

They begin as young, energetic employees who are dedicated to the mission of the nonprofit organization they work for. But what happens several years down the line, when increased financial obligations and desire for growth and creativity mean those same idealistic workers begin looking for other options?

# HOW TO PROFIT FROM A nonprofit

BY *Shira Werblowsky*





Call it one of life's ironies: people in their early twenties are supposed to choose a career path for life, long before they know where their life will take them. Will they marry young or old? Have many children or few? Have a working spouse or not? Live in town or out of town? With so many unknown variables, it's no wonder that many people have a change of heart mid-career, after they have a better understanding of themselves and their family circumstances.

People working in the Jewish nonprofit industry experience this dilemma as well. Some young adults get a Master's in organizational development or take the Torah Umesorah fundraising course, enthusiastically intending to pursue a nonprofit career. Some want to give back to a youth organization that shaped their life as a teen. For others, the decision "sort of happens"; they accept a few administrative duties while still in kollel, and it eventually morphs into a full-time job. Unencumbered by huge tuition bills and other family-related expenses, they all envision happily giving to the community "forever."

At some point, though, young adults morph into 30-somethings with financial responsibilities, and dedicating their life to their organization is no longer realistic. Or they might want to utilize the professional skills they've developed on new and more challenging projects, only to find there are no opportunities at their organization. When they see that their peers who have chosen for-profit careers have already achieved financial and professional success — won a coveted partnership at a law firm or sold a new app for millions — frustration can set in and panic, as they contemplate their next career move.

But it doesn't have to be this way. In fact, if we want our nonprofits to continue to effectively serve the *klal* in the future, the time to create a better career roadmap is now.

### START WITH AN EXIT PLAN

Rachel Prero of Cleveland, Ohio, spent five years working for NCSY. Involved with NCSY since college, she felt *kiruv* was her calling. In addition, NCSY provided a perfect work atmosphere while her husband was in medical school; the stress of working for a for-profit company would have been too much to handle during her early-married years. But at a certain point, always "being there" for her own family and her NCSY teens — including weekends and evenings — proved too hard to maintain. Today she works as an executive recruiter specializing in neurosurgery, a better fit for her family and financial needs.

Rachel had a relatively smooth transition from the nonprofit sector to a for-profit career. But it isn't always so easy. For instance, what about the young, hip *kiruv* rabbi on campus who can't imagine that one day he will be considered "outdated" by college kids — until it happens?

*Rabbanus* doesn't necessarily have a use-by date, but campus *kiruv* does, says Rabbi Dr. Ivan Lerner, a consultant for two large *kiruv* organizations, JLE in London and MEOR in the USA. Aging, he adds, eventually happens to everyone.

Rabbi Lerner, a clinical and industrial psychologist in Silver Spring, Maryland, is also a former pulpit rabbi and school principal. He advises every new campus rabbi to see the job as a three-to-five-year stint — and to plan from the start what they're going to do when they're "too old" for campus life.

For instance, they should invest in

learning new skills and continuing their education, even if it's only a few night courses at a time. Rabbi Lerner recommends studying practical subjects, such as accounting, computer programming, or app development — skills that can be immediately lucrative. "Prepare an exit plan," he advises, "so you can leave when you feel ready to move on."

### GET TO KNOW YOUR CORE

Ari Rockoff of West Hempstead, New York, is the director of the OU's Leadership Development Institute. He encourages his team to own their own growth and take an active role in continuously enhancing their skills and knowledge. He comments that nowadays, with the advent of online courses, webinars, podcasts, and business coaches, it's relatively easy to learn new skills, better business practices, and innovative technology. In addition, he stresses the importance of self-reflection: identifying what you really love and what you excel at.

Résumés, he says, should reflect a person's core strengths, which are sector neutral. Core strengths may be people skills, data management, fiscal management, selling skills, emotional insight, strategic planning, and so on. Once a person knows his strengths, he can begin to visualize utilizing these transferable skills in alternate settings. A super fundraiser can also be a fantastic salesman, while someone with strong fiscal skills can be a great bookkeeper or CFO.

Knowing your core strengths gives you the confidence to envision the many ways your career might flow, says Ari, whether it's within your current organization or at a new one. It's also important to seek out mentors with life experience who can

offer wisdom and impartial advice.

Transferring core skills enabled Aryeh Yanofsky of Far Rockaway, New York, to make a smooth transition from corporate to nonprofit and then back again. While completing his BA in IT, he accepted an internship with a large nonprofit as a side gig. After completing his BA, Aryeh joined Chase Manhattan Bank and continued to work at the nonprofit on the side. Then Chase started to downsize. When the nonprofit offered Aryeh a promotion, he grabbed it and moved fully into the nonprofit world. Later, he worked in management at two other large nonprofits.

