



Executive Summary:
University Student Perceptions of Careers
in the Nonprofit Sector

June 2010

HR Council for the Nonprofit Sector

The HR Council takes action on nonprofit labour force issues.

As a **catalyst**, the HR Council sparks awareness and action on labour force issues. As a **convenor**, we bring together people, information and ideas in the spirit of collaborative action. As a **research instigator** we are building knowledge and improving our understanding of the nonprofit labour force.

© 2010 HR Council for the Nonprofit Sector

Copyright is waived for charitable and nonprofit organizations for non-commercial use, with attribution. All other rights reserved.

Aussi disponible en français.

201-291 Dalhousie Street | Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7E5
t: 613.244.8332 | tf: 866.594.8332 | f: 613.241.2252
www: hrcouncil.ca | Twitter: [@HR_Council](https://twitter.com/HR_Council)



The HR Council is funded by the Government of Canada's Sector Council Program. The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

Canada

Executive Summary

Relatively few students have a specific job or a particular employer in mind to pursue following graduation, though almost everyone had given some serious thought to the issue.

Introduction

During 2008 - 2009, the HR Council undertook research to improve the nonprofit sector's understanding of the characteristics and motivating factors of prospective "early career" employees. The project, *Tapping into the Talents of Early Career Employees*, included a [literature review](#) and subscription to a [national survey](#) of Canadian students, *From Learning to Work™*, conducted by DECODE and Brainstorm Consulting in 2009. The research for the project also included focus groups with university students as outlined in this report.

Objectives and methodology

The HR Council commissioned EKOS Research Associates Inc. to conduct five online focus groups in an effort to enhance the Council's understanding of the views and experiences of 3rd and 4th year university students concerning the following:

- Knowledge and awareness of jobs and careers in the nonprofit sector
- Perceptions and expectations of job satisfaction in the sector
- Positive and negative factors that would influence a decision to work in the sector

During October 2009, a total of five online discussion groups were conducted with 36 randomly selected third or fourth year undergraduate university students in Canada who were between the ages of 20 and 29 years. Two discussions were held with students whose studies had included community-service learning¹, and three groups were held with students who had not had this type of learning experience.

Overall, the research participants were very engaged in the discussion.

1. Community service-learning (CSL), sometimes known as service learning, combines volunteer service with academic work. CSL provides students with opportunities to become engaged in their community and to undertake work that benefits the community. A key part of CSL is that students reflect on their work in a formal way, through activities such as journal writing, group discussions, presentations, research projects and written reports. This process of reflection is what distinguishes CSL from volunteering.

Collectively, they attended universities from across Canada and were studying a wide range of fields, mostly social sciences, arts and humanities, business, and applied sciences.

The focus groups findings are very consistent with previous research commissioned by the HR Council, particularly with respect to the perceived advantages and disadvantages of working in the nonprofit sector and of the trade-offs associated with such a career.

Perceptions of early career employment and the labour market

Relatively few students have a specific job or a particular employer in mind to pursue following graduation, though almost everyone had given some serious thought to the issue.

Participants exhibited realistic and pragmatic views and expectations of the labour market. No one expects to have an ideal job, much less an ideal first (“real”) job. Rather, they anticipate having to make trade offs among a number of factors: money, fulfillment, stability, variety, advancement opportunities, etc. Money (i.e., salary and benefits) is on everyone’s mind, but the vast majority is willing to trade it off in a first job as long as they can “survive” financially; for many this means covering basic expenses, plus student loan repayments, or put another way: \$40,000.00 per year. Overall, the key first job criteria (in no particular order) are:

- Working in one’s field of study
- Advancement opportunities
- Decent wages/benefits
- The opportunity to learn and develop skills
- A good work environment (people and organizational values)
- Flexibility (e.g., hours)
- Doing good/contributing to society

Students employ all of the usual techniques to find employment (e.g., Internet job sites, networking, etc.). They are not aware of Internet sites specializing in employment opportunities in the nonprofit sector. Much of their focus seems to be on-campus, including career counselling services and job fairs. When seeking work in the nonprofit sector, participants feel that volunteering is a useful way of gaining experience and “getting their foot in the door” as well as making contacts.

