

Making the Switch:

Transitioning Your Career

From the Private to the Public Sector

VINCENT ROBINSON ('99)

When Cisco Systems announced that part of its cost-cutting strategy would be to furlough many of its workers – rather than lay them off – to give them an opportunity to work in the social sector, the decision was widely applauded as an expression of corporate social responsibility in the face of tough economic times. This move was quite frame-breaking for a large corporation like Cisco, and has been celebrated as a win/win arrangement: Cisco keeps its talent, and the social sector can still benefit from that talent.

The question of how seasoned business people with valuable skills but limited nonprofit experience can successfully enter the social sector has begun to emerge only recently. A weak job market has amplified the issue and made it more widespread for many Stanford MBAs and others considering a first approach or a return to the nonprofit sector. How does a business person construct and execute a successful job search in the social sector?

The social sector holds many professional benefits: accelerated levels of re-

sponsibility, entrepreneurship in the face of significant resource constraints, and working with passionate people. But the social sector is a field all its own, requiring some learning and “teeth-cutting” time. “If you were changing from product management to banking, you would know that you had to learn the banking business,” says **Kim Smith** ('98), CEO of New Schools Venture Fund, a nonprofit venture fund focusing on educational reform.

Although an MBA program provides its students the opportunity to explore different industries and change fields, most first jobs after the MBA program are entry level, where learning and growth can be relatively risk free. However, past work experience and economic needs might cause an individual to believe he or she should enter at a higher level of management, where the steepness of the learning curve could present significant risks for a social sector organization. There are colorful examples of public and nonprofit organizations bringing in business people as leaders, only to find that lack of experience and limited understanding of an organization's culture tremendously limited their effectiveness. Yet conventional wisdom still

holds that the social sector ought to have more people with business skills and savvy.

That remains true, according to Ellen Friedman, vice president of the Tides Foundation and a 1984 graduate of UCLA's MBA program – but with some qualification. “There is a perception that the business sector has all the answers, and that's really a house of cards.” This could explain the difficulty some business people experience in the social sector job search. Certainly, there are plenty of learning opportunities, but the trick lies in transferring the skills from the business world to the social: human capital management, access to capital, analytical rigor, a focus on long-term sustainability are only a few. For the nonprofit hiring manager, the MBA is a signal for a certain set of skills. Still, program or fundraising experience, for example, may be just as highly valued as one's ability to analyze a balance sheet.

Consider the advice of some MBAs who have successfully switched, and others who are still searching.

Be Honest About Your Strengths, Weaknesses, and Interests

By all accounts, the social sector is fueled by people who care about issues. Hiring managers suggest reflection about what issues you care about – is it education, the arts, healthcare, community development, the environment, or something else? What functional areas interest you: fundraising, program development, evaluation, or outcome measurement? As **Srija Srinivasan** ('95), now a program officer at the Peninsula Community Foundation, says, “Look for the things you love, and if it takes you to the social sector, great!” Are you a strategist, an executive, or both? Do you prefer a consultant-type role, or are you better at (and happier with) a significant budget to manage and many people report-

ing to you? Moreover, what are your strengths — are you deeply experienced in packaged goods branding? What skills does that experience confer? Marketing strategy, execution, market segmentation, and prioritization could be quite useful to a nonprofit arts organization or to the fund development function. Likewise, a background as a small business owner lends itself well to the social sector, but are you comfortable asking for donations?

If you don't have a framework for even thinking about your interests and where you could comfortably (and productively!) plug in to the social sector, the Bay Area Nonprofit Job-Search Organization (BANJO) has a useful publication on just this issue. A solid understanding of the kinds of organizations and functions that may hold interest for you will help fine-tune your search.

Build a Bridge from the Middle

Serving as a bridge — a facilitator, a translator — between the private sector and the social sector is an admirable goal of many MBAs approaching the social sector. From most reports, that position is a difficult proposition to put into action. Identifying organizations that are eager for business thinking, developing a relationship with them, and understanding the specific cultural peculiarities of the sector all can go a long way in bridging from the middle rather than from shore to shore. It is most important to learn from and acculturate to the other side, so that the bridge has a strong foundation to cross what have been choppy waters. There is no better time to embrace these principles than during the job search.

Examples of the usefulness and application of business thinking in the social sector abound. Trends in the field provide

some guidance to the nonprofit MBA job seeker. Many nonprofits are exploring new ways of developing revenue for stronger, more sustainable organizations. The GSB's Alumni Consulting Team, BoardMatch Plus, and BoardNet USA are all great resources. Through self-identification with these groups, social sector organizations have done some screening for you.

Still, cultural aspects of social sector organizations raise difficulties for business people and MBAs. Reliance on process and facilitative skills, with a focus on relationships among workers, remains primary.

Resources for the Social Sector Job Seeker

- **GSB Alumni Jobs Database** (gsb.stanford.edu/alumni/career/bulletin/jobtrak.html)
- **GSB Online Alumni Database** (alumni-gsb.stanford.edu/services/index.cfm)
- idealist.org
- fdncenter.org/pnd/jobs
- opportunitynocs.org
- philanthropy.com
- ynpn.org
- execsearches.com
- nonprofitoyster.com

And the languages used by each sector could not be more different. For instance, one board member of a Bay Area nonprofit asked, "What's organizational benchmarking?" This was in response to a business person expressing a need for more information about where the organization stacked up relative to its peers.

Being open and asking questions are, to many nonprofit managers, distinguishing features among the deluge of applicants they are currently seeing. The Peninsula

Community Foundation's Srinivasan suggests that a real asset to success in the social sector is the ability to work with different kinds of people and to be comfortable in many settings.

Prepare to Sacrifice

Career management for the industry changer is always challenging, but in the social sector there are additional sacrifices. Robert Walker, executive director of the Management Center in San Francisco, himself an MBA, acknowledged that difficulty but emphasized the need to be thoughtful about the sacrifices you're willing to make. Economics are without question the most obvious difference in the sectors, but by no means the only one. Position, prestige, and respect also can be issues. Are you ready to enter a few levels down, or to make significantly less money? If not, then consider serving on a board or in some other volunteer capacity. Doing that will increase your network organically — the social sector is pretty small, and the power of the network is even more pronounced. Over time, the network will pay off, but it will require additional time and energy as people become more familiar with your work.

To the MBAs and other business people considering careers in the social sector, and especially for those who have encountered some frustration: Fret not. Just like in any other field, your credentials and experience will be helpful. Remember that the MBA will not get you the job, but your ability to be flexible and add value will. With a dash of confidence and humility, current social sector job seekers soon will find themselves working on issues they care about with like-minded colleagues, and a whole new world will have opened up before them.