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Young People & Nonprofit Work

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INTRODUCTION

Young workers are essential to the long-term sustainability of the sector. In order to have experienced managers and senior leaders tomorrow, nonprofit organizations need to hire and retain young early-career workers today. Without investing in young talent, nonprofit organizations will inevitably experience talent gaps in the future.

In order to better understand the experiences of young workers in the nonprofit sector, we conducted a series of exploratory interviews to hear directly from young workers themselves. These interviews revealed significant insights into the experiences, aspirations, and challenges of young people currently working in the nonprofit sector. There is a common perception that young people leave the nonprofit sector because they are drawn to better opportunities in business and government, but young people challenged that narrative. They described challenges making entry into the nonprofit sector difficult for some, and near impossible for others. They reported difficulty finding stable nonprofit work, and navigating possible career paths. Many experienced mounting pressures leading them to question the long-term viability of a career in the nonprofit sector.

Funding reform was identified as an important dimension of improving the experiences of young nonprofit workers, but most of the employment challenges reported can be addressed relatively simply at an organizational level, with modest cost. In this report, we summarize findings from these interviews, and provide concrete recommendations to help nonprofit organizations counter organizational practices that keep promising young people out of the nonprofit sector and push them towards opportunities elsewhere.

METHODOLOGY

This report highlights key findings from interviews conducted with 13 young nonprofit workers working in Ontario-based core nonprofit organizations.¹ Study participants ranged in age from 26 to 34, with an average age of 30. Eleven identified as women and two as men, a ratio broadly consistent with the gender ratio among nonprofit workers throughout Canada (HR Council for the Voluntary and Nonprofit Sector, 2008). All had pursued undergraduate studies and virtually all had either completed a master's degree or a graduate certificate – some had completed multiple post-graduate degrees.

Participants worked in a range of nonprofit subsectors, including social and youth services, health, environment, and the arts. They held a variety of roles, with primary responsibilities including fundraising, events management, communications, and volunteer management. Seven were employed at organizations with five or fewer employees, two at organizations with six to 20 employees, and four at organizations with more than 20 employees. Most worked in the Greater Toronto Area, two in rural northern communities, and one in Ottawa. Seven participants had full-time permanent positions, three held part-time permanent positions, two had full-time fixed-term contracts, and one held multiple short-term, part-time contracts with the same nonprofit employer. At the time of the first interview, tenure with their current employer ranged between three months and four years. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling.²

Two semi-structured interviews were completed with each participant. Most first interviews were conducted by telephone and averaged 58 minutes. They focused on participants' entry into the nonprofit sector, including how they first became involved with nonprofit organizations, their motivations for seeking nonprofit work, their experiences during

¹ The core nonprofit sector excludes hospitals, universities, colleges and public and separate school boards. We focused on young people working in core sector organizations because the core accounts for the vast majority (99%) of charities and nonprofits, and because core organizations are typically smaller, less well-resourced, and tend to face greater human resources challenges.

² In snowball sampling, early study participants suggest other participants. The process is much like rolling a snowball through the snow to make it larger.

the job search, and factors making nonprofit work rewarding and challenging. Findings from these interviews were used to inform and structure longer follow-up interviews, most of which were carried out in-person and averaged 80 minutes in length. These more in-depth interviews focused on the specifics of each participant's current nonprofit job, including type of employment, benefits, and professional and career development. With one exception, interviews were audio recorded and key portions transcribed.³ All interviews were conducted between March and August, 2016.

³ One participant requested their interviews not be recorded.

KEY FINDINGS

This study examines the early career experiences of young nonprofit workers in Ontario. While exploratory, it provides significant insight into young people's experiences obtaining employment in nonprofit organizations and how these experiences affect the sector's ability to attract and retain young workers over the long-term. It is important to emphasize that the study draws on a small convenience sample from the Greater Toronto Area, composed mostly of young workers with smaller nonprofits. A group of young workers with larger organizations located in other areas might report somewhat different experiences. Additionally, the study focuses on young workers and does not directly examine the experiences of other early career nonprofit employees, such as newcomers to Canada or mature workers transitioning to the nonprofit sector.

