

Our hiring practices are inequitable and need to change

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Hi everyone, I just returned from giving a keynote speech in at the [Chatham-Kent Nonprofit Network's](#) annual conference (in Ontario Canada) called "We Are Unicorns: Why Nonprofit Peeps are Awesome, Magnificent, and Downright Sexy." It was an easy speech to give, since we are all those things, and our sector is kicking some serious butts. Just look at this [article in Forbes](#) that says we are more "poised for the future than either business or government." And [this report](#) that shows we have been growing jobs at a rate of 2.1% while businesses have been losing them at a rate .06%. In light of this, I recommend we all go home early today and bake some unicorn-shaped cookies to celebrate.

However, since we are adding so many jobs, we need to now focus more attention on our hiring practices, which, unfortunately, are often medieval, short-term-focused, and inequitable. We have been relying heavily on the for-profit world's hiring model, which has not been aligned with our sector-wide values of equity and community. It leaves out too many good people, and it is time that we as a field examine and change how we hire people. Here are some weaknesses of the hiring process for us all to reflect upon while we eat our unicorn cookies:

We have an over-reliance on formal education: Tons of amazing candidates, for whatever reason, often because they are poor or they are from disadvantaged communities or both, or because they creatively cannot conform to our rigid education system, could not complete their formal education, but they have gained experience and skills and have incredible versatility. Education inequity is one of those things we as a sector are trying to address, yet ironically we use education as a barrier in hiring. Until we reach a state where everyone, regardless of income and background and learning style, can get a college degree, using formal education as a requirement risks leaving out otherwise well-qualified candidates. This is not to say that we should not consider formal education, especially for positions that require specialized skills (MSW for a counseling position, for example), but that we shouldn't use it as a means to instantly eliminate people.

We have myriad gate-keeping factors: A colleague once told me, "I go through people's resumes. If I see a single typo, it goes straight into the no pile." And I thought, "Yeah, those no-good lazy bums who don't bother to proofread!" But let's think about all the great candidates whose first language is not English; their perspective and ability to speak a second or third language should more than make up for the occasional mistake in English. And as much as I appreciate hand-written thank-you notes after interviews, I know that not everyone from every culture has been trained to do this. Let's not be so hasty to dismiss people based on rules that were written ancient years ago.

We focus too much on the short-term: Since so many of us are "building the plane as we're flying it," we too often focus on hiring people for the immediate challenges, and not for long-term goals. This is why I see so many organizations where there is little or no diversity on staff. This is alarming if a huge portion of their clients is diverse. The excuse that "we couldn't find anyone from diverse communities who was qualified to start right away" is narrow-sighted. Most of us have three or five-year strategic plans detailing stuff we need to invest in now so that they'll pay off in the future. We need to start thinking of hiring in the same way, and ask ourselves if a candidate will be a smart investment not just for the next few months, but for several years down the road. The right candidates may not be the best fit in the short-term, but with enough training and support, they will be instrumental to the organization in the future.

We look down on people from our own field: For some reason, maybe because of our own inferiority complex (see "[The nonprofit inferiority complex is not sexy](#)"), we seem to think people from outside our sector have a better grasp on our work than we do. This is why we keep seeing business people taking on major nonprofit leadership roles, though they have never had any experience in the sector besides serving on a board. A colleague and reader recently sent me a job posting from a major nonprofit consulting group seeking a senior consultant. This is an influential group whose research and recommendations affect the nonprofit sector. Among the required qualifications are "Three years or more of consulting experience" and "Graduate degree from a leading institution. (MBA, MPP, PhD, JD)." Really? So basically, I would not qualify for this position, whose main function is to advise nonprofits, because even though I've been running nonprofits for a decade, I haven't had three years of consulting experience, and my lowly Master of Social Work is probably not from a "leading institution."



The Consequences

The way we hire has to change. The consequences of poor hiring affect not just our own organization, but the entire nonprofit sector:

We leave out voices from communities that are most affected: Current hiring practices leave out people who are most affected in favor of people who are adept at playing the HR game. This is intrinsically wrong, as I've written about in "[Are you or your org guilty of trickle-down community engagement?](#)" and other posts. The communities who are most affected by inequity must be leading the efforts to address it, and our hiring practices must pave the way for this, not actively prevent it.

We reinforce dominant, often ineffective perspectives. Without diverse voices, we are stuck talking about the same problems in the same ways, which often means just blah blah and [fake equity](#). It's slightly terrifying to think that the JDs and MBAs from "leading institutions" are going to be writing white papers suggesting what we nonprofits

should be doing sector-wide.

We drive talented people out of the community or profession: Recently I met a person who was whip smart, compassionate, dedicated, and experienced. But despite having numerous connections with other professionals in the sector, all of whom unanimously think she's awesome and gets stuff done, due to her lack of a formal degree, no one would hire her at a pay where she can actually survive. This talented, passionate, community-driven person must now think of selling her house in a town she grew up in and wants to contribute to, and move to another city. Unfortunately, this is only one of many examples of good people we are losing because of our rigid hiring rules.



Stuff we need to do

It is people who drive the work in our sector, and finding and keeping the right people is critical to our success. We nonprofits are not the same as the for-profit sector and shouldn't be emulating the business model. We should learn from it, yes, but we cannot lose the elements that make us so awesome and separate us out from the other sectors—our unique focus on equity, on community, on giving people a chance. The archaic hiring model, which we copied from the for-profit world, with its punitive and inequitable barriers, has to change. Finding the “right” person can no longer be about who writes the best resume and cover, dresses in a suit, gives us answers we are trained to like on interviews, and write a handwritten thank-you note. Here are some things we need to do to make hiring more equitable, and thus, more effective:

Take the time: Finding the right candidate takes a considerable investment in time. Because of the time crunch, we come up with shortcuts to expedite the hiring process, and these short-cuts are often inequitable. Let's slow down when we can and take the time to write a proper job posting, recruit the right people onto the