Although Aryeh never intended to remain in the nonprofit sector, he stayed because he loved helping others; his work was personally fulfilling and emotionally satisfying. But he felt that his drive, creativity, and executive skills could be more appreciated elsewhere, so he began to consider other options. When an HR executive from a major health insurance plan reached out with a job offer, Aryeh was torn between the satisfaction he felt helping the special needs community and the need to find more fulfillment in his career.

### NO SPACE FOR GROWTH

According to Aryeh, the nonprofits where he worked didn't have the capacity to foster professional development. They were hyper-focused on maintaining and expanding services while remaining under budget. The discretionary income to invest in innovation was non-existent, a constraint that Aryeh found stifling. In contrast, innovative businesses thrive on new ideas to stay ahead.

The industry was in flux due to changing regulations and legislation, and in just four years, Aryeh helped his company

grow from being an insignificant player in the market to the largest in the industry. While the pressure to perform was much higher, the ability to make calculated risks proved very lucrative and professionally satisfying.

This sentiment was echoed by someone who asked to remain nameless who works in the nonprofit sector but is currently interviewing with consulting firms, investment banks, and other nonprofits. He says his main frustration came from encountering “founder’s syndrome,” where the founder of the organization identified a need, founded an organization, and grew it to its current size, and then has difficulty relinquishing any leadership responsibilities. Of course, the syndrome can also be found at tech start-ups and family businesses, but after continuously being prevented from making any real impact, he’s decided to explore jobs that offer a greater chance for accomplishment, in either the for-profit or nonprofit fields.

Money is also a driver, he admits. Earning a lower salary is an acceptable tradeoff when you feel very fulfilled and your family is young. But, echoing so many others, he says that income becomes increasingly important once the tuition bills start piling up.

### GROOMING A SUCCESSOR

While in the past an employee might have stayed at a nonprofit organization for a decade or so before making a change, the trend today is to jump ship much faster. According to Deloitte’s 2018 Millennial survey, this is a generation on the move. Forty-three percent of Millennials envision leaving their jobs within two years; only 28 percent seek to stay beyond five. Those who are less than satisfied with their pay and work flexibility are increasingly

attracted to the gig economy.

This new work climate may sound like bad news to some. But according to an expert at New York-based Leading Edge, a nonprofit dedicated to helping Jewish nonprofits improve employee satisfaction and manage executive change, that’s not always the case. Some organizational churn is healthy, because when people are ready to leave their organizations, it’s time to move on.

“Everyone, in every industry, wants to go to work and feel good about the day,” she says. “Everyone, in every field, wants a boss who is respectful and empowering. However, when someone is making a high salary, he may be willing to compromise personal satisfaction and emotional security at the office for financial gratification. In the nonprofit sector, the monetary compensation is typically lower than the corporate world. So if the ability to make an impact is diminished, or your boss doesn’t treat you well, you have no motivation to stick around.”

Last fall, Leading Edge published its third annual report on employee satisfaction in the Jewish nonprofit industry. The report was based upon the responses of more than 7,000 employees at 52 organizations. While the survey found that Jewish nonprofits generally excel at instilling a sense of mission in their employees, there were also areas that needed improvement. For example, addressing the issues of losing talented employees and preparing the next generation of high-level managers should be on any organization’s agenda.

The expert at Leading Edge recommends that organizations acknowledge the reality of today’s work world and create a plan to deal with it — such as creating a leadership pipeline where younger talent is continuously evaluated, invested in, and trained for eventual management. This will enable an organization to survive when a core manager moves on.

If a nonprofit only has one senior fund-



raiser and he leaves, that can be a devastating blow — he “owns” all the relationships and know-how. Having an associate fundraiser who supports the senior fundraiser ensures that someone else on the team is familiar with the donors and the fundraising cycles. They also own part of the relationship, says the Leading Edge expert.

Yet another change on the horizon is the retirement of the baby boomer generation from management positions. That means there will be more opportunities for the millennial generation to assume leadership roles in existing nonprofits during the upcoming years. But if Jewish organizations don’t train the next generation, warns Leading Edge’s expert, the transition will be messy.

“Organizational change often is,” she adds. “Giant corporations bring in a new CEO to overhaul the company and then push back and do the changes incrementally because they’re too jarring. That’s normal and par for the course. It will be like that for nonprofits, too.”

While stepping back is always difficult for a founder, one way to make the transition smoother for all nonprofit organizations is to have CEOs nearing retirement age groom successors of their choice. This is a gift that enables them to impart their values and wisdom personally. And it’s much more pleasant than the alternative: having the board choose a successor after the founder is no longer able to run the organization or is pushed out.

### WELCOME SEPARATION

Sometimes, the reason people leave the nonprofit sector is because they are too successful — which can be good news for both former employees and the organization. When those former employees are still very dedicated to the *klal*, they can contribute greatly as lay leaders to the community and causes they love.