Young people's reasons for seeking nonprofit work

If there was one unifying thread through our interviews with young nonprofit workers, it was their passion for working in the nonprofit sector and sincere desire to do meaningful work. Again and again, they described formative experiences, personal connections to causes, and motivations that steered them towards nonprofit employment. They told us how attractive they found nonprofit work, in terms of potential to make a difference and diversity of possible roles. This passion forms the lens through which they view the sector and interpret their early experiences as nonprofit workers.

Passion for a cause

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People have different reasons why they work; some do it just to make money, but I don't see work that way. It takes too much of my time for it not to be something I'm totally passionate about.

Many young people are drawn to nonprofit work because they have a passion to help advance causes that are important to them. Typically, participants said they first became aware of “their” cause at a young age, through their studies, friends and family, and community engagement. They then became involved with charities and nonprofits advancing this cause as volunteers and/or placement students. Through this exposure, they realized it was possible to pursue paid work related to the causes they care about. This *cause-first* orientation of young workers is important because it tends to make them reluctant to explore nonprofit work options not directly related to their specific cause. Early in their career, young workers’ entire view of nonprofit work tends to be centred around their cause – meaning they may not be aware of, or know how to access, opportunities available to them in other parts of the nonprofit sector. In fact, they may not see their cause and associated organizations as part of a broader nonprofit sector at all. As a result, many young job seekers are unaware of the full set of nonprofit employment opportunities available to them and, inadvertently, constrain their options.

Desire to create change

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We’re making the world a better place; everyone who comes in learns [new skills] – we’re doing good for individuals, society, and the environment.

A lot of people in the nonprofit sector are here because they care, and they are often brilliant innovators and thinkers.

Young people are eager to pursue work that is meaningful and consistent with their values. This means seeking employment that allows them to improve their communities and see positive outcomes from their efforts. However, participants did not believe that the potential for doing meaningful work was restricted to the nonprofit sector and they believed they could also do good work in the public and private sectors. That said, many did express a distinct preference for working in nonprofits. They saw the nonprofit sector as especially well-positioned to challenge systems of oppression and underlying causes of inequity. They felt that their personal values aligned with the primary objective of the nonprofit sector – creating social good.

Flexibility and wearing many hats



While it can also be a burden, I love the flexibility; I don't have to work in rigid structures.

We're nimble and flexible, there's a lot of opportunity to do great things – things that would be harder to do in complex organization structures.

Young people are drawn to employment that allows them to engage in different kinds of tasks and work in flexible and dynamic ways. They appreciate being trusted to take on new responsibilities and problem-solve, whether this means tackling new information technology challenges, learning to create a program budget, or writing a grant proposal for the first time. They appreciate work that is dynamic and that allows them to learn as they go. Participants placed a high value on flexibility, such as the ability to work flexible hours, work remotely, and adopt non-traditional working styles and organizational structures. They appreciated having space to be creative and offer innovative solutions to problems. Some participants shared a belief that many of these forms of flexibility are less common in the private and public sectors, making the nonprofit sector especially appealing to them. However, while young workers valued flexible working conditions, they said that when flexibility is offered without – or in place of – appropriate supports or employment stability, it can feel like ambiguity and lead them to feel stressed and disengaged.

Challenges of securing initial employment in the nonprofit sector

Although they are highly motivated to work in nonprofits, young workers report that obtaining their first stable, paid position is extremely difficult. Regardless of time period or sector, securing one's first paid position has never been easy. However, the challenges facing today's prospective young nonprofit workers seem particularly acute. This may be keeping promising young workers out of the sector and may even lead those who are successful in obtaining early career positions to question the long-term viability of a career in the nonprofit sector.

A profusion of unpaid and less stable work

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There aren't a lot of entry-level positions available, and there is also a propensity to fill them with volunteers. The kind of position you'd make available for a new grad, the sector fills with volunteers.

There is this sort of Catch-22 of everyone wanting employees with demonstrated work experience and they're not willing to accept unpaid work experience.

It's like a revolving door, people do a contract and then they're out, and then you get the next crop of people on contract, and then they're gone.

