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[Home](#) [Advice](#) [Manage Your Career](#)

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Considering a Job in Fund Raising?

By Jeffrey A. Schoenherr

I know what you're thinking after reading that headline: "Search for a new job? I'm just thankful to have any job in this economy." With layoffs at companies in what appears to be nearly every industry, and economic news good one day and bad the next, everyone currently employed should be pleased.

But you don't have to delay your job search just because of the uncertain news all around us. For those already in the fund-raising business who are ready to make a change, or those interested in entering the field, now is the moment to be actively searching.

Plenty of development positions are available today in higher education and in other nonprofit sectors. Just look in the job sections of this publication and *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*. You will notice that fund raisers of all skill levels are being sought throughout the country and around the world.

With the positive employment outlook for this industry, even those who are merely thinking of entering fund raising should seriously consider it now. *U.S. News & World Report* agrees, listing fund raising as one of its "Best Careers" for 2009 and beyond. According to the magazine, not only does the hiring of fund-raising professionals continue to grow in the slow economy, but so, too, do the salaries offered. For example, a salary range of \$54,900 to \$92,700 was given for fund raisers with eight or more years' experience in the field.

U.S. News also gave fund-raising careers a grade of A in all categories, including job-market outlook, prestige, and job satisfaction.

Interestingly, the magazine's praise for the field doesn't stop at the traditional positions of fund raiser and fund-raising manager. One of the "Best-Kept-Secret" careers for this year is "prospect researcher," a job in which you collect information about potential donors. *U.S. News* calls that position "one of nonprofits' hidden heroes," and I concur. As the entire field continues to grow, so will opportunities for prospect researchers, who offer the key support

necessary for fund-raising campaigns to be successful.

The rise of fund raising among educational institutions in Europe, Australia, and now Asia offers unique opportunities. Many overseas colleges and universities have looked to the United States for fund raisers to lead their organizations and bring the breadth of knowledge we have mastered here. Now is a terrific time for those who have the ability to relocate, and especially those who have interest in, or experience, working with other cultures.

An overseas position is not necessarily a good fit for everyone, so you'll need to be honest with yourself. Think about how successfully you will be able to handle a new position, in a new culture, which may present different rules than those with which you are familiar. Also, consider whether you (and your family) will thrive overseas. It may seem exciting at first glance—but this is a major life change, not just a career move.

So you have looked at the job listings. You are ready to move forward. Now what?

I took note of some recent advice offered by Richard Nelson Bolles, a leader in the career-development field for more than 30 years and author of the best seller for job hunters, *What Color Is Your Parachute?* In a September 1 article in the newsletter *Bottom Line Personal*, Bolles described successful and unsuccessful job-hunting strategies for "finding a job 'when there are no jobs.'"

Mailing your résumé in response to a print advertisement or online posting may appear to be a good plan. However, most employers receive a huge number of applications in response to those listings. If you rely on that strategy, you will find it difficult to make yourself stand out as a candidate. Rather than lump your résumé in with everyone else's, Bolles recommends handing it personally to someone in the organization. An even more effective approach would be to involve someone who can say they have met with you and can offer a favorable opinion.

Luckily for us as fund raisers, the best strategy for finding new positions is one we all know well and practice each day—networking. Bolles believes that employers love to hire based on personal recommendations from employees and trusted contacts. That's why you should always look to expand your network, whether or not you are searching for a new position. Isn't that what we do all day as development professionals anyway?

It was just such a personal connection that led to the recent hiring of my team's new administrative coordinator. After reading at least 60 applications online and interviewing several candidates, I

received a personal recommendation and a hand-delivered résumé for another candidate from a colleague. After reviewing the résumé on the spot and questioning the colleague about the candidate, I immediately called her for an interview. Why? Because I trust my colleague's opinion and liked the positive words he had to say about her. We hired her after two meetings.

If, as a candidate, you do not have a contact in the organization in which you are interested, Bolles suggests approaching the prospective employer for an "informational interview." That strategy is becoming more popular and will at least get you in the door. You may even meet with someone who can become your future contact.

As a hiring manager, I have personally seen that strategy work well. More and more I receive requests from colleagues at other institutions who ask to meet with me while they are traveling in the area. Most want to discuss future opportunities at our institution or just talk about fund raising. Recently I have had requests from several people who work outside of fund raising but want to meet with me. They usually ask for time to talk about how to break into the field. I end up reviewing their résumés and offering suggestions on how to demonstrate transferable skills. That probably gives them an advantage when they begin their search.

Many of us receive countless telephone calls and e-mail messages from professional recruiters about job openings. They always seem to be looking for suggestions and leads about good candidates. Because I cannot respond to everyone, I have chosen a few recruiters who are trustworthy and added them to my network. Whenever they contact me, I try to offer names of people I believe may be a good fit for a particular opening.

Those people may not always be interested in the position, but they know I am looking out for them, and they would do the same for me. We have agreed that it is far better to hear about an opportunity and turn it down than not learn about it at all.

When you're job hunting, it is important to search for institutions that suit your interests and personality. Look at an organization's mission, culture, and even at its donors. Ask yourself: Can I successfully work with people in the organization, as well as its external constituents? What types of people are involved—alumni, parents, grateful patients, unaffiliated donors? And have I worked successfully with those groups in the past?

Be honest with yourself when answering those questions so that you make a smart move and don't experience regret in a few months. I

have seen instances in which colleagues were not the right fit for a position, or made a poor career move because they did not give enough thought to the people they would be working with. It takes only a little time to ask questions and think about the organization with which you may soon become connected.

If you're ready to make a career move, don't let the bad economic news fool you. Many colleges and universities are looking for external experience. Rally your network and move forward.

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