



# Growing Younger:

## Tapping into the Talents of Early Career Employees

*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.

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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



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Canada

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# 1 Project motivations

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In the face of an aging workforce and increasing competition for fewer workers, the nonprofit sector will need to develop strategic approaches to the recruitment and retention of younger workers.

In 2008 and 2009, the HR Council undertook research to deepen the nonprofit sector's understanding of the characteristics and motivations of prospective "early career" employees: post-secondary students, recent graduates, and those seeking or working in their first jobs. The purpose of the *Tapping into the Talents of Early Career Employees* project was to improve the nonprofit sector's ability to attract early career employees, particularly recent university graduates. In the face of an aging workforce and increasing competition for fewer workers, the nonprofit sector will need to develop strategic approaches to the recruitment and retention of younger workers; this report offers a portrait of younger workers and recommendations about how nonprofit organizations and the sector at large can attract young talent. Research for the project included:

A **literature review**. The Canadian Career Development Foundation conducted a literature review that examined:

- Characteristics, motivating factors and employment preferences of early career employees
- Factors influencing career decisions by early career employees

A **quantitative study**. The HR Council subscribed to *From Learning to Work™*, conducted by DECODE and Brainstorm Consulting. This 2009 online survey covered over 16,000 university and college students from across Canada, exploring:

- Factors influencing students' choice of field of study
- Student preferences regarding industries to work in following graduation
- Student debt levels
- Career goals
- Salary and promotion expectations
- How students learn about employers
- Factors influencing choice of employment following graduation
- Brand rankings for selected employers

**Qualitative research.** The HR Council commissioned five online focus groups with university students, conducted by EKOS Research Associates in October 2009, that explored:

- Job qualities participants will seek when they look for employment
- Knowledge and awareness of careers in the nonprofit sector
- Perceived benefits and drawbacks of working in the nonprofit sector
- Student responses to communications materials promoting work in the nonprofit sector
- The influence of community service-learning on participants' attitudes to the sector

**Attendance at PPX workshops.** Four members of the project advisory committee attended workshops on Generation Y recruitment and retention in Ottawa, Toronto and Calgary, sponsored by the Public Policy Forum.

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**Melissa Brizuela**

Toronto, Ontario

**Sharon Evans**

Calgary, Alberta

**Jesse Gair**

Winnipeg, Manitoba

**Ginny Gonneau**

Barrie, Ontario

**Elana Ludman**

Montreal, Quebec

**Andrew Naples**

Kingston, Ontario

**Rena Tabata**

Vancouver, British Columbia

# 2 Background and context

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With more than 1.2 million employees, or 7% of the total labour force, working in 69,000 organizations across the country, the nonprofit sector must prepare for the impending shifts in the Canadian labour force.

## A demographic challenge

The Canadian labour force is aging at a rapid rate. By 2011, approximately 41% of the working population will be between the ages of 45 and 64, compared to 29% in 1991 (HRSDC, n.d.). Because fertility rates declined following the baby boom, there are not enough young workers to replace retirees leaving the labour force.

Statistics Canada projects that the combination of low birth rates and an aging labour force will cause labour force growth to slow over the next 25 years (Martel et al., 2007). Even if baby boomers delay retirement, slower labour force growth will heighten competition for skilled workers of all ages. In all sectors, these demographic trends are giving rise to serious concerns about productivity, skills shortages and sources of replacement workers in the years to come.

With over 1.2 million employees, or 7% of the total labour force, working in 69,000 organizations across the country, the nonprofit sector must prepare for the impending shifts in the Canadian labour force. A recent survey conducted by the HR Council found that the mean age of employees in the sector is 43.4, slightly older than the Canadian labour force (HR Council, 2008, p. 25). The survey also found that organizations across the sector are already facing significant recruitment challenges.

Nonprofit organizations realize that the effectiveness of the sector depends upon the ability to attract and retain workers of all ages. In particular, engaging early career workers is vital to the long-term viability and vitality of the sector.

## Recruitment and retention challenges in Canadian nonprofits

The HR Council's Labour Force Study (Nov. 2007 - Jan. 2008), found that of the nearly two-thirds (65%) of sector employers who reported recruitment activity during the previous year, almost half (47%) said recruiting was either "difficult" or "very difficult". The most commonly cited recruitment challenges were a scarcity of applicants (70%); low salary (67%); lack of applicants with relevant work experience (57%); and lack of applicants with skills required for the job (56%) (HR Council, 2008, p. 17).

Most nonprofit organizations have a much easier time retaining existing employees than recruiting new ones. Most employers (59.5%) indicate that it was either "easy" (30.6%) or "very easy" (28.9%) to retain current employees. A quarter of employees, however, indicate they are currently looking for a new job, most often because of dissatisfaction with their salary (HR Council, 2008, p. 16; pp. 36-37).

In a 2007 study by Imagine Canada, nonprofit leaders said that recruiting skilled staff—especially senior staff and young staff—was their biggest challenge. These leaders indicated that the sector needed to make stronger efforts to understand young employees' motivations—and to make more room for young people to contribute their skills and grow professionally in nonprofit organizations (Zarinpoush & Hall).