Many participants found traditional entry-level positions scarcer in the nonprofit sector than in the private or public sectors, because nonprofits can use volunteers to fill many positions that would be paid entry-level positions in other sectors. As the emphasis on recruiting and harnessing high-skill volunteers increases, participants believe this will become even more of a barrier for young job-seekers. Not surprisingly, participants reported that it is the norm for young nonprofit job seekers to use volunteering to gain relevant experience, build their skills, and become more attractive as potential hires. However, many reported that while their experiences as volunteers demonstrated that organizations clearly value and depend on them as volunteers, as job seekers they consistently found these volunteer experiences discounted, compared to prior paid experience. They found that while there are many opportunities to gain useful experience as a volunteer, translating this experience into paid employment can be extremely challenging.

In addition to greater reliance on volunteers, participants reported that organizations are increasingly hiring entry-level staff on a contract basis. For workers on short-term contracts (i.e., less than a year), this meant piecing together project-based contracts from multiple employers, or accepting back-to-back short-term contracts with the same employer, with no guarantee of renewal. For workers on longer-term contracts there was greater stability, but some noted these arrangements can carry unintended, lasting consequences. These positions are

often tied to project funding and participants reported that job responsibilities and earnings are often fixed for the entire duration of the contract. This limits the scope of job responsibilities and, compared to non-contract employment, can decrease involvement with other areas of the organization's work and make it more difficult to transition into more advanced roles with the organization.

Fierce competition for good positions

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You have a situation where someone has a lot of transferable skills, a lot of great experience...[but the organization] wants people who have that exact experience and can hit the ground running.

The way people talk about young people coming into the sector [it's as though] they don't have the capacity or the skills, [you forget] you didn't have them either – you teach them. You think we can't do it because we haven't been given the opportunity.

A scarcity of traditional entry-level nonprofit jobs, combined with a highly competitive job market inside and outside the nonprofit sector, has created fierce competition among job seekers. As a result, nonprofit employers are being extremely selective. While today's young candidates are the most educated generation to ever come into the workforce, participants reported that employers are placing a very high premium on directly applicable skills and experience for entry-level positions. They found this disadvantages those in their position, who are newer to work and tend to have more transferable, rather than direct, skills and experience.

Additionally, young workers felt that employer expectations related to formal education have become unrealistic and are helping make entry into the sector more challenging than truly required for the positions on offer. In response to the competitive job market, nonprofit employers (as with employers in other sectors) are demanding that new hires hold costly advanced degrees, certifications, and formal training – regardless of whether truly required. Participants reported that many job postings now require candidates to have graduate degrees for

positions where an undergraduate or college degree might previously have been adequate. Additionally, they said some job postings require candidates to have already completed certifications that, in the past, they would have been able to complete while on the job – often with employer support. As a result, today’s young workers believe they have significantly less access to the kinds of paid, skill-building opportunities past generations had when they first entered the job market. Given this competitive environment, some participants felt compelled to pursue postgraduate studies and training, despite believing these advanced degrees would not make them or their competitors any more truly qualified for the work they sought.

Barriers to staying employed in nonprofits

Once young people have successfully obtained stable nonprofit employment, they face continuing challenges to remaining in the nonprofit sector. While there is a widespread perception that nonprofits inevitably lose talented staff to better benefits and opportunities offered in the private and public sectors, participants consistently challenged this narrative. Instead of feeling drawn to better opportunities in other sectors, they described their experiences in terms of steadily accumulating challenges that gradually push them out of the nonprofit sector. Significantly for organizations seeking to increase retention of young workers, many of these challenges can be at least partially addressed with little or no financial cost.

Ambiguous performance management and expectations

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There are no rules...It’s difficult to navigate who is the correct person to talk to and there isn’t really a procedure for how things should be handled.

I don’t think anyone at my work has any idea what I’m doing.

Most participants found performance management in nonprofit organizations to be highly ambiguous. Overall, they characterized practices and processes as sporadic and informal. They found that ambiguous processes and lack of feedback made it difficult for them to objectively assess their work and caused feelings of

frustration and anxiety. Even in organizations where performance management was more formal, many found the processes to be highly unidirectional, in that they were not able to provide input on the kind of supervision and support they felt they needed from their managers. For many, this type of ambiguity and unidirectionality was a key reason they had left previous nonprofit employers.