Perceptions of careers in the nonprofit sector

People who work in the nonprofit sector are generally perceived as having traded-off salary/benefits, job security, and, possibly opportunities for advancement in exchange for greater fulfillment in the form of contributing to society, learning and developing skills, and having a good work environment. Focus group participants who have experience in the nonprofit sector as paid employees, through community service-learning or as volunteers, are more likely to be comfortable making such a trade-off, in large part it seems, because they have experienced the intrinsic rewards.

Nonprofit workplaces were described as less hierarchical with a more relaxed environment, offering more responsibility, a greater range of duties and opportunities to do hands-on work with people.

There is significant interest, even desire, on the part of some students to work in the nonprofit sector, particularly among those with community service-learning experience. Most other students are open to the possibility, however, many had not previously considered the nonprofit sector as a post-graduation employment option. A few felt that the perceived drawbacks were a barrier to pursuing employment in the sector, citing concerns over salary or a lack of demand for their skills.

The key questions that students have about working in the nonprofit sector pertain to compensation and job security (e.g., term vs. permanent employment). They would also want to know a significant amount about the work and mandate of a prospective nonprofit employer. If recent graduates

are trading-off certain elements (e.g., salary) for the type of fulfillment and reward that can come from working for a nonprofit organization, they want to ensure that there is a good match between their personal values and interests with those of the organization.

Awareness and knowledge of the nonprofit sector, through volunteering or a community-engaged learning experience, appears to be linked with positive perceptions of the sector, and more specifically, working for a non-profit organization.

Communications

Participants were presented with a list of ten statements developed by the project's advisory committee that could be used by the nonprofit sector to communicate to university students about employment and careers in the nonprofit sector. They were asked to select the statement they preferred and then to rate each one on a scale of 0 to 100. While there was a wide range of responses (in fact, every statement was selected as a favourite at least once), the most resonant were:

- *Today I helped house a homeless family, finished a strategic plan, met with community leaders, launched an ad campaign... all in a day's work:* It speaks to the rewarding and fulfilling nature of employment in the sector, while also providing a sense of the work that people do
- *Find work, find your passion, find balance. Find yourself in a non-profit career:* The notion of passion has appeal to young people and is consistent with their perceptions of a career in the nonprofit sector

Participants were invited to view and comment on two pages from the booklet *Careers in the Nonprofit Sector*, developed by the Institute for Nonprofit Studies, Mount Royal College (2008). Both personal narratives by people employed in the sector and factual descriptions of careers in the nonprofit sector were thought by students to be interesting and useful.

Participants use the Internet as a key source of

information on careers and employment opportunities. The research suggests, however, that few students are aware of sites specifically devoted to jobs in the nonprofit sector. The positive reaction of the focus group participants to the nonprofit sector page on the Gateway to Careers website, developed by The Alliance of Sector Councils, suggests that existing sites should be more widely promoted to university students and additional online material should be developed.

Promotion of careers in the nonprofit sector

Participants offered a wide range of suggestions as to how the nonprofit sector could encourage more university students to think about a career in the sector. The most common recommendation was the use of an advertising campaign targeting university students, particularly on campus. A number of participants stated that they had never seen any form of on-campus promotions for nonprofit organizations. The absence of nonprofit organizations from campus career fairs might serve to reinforce the perception that there are not many opportunities for paid employment in the sector, and that nonprofit organizations are too cash strapped to participate. Students also recommended coordinating recruitment efforts with university co-op programs and advertising positions on the co-op websites.

Another common suggestion was that marketing should focus on addressing the concerns that many students have with regards to a career in the nonprofit sector, namely wages and job security. A number of participants also recommended focusing on the rewarding and meaningful nature of a career in the nonprofit sector, as many saw it as the sector's biggest strength.

Note to readers:

*For a more fullsome discussion on this topic, please see *Growing Younger: Tapping into the Talents of Early Career Employees*.*