These opinions echoed findings from a number of American studies, which conclude that simply making a stronger recruitment pitch to young workers will not be sufficient to attract them to nonprofit organizations. Rather, structural changes (such as better work-life balance, technological renewal, and clearer and more appealing career development paths) will be necessary to meet young people's expectations (Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2008).

The most commonly cited recruitment challenges were a scarcity of applicants (70%); low salary (67%); lack of applicants with relevant work experience (57%); and lack of applicants with skills required for the job (56%).

—HR Council, 2008, p. 17

“ I think in many ways the sector that you work in doesn't make a lot of difference. The individual company/organization plays a much greater role in shaping the benefits of the job.”

—Focus group participant

# 3 Generation Y at work

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Generation Y workers perceive their generation as highly adaptable, comfortable with technology, accepting of diversity, willing to learn new things, open to change, and liking informality.

Krywulak & Roberts, 2009, p. 44

## A brief overview of the millennial cohort

Young people currently in post-secondary education and in their early career years are considered to be part of Generation Y (sometimes known as Millennials). Born beginning in the 1980s, this generation has attended post-secondary education in greater numbers and for longer periods than previous generations. Their ethnic, religious and family backgrounds are more varied than previous generations. Having grown up with new technologies, they are generally viewed as being more tech-savvy than older generations.

The first wave of Generation Y graduated from college and university just as baby boomers began to approach retirement. As Generation Y entered the workplace there was much hype and speculation about their perceived characteristics and workplace preferences. It is important to disentangle real generational differences from stereotypes, however; a recent report by the Conference Board of Canada found that perceived workplace differences among the three generations in the workplace are greater than actual differences (Krywulak & Roberts, 2009).

Workplace attitudes are shaped by life stage, education, gender and culture as well as generational cohort. Some supposed Generation Y characteristics can be attributed to generational influences – including the proliferation of information and communications technologies; parenting and educational practices that have focused on promoting self-esteem and student-centred learning; and increased exposure to ethnic and cultural diversity (Krywulak & Roberts, 2009, pp. 11- 12). Other characteristics – such as a desire for varied experiences, prompting job-hopping – reflect life stage.

Generation Y is by no means a monolithic social group. Not only is this generation the most ethnically and linguistically diverse cohort in Canada, but it has come of age in a media environment where a huge proliferation of choices in entertainment and communication (online communities, television channels, satellite radio stations) have enabled young people to explore niche social identities in new ways. According to Environics social values data, young people are more varied in their social values than either the baby boomers or the baby boomers' parents (Adams, 2000).

Given that Generation Y is internally diverse and not as starkly different from older people as is sometimes assumed, nonprofit organizations should not be overly preoccupied with supposed generational differences. Promoting inclusive management practices that benefit all employees is likely to be a more effective approach.

# 4 Choosing a career path

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Nonprofit managers report that after young employees get some training and experience in a nonprofit, they often move on to better paying positions in the private or public sectors.

## Young people's interest in nonprofits

Few Canadian youth are considering a career in nonprofits. A 2009 national survey of Canadians aged 16 to 27 years by Ipsos Reid found that 2% of this group identified the nonprofit sector as a preferred field in which to pursue a career (Ipsos Reid, 2009).<sup>1</sup> Other Ipsos Reid youth surveys have mirrored these results.

The sector appears more attractive to those with a post-secondary education. In 2009, the From Learning to Work™ survey had a total sample of 16,688 students from 50 post-secondary institutions across Canada. The majority (84%) were university students, most pursuing an undergraduate degree. One in ten of these students expressed interest in nonprofit employment following graduation, although most were also considering other career possibilities. When asked to single out their preferred type of organization to work for following graduation, 6% of the total sample selected “Non-profit/Charity/Social Enterprise” (HR Council, 2010a).<sup>2</sup>

1. The Ipsos Reid survey is representative of Canada's regional, age and gender composition for 16 to 27 year olds in accordance with 2006 Census data.
2. The From Learning to Work™ survey is not representative of all undergraduate students in Canada. Certain fields of study were under-represented - liberal arts, fine arts, education, social sciences and law. Given that students in these fields showed a stronger interest in the nonprofit sector, students' interest in the sector may not be fully reflected in these results.

Among university undergraduates who participated in the EKOS focus groups commissioned by the HR Council, awareness of nonprofit organizations was generally high, although students were not familiar with the full range of employment opportunities available. Participants who had community-service learning experience (i.e. placements in community organizations as part of their academic studies) were especially familiar with the benefits and challenges of work in the nonprofit sector—and were more likely to say they had considered (or were committed to) pursuing a career at a nonprofit organization.<sup>3</sup> Many other students had not considered the sector as a post-graduation employment option but were open to considering this possibility (HR Council, 2010b).

