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As in military, mission key for nonprofits

By Tranette Ledford

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Finding a personally fulfilling career can be as much a part of the job search equation as translating your military skills into the civilian sector. Hiring managers in businesses nationwide are interested in hiring former service members — and nonprofit organizations are no different.

If you've heard that nonprofit groups can't pay you or that they're made up of non-professional workers in disorganized groups, you've heard a few myths, according to Matthew Hugg. He is the creator and president of Fundraising Transitions.com, a career services and coaching firm that works with professionals looking for jobs in fundraising and nonprofit agencies.

For some 20 years, Hugg has worked with charitable organizations and assisted in developing strategies and fundraising techniques. Before creating FundraisingTransitions, he was the director of development and alumni relations for the University of the Arts in Philadelphia and also served as the associate vice president of development for both Ursinus College and the University of Cincinnati Foundation in Ohio.

Hugg says many people have the wrong idea about what nonprofit organizations are really like and what they do. He offered to set the record straight for service members interested in finding a meaningful second career.

Q What do you typically tell people about nonprofit careers, given the misconceptions out there?

A Some people say, "A nonprofit? You mean those tiny, disorganized ... do-gooder groups?" And I have to say, "No, I mean the multinational organizations that provide food to refugees in 20 countries, or the regional medical center that cares for the urban poor in neighborhoods that remind you of the worst of Baghdad, or the university that educates up-and-coming engineers who will develop the latest life-saving armor, or your local disaster relief organization that runs circles around FEMA."

Service members may also wonder if the nonprofit culture is one that will accept them. This is a legitimate, significant question for someone with a military background. But the answer, just like the answer in the for-profit world, can be a resounding "Yes" — if you find the right organization. You'll find that nonprofits represent a wide variety of causes, political agendas and approaches to their work. There is one that will accept you with open arms, and will be grateful for your experience.

Q Can you explain the truth about nonprofit work so these misconceptions can be eliminated for our readers?

A There's a common presumption that nonprofits are kind of flakey. As in the business world, the 'flakey factor' varies widely. ... For instance, I was a bit taken aback when I once

interviewed at a cutting-edge disabled-care organization. All the field staff referred to the central headquarters as the “corporate office.” When I got there, I found that they were right. The place had a corporate culture that could rival IBM’s. No flakes there, believe me.

Another myth is that nonprofit work is “lite” work. If you say to yourself, “Hey, I’m from the military where we have real life-and-death situations to deal with and we don’t ‘play’ like they do in the nonprofit world,” then you’re wrong. You’ve never worked hard until you’ve worked at a nonprofit.

Long hours, bad hotels, and tight deadlines can all be present in a nonprofit, just as much if not more than a lot military postings, and in places that define the phrase “war zone.” And speaking of war zones, let’s touch on “life and death” for a moment. How life and death is sustaining an orphanage in Vietnam? Or bringing it home, how about finding housing for single mothers who are committed to turning around their lives? Or maybe fundraising so that scientists can develop more effective cancer treatments?

Q Are nonprofits, in general, financially strapped?

A That’s a big one. When most people think about nonprofits, they think of their local theater company, or maybe their child’s scout troop selling popcorn and holding bake sales, scrimping for every dollar to feed their mission’s budget. And that’s the key. Many nonprofits — whether big or small, high or low income — act poor because they know that every dollar they save can go into their mission — whether it’s saving another life, another tree, another you-name-it.

So what does this mean to you? Will you have to live like a monk? No. Increasingly, nonprofit managers see that to get good, happy, productive talent, they need to pay a living wage. Added to this, many believe that it is their moral imperative to do so — an attitude that you might not have encountered anywhere else. Does this mean that you might make as much as you would in the for-profit work sector? Maybe, maybe not. Whether you live like a monk on the pay is up to you, but hair shirts are not typically issued at nonprofits’ human resources offices.

Q Are most nonprofits small? And would this mean fewer opportunities?

A There is clearly an “80/20” rule at work among nonprofits, meaning 80 percent of the nonprofits do tend to be small. Because there are so many nonprofits, and record numbers of new ones are being registered each year, the vast majority are small. But the vast majority of registered for-profit businesses are “micro-businesses” that are rarely heard or seen, too.

Meanwhile, many nonprofits are huge — hospitals, universities, retirement communities, national health organizations, international relief organizations and many more. These leviathans serve giant issues and have an insatiable need for talented staff, in a variety of specialties.

Q How important a consideration is the mission of the agency?

A Like your work in the military, mission is key. Whether it’s improving the lives of migrant workers or seeing that kids with cancer get their last wish, dedication to mission is one of the major similarities between nonprofit and military work, and what distinguishes it from most of the for-profit world. It’s also what keeps you motivated, so that when your new boss says that you have to do something that doesn’t seem to make sense ... your dedication to the mission keeps you going.

Q What would you advise as a first step toward a nonprofit career?

A Start getting to know the nonprofit world — and yourself. Where are your interests? What mission appeals to you? ... Then start looking for the nonprofit that serves that mission. I would

suggest starting with sites such as www.GuideStar.com and begin reading www.philanthropy.com. Also take a look at www.np.times.com. Believe me, you have a place in the nonprofit world.

Career Transition Experts is a monthly feature. Tell us what you think in an e-mail to Tledford@atpco.com.

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