

Perfect

A large, textured white rectangular object, possibly a scale pan, hangs from a chain against a light-colored wall. The chain is made of small, dark links and is attached to the top center of the object. The object has a rough, pebbled texture and is positioned vertically, occupying the right half of the page. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

How
finding
the right
fundraisers
for the
right jobs
is not as
simple as
you may
think

Match

A photograph of three business professionals—a man and two women—pulling on a thick metal chain that is attached to a large, dark, spherical object hanging from above. They are all looking upwards with determination, suggesting a shared effort or challenge. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS

New nonprofit organizations come into existence every day, and job boards are filled with development positions. What's not to like—it appears to be the perfect environment for both new and seasoned fundraising professionals. However, creating the perfect match between an organization and a candidate is not that easy.

Although the economic downturn has highlighted the importance of fundraising, recruiters report that a nonprofit's needs and hiring decisions are not necessarily in sync with a development officer's qualifications and aspirations. If you think you have your finger on the pulse of the profession, you may be in for a surprise. →

Education Is Good; Experience Is Better

A fundraiser needs both technical skills and the intangible ability to create and nurture relationships. While the proliferation of academic programs in nonprofit management and philanthropy may imply that the profession can be learned in the classroom, education cannot trump experience. “Fundraisers need to be both tacticians and practitioners,” says Pamela A. Cook, ACFRE, principal, Pamela Cook Development Search (www.pamelacook.com) in the San Francisco Bay Area. “Additional education is always helpful—it’s a signal of commitment to the profession, but it can never take the place of actual experience. Education alone isn’t going to lead to the most desirable development job.”

Formal fundraising education does provide a helpful grounding in technical knowledge, but it may leave fundraisers with an unrealistic sense of their own marketability. “We’re at a place where we’re turning out people who are well-educated in the profession, who believe they should be at a certain place in their career at an institution earning a salary that isn’t comparable to their achievements,” says Nancy Racette, CFRE, principal and COO of Development Resources (www.driconsulting.com) in Washington, D.C. “They don’t have the level of experience for the jobs they think they’re qualified for. I can quickly discover whether or not someone has actually sat across the table from someone and asked for a major gift. If they say, ‘It’s just zeros,’ they’ve

never asked for a million-dollar gift. It’s not just zeros at that level—it becomes a contract negotiation.”

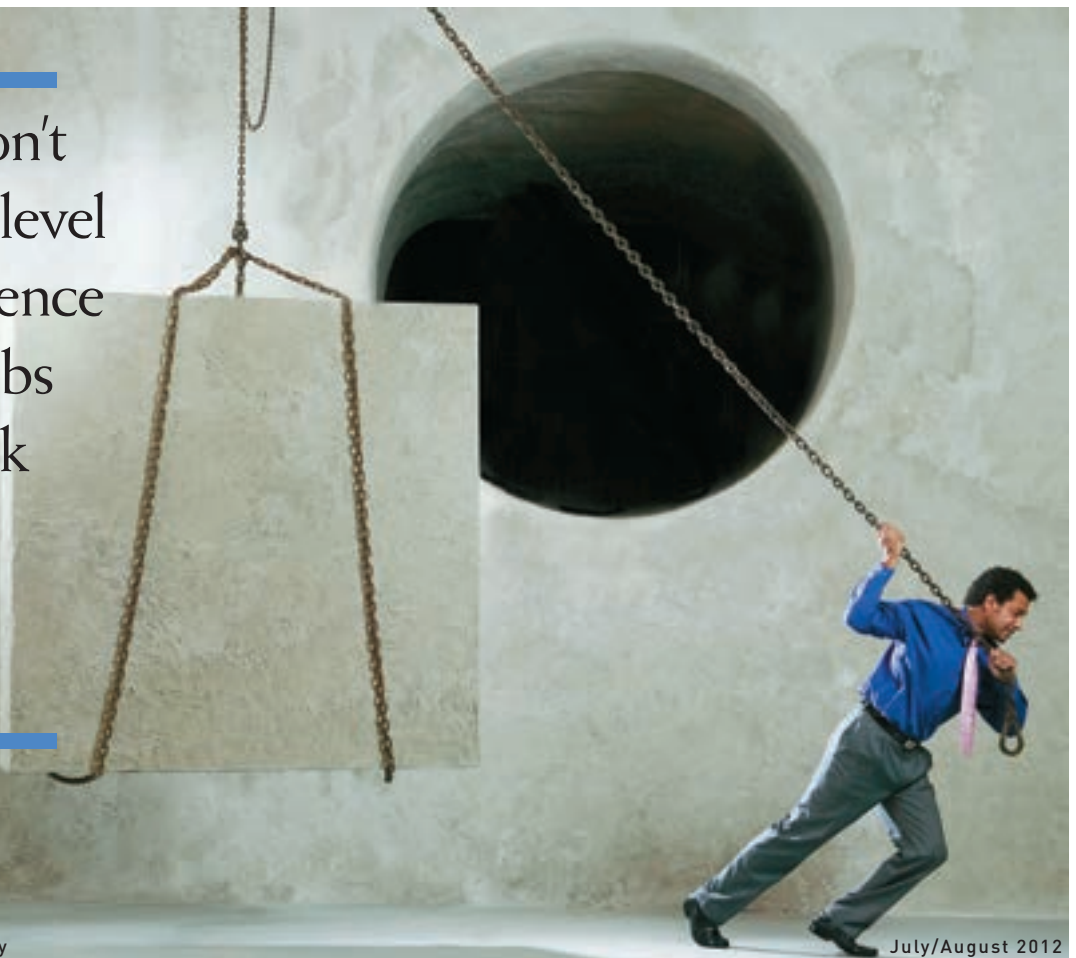
Most development jobs require a minimum of a bachelor’s or master’s degree, but recruiters don’t agree on the value of fundraising-specific certification. Stephanie Cory, director of development at The Arc of Chester County (www.arcofchestercounty.org) in West Chester, Pa., says she recently saw an ad for a hospital major gifts officer that required the CFRE, but it is much more common for organizations to list it as a preference.