**Gender imbalance.** There is a significant gender imbalance among young people indicating an interest in the sector. Ipsos Reid found that 1% of males and 3% of females were interested in a career in the sector while the *From Learning to Work™* survey found that 23% of those interested in the sector were male and 77% were female, a finding that mirrors the current composition of the nonprofit sector labour force (HR Council, 2008, p. 25).

**A cautionary note on assessing interest in the “sector.”** Surveys asking youth about their interest in a career in the “nonprofit sector” may not fully capture potential interest. The sector is very diverse with many areas of activity and a wide range of missions and occupations. Young people may be attracted to specific issues or occupations without identifying these as elements of any sector. A US study found that young adults do not “consciously seek work in one sector or another. Rather, they measure potential employers and careers based on the nature of the work and other factors” (Cryer, 2004, p. 33). As well, the varied names used for the sector – nonprofit, not-for-profit, voluntary, community, and charitable – may cause confusion among young people.

## Competition with other sectors

Nonprofit organizations are widely viewed as training grounds for employees: sector managers report that after young employees get some training and experience in a nonprofit organization, they often move on to better paying positions in the private or public sectors (Hall, M. et al, 2003, p. 33). The HR Council’s Labour Force Study found that, among organizations experiencing recruitment challenges, 45% cited competition from for-profit organizations and government agencies and departments as a problem (HR Council, 2008, p. 17).

The Comité sectoriel de main-d’oeuvre: Économie sociale et Action communautaire (CSMO-ESAC) has taken note of demographic trends in Quebec and released a discussion paper which expresses concern that with the coming labour shortages, young people will be lured away from the nonprofit sector to the public or para-public sector by better salaries and working conditions (CSMO-ESAC, 2006). In response to concerns about labour shortages, the CSMO-ESAC is undertaking a three year marketing and awareness campaign to promote careers in the social economy and community sectors to young people in Quebec.

The *From Learning to Work™* survey (2009) found that interest in working in government is high among students who are considering nonprofit employment. The survey found that 59% of these students also expressed an interest in working for the public service following graduation. Among students whose first choice was to work in a “non-profit/charity/social enterprise” 38% expressed an interest in the public service (HR Council 2010a).

Commitment to a mission or “cause” may sometimes override inadequate compensation and job insecurity. However, young people who are attracted to public-benefit work may see opportunities in all sectors: the public sector offers employment focused on social issues; the private sector increasingly addresses corporate social responsibility; and social enterprises offer an approach that blends business with social purposes.

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3. Given the qualitative nature of the focus group research and the small number of students involved, this finding should be interpreted with caution but is noteworthy.

# Case Study:

Gen Y transition from nonprofit to government

## “I liked my job in a nonprofit, but..”

Sarah, 27, worked for a national nonprofit for three years after graduation from university then moved to a position with the federal government.



I liked my job in a nonprofit. I enjoyed the diversity of the work, the supportive team atmosphere, and the direct interaction I had with communities and people. It was satisfying to respond to problems immediately, implement solutions and see results. I was encouraged to be creative in my work and I developed a wide range of concrete skills. I appreciated the generous vacation leave and the opportunities to travel throughout the province.

However, I worked lots of overtime and was often overwhelmed and tired. Due to the low salary, I lived at home after graduation in order to pay off my student loan. The organization couldn't offer me long term job stability, just term positions. There was no pension and minimal benefits. Over time, I felt like I had plateau'd in my learning. I grew frustrated and tired. I also missed working with men, as my colleagues were almost exclusively women. While we were a great team, I missed having a gender balance.

I decided to take a position with the federal government, working on the same issues that I had focused on in the nonprofit sector. I was ready for a change, for new challenges and opportunities, and it seemed like the obvious next step. Having worked at the grassroots level, I appreciate the opportunity to see and contribute to the larger picture and, I hope, have a wider impact in my work. On a practical note, I also wanted more job stability, access to maternity benefits, and a pension. My salary is now much better; I can afford my own apartment while still saving money. While the pace at work is busy, I don't work overtime so my work-life balance is much improved.

More importantly for me, my new job is stimulating and offers new challenges. There are a lot more opportunities for professional development and career advancement. I will also have the chance to travel both internationally and within Canada, which is something I value. I have a sense of community with my colleagues: they are friendly, approachable and supportive. And I work with younger people, both men and women. While I sometimes miss direct contact with people impacted by my work, my contributions still feel meaningful.

Other things have been more of a challenge, however. Working in a complex hierarchy has been a major transition; in government, the many actors and considerations mean that things move very slowly. I also continue to struggle with being perceived as a “government official” in some situations. I have to be careful about discussing confidential or politically sensitive issues outside of the office and have to keep my opinions to myself at times. Nevertheless, I definitely feel the transition to government has been a good change for me and I'm glad I made the jump.



