

Top Ten Myths about Working for Nonprofit Organizations

1. “Only Rich Kids Apply” *No one makes any money in the nonprofit sector.*

The term “nonprofit” refers to the 501(c) tax code in the United States. Non-governmental organizations, or NGO, and “charity” are the common terms used outside the U.S. Revenues generated by nonprofit organizations go back into programs that serve the organizations’ mission. There are no stockholders receiving annual financial dividends, and employees do not receive a bonus at the end of a good year. According to the Independent Sector, \$670 billion are earned by nonprofit organizations annually, and one in twelve Americans work in the nonprofit sector.

2. “Business rejects apply” *The nonprofit sector is for people who could not make it in the business world.*

Nonprofit organizations are full of intelligent people with a passion for their work (many with graduate degrees and years of experience in the sector). Many people switch between the nonprofit, government, and private sectors during their careers. Each line of work presents its own sets of challenges, but there are many talented people in all three sectors. Business people are often surprised to learn how difficult it is to make the transition into the nonprofit sector which has different, often rigorous standards of success.

3. “No upward mobility” *Working for a nonprofit is not really a career path.*

Working in a nonprofit sector is sometimes considered taking a break from the “real world” with the implied assumption that it is not an option to spend a lifetime doing this work. In reality, the nonprofit sector provides many people with a lifetime of exciting work. Nonprofits also tend to offer young people more leadership opportunities than other sectors.

4. “Smiles all the time” *Everyone that works in the nonprofit sector is nice.*

Most people who work in the nonprofit sector generally do care about making the world a better place, but do so plenty of people that work in the private sector. Do not be surprised when you encounter many difficult personalities, big egos, and office politics, which exist in a professional environment. Perhaps there are a higher percentage of kind-hearted people in the nonprofit sector, but there is no way to measure this, and there are plenty of exceptions.

5. “Collaborations all around” *The nonprofit sector is not competitive.*

In a world of limited resources, nonprofit organizations compete intensely for media attention, recognition, funding and other resources. In some cases, competition among organizations with similar missions may be detrimental to the pursuit of this shared mission, but competition also can be healthy, and a catalyst to adopt more effective programs. Organizations collaborate often and talk about working together even more. But some organizations provide a similar service and compete to be the most effective provider on that service. In other situations, organizations work on different solutions to a similar problem. On certain issues, organizations may have missions that are in direct opposition to another (abortion, environmental reform, gun control, etc.).

6. "Wasting time and money" *Nonprofit organizations are inefficient.*

Nonprofit organizations do not have clear bottom lines or profit margins; serving a human or environmental need makes success and efficiency much more difficult to measure. Add to that the reality of limited resources and an emphasis on serving clients (often at the cost of organizational maintenance), and it becomes clear why the sector is often perceived as inefficient. There are certainly some inefficient and disorganized nonprofit organizations, just as we see plenty of dysfunctional organizations in the private sector. In both cases, this is not necessarily a reflection on the sector as a whole.

7. "I can't deal with people" *Nonprofits only do direct service work.*

The most visible nonprofits are often soup kitchens, mentoring programs, and other organizations that involve people working directly with other people who need some form of assistance. But many people who work for nonprofits are accountants, computer programmers, sales people, human resources professionals, managers, fundraisers, and executives. Many more are researchers and advocates for certain issues or supporting the work of direct service organizations.

8. "Poor and poorly dressed" *Nonprofits lack resources and are informal.*

Universities, some hospitals, and many other large institutions with multi-million dollar annual budgets are nonprofit organizations. Cultures within nonprofits vary, but business attire is the norm at many large and small nonprofits.

9. "Only for liberals" *All nonprofits support left-wing causes.*

The nonprofit sector itself does not have a political agenda, and many organizations exist to provide services and promote interests that the government does not. The organizations within the sector lean left, right, and everywhere in between.

10. "I love volunteering, so why not?" *Working for a nonprofit is just like volunteering*

Nonprofits rely on volunteers to do their work, especially in direct services. Volunteers, however, are often shielded from the organizational, financial, and other challenges with which the actual employees of an organization must contend, to say nothing of the burnout issues faced by many who have spent more time working in the field.