Colette Murray, J.D., CFRE, CEO of Paschal Murray Executive Search (www.paschalmurray.com) in Raleigh, N.C., includes “CFRE preferred” in every search she conducts because she believes it demonstrates a commitment to the practice of the profession. However, she won’t exclude a great candidate who doesn’t have it.

Major-Gifts Officers Are Crucial— and Hard to Find

Across the sector, recruiters and development hiring managers say their biggest challenge by far is finding seasoned, hands-on, major-gifts officers. “Unless it’s an annual-fund or special-events position, organizations want someone who’s solicited and closed major gifts,” Murray says. “That’s the No. 1 expectation—that you can say I’ve looked people in the eye and closed gifts. The second thing they want is involvement in big campaigns. The problem is, people who

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have that experience want to be vice presidents or whatever the chief development position is called. They don't want to be major-gift officers."

Missy Ryan, CFRE, senior director of university development at Clemson University (www.clemson.edu) in South Carolina, says she wakes up every day thinking about how to get the best major-gift officers. "When we do a search, the defining factor we keep going back to is results. We want to see a portfolio managed and the dollars closed—that's the most important piece for us. We've seen some people who've come out of master's programs in nonprofit management, and the best candidates are those who show a passion for knowledge of their profession. But it's one thing to be able to quote the book and another thing to be able to say, 'Let me tell you some nuances of that and how it shook out in my experience.'"

Bill Moran, president of the Moran Company (www.morancompany.com) in Leawood, Kan., agrees. "Just because you graduate with a degree or pass a test doesn't mean you can practice," he says.

The lack of hands-on, major-gifts experience may be a product of a trend Racette has seen among the candidates she interviews. "Most fundraisers see themselves as people who move a process—as the person who sets up the organization for successful fundraising. They feel they'll be successful if they have a board and an executive director who will be strong fundraisers. That's what most applicants ask me: 'Is there a strong board?' They don't necessarily see themselves as the actual fundraiser, the actual asker."

Moran's experience also reflects a shortage of development officers who spend the majority of their time actually asking for the gift. "I don't see as many current fundraisers out making calls," he says. "If you're not making calls, you won't be raising money. You've got to be out of the office, willing to make the ask, and you have to be able to close. Fundraisers can sit in an office all day and not be productive. They can dodge campaigns and move around in the profession without being productive. This may be because there's a lack of accountability or a lack of expectation. It may be because nonprofits don't have an understanding of the process or an awareness of what makes fundraising successful."

