Myth No. 1: Nonprofit employees are mostly social workers

Years ago, many nonprofits were places where social workers, nurses, and retirees spent their time meeting community needs (feeding, housing, educating, counseling, etc.). Today’s nonprofits are still addressing community problems, but organizations have evolved into much, much more. They are looking for people who have the skills, determination, and passion to do whatever it takes to see the mission accomplished.

As the sector has matured, the men and women who work at nonprofits have evolved as well. Having the heart (passion) is still necessary. But equally important is the head (knowledge) to make sure these important operations are efficient and effective.

For that reason, today’s nonprofits employ more than just social workers. You’ll also find professionals with PhDs, MBAs, JDs, and degrees in business, psychology, and other specialized education working in organizations.

Myth No. 2: Nonprofits employ people who can’t succeed in the business world

The men and women who work at nonprofit organizations are highly motivated and intelligent. Those choose their careers based on a desire to make the world a better place to live—not on how much fortune or fame they can gain.

Many people make the jump from for-profit to nonprofit. Those with backgrounds in government, finance, private businesses, and corporations find their skills and experience blend nicely with nonprofit work.

Myth No. 3: Nonprofit employers are mostly small operations

There are plenty of small nonprofit organizations. But there are also many large, multifaceted operations with hundreds or thousands of employees.

In many communities, nonprofits are the largest employers. In Springfield, Mo., the two largest employers are nonprofits (hospitals), employing more than 10,000 each. In addition, several other major employers are nonprofits. They’ll find similar scenarios in cities throughout the United States, where major employers are nonprofit organizations.

Myth No. 4: Nonprofit employees don’t get paid decent wages

It is true that most people working in nonprofit organizations are not overpaid. But salaries and benefits have risen considerably over the past decade.

A nationwide study of nonprofits found that average salary for a nonprofit executive director in the U.S. is $107,651. In Springfield, the average annual salary of an executive director is $88,828. Of course, that number is slightly inflated because it includes the salaries of hospital presidents. Without the healthcare institutions included, the average E.D. salary is still more than $65,000. For non-executive workers, the average is over $52,000 a year. Entry-level employees make about $32,000 a year.

The wages of the nonprofit sector are, at all levels, highly competitive with other industries.

Myth No. 5: Nonprofits will hire any warm body that comes through the door

Most organizations are filled with men and women who are extremely passionate about the work, and they are very picky about who they employ. They are looking for people who have the skills, determination, and passion to do whatever it takes to see the mission accomplished.

A lot of nonprofits are very well known and respected and are considered a desirable place to work. So it’s not surprising that these groups receive a flood of applications when vacancies occur, allowing them to select from a pool of quality candidates.

Myth No. 6: Working at a nonprofit is easier than working at a for-profit company

Working in the nonprofit sector is not for the faint-hearted, lazy, or selfish person. In many ways, it can be harder than working at a for-profit.

Nonprofits usually have very limited budgets, which means they must make do with less. They have to stretch dollars and frequently make great sacrifices in order to help the organization succeed. The hours can be long and the demands for their help can be overwhelming at times.

Beyond the financial and physical challenges, the work can be emotionally draining. Working every day with wicked problems can take its toll.

But the rewards go far beyond monetary. There is great satisfaction in helping people in need and knowing you had a part in making our world a better place to live. Studies have shown people working in the nonprofit industry have much higher satisfaction rates than those working in the for-profit sector.

Myth No. 7: All nonprofit organizations do social work

While some nonprofits groups are actively engaged in “social good,” there are many other types of work within the sector.

There are more than 25 different types of tax-exempt organizations. These include hospitals, colleges and universities, faith-based groups, labor unions, animal shelters, credit unions, sports leagues, historic organizations, chambers of commerce, scientific groups, neighborhood associations, country clubs, and many other different types of organizations.

Employees in nonprofits have varied and challenging daily tasks that are frequently outside the realm of social work.

Myth No. 8: Nonprofit work is not a profession

It is not unusual to find those who have spent their entire career working in the nonprofit industry. Decades ago, the nonprofit industry was filled with organizations ran by one part-time paid employee and a handful of volunteers. But today’s organizations have highly skilled employees who have made a career of nonprofit work.

It’s well known that today’s young men and women (often called Millennials) are civic-minded, determined to change the world. Their determination and passion is a perfect fit for most nonprofit organizations.

Many in this age group are now viewing nonprofit work as a lifelong pursuit.

Colleges and universities now offer academic programs designed to train the new wave of engaged students and current nonprofit industry professionals. Degrees with words like Nonprofit, Philanthropy, and Social Enterprise have popped up throughout the United States and online.

Whatever place you are in your career choice—starting new, considering a change, or nearing retirement—you should give serious consideration to working in the nonprofit industry.