

Moving from For-Profit to Non-Profit Careers – The Search for Meaningful Work

Rita's Career Corner...With Rita B. Allen March 2013

Climbing the corporate ladder is no longer the vision of ultimate success for many individuals today across all demographics. Baby boomers are looking to give back to their communities and professions. Gen Xers desire balance and autonomy in their work. Gen Yers and Millennials have a strong sense of civic responsibility and community. These are just a few motivations that have caused many professionals to intentionally seek work in the non-profit sector and transition to work that is more meaningful and contributes to achieving a very specific cause that better our health, families, children, women, communities, lives, environment, etc. This has been an on-going trend that has grown considerably over the last decade and continues to at a fast pace. The reasons vary and are in most cases very specific to each individual. Some have chosen to do so after facing a personal experience, or at different life phases, to pursue personal interests, and/or to truly make a difference in a meaningful way. After 9/11, so many people reflected on what was most important to them and how they wanted to spend their time and utilize their talents.

We are living in a very dynamic and changing global marketplace which has created many opportunities to contribute in non-traditional ways and in ways that truly count for each and every one of us. The non-profit sector has grown tremendously enabling for much growth and opportunity in a way that is as competitive as the for-profit sector. Some of the desired skills and competencies they demand overlap with those in the for-profit sector including leadership skills, financial and business acumen, results-orientation, and development skills to name a few.

People really want to make a difference and contribute in a way that yields tangible results and success...and to experience a feeling of joy and fulfillment. Like any transition we make in our careers, the first step is to do your own due diligence by assessing your strengths, weaknesses, interests, values and priorities followed by goal setting, both short term and long term. Determine what is right for you – what you have to offer, what you want and be ready to ask for it. In order for you to be true to yourself, the self assessment is crucial so that we make the right choices and decisions at the right times of our lives and careers.

Such was the case for **Victoria Wang**, formerly a marketing executive in financial services and high technology industries, prior to co-founding **The Story Exchange**, www.thestoryexchange.org, a non-profit global video project empowering women to start their own businesses. They know the importance of role models and that's what The Story Exchange is all about: it's women inspiring women. By telling the stories

of successful entrepreneurs from all walks of life and sectors they encourage others to gain economic freedom, create the lifestyle of their choosing, and uncover their full potential. While in the for-profit sector, Victoria had served on several non-profit boards in addition to offering her time and expertise as a volunteer on many committees. As she reached a crossroads in her career looking for the next chapter, she knew she always wanted to help promote, support and empower women, which was the reason she started The Story Exchange; to provide role models and inspiration for women through the medium of videos and story-telling on the web. Victoria stated this was an opportunity for her to give back, "As an immigrant, our family escaped communism and came to the US. This country has provided me great opportunities to succeed and thrive as a woman, wife and mother. I want to play a role in helping other women succeed as well." Victoria was able to turn her passion into a reality through much hard work and determination. Through her networking efforts, she was led to a friend of a friend, who was a documentary filmmaker and became her co-founder. Victoria stresses the importance of follow-through, responsiveness, and appreciation of the people who help you along the way. In addition, she believes you should follow your instincts; seek counsel from trusted advisor and listen to their comments; be persistent; don't be discouraged with fund raising efforts and keep moving forward; if you don't have passion, don't do it; and be flexible and open to unexpected opportunities.

Another organization that I have personally be involved with is **More Than Words**, www.mtwyouth.org, a social enterprise which empowers youths who are in the foster care system, court involved, homeless, or out of school to take charge of their lives by taking charge of a business! I've truly been inspired by their accomplishments! MTW started in 2004 as a pilot online bookselling venture with a few young men in state custody and then transitioned to a vibrant storefront in 2005 and added café training program in 2008. Youth ages 16-21 work as a team to manage their online and retail bookstore and café as they gain skills and accountability while receiving intensive support to map plans for their future. MTW sticks with youth for the long haul with at least 24 months of follow up support. In addition to their site on Moody Street in Waltham, they have a 2nd site on East Berkeley Street in Boston. I invite you to stop by either location, have a latte and browse their book shelves.

There are numerous organizations that need talented staff in addition to volunteers. Find ones that are aligned with your passions and get involved! Not only is it a great way to give back and make a difference, but it is also a viable career path!

Tips for Considering a Transition to the Non-Profit Sector:

- 1) Do your homework** – research your areas of interest and learn as much as you can about how non profits function, understand their mission and vision, assess culture for fit and alignment
- 2) Network** – reach out and talk to a lot of people, ask a lot of questions, listen to their input and feedback, attend various events and start building relationships
- 3) Identify transferrable skills and talents** – focus on the value you will offer and bring to the organization in helping them achieve their goals - non-profits look for similar skills as for-profits such as leadership, influencing, relationship building, and financial acumen
- 4) Volunteer first** – offer your time and expertise, sit on a committee, serve on a board, gain experience in the non-profit sector in a variety of ways, determine strengths and limitations in addition to likes and dislikes, learn first-hand and build credibility

- 5) **Believe in the Mission** –_be passionate and stay passionate about the cause, and demonstrate a track record of engagement and involvement in that cause
- 6) **Be realistic and practical** – manage expectations appropriately, be prepared to work hard and long in addition to dealing with disappointments, celebrate accomplishments and milestones

Ask Rita...

Question: I would love to work for a social enterprise but am reluctant to give up my high paying job to start over in a new industry, especially one that does not traditionally offer high rewards or benefits. What is the best way to transition into the non-profit sector?

Answer: That is wonderful that you assessed your desires and interests and are considering the personal choice to make this transition. The question is have you done enough homework to research the specific social enterprise that would be right for you and to better understand what is required? Don't base your facts on myths or preconceived notions. Talk to people who have made this transition and ask them about their experiences. Learn what is involved in a typical day. Don't rush into anything without learning all you can learn about the different options that would appeal to you. Then start to assess how you could apply the skills you have and seek a role that leverages your talents and experiences. Last but not least, volunteer first to gain first-hand knowledge and to build a network. Once you have done all this, then you can start to create a plan for yourself should you decide to make the transition. Good luck!

Rita Balian Allen is the President of Rita B. Allen Associates, a provider of career management/talent management consulting and executive coaching services located in Waltham at www.ritaballenassociates.com and the President of ACPI – NE (Association of Career Professionals International – New England), www.acpi-ne.org