## Comparisons with other sectors

When asked to compare their perceptions of work in the nonprofit sector to work in other sectors, undergraduate students who participated in the EKOS focus groups commissioned by the HR Council saw a range of advantages to careers in nonprofit organizations. In addition to being more meaningful than “help[ing] a corporation make a profit” (as one student put it), students saw nonprofit work as likely to be more practical and hands-on than work in other sectors. Participants also believed, in some cases based on personal experience, that they would have opportunities to take on more responsibility and perform a wider range of tasks in a nonprofit organization than they would in other sectors, in part because they saw the nonprofit sector as less rigidly hierarchical than other sectors. Many participants believed that the social atmosphere in nonprofits would be more collegial and relaxed than in the public or private sectors (HR Council, 2010b).

There was a general perception among the students that nonprofit organizations not only work with tight budgets, but often struggle to survive. Many students had the sense that the essential trade-off of working in the nonprofit sector was that work provides satisfaction and fulfillment but employees earn less money and experience less job security than those in other sectors (HR Council, 2010b).

## Factors that influence young people’s thinking about possible careers

There is limited research on the factors that influence the career decisions of post-secondary students and early career employees. The data below point to a range of possible influences.

**Volunteer experiences** may shape young people’s perceptions of the nonprofit sector. A U.S. report notes that students who had volunteered in the sector were much more aware of the kind of work it offered and more motivated to seek employment where “they could make a difference” (Cryer, 2004,

p. 36). Many students who participated in the EKOS focus group research were active volunteers and their perceptions of the sector were based on their involvement with charities (HR Council, 2010b).

Young Canadians aged 15 to 24 are more likely to volunteer (58% volunteered) than Canadians in any other age group, partly due to mandatory community service requirements associated with some organizations and school systems (Hall et al., 2009, p. 51). Ontario’s mandatory high school community service program exposes nearly all students to the voluntary sector, although a study of the program found that among university-bound graduates, nearly nine in ten (85-88%) had already had other volunteering experiences (Southern Ontario Social Economy Research Alliance, 2009).

**Community-engaged learning.** Canadian and U.S. research in the field of career development has shown that internships, co-op placements, practicums and other work-study experiences are extremely helpful to young people making career decisions (Bell & Bezanson, 2006; Eyler et al., 2001). These experiences (which may be paid or unpaid, and may or may not yield academic credit) help students and recent graduates distill where, how and why they want to work in a given sector or occupation.

**Community service-learning.** In curricular community service-learning (CSL), students complete community placements that are associated with an academic course. Students have opportunities to reflect on their learning and make the link between what they learn in class and in the community – between theory and practice – through a process of reflection that may include journal writing, group discussions, presentations, research projects and written reports (Charbonneau, 2009).

A national longitudinal study in the United States found that community service-learning encouraged students initially pursuing non-service careers to switch their choice to a service career, and reinforced an initial choice of a service career. The study noted that “Students often choose career paths based on limited knowledge of themselves or the world of work, or simply because of what their parents or friends suggest. Service learning opens new possibilities to such students” (Astin et al., 2000, p. 87).

Internships are entry points into nonprofit employment for many early career employees, according to several US studies (Cryer, 2004). One study found that many nonprofit employees' first contact with nonprofit organizations came through internships, and noted that "the variety of career opportunities was surprising to them" (Chieffo et al, 2004, p. 23). The study found that students who held internships at nonprofit organizations had a clearer perception of how these organizations operated, and their experiences strongly influenced their feelings about the sector, both favorably and unfavorably. (Cryer, 2004, p. 33) The EKOS focus groups revealed similar dynamics; students who had completed community service-learning were articulate about the benefits of working in the sector, and more able than other students to generate a range of questions about working in the sector.<sup>4</sup> In particular, their questions reflected an awareness of some of potential downsides to working in the sector: unstable funding and short-term employment (HR Council, 2010b).

An evaluation of the Community Experience Initiative, which placed Canadian business students in community organizations over seven years, found significant benefits for students and the host organizations. The internships increased awareness of community sector issues, involvement in the sector and a sense of commitment to the sector. The evaluation found that 67% of former students now working in the private sector are able to engage with the community sector through their work and 28% are employed by their host organization or another nonprofit (Community Experience Initiative, 2007).

Community-engaged learning opportunities are an effective way to make students aware of nonprofit career opportunities; the fact that more academic institutions are offering this form of learning is good news for the nonprofit sector (Charbonneau, 2009). As community-engaged learning becomes more common, however, nonprofit organizations, their academic partners, and the programs' funders must work together to address capacity issues (see "Recommendations" section). When organizations do not have the capacity to accommodate students

effectively, community placements can become negative experiences for students and organizations alike. Among the frustrations community organizations commonly associate with student placements are scheduling problems; a lack of consultation and lead-time from partner academic institutions; placements that are too brief to be effective for either the student or the organization; and the sense that a disproportionate amount of responsibility for placement management falls on the nonprofit organization (as opposed to the academic partner) (Macdonald, 2009a; Stoecker, 2009).

Although these frustrations are serious for the nonprofit organizations that experience them, an equally pressing concern from a labour-force perspective is that rocky community-engaged learning experiences may leave students with a negative impression of the nonprofit sector at large—and may damage the sector's reputation among early career employees over time.