Another factor commonly mentioned by participants was a lack of clarity around job expectations. When starting a position, many participants did not receive a formal orientation, job description, or complete information on how performance would be assessed. They said this was particularly likely when they had previously been volunteers with the organization, or had prior experience in a similar role at another nonprofit. An ambiguous start to a new role makes it difficult for young workers to know how to be successful. This causes considerable frustration and lost potential, both for young workers and the people they report to.

Undefined career paths

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My biggest issue is that I never know what to do next because my job is so niche. It's not that the skills aren't translatable, but it's like, where do I go and which part of my skillset do I focus on developing?

There is no budget for professional development...it's a nicety that is brought up in reviews.

It is widely understood that opportunities for internal promotion within a single organization are more limited in the nonprofit sector, compared to the public and private sectors. To progress, early career nonprofit workers typically need to seek out more advanced positions with other organizations. While participants accepted this reality, they believe the process is more ambiguous and difficult for young workers than it needs to be. Many described situations where the day-to-day roles and responsibilities of their positions were significantly broader than described in their formal job descriptions. While it is not uncommon for the roles and responsibilities of a given position, as worked, to differ somewhat from the job description, the differences described by participants were significant. Additionally, while employers were open to extending job responsibilities,

they were often reluctant to formally acknowledge that roles had changed and recognize the additional responsibilities young workers had taken on. As a result, many participants described a disconnect between their responsibilities and the organizational recognition they received, including job title. This made it difficult for them to know what more senior positions they might realistically apply for and move into.

Career paths are often made more defined by professional development. While the importance of professional development is widely understood in the nonprofit sector, budget constraints often mean that financial resources are limited. Most participants reported that they received little or no support from their employer for professional development. When resources were available to staff, there was often a high degree of ambiguity as to how they could be accessed and what kinds of professional development they could be applied towards. When participants did receive professional development, typically it focused on their current role and offered little potential for developing skills relevant to more senior roles. Most participants described feeling pressure to stay competitive within the broader labour market, and regularly sought out training to develop new skills, often paying out-of-pocket to access these opportunities.

Financial insecurity

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It helps that I'm single and I don't have a family to support. The flip side of it is that there is no way I could with this job...It's the kind of thing where I want to do work like this, that helps people, that makes the world a better place, but I'm also in my thirties and have other priorities in my life as well.

I've only been on one payroll with a benefits program—the bad job [I mentioned before]. This was another reason why it was so difficult to leave that job—because benefits are important.

In addition to a lack of clarity around job expectations and poorly defined career paths, many young nonprofit workers struggle to be financially secure. Many are

barely making ends meet on their current salary and cannot afford additional expenses. This means that child rearing, home ownership, and saving for the future are all beyond reach. This is a daunting reality for young people in their mid-to-late 20s and early 30s who have, or may be planning to have, children or have aging family members to care for. When young people have spent extended periods of time completing unpaid and unstable work, they can feel particularly financially insecure and uncertain about the future. The participants we spoke with were mindful of their nonprofit employer's financial realities and the salaries they could reasonably afford, but they struggled to reconcile this with their own financial constraints, particularly when job responsibilities felt ever-increasing.

Most participants, including those in full-time and permanent positions, reported they did not receive health or retirement benefits. As a result, many depended on benefits from partners working in the private or public sector. For those unable to access benefits this way, this often meant forgoing health treatments. For some, experiences with health concerns had already limited their options for work in the nonprofit sector. For many, saving for retirement seemed like a distant dream.

Funding practices that contribute to employment challenges

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Funding can be plentiful one day and pulled out from your organization the next, there is tons of competition...all these things can affect your organization's financial health, so none of us are secure really.

I have struggled with my salary and I've even thought about taking a pay cut at times because it's very hard to find funding general enough to go to my salary.