Nonprofits Need to Be Educated, Too

As Moran points out, organizations' naiveté about how fundraising really works can set the stage for even the best fundraisers to come up short. Everyone has heard stories about bosses who expect development officers to come in with a long list of contacts they can solicit, or boards members who believe hiring a business person is the key to their fundraising success. With increasing pressure to raise money, unreasonable expectations can quickly turn to frustration and failure. "More and more, we're seeing that employers are unrealistic about how soon people can come in and start raising money," Murray says. "They may give them a week before they start saying, 'Where's the gift? Where's the gift?'"

Murray adds that she is concerned when new vice presidents of development want to build a whole new team rather than coaching the existing staff and making use of the institutional memory. "The loss of having to replace a major-gift officer is huge," she says. "It's important for employers to learn how to get the best out of the people they have and not just kick them to the curb."

Limited budgets also can lead to bad decision making on the part of organizational leaders, Cory says. "There's a disconnect between what smaller organizations want people to do and what they're willing to pay. They'll say they want a fundraiser with five to 10 years of experience, and then they'll fill the position with someone who has no experience because they want to save money. Small shops want people to do everything under the sun—write grant proposals, handle marketing, organize special events and do major gifts and planned gifts—and they want to pay \$45,000. Organizations need to figure out what their priorities are."

Organizations with large staffs and big budgets are not immune to hiring errors, either, according to Racette. "We haven't taught fundraisers how to hire fundraisers—how to have good, strong people around them. I had a client who was a chief development officer hiring a deputy director of development. She wanted someone with a decent amount of experience in a fast-paced environment, and I gave her the résumé of a very strong candidate. But she wouldn't interview her. She said, 'I saw that she's been in academia, and I have a bias against that.'"

Who's Coming In; Who's Going Out?

Moving up the traditional development career ladder is not the only option fundraisers are considering when they look five, 10 or 20 years down the road. Some are seeking development experience in order to become top-level administrators—college presidents, executive directors or heads of independent schools. Others see a future in consulting.

Of the development professionals who want to stay in the sector, Murray says: "If they're in the first two-thirds of their career, they aspire to be the vice president or chief development officer. When they get to the last third of their career, we're seeing people say, 'I really just want to carry a portfolio.' We have people well into their 60s who, for their last job, just want to do major gifts with no management."

In job interviews, Racette hears candidates say, "What I really want to do is work for a foundation" or "I want to work in corporate social responsibility." They don't want to be the revenue generator, she explains. "It's hard. It's stressful. There's more pressure in these economic times."

Recruiters also are seeing an increasing number of applicants from the for-profit sector who want to become fundraisers. Why? The reasons range from being downsized from a job to wanting to do more meaningful work. "Every year I hear from more people who want to enter the sector," Cook says. "People from for-profit can transfer successfully, but it's difficult. They may have unrealistic expectations about salary; they

may find it hard to work in a consensual environment. It takes patience and research, and you have to show that you have a real understanding of the sector. I encourage people to look at courses and certificates, but they need experience asking for gifts, too, so they should volunteer and serve on boards.”

Moran says that a successful transition from the for-profit sector may require starting in a lower-level position in a more challenging environment. “You may have to start with an organization that’s willing to take a risk. That might be a smaller organization that can’t pay as well,” he says.

While working with an organization in a small, rural Iowa town, Moran found that experienced development officers who lived in the two cities where he focused his search were not willing to relocate. He ended up hiring a local person with a background in marketing. “She had done very well in her marketing career, and we thought she had great instincts,” he says. “We sent her to fundraising school and had a consultant mentor her for a few months. Now she is doing well. The organization loves her.”

Stronger Recruitment and Retention Efforts

Large institutions are addressing their hiring challenges by moving beyond advertising for available positions. “We’ve begun to engage in the process more actively,” Ryan says. “When we meet great people, we need to stay in touch and know where they are in their careers. We’re getting ready to post three senior director of development positions, and I’m calling people to ask if they’d be willing to come and listen to what we have to offer. And if they’re not interested, do they know anyone who might be?”