**Field of study.** The 2009 *From Learning to Work*<sup>TM</sup> survey found that students interested in nonprofit careers are more likely than other students to choose studies that align with their interests and abilities, and significantly more likely to choose studies that lead to a career that allows them to make "a positive impact." Half chose their area of study because it provides them with a range of transferable skills and one-third chose studies that were conducive to working in other countries. They were significantly less likely to choose studies that lead "to a stable career," or to high incomes (HR Council, 2010a).

There is a strong co-relation between students' field of study and their potential interest in nonprofit careers. Students in business, engineering and information technology were much less likely to express interest in specific nonprofit employers. Liberal arts and natural science students were more likely to list nonprofit organizations among preferred employers (HR Council, 2010a).

Very few post-secondary students in Canada pursue studies focused on the nonprofit sector. Mount Royal University in Calgary offers the only undergraduate degree in Canada focused on

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4. This finding is drawn from qualitative research with a small number of students; the relationship it suggests between community service-learning and enhanced knowledge of the nonprofit sector may not be general.

nonprofit sector management. Throughout Canada, most courses pertaining to nonprofit management are offered as continuing education programs (Timeraiser, n.d.; Nenshi, 2008).

**Personal relationships.** There is considerable evidence to suggest that personal relationships are extremely important in shaping young people's career plans. A number of studies have found that before students begin post-secondary education, parents exert the strongest influence on students' thinking about future careers (Bell & Bezanson, 2006). Research also shows that high-school students are more influenced by direct exposure to workplaces or the person doing the work than other forms of career information (Bell & Bezanson, 2006).

During post-secondary education, personal relationships remain important; the *From Learning to Work™* survey (2009) found that students rated personal relationships as most influential factor shaping their career selection process. Students rated acquaintances, professors and parents as more influential than co-op or career centre advisors (HR Council, 2010b). Professors also exert some influence: a 2008 survey of post-secondary students by the Canadian University Survey Consortium found that 67% of fourth-year undergraduate students have talked with their professors about employment or careers (PRA Inc., 2008).

**Online materials.** While personal relationships may shape broad career decisions, students often seek specific information online. Ipsos Reid found that about two in five (38%) young people say they would use the Internet first when seeking career information (Ipsos Reid, 2009). In the EKOS focus group research, students also confirmed the importance of the Internet (HR Council, 2010b).

The *Tapping into the Talents* project found a dearth of information (both in print and online) about careers in the sector targeted to young people and those who advise them about employment and career decisions. A few exceptions include:

- A booklet on [Careers in the Nonprofit Sector](#) developed by Mount Royal College (2008)
- A single page on the website, [Gateway to Careers](#), developed by The Alliance of Sector Councils
- A few articles on [CharityVillage.com](#)

- The [Idealist Guide to Nonprofit Careers for First-time Job Seekers](#) (2008)
- The [Nonprofit Career Guide: How to land a job that makes a difference](#) by Shelly Cryer (2008)

## Supporting career development: a task for all sectors

Research on career development services for youth and young adults has found that Canada does not have a well-developed system of career counseling and career information resources for students and early career workers. There is limited awareness of the benefits of career development and no national career development strategy or standards for service provision. Career development services for youth are highly decentralized. While there are “pockets” of promising practices that respond to a variety of youth needs, a system of coherent and comprehensive services for youth and young adults, whether in or out of school, does not exist. As a result, many young people are not well informed about career possibilities (Saunders, 2008, p. 17 citing Bell & Bezanson, 2006).

A 2008 survey of post-secondary students by the Canadian University Survey Consortium found that students are inadequately prepared for developing their career following graduation: 47% of undergraduate students have not made a decision about their careers; only 67% of fourth and fifth year students have a resume; few students report using employment services at their university; and only one in five has met with a career counselor. Students in the social sciences, arts and humanities are least likely to have worked or attended an employment fair; these students are also least likely to have decided on a career (PRA Inc., 2008). A study of University of Lethbridge students also found that even students about to graduate view career planning as only “somewhat important” and that Faculty of Arts students have limited awareness about opportunities offered by the university for experiential learning (through co-ops, internships and/or work experiences) (Archer, 2004).

# 5 Employment priorities and preferences

“Interesting work” and “work-life balance” [are] the most important factors for all students as they contemplate future employment.