Virtually all participants saw funding practices and policies as a key driver behind many of the employment challenges they face. They viewed them as playing a large role in poor employment conditions, such as job instability and short-term contracts, a lack of health and retirement benefits, and limited funding for professional development. However, while participants overwhelmingly felt that funding practices significantly contribute to these

challenges, some felt that nonprofits were not doing their best to advocate for better working conditions for staff. For example, they described instances of senior leaders not communicating with funders to negotiate the creation of better jobs or exploring ways to keep high-performing young employees originally hired through temporary government-sponsored employment programs. Participants believed that nonprofit leaders have an organizational responsibility to work collaboratively and openly with funders to encourage funding practices that support stable working conditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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I don't know that I'd be able to tell [nonprofit leaders] anything they don't already know...but I think I would say think about this more, every day, think about where you are positioned in the world when dealing with staff, because I think that you forget sometimes that you have a stable position.

Young nonprofit workers face a number of considerable barriers to securing stable nonprofit work and thriving as nonprofit workers. Our interviews suggest that nonprofit organizations need to understand these barriers and intentionally adapt their practices if they are to successfully recruit and retain young people. While this might seem like a daunting task given the constraints affecting nonprofits, there are simple ways for organizations to improve nonprofit work without referring to external forces. In this section, we identify both short- and medium-term recommendations that can be implemented at an organizational level by nonprofit leaders and staff committed to recruiting and retaining young nonprofit workers.

1. Decrease barriers for young people entering the nonprofit sector

There are many ways for nonprofit organizations to actively improve young people's transition from school into paid nonprofit work. This means both improving young people's access to paid entry-level opportunities and limiting their need to complete multiple volunteer and contract roles before securing more stable paid work.

Address the clarity of volunteer and contract positions

Regardless of whether a position is paid or volunteer, long-term or short-term, enhancing the quality of volunteer and contract positions improves

young peoples' early experiences with the sector and enhances their ability to meaningfully contribute. When young people have positive and meaningful early experiences, their desire to stay within the sector is increased.

- **Provide a job description.** Outline in writing what is expected of a volunteer or contractor. Additionally, provide them with a description of their direct supervisor's responsibilities, including how they are accountable to them. Review role descriptions early in their tenure and continue to review and revise role descriptions on a fixed and recurring basis (in the case of a short-term paid contract, when the contract is being renewed). For contractors, use these reviews as an opportunity to confirm whether compensation should be increased to reflect growing responsibilities.
- **Offer an orientation and training.** When a volunteer or contractor joins the organization, help them become quickly familiarised with both their role and the nonprofit by offering an orientation and training. Regardless of whether they have former experience with the organization or previously completed a similar role, an orientation and training are necessary to ensuring they have the tools they need to be successful in their position. This is also an opportunity to identify and address training needs specific to the individual.
- **Provide performance management and development.** Create shared understandings of how performance will be assessed by working with volunteers and contractors to develop performance measures for their position. Create regular opportunities to discuss their professional and career development goals, and explore alignment with their current role or other opportunities at the organization. If there is a mismatch between their development goals and opportunities for growth and advancement at the organization, help them build relationships within the nonprofit sector by connecting them with nonprofit professionals at other organizations.
- **Be transparent and intentional about how your organization uses volunteers and contractors.** Volunteers and contractors should be used intentionally and not interchangeably with employees. A

nonprofit organization can face significant financial penalties if they hire individuals as self-employed contractors to avoid paying benefits, CPP, and EI contributions (HR Council, n.d.).

Adopt hiring practices that are inclusive of young people

Nonprofit organizations can improve their hiring practices so they are more inclusive of young people. Inclusive hiring practices increase young people's access to paid nonprofit opportunities by limiting factors that discourage them from applying to paid positions and challenging hiring practices that disadvantage young applicants.