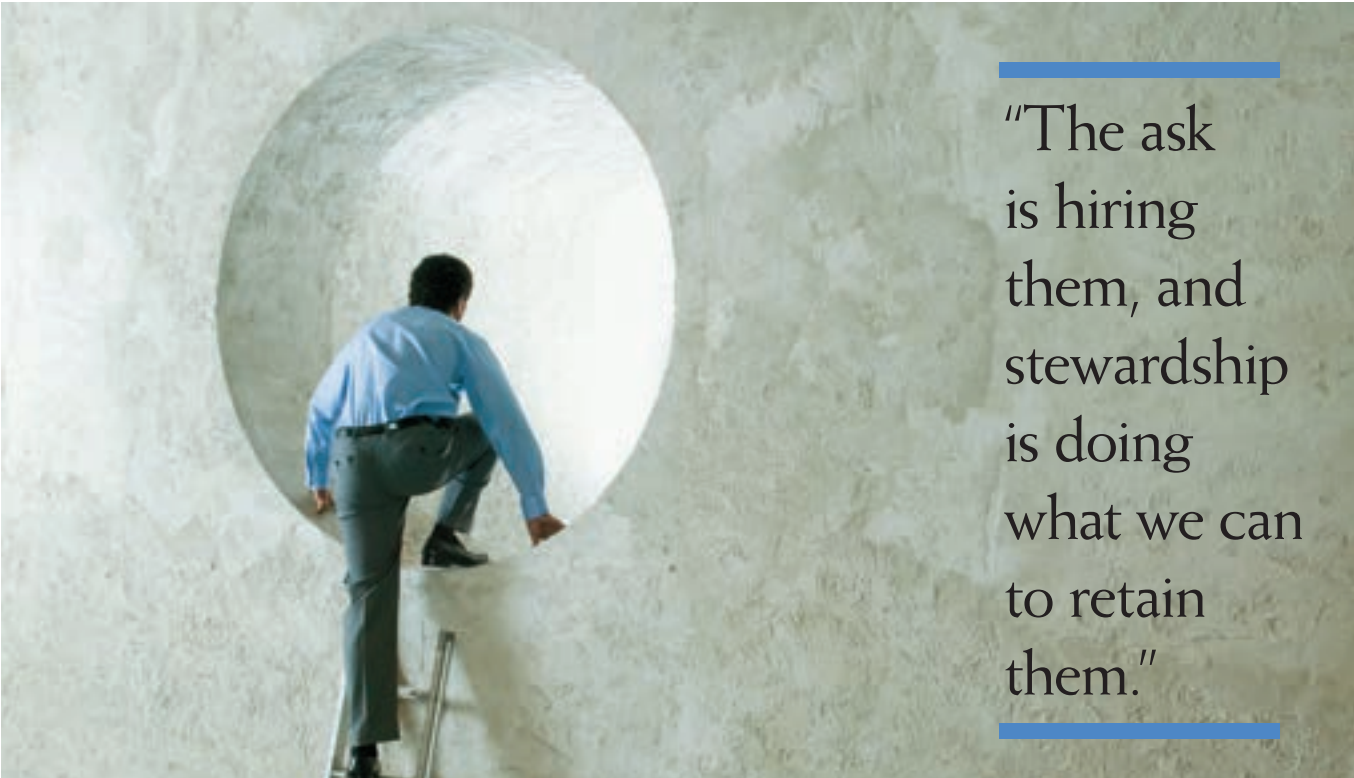
At Penn State University (www.psu.edu), Lyn Culver, director of recruitment and professional education, is responsible for recruiting new development officers, training internal development staff and managing a development internship program. “In the past five to six years, more and more people like me are being hired to focus on recruiting and training,” she says. “If you’re a very small organization, it might not be worth your time. But places like the University of Virginia, Michigan, Indiana, Penn and Johns Hopkins have a person or some combination of people who do what I do.”

Culver also uses her networking skills and the Penn State alumni database to find potential candidates and compares her outreach efforts to working with major-gift prospects. “Researching and assessing candidates is like identifying good prospects. I engage them by calling them, talking about their interests and asking when they might be interested in making a job change,” she says. “The ask is hiring them, and stewardship is doing what we can to retain them. I’ve had relationships with people for years before they came to work here.”

Penn State provides an extensive menu of training workshops, seminars and panels for development staff at all levels on topics ranging from how to make an assessment call to working with volunteers and academic leaders.

Providing professional development and opportunities for advancement is an effective strategy for training and retaining the best people, according to Murray. “If you ask people to describe their ideal job, they will mention training, coaching and mentoring more than they will salary,” she says.