Studies that examined secondary and post-secondary students’ preferences with respect to future careers and employers found that students tend to focus on the following factors:

- compensation (monetary and non-monetary)
- challenging and meaningful work/happiness at work
- work-life balance
- good relationships/a respectful work environment
- lifelong learning opportunities
- their employer’s citizenship policies and track record<sup>5</sup>

In the EKOS focus group research, participants expressed pragmatism and flexibility when asked what they were looking for in their first “real” job. There was broad acknowledgement that they might not immediately find work in the field in which they had trained, and that the salaries in their first position might be modest. In addition to a “decent” salary (defined by one group as an annual salary of \$40,000), participants wanted to be part of a positive organizational culture, in a job that offered the possibility of growth, learning, and advancement. (HR Council, 2010b)

The *From Learning to Work*<sup>TM</sup> survey (2009) found that “interesting work” and “work-life balance” were the most important factors for all students as they contemplated future employment. Students who express interest in nonprofit employment, however, rated other factors differently from other students. The

5. This list combines findings from Sobon, 2003 and Barnard, 2003.

survey found that 87% of students considering nonprofit employment identified “dedication to a cause/serving the greater good” as an important career goal, as compared to 72% of students overall. Job security is less important to those interested in nonprofit work but still scores high (77% compared to 86% of students overall). Students interested in nonprofit employment are significantly more likely than other students to seek “opportunities to have a personal impact” (53% versus 41%) and work that involves a “commitment to social responsibility” (53% versus 32%) when evaluating employment opportunities following graduation. (HR Council, 2010b)

It is noteworthy that the *From Learning to Work*<sup>TM</sup> survey (2009) found work-life balance, especially flexible working hours, to be the highest priority career goal for all students. Findings from the HR Council’s Labour Force Study indicate that employees of nonprofit organizations find it difficult to balance work and other commitments. Nearly half (46.3%) agreed that “My job leaves me with little time to get other things done” and “My work schedule is subject to last minute changes (47.2%). Only 9% agreed that the number of hours they work is manageable (HR Council, 2008b, p. 30).

The *From Learning to Work*<sup>TM</sup> survey (2009) found that students considering nonprofit employment reported significantly lower expectations for their starting salary and salary after five years than other students. Students expressing a definite interest in the sector expect a starting salary of \$40,000 and a salary of \$59,500 after five years (HR Council, 2010b). The survey found that 60% of students considering nonprofit employment will owe an average debt of \$25,000 following graduation. The EKOS focus group research revealed that students were pre-occupied with their debt levels when considering their employment choices following graduation. This mirrors US research that found that debt levels were a concern to students considering the prospect of nonprofit employment (Cryer, 2004).

The survey found that 87% of students considering nonprofit employment identified 'dedication to a cause/serving the greater good' as an important career goal, as compared to 72% of students overall.

—From *Learning to Work*<sup>TM</sup> survey (2009)

“ I would like the fact that the organization I’m working for has a purpose other than making money.... Feeling like your work is meaningful and making a positive difference.”

—Focus group participant

# 6 Finding work in nonprofits

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A number of focus group participants believed that volunteer work was a more important prerequisite to work in the nonprofit sector than in the private sector.

Students find their way into the nonprofit sector through a range of paths, from volunteer experiences, community-service learning and internships to more standard job-search approaches.

The *From Learning to Work*<sup>TM</sup> survey (2009) found that students considering nonprofit employment learn about employers primarily from career/job websites, employer websites, and friends and family. When researching employers, students are most interested in learning about current job offerings, job descriptions and requirements, and salary and compensation. (HR Council, 2010a)

The findings of the HR Council's qualitative research echo these quantitative findings. The EKOS focus group participants pointed to personal networks (family and friends as well as professors and past employers) as likely sources of information and guidance. Participants also focused on on-campus job fairs and career counseling services. The Internet was seen as an obvious source of information about both specific jobs and more general employment trends and requirements. Notably, focus group participants did not tend to see social networking sites such as Facebook as important sources of employment information; these sites were seen more as social outlets, not research tools (HR Council, 2010b).

A number of focus group participants believed that volunteer work was a more important prerequisite to work in the nonprofit sector than in the private sector. Some also believed that personal networks played a bigger role in finding work in the nonprofit sector, reasoning that private businesses are more likely to have the resources to carry out extensive search processes whereas community organizations are less likely to be able to invest heavily in recruitment (HR Council, 2010b).

In considering employment in the sector, focus group participants wanted information about compensation, job security and opportunities for advancement. In considering specific employers, they would also want to know a significant amount about the work and mandate of an organization to ensure a good fit (HR Council, 2010b).

# 7 Managing Generation Y's need for change

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Today's early career employees appear more likely to view jobs not as long-term arrangements but as stepping stones to further positions and learning opportunities.

While compensation and job security are important factors in retaining young employees, the HR Council research confirmed the importance of offering early career employees opportunities for development and advancement. Whether it is a life-stage phenomenon or a stable feature of the generation, today's early career employees appear more likely to view jobs not as long-term arrangements but as stepping stones to further positions and learning opportunities. As Allison Treppa of the Michigan Nonprofit Association writes, "Nothing is merely a 'job' but a stepping stone to the next big thing. If it feels stagnant, workers will make a change." (2007) Journalist Philip Quinn echoes this observation: "[Millennials] find it hard to justify staying; they have to feel they're moving quickly to the next opportunity within the organization. This is where small ...companies are going to have the most challenges. They don't offer as many layers of opportunity..." (2008).

