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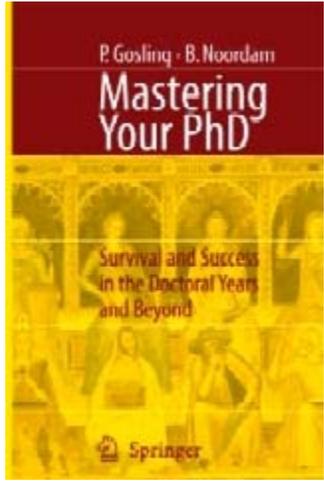
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**Mastering Your Ph.D.: Exploring Nonprofit Organizations**

Patricia Gosling  
Germany  
2 May 2008

Perhaps you've decided not to pursue a career in academia, but you're not sure about jumping into an industry job, either. Have you considered the nonprofit sector?

If you're passionate about a particular issue, mission-driven, and--in addition to your passion for science--desirous to improve the state of humanity and the world, you may be a perfect candidate for a job with a nonprofit. This article aims to give you a sense of the breadth and range of the possibilities open to you and a general sense of what nonprofits have to offer.

**WHERE TO START**

Not just soup kitchens and humanitarian aid, nonprofit organizations focus on nearly every issue you can think of: environmental protection, biomedical research, health care, education, international aid, disaster relief, science policy, and science awareness, among countless others. In the United States alone, more than 12 million people--some 9% of the workforce--are employed in the nonprofit sector.

If you don't wish to stray too far from the bench, you can seek research jobs at the many well-known and well-funded nonprofit organizations dedicated to biomedical research; examples include the [Howard Hughes Medical Institute](#) (United States), the [Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center](#) (United States), and the [Monash Institute of Medical Research](#) (Australia).

Numerous smaller nonprofits, such as the [Robert Packard Center for ALS Research](#) and the [Australian Stem Cell Centre](#), to name two, have a specific biomedical focus. Some mid-sized nonprofit organizations that hire biomedical researchers include [SRI International](#) (a nonprofit scientific research institute focused on innovative technologies) and the [Institute for OneWorld Health](#), the world's first nonprofit pharmaceutical company, both based in California. These small and mid-sized organizations attract excellent researchers who are passionate about their

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work and committed to research in areas typically neglected by profitmaking companies.

If you've decided to pursue a career outside the lab but would like to stay in science, then the nonprofit sector has many options for you, including, for example, working in science education for an organization such as the [Society for Science and the Public](#), as an outreach coordinator for the [American Association for the Advancement of Science](#) (the organization that publishes *Science Careers*), or as a program officer at the [Alfred P. Sloan Foundation](#). Ph.D. scientists in agricultural or environmental sciences may choose to pursue a career at one of the many nonprofits active in the developing world, such as The [Nature Conservancy](#) and [Earthwatch Institute](#).

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## ADVANTAGES

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There are many issues to consider before starting on a career path in the nonprofit sector, including your personal and professional career goals. Here are a few of the advantages:

- *A wide range of excellent and compatible colleagues.* Nonprofits often have their pick of the brightest and most dedicated candidates, many of whom share your values. Staff members typically have a passion for their work and are committed to effecting social change. The result in many cases is an atmosphere of passion, teamwork, and collaboration.
- *Excellent opportunities for professional growth.* Due to the lower staff-to-project ratio in many smaller organizations--and often a flatter organizational structure--you may be assigned several projects and a wide range of tasks, offering you a better-than-average opportunity to strengthen your skill set.
- *Flexibility.* Compared with a corporate enterprise, for example, nonprofits may offer more flexibility in setting and achieving goals, establishing benchmarks, and setting strategies for meeting the organization's mission.

## DISADVANTAGES

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Like any sector, nonprofits have some potential downsides:

- *Lower salary.* Most but not all nonprofits pay salaries lower than those in industry. This is especially true of advocacy organizations. But there's a wide range across the nonprofit sector, so don't let this particular issue discourage you.
- *Higher employee turnover.* There are many reasons for employee turnover in the nonprofit sector; burnout is high on the list, particularly if the organization is understaffed and you are required to multitask. Staff members may leave for better paying jobs, to switch sectors, or to return to school. Often, the smaller nonprofits lack professional-development tools aimed at retaining employees.
- *Limited opportunities for career advancement.* At smaller nonprofits, like most small organizations, upper management is very stable, so you might have to switch to another organization to advance in your career.
- *Structural differences.* If you thrive on hierarchy, discernable targets, and clear deliverables, small and medium-sized nonprofits might not be for you. Organizational clarity may be lacking, as these smaller nonprofits strive to fulfill their missions with limited staffing and resources. In larger and better funded organizations, these differences from industry tend to be less pronounced.
- *Fundraising.* Depending on the type of nonprofit, much time will be spent raising funds and writing grants.

One big advantage for many is that nonprofit organizations, whether large or small, are committed to their mission, not to shareholders or to maximizing the bottom line. This philosophy, however, may lead to an organizational structure and management style that, for better or worse, can create tensions and obstacles regarding the best way for the organization

to meet its mission and goals.

## IS NONPROFIT RIGHT FOR YOU?

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How will you know if working in the nonprofit sector is right for you? Understanding yourself and your personal and professional goals is a first step. If you're passionate about a particular issue, and you like the idea of giving back to the community or making the world a better place to live, then a nonprofit organization may be the perfect place for you to launch your career.

Whether you're considering a job at a particular nonprofit or looking for a nonprofit organization to work for, you should, as in any job search, thoroughly research the organization while keeping a few sector-specific issues in mind as you explore your options.

First, look carefully at the organization's mission statement, which you can almost always find on its Web site, to decide whether its mission is one you're passionate about (or, at a minimum, one you can believe in). Next, look at the organization's staff profiles to see if the type of people it employs fits your skills and career ambitions. Finally, take a look at the annual report to see what kind of operating budget the organization has and how funds are allocated. This information will give you crucial clues about how the organization goes about achieving its mission, the type of people it hires, and the stability of its finances. Try, if possible, to contact someone who works for the organization, or a former employee, to get a better sense of its structure, culture, and day-to-day operations.

Once you make it to the interview stage, no matter the size or renown of the organization, ask some key questions to get a better sense of the organization's operations and how they treat their staff:

- What is the structure/hierarchy of the organization? How are decisions made and communicated to the staff?
- Does the organization encourage teamwork and collaboration, or do staff members work independently on projects?
- What opportunities are there for advancement within the organization and/or partner organizations?
- What kind of training will I receive? What opportunities exist for professional development?
- What are the organization's near-term and long-term goals?
- How is the organization funded and what type of operating budget does it have?

The answers to these questions may help you align your possibly idealistic expectations with how things really work. Even if the organization is doing excellent work to improve the state of humanity, you can be sure that petty grievances, turf wars, and other aspects of interpersonal friction will be present—just as in any profitmaking corporation or bureaucracy-laden government institution.

Finally, ask yourself: Am I passionate about the organization's mission? Is this a place I would like to come to work every day? Do the organization's goals and objectives fit with my own interests and values? Do I see this as a first step in a career progression of increasing responsibility?

The nonprofit sector isn't for everyone, but for many, particularly those making the transition from academia, the values and culture inherent in the nonprofit world may offer an exciting and rewarding career choice.

Patricia Gosling is the author (with Bart Noordam) of *Mastering Your Ph.D.: Survival and Success in the Doctoral Years and Beyond* (Springer, 2006). She is a senior medical writer at Novartis Vaccines & Diagnostics in Germany and a freelance science writer.

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