- **Only ask for job requirements that are necessary.** In job postings, only ask for credentials, requirements, or years of experience that are necessary for the position. Pay particular attention that entry-level job postings emphasize key competencies, rather than exhaustively list all possible skills and qualifications. This will encourage younger workers who are often stronger in transferable skills and experience to apply. Additionally, do not choose job requirements arbitrarily or to decrease the number of applications to review. If there are concerns that an increased number of applications will increase the workload of hiring staff, budget increased time for hiring— it is a worthwhile investment that in the long-run saves human resources expenses.
- **Write clear and comprehensive job postings.** Save time and limit misunderstandings for both job applicants and hiring staff by using clear and comprehensive language in job postings. Job descriptions should be easily understood, even by those who are new to work. Only classify a job as entry-level if it is truly for entry-level applicants, for example, a job that requires three or five years of relevant paid experience is not entry-level. If a position is entry-level, think twice before asking for relevant paid experience.
- **Disclose the salary range on job postings.** When salary ranges are disclosed on job postings, job seekers have an easier time identifying whether they are an appropriate candidate and can afford to live on the salary being offered. This is a more efficient hiring process for both

hiring staff and applicants. If publicly disclosing salary ranges is not currently feasible, help your organization work towards this goal. In the meantime, inform candidates of the pay range as early in the hiring process as possible.

- **Know how volunteers will be considered for employment opportunities within the organization.** Nonprofits should be aware of possible job candidates among their young volunteers, but particularly mindful of not mishandling the process and compromising existing valuable volunteer relationships. Implement transparent policies and practices for how volunteers will be considered for employment opportunities, and ensure that volunteers are aware of them. Be particularly attentive to ensuring that communication throughout the hiring process is timely and respectful, ensuring that volunteer applicants feel respected and that their candidacy is being taken seriously, regardless of the eventual outcome.
- **Increase paid entry-level opportunities.** Where possible, explore ways to convert entry-level volunteer and unpaid internship roles into paid positions. The greater the number of paid entry-level positions, the greater the pool of young people with diverse socio-economic backgrounds who can pursue paid nonprofit work. Commit to exploring the creation of stable and predictable contract positions, such as those funded through the Canada Summer Jobs program. Recurring positions such as these can be easier to plan and budget for both from the perspective of the nonprofit and the young worker.

2. Engage young workers in ways that increase their likelihood of staying in the nonprofit sector

Nonprofit organizations can address proliferating challenges pushing young workers out of nonprofits by engaging them in ways that increase their likelihood of staying in the sector. Improving young workers' experiences in the sector increases nonprofits' ability to retain and advance talented young workers, and supports the development of a talent pipeline for the sector.

Recognize and encourage learning and growth

Nonprofit organizations can foster and encourage a culture of learning and intergenerational exchange, where staff of all ages and career stages learn from each other and together. Nonprofits have a competitive advantage over other organizations when their staff adapt, grow, and problem-solve more collaboratively and effectively.

- **Create clear role expectations and support staff in meeting these expectations.** To facilitate the recognition and encouragement of learning and growth, first create a shared understanding between a young worker and their supervisor of role expectations and what success in their position looks like. Develop clearly defined performance measures and review these on a fixed and recurring basis. These formal reviews can be supplemented, but not substituted, by frequent and informal check-ins. This will reduce ambiguity for both the employee and their supervisor, and create a shared understanding of how well an employee is meeting their performance measures. This will additionally make it easier to recognize when their responsibilities have changed or increased.
- **Formally recognize growth.** Adopt formal ways of recognizing when an employee's position has evolved and when they have assumed responsibilities they were not originally hired to do. Common ways of recognizing increased responsibilities include a title change and increased compensation. When resources are scarce, or when in doubt about how to recognize staff growth or achievements, simply ask them their preferred ways of being recognized.
- **Foster and develop leadership.** Leadership is an attribute that can be fostered and developed among nonprofit staff of all ages and career stages. Provide young workers with concrete opportunities to assume responsibility and practice leadership. In organizations where decision-making is centralized, this may require changing how some decisions are made, and the staff involved in these processes. Additionally, model positive leadership attributes and encourage intergenerational mentorship and exchange within and across organizations.

- **Support career planning.** Engage young workers in making career development plans and support them in meeting their career goals. Ensure they are aware of the full range of employment opportunities available to them within the nonprofit sector, particularly if their work and volunteer experiences have focused on one specific cause or subsector. Offer opportunities for them to participate in events, training, and conversations with staff within the organization and at other nonprofits.