According to HR Council research, most nonprofit organizations in Canada are small: three-quarters have fewer than ten employees and over half have fewer than five employees (HR Council, 2009). In such small organizations, promotion and advancement opportunities are limited. Although there is no Canadian research on how small organizations and "flat" organizational structures might affect retention within nonprofits, U.S. research has found that a lack of career ladders was a top concern of employees in the American nonprofit sector. The study confirmed that nonprofit professionals frequently change employers to advance their careers (Commongood Careers, 2008).

The 2009 *From Learning to Work*<sup>TM</sup> survey found that most students who are interested in nonprofit employment don't have a well-defined career plan and are not confident that their first job after graduation will be one they really want. They are willing to accept a job that is not ideal, but may be a good starting point for their careers. They are also willing to change jobs frequently in order to find work that fits their interests and abilities. The survey also found that 61% of all students (regardless of preferred industry) expect a promotion within the first 18 months in a job (HR Council, 2010a).

The research suggests that employers should discuss career goals and opportunities for development when first hiring young employees and at regular intervals afterwards. Such communication is important, given that young employees' ideas about what constitutes a career "path" might differ markedly from their older managers' ideas: "Rather than building a career with a single organization, younger people view their career as a buffet, are interested in sampling a variety of interesting experiences, and are more likely to move laterally within an organization or across organizations to go after the challenges and opportunities they seek" (Toupin & Plewes, 2007, p. 133).

Sector organizations also need to consider strategies for keeping young professionals in the sector as well as HR practices that support organizational retention. One possible strategy to promote sector retention is developing peer networks that promote networking and career development opportunities for early career employees and emerging leaders. Chapters of the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network have developed in the United States for this purpose (see: [www.ynnpn.org](http://www.ynnpn.org)). In Vancouver, Vantage Point has developed the [Next Leaders Network](#) to engage young professionals and leaders in interactive workshops that support career development and peer networking.

The research suggests that employers should discuss career goals and opportunities for development when first hiring young employees and at regular intervals afterwards.

“Working directly in the field is really interesting. Perhaps when I am older and less adventurous I might prefer the comfort of managing from a desk so I need a career that can give me that flexibility.”

—Focus group participant

# 8 Recommendations

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Any meaningful response to our sector's labour force challenges must include greater financial stability for both organizations and employees.

In view of the findings presented in this report, the HR Council believes the nonprofit sector should take a number of strategic actions to ensure that talented early career employees continue to bring their energy and ideas to Canadian nonprofit organizations in the years to come. Underlying the recommendations outlined in this section are two general systemic changes that are crucial to the long-term health of our sector's labour force: improved financial stability for nonprofit organizations and retention strategies that focus on improved compensation and job security for paid staff. Although the recommendations laid out in this document acknowledge the financial constraints of many nonprofit organizations and offer ideas about improving recruitment and retention in the face of these constraints, the HR Council believes that any meaningful response to our sector's labour force challenges must include greater financial stability for both organizations and employees. In addition to that general recommendation, the HR Council believes the following strategic measures are important means of improving nonprofit organizations' recruitment and retention of early career employees:

# Recommendation 1

*To improve awareness of the range of career opportunities available in the nonprofit sector, sector organizations should develop high-quality communications materials about careers in the sector, and make these materials available to young people and to those who advise them about career and employment decisions.*

## The context

Young people consistently report that personal relationships influence their career decisions. They also look to on-campus job fairs and career counseling services as well as the internet for career and employment information. Notably, young people report that they consult these sources not only for specific employment opportunities but also for general information about the range of employment opportunities available. Currently, little information about careers in the nonprofit sector is available through these channels. Lead organizations in the sector should work collaboratively to develop key information.

## Strategic action

Examples of concrete actions that respond to this recommendation could include:

- Nonprofit career and employment opportunities should be promoted through on-campus career centres and on-campus events
- Information about careers in the sector should be made available through websites that are in turn promoted through marketing campaigns
- General online information about careers in the sector should be linked to sites offering specific employment opportunities
- Information about jobs and careers in the sector should include salary ranges for entry-level and early-career work to promote realistic expectations about salaries
- Material promoting careers in the sector should address job security and opportunities for advancement
- Material promoting careers in the sector should include personal narratives about how individuals developed their careers, as well as factual descriptions of occupations and careers
- Communications depicting nonprofit organizations should represent people of different ethnicities, and young men as well as young women
- Efforts to promote early career employment in the sector should focus on the benefits of working in the sector as perceived by young people, including opportunities to contribute to a cause, "make a difference" and use their skills and education in the service of meaningful goals
- Communications materials should emphasize positive aspects of nonprofit careers that make them distinct from careers in government
- Outreach efforts should focus on students studying a variety of disciplines and should demonstrate how students' degrees and skill sets can be applied in the sector
- The HR Council should offer periodic webinars to career advisors to provide information about careers in the nonprofit sector and job search strategies

# Recommendation 2

*Sector organizations should work with educational institutions, funders and intermediary organizations in order to (a) expand access to community-engaged learning opportunities; and (b) address capacity issues in nonprofit organizations that hinder the sector's ability to deliver quality experiences to students, interns, and others.*

