

The forum3 guide to starting your not-for-profit sector career



Whether you're a graduate taking your first steps into the world of work, or you're planning to make the move from a private company to a charity, there's one very important question to ask: how do I start my career in the not-for-profit sector? In this guide, the forum3 team outlines the 10 key points to bear in mind when considering a change in career or when starting out in your first role.

1. Be realistic

It's important to have the right motives and the right expectations when starting a new job in the not-for-profit sector. The most common response from candidates when asked why they want to make the move is that 'they want to put something back' or 'they want to make a difference'. But it's vital to understand that working in the not-for-profit sector is just as challenging and just as hard work as working in a commercial business. A charity is just as keen to attract the best candidates who will work hard and deliver results as a private sector business. So it's not just about 'doing good' but about adding value. That means going into a new role with your eyes wide open – and without those rose-tinted glasses.



2. Do the maths

Not-for-profit organisations tend to have fewer funds to spend on salaries and pay less competitive rates than many commercial organisations. Candidates tend to balance the lower salary against the job satisfaction that they derive from working in the sector. But the reality is that you may have to take a salary cut when moving from the commercial sector to an equivalent role in a charity or arts organisation. And that implies some careful thought about how you'll balance the books when you change jobs. It's a good idea to make a list of your outgoings and check it against the net salary that you are likely to be paid.

4. What floats your boat?

There are just as many choices to make in the not-for-profit sector as there are in the private sector. And there's a world of difference between working with a large international aid agency like Oxfam and promoting a specialist arts organisation in London. So it pays to think very carefully about the different options that you have when applying for a new role.

3. Which role will it be?

There's also a wide range of career options within charities. As with commercial organisations, you'll find opportunities to work in support roles (finance, personnel, receptionists, personal assistants, secretaries) and management. There's also likely to be a marketing and PR function as well as more specialist roles in fundraising and management of major donors. In some cases there will be an opportunity to work with volunteers on UK or overseas projects. So it's not as simple as saying you want to work with a particular organisation – you also need to think about what you'll do for it.

5. Are you experienced?

Employers are looking for more than passion for a cause. More than anything, they want proof that you have a serious interest in the area that you are applying to work in - as well as an understanding of how the sector works. So aim to pick up some work experience in a relevant area of the market before you apply for the job. It could be that it's unpaid, but even a couple of weeks of volunteering experience will demonstrate commitment.



6. Do your research

Before applying to a charity or other not-for-profit organisation, find out as much as possible about the way it operates. Who runs the organisation? Which areas of the UK does it operate in and/or how many countries does it work across? How is it funded? And what are its plans for future development? The best places to start are the organisation's own website and search engines such as Google – which will also show you where the organisation has been written about in the news. Being prepared means that you can both ask and answer questions intelligently in your interview, as well as pen a well-informed application letter.

8. Choose your partner wisely

Although some organisations advertise for people themselves, many work with a third party recruitment consultancy such as Charity People. The main reason that charities use consultancies is that they help to screen out unsuitable candidates and ensure that only relevant applications are submitted. The advantage to candidates is that their application is taken seriously because it comes recommended and is not part of a big pile of unsolicited mail. A good consultancy will also help you to work through your ideas on working in particular areas and to develop a relevant application letter and CV.

7. Prepare yourself

You've secured an interview with your preferred organisation. Congratulations! But now is the time to get all your ducks in a row. Be prepared to be asked about why you want the role and what you think you will bring to the organisation. And be as clued up as possible about the role and the organisation. Show enthusiasm for the opportunity and ask questions that demonstrate your understanding of the area in which this particular charity operates. Remember to sell yourself on the basis of your experience to date and any relevant skills and knowledge that you have picked up along the way.



9. Take a trip to the fair

A good place to start looking for a new job or a volunteering opportunity is at exhibitions and careers fairs. forum3 (www.forum3.co.uk) is the UK's leading event for organisations who are looking to recruit candidates into a wide range of jobs. A day spent at the fair will give you access to more than 150 different not-for-profit organisations and will help you make up your mind exactly where you want to take your career next. The fair also includes more than 70 career development seminars, and there are sessions for everyone interested in working or volunteering in the not-for-profit sector whether at home or overseas.

10. Work hard and enjoy the ride

There is a misguided notion that a career in the not-for-profit sector will somehow be 'cosy' or an easier option than working for a commercial business. But those days – if they ever existed – are well and truly over. Greater scrutiny and interest in the way funds are raised and managed has led to a more commercial and stringent approach by not-for-profit organisations. They want the best people for the job: so be prepared to work hard and do your absolute best – whether that's when selling your skills in an interview or when you've secured a new job. And finally – Good Luck!

