investment banker with expertise in tax law applying to run the group's fund-raising subsidiary.

But as the interview delved into details about the job, the talk turned in a way that made Mr. Stack worry that the candidate would be a short-timer at his organization, which maintains headquarters in Princeton, N.J., and develops homes and employment for people with disabilities in nine states.

"It started to become obvious to me that he didn't care as much about the mission as he did the money," Mr. Stack says. "He kept going back time and again to what bonuses and incentives might be available. He seemed much more about advancing his own life than that of people with disabilities."

Mr. Stack passed on the candidate. And it wasn't the first time he had faced situations like this. With the economy struggling and the job market drum-tight, more and more applicants are looking to nonprofit openings as an option. While the trend promises an influx of talent, it also increases the possibility that candidates may be simply looking for a stopgap or rebound job until the market improves.

"The bottom line is, we are looking for people who want to land rather than being in a holding pattern until they find a better airport," Mr. Stack says. "I'm still looking for the magic formula to determine if someone is going to stick around."

While there is no surefire way to insure against hiring people who will flee as soon as they find a better opportunity, recruiters suggest some practical steps to help identify job seekers looking for a career rather than a pit stop.

**Ask open-ended questions.** Odds are, no candidate is going to come out and say they are only taking a job until something better comes along. Therefore, "open-ended questions are the best methodology for probing intent," says Terry Henley, director of compensation services at Employers Resource Association, a nonprofit organization with offices in Cincinnati and Columbus, Ohio, that provides human-resources guidance to nonprofit and for-profit clients.

In other words, ask questions that get candidates talking beyond the lines on their résumé and more about their values, goals, experience, and outside interests or passions.

Among the potential questions that Mr. Henley suggests:

- This is a considerable change from your previous career choices. What are your reasons for making the switch?

- What specifically about this position and this organization prompted you to apply?



- What career ambitions does this position and organization meet for you?

- In this environment, there are scores of candidates—what makes you stand out?

**Watch body language.** Regina Barr, an executive coach in Minneapolis who often works with clients seeking nonprofit careers, suggests bluntly asking seemingly overqualified candidates why they are interested in taking the open nonprofit job, and then paying close attention to not only what they say but also how they say it.

In particular, she says, failure to make eye contact, crossing arms, or leaning back may indicate uncertainty. Conversely, candidates who become animated and lean forward may be signaling that they are pursuing their true passion. "Don't make the assumption that everyone is just looking for a bridge to another job," she says.

**Listen closely.** A candidate who is looking to the nonprofit world as a less stressful environment or a chance to "get out of the rat race" is a frequent red flag for Bruce Hurwitz, an executive recruiter in New York who specializes in placing candidates in fund-raising positions.

"I recently talked to several potential candidates, some of whom said they were willing to give up a six-figure cut in salary because they wanted out of the rat race," Mr. Hurwitz says. "I explained to them that in the nonprofit world it's just different rats. You are going to have frustrations, you are going to have stress. That doesn't go away."

Another red flag: when candidates simply say they are ready to move into

the nonprofit world, without being able to narrow what type of charity they would be most interested in and why.

"I am looking for the rationale and the emotional response," Mr. Hurwitz says. "The more personal the answer is, the better."

**Check candidates' homework.** How much time and effort candidates put in before a job interview may provide clues as to whether they are really

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interested in the job, and in an era of lightning-fast Google searches, there's no excuse for lacking a basic knowledge of any charity's work. Even candidates with for-profit or government backgrounds should have some basic working knowledge of the nonprofit world.

"If I am looking for a nonprofit CEO and he or she doesn't know what a [Form] 990 is, then we have a problem," Mr. Hurwitz says. Also, any candidate should ask in-depth questions during the interview about the charity's work.

**Look for ties to the charity's mission.** When interviewing potential candidates to recommend to clients, Mr. Hurwitz says he always looks for strong connections between the candidate and the charity—even if the candidate has never worked for a nonprofit organization.

"I am trying to find out if there is

something real there," he says. "Maybe the person has had to deal with an issue that is part of the nonprofit's mission. If there was a history of family members dealing with substance abuse, then that mission could be personal for him or her."

Look closely at résumés for a history of volunteer work, and ask references for examples of the candidate helping others or working with charities. "If someone who never volunteered suddenly wants to work for nonprofits, that's something like finding religion," Mr. Henley says. "It just doesn't smell right."

For Mr. Stack, of Community Options, spotting those real-life connections between a candidate and charitable causes is a good sign. "Even if it's as simple as coaching Little League, it's a tip-off that there is more to their life than money," he says.

Mr. Stack cites the case of a marketing executive coming from the for-profit world who recently got a job with Mr. Stack's organization, in part because of his strong history of volunteer work.

"It seemed like a theme in his life," Mr. Stack says. "This was a person to look at with very open eyes, because even though he hadn't worked for a charity, he understood our challenges."

**Don't rule out likely short timers automatically.** If they bring skills the charity badly needs, "it might be worth it even if it is only for a year or two," says Ms. Barr. "If someone was looking at a job as a bridging opportunity, I would have a very honest conversation about what type of time commitment they would be willing to make, and then make a decision."