Moshe Kinderlehrer of Bergenfield, New Jersey, now the owner of the *Jewish Link NJ*, spent over 18 years in donor development at prominent organizations including Leket Israel, OHEL, and Yeshiva University. But with a special-needs son and rising bills, one income from a nonprofit simply wasn’t enough.

Another factor in his decision to start his own business was personal. Although Moshe was very successful as a fundraiser, he reached a stage where he didn’t want to be asking his friends, neighbors, and community for money, even though the money was supporting important organizations. As the owner of the *Jewish Link*, a highly successful local paper servicing the *frum* communities of New Jersey, the Bronx, and Westchester, Moshe is able to give rather than always ask. He can give good press and publicity to neighborhood businesses as well as nonprofits that need help publicizing their message. Everyone doing a dinner calls him, he says. In return, Moshe has been honored twice in the last four years.

Moshe is also still very involved with his former nonprofit employers and other nonprofits as a layperson, which works well for him. “I get to do a lot of chesed and work with a lot of good people,” he comments. “But it’s a powerful feeling to be able to say this is *my* business. People see me differently than they did before.”

Shlomo (not his real name) of Detroit, Michigan, is another example of someone who left the nonprofit world due to too much success and who has since turned lay leader. As a young married, he appreciated the flexibility of the nonprofit environment as well as the opportunity to give to the community. Shlomo spent more than 15 years at his nonprofit, working his way up to a senior management and development position at a national organization. But after he became the “face” of his organization, he felt like he always had to be “on.” At Shacharis, he would be sitting next to the wealthy businessman from whom he’d solicited a large gift the night before. Leaving the nonprofit world and starting his own business offered a welcome separation between his personal and professional life.

Today, Shlomo sits on the board of several local organizations. “I think I’m helping my former organization more now as an outsider,” he comments. “I coach the fundraiser on how to approach my former donors, I schedule meetings for him, and I’m always available to discuss fundraising strategy. And as an outsider, I’m able to help lots of local organizations. If you’re going to move on, you have to still stay involved. That’s the best part of your day.”

An expert from Leading Edge adds, “There’s plenty of room to make an impact from the outside. Former nonprofit employees often make ‘rock star’ board members. They understand the challenges of the industry from the inside and have the ability to enable real change.”

FORMER  
JOB, FUTURE  
FAVOR

But why should an organization invest time and money in grooming talented young employees, if they’re going to jump ship anyway, after they become successful? The truth is that some would love to stay, if the organizations could make it financially possible and create space for career development.

But according to the OU’s Ari Rockoff, the time and money invested in someone who becomes a former employee isn’t a waste of the organization’s resources. He recommends that nonprofits view their employees in the same light as management consulting firms do: as future “clients.” Or, in nonprofit parlance, future supporters.

Large management consulting firms travel to the elite colleges, market their firms heavily, and rigorously pursue the best talent. It may seem counterintuitive, but after only a few years of employment, these same employees are encouraged to leave the firm and explore new opportunities — although the companies make sure the alumni remain a respected and welcome group, with strong ties to their firms and inclusion at annual events. This strategy is intentional. Former McKinsey consultants hold senior management positions at the most elite corporations around the world. When these corporations need consulting services, the managers naturally give the business to their former employer. The revenue generated by former employees amounts to staggering sums.

Similarly, Ari suggests that if nonprofits treat their young staff well, part on good terms, and remain in touch, there’s a high likelihood that these alumni will remain financial supporters in the future. He points to Gary Torgow and Lee Samsom, who began their respective careers as NCSY regional directors. After dedicating

years to building up NCSY, they moved into the business world and enjoyed great success. Both remained highly committed to NCSY as lay leaders and philanthropists.

TWO-WAY  
STREET

Yet another twist in the nonprofit career path occurs when successful businessmen who have used their skills to build large businesses decide to pivot to professional *klal* work as a grand finale to their career. Allen Fagin, who had an illustrious law career at leading international law firm Proskauer Rose, served as Proskauer’s chairman from 2005 through 2011. During that time, the firm grew to more than 750 lawyers and approximately 1,500 employees, and it opened offices in London, Sao Paulo, Chicago, and Hong Kong.

Mr. Fagin retired from Proskauer at the end of 2013 to devote himself “with far greater intensity, to communal activity.” In April 2019, he will have completed his fifth year serving at the helm of the OU, where he has added greater organizational structure and professionalism throughout the organization.

But whether using your personal talents to help others happens at the start of your career or the end, or as part of a lifetime of dedicated lay leadership, when people channel their talents to help the *klal* — and organizations channel their resources to help their employees thrive — amazing things begin to happen. ●

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