## The context

Research outlined in this report affirms that community-engaged learning, such as volunteer placements, community service-learning and internships, is an effective way to expose students and recent graduates to the range of opportunities available in the nonprofit sector. Currently, US and Canadian studies report that community staff observe “an absence of practical understanding by many campus partners about the day-to-day impact of student placements, and how campus requests and actions impact the ongoing operations of the organization.” (MacDonald, 2009, p. 12) Community partners require policies, planning and staff positions assigned to support placements (MacDonald, 2009, p. 27). Lack of funding is also an issue, since organizations do not receive remuneration for hosting students. In some communities, intermediary organizations such as community foundations, United Way, and Volunteer Centres could play a role in supporting community-engaged learning. Expanding and improving community-engaged learning opportunities stands to benefit nonprofit organizations, students and their communities.

## Strategic action

Sector organizations could respond to this recommendation by:

- Assessing their capacity to manage student placements, being selective about placements and limiting the number in keeping with organizational constraints
- Developing detailed web pages on their organization's website to enable students and faculty to pre-screen and learn more about their organization
- Developing and communicating orientation information, guidelines and requirements for student placements to academic partners and students
- Negotiating realistic arrangements with academic partners using written agreements
- Building long-term relationships with a limited number of academic programs, while remaining flexible about emerging opportunities
- Working collaboratively with other nonprofit organizations to develop common community standards for student placements
- Working collaboratively with other sector organizations and academic partners to develop common infrastructure to support student placements

# Recommendation 3

*Nonprofit organizations should implement organizational practices that improve recruitment and retention of early career workers.*

## The context

HR practices that clarify expectations and promote job satisfaction improve recruitment and retention of early career employees. In particular, early career employees appreciate opportunities to learn and develop their skills.

## Strategic action

Strategic action to improve recruitment and retention could include these practices:

- Provide detailed information online about the organization and employment opportunities; include salary ranges in job postings, if feasible.
- Review salaries and bring them as close to market rates as possible. Be creative with benefits.
- During the recruitment and selection process:
  - Provide a realistic and detailed job description
  - Explore career aspirations with candidates, and
  - Discuss opportunities for mentoring, training and development, increased responsibilities and promotions.
- To increase job satisfaction and retention:
  - Provide new recruits with comprehensive orientation and opportunities to understand the impact of their work and how their efforts support the mission of the organization
  - Provide mentoring, training and professional development
  - Make jobs as interesting and rewarding as possible
  - Provide cross-training opportunities (especially in entry-level positions)
  - Create developmental and leadership opportunities for young employees to grow their skills
  - Provide constructive feedback and be generous with praise and recognition
  - Offer promotions where possible, including "lateral" promotions
  - Discuss employees' career goals periodically and be prepared to respond to career and life changes of employees

# Recommendation 4

*Nonprofit organizations should collaboratively pursue initiatives that support employee development to promote retention of early career employees within the sector.*

## The context

HR Council research has documented a key characteristic of the nonprofit sector in Canada: many small organizations with few formal organizational links. Small organizations offer fewer opportunities for promotions and are less likely to have budgets for training and development, making it more difficult to retain early career employees who are looking for opportunities to develop their skills and advance their careers. Collaborative approaches to employee development could strengthen the likelihood that young employees will remain in the sector as they develop their careers.

## Strategic action

Examples of initiatives that respond to this recommendation could include:

- Learning opportunities, such as short-term secondments, that provide specific skills and experience
- Peer networks that offer professional development workshops and opportunities to learn about the work of other nonprofit organizations in the community
- Mentoring and leadership development programs for young employees

“ In my experience, nonprofit jobs have been very supportive of my personal development. [You get] opportunities to do things more formal jobs don't [give you]. [There's] skill-building, great opportunities to expand your knowledge. I like non-hierarchical, coalition-based work environments.”

—Focus group participant

# Recommendation 5

*Nonprofit organizations should implement a range of measures to promote work-life balance for all employees.*

## The context

Early career employees view work-life balance as a top priority. HR Council research suggests that many older employees in the non-profit sector find the demands of their jobs unsustainable. Thinking seriously about work-life balance issues should be a priority for the sector, both for the sake of recruiting early career employees and for the sake of retaining those already working in the sector.

## Strategic action

Examples of concrete actions that respond to this recommendation could include:

- Intentionally develop a work culture that appreciates and encourages work-life balance. Senior staff set the tone for others and should actively promote this work culture.
- Provide flexible work arrangements, including flexible hours and location of work.
- Develop and implement clear policies on overtime, including tracking hours worked and compensation for overtime.
- Discuss work culture with new employees, including expectations about overtime, and challenges posed by work volume and flexible job descriptions; encourage employees to set reasonable boundaries on their work lives.



I have [worked in a nonprofit and] found it to be a great experience. I would do it again. When people have a sense of purpose at work they are often happier in their workplace. So it often makes for a friendlier work environment.



—Focus group participant

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