Murray suggests that some of the best development



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officers-in-waiting may already be working elsewhere in an organization and cites a training program done in the past by the California State University System. “They did a conference for staff members who wanted to learn about the field,” she says. “That was a great model, but they had to end the program because of budget cuts. That’s something AFP could do—go to those campuses and put conferences on for them, and train people who want to become development officers. It would cost less to send trainers there than to send all those people to a conference.”

Organizations Growing Their Own

Penn State also puts another spin on developing talent in its own backyard through a summer internship program. In three years, 17 of the 31 participants graduated and went directly into entry-level development positions at PSU and elsewhere. Several interns graduated in 2012 and are currently looking. The full-time, paid internships include 32 hours a week working in a university development office; eight hours on Fridays discussing case studies and hearing presentations from donors and development professionals; and a two-day course, the Art and Science of Donor Development, offered by Advancement Resources (www.advancementresources.org).

Geoff Halberstadt, assistant director of development at Penn State’s College of Engineering, was a political science and history major who aspired to teach at the college level. He had been a member of the student philanthropy council, which worked with the Office of Annual Giving to increase awareness among students of the importance of philanthropy, but he applied for the internship because he felt his résumé lacked practical experience.

While interning in the development office in the College of Agricultural Sciences he helped plan a scholarship banquet, worked on marketing materials for the senior class gift and accompanied development officers on assessment, cultivation and solicitation calls. Halberstadt says the tipping point that prompted him to rethink his career path was meeting with alumni and donors and seeing firsthand how passionate they were. “That was the game-changer,” he says. “The work that development officers do can be life-changing for a student. Philanthropic gifts can be the difference between receiving a degree and accomplishing great things in life and not having that opportunity.”

Halberstadt now carries a portfolio of major-gift prospects and says his short-term goal is to work his way up through the major-gift ranks.

Stephen Logue, assistant director of the Clark Fund at Clark University (www.clarku.edu) in Worcester, Mass., also spent his Penn State internship with the College of Agricultural Sciences. He says the internship proved invaluable when he began to apply for development jobs. “The fact that I had real, on-the-job experience being on the road with development officers, and not just stuck in an office doing projects, was a boost,” he says.

In addition to being in charge of Clark’s student phone program, Logue advises the senior class gift committee and the undergraduate philanthropy committee, solicits annual gifts from seven recently graduated classes and is assisting the class of 2002 with its 10th reunion. “I do like the fact that my job allows me to work with students and alumni,” he says. “I think I would enjoy the major-gifts aspect, but I still have learning and growing to do. I really like higher education and the whole academic environment. This is where I see myself, and it’s really gratifying work.”

When asked if she faces any challenges with confident young interns thinking they’re ready to move up the ladder prematurely, Culver laughs. “I can’t believe they could listen to me and have any sense of entitlement. I talk about finding a place that will allow you to grow and learn, and to stick with it for at least two years. I’ve had several who’ve called after a year and said, ‘I saw this position advertised. Should I apply?’ and I say, ‘No! Stay put.’”

Youth Is the Future

The professionalization of fundraising comes with new respect for what fundraisers do, as well as challenges in finding enough people who possess the skills and experience to do it well. Penn State’s forward-thinking focus on young fundraisers may be the perfect solution for what Racette describes as the profession’s “generational gap.”

“At one end of the spectrum, there are many senior-level fundraisers who have reached a salary higher than most organizations can or are willing to pay,” she says, “so when senior leaders are ready to move on they look to transition from careers as fundraisers to consultants. This results in a lack of quality senior-level talent at the top. At the other end, there are many young professionals entering the development sector. What the fundraising profession is lacking are those individuals who fall somewhere in the middle. This results in constant turnover and a lack of consistency that can harm an organization’s overall program.

“That said, I’m optimistic that the profession can grow a new generation of passionate fundraisers who are in tune with today’s fundraising environment. I’m hopeful that organizations will focus on developing talent and mentoring young professionals, allowing them to gain the skills and experience necessary to fill the ‘middle gap’ and progress to even higher levels.”

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Resources

For more information about Penn State’s internship program, visit <http://giveto.psu.edu/s/1218/index.aspx?sid=1218&gid=1&pgid=605>.