Improve practices and planning around compensation

Young workers' experiences in the nonprofit sector can be improved in many ways with little or no financial resources. That said, they can only continue working in the sector when they can afford reasonable life expenses. Nonprofit organizations and their staff stand to gain when nonprofit leadership prioritizes strategic and long-term thinking around compensation.

- **Anticipate room for growth.** When setting the salary for positions think ahead and leave room for increases, including for workers hired through contract positions. Staff hired on temporary contracts often see their role and responsibilities grow as they demonstrate their capabilities and as opportunities become available. Bear in mind that when responsibilities grow, compensation should likely grow as well. Even modest salary increases to reflect growing responsibilities can help improve an employee's finances and offer the sense that their earning potential is not static.
- **Be transparent about raises and promotions.** Establish clear and openly communicated policies and practices that inform how pay raises and promotions are determined. These will ensure that raises and promotions are managed both intentionally and evenly across the organization. This increases employees' ability to plan for the future and helps reduce possible feelings of uncertainty about advancement within an organization.
- **Study and model compensation benchmarks.** Research salary and benefits norms and strive to model your organization's compensation

offerings after these. Consult nonprofit salary surveys, as well as private and public sector studies. Be knowledgeable of where your organization's compensation package sits in relation to other organizations and as necessary, create a plan to increase the competitiveness of the compensation offered by your organization. Even if offering health and retirement benefits seems currently out of reach, research how much it would cost to offer them to staff.

- **Commit to reviewing staff compensation on a biennial basis.** Commit the board of directors and senior management to reviewing staff salaries and benefits at a minimum on a biennial basis. Develop compensation indicators to guide your organization's progress towards offering equitable and competitive compensation for staff at all levels of the organization. A good way to start crafting indicators is by consulting the Decent Work Charter and Checklist developed by the Toronto Neighbourhood Centres (Ontario Nonprofit Network, 2016). This approach to staff compensation helps create a holistic review process and frames compensation as not only a financial cost, but also a direct contributor to the overall sustainability of the organization.
- **Advocate on behalf of staff for better compensation.** Seize opportunities to advocate on behalf of your team for better compensation. This means engaging funders in conversations about how their funding practices can support quality nonprofit jobs. It also means including equitable and competitive salaries in grant applications instead of lowball wages. These practices can help normalize pay equity throughout the sector.

CONCLUSION

Young workers play an important role in creating a thriving, high-impact nonprofit sector. Findings from this research show that nonprofit organizations should not accept that losing talented young workers to other organizations or sectors is inevitable. Improving how nonprofit organizations attract, retain, and develop young workers is crucial for preventing future talent gaps. There are many simple, reasonable steps nonprofits can take to improve young people's ability to stay and thrive in the sector.

Many of the poor employment practices described by young people reflect broader human resources challenges that have become pervasive throughout the nonprofit sector. Improving the experiences of young nonprofit workers – and workers of all ages and career stages – requires a fundamental shift in how nonprofit organizations engage employees towards pursuing their missions.

People-centred organizations: A way forward

The concept of people-centred organizations is becoming increasingly popular in the business literature. Research has shown that organizations that prioritize their staff perform significantly better (Pfeffer, 1998; Strack, Caye, von der Linden, Quiros, & Haen, 2012; Ton, 2014). Becoming people-centred means recognizing that employees are instrumental in creating organizational value and shaping its successes. This includes offering fair compensation and employment stability, and investing in performance management and leadership and talent development.

Being client-focused is embedded in the DNA of nonprofit work, but this focus on people does not translate into prioritizing nonprofit staff. Our interviews with young nonprofit workers suggest that many nonprofit organizations are struggling to prioritize their people. The nonprofit sector needs a committed and engaged labour force to continue tackling complex societal issues and meeting

bold objectives. The impact of the nonprofit sector hinges on its workers, and nonprofit employers gamble when they do not prioritize their employees.

In the context of youth employment, a people-centred approach means engaging young workers in ways that increase their likelihood of staying in the sector. It means thinking beyond the temporary function a person can perform, and supporting them in navigating broader opportunities. When nonprofit employers see young workers as part of the long-term vision for the sector, young people are much more likely to see a role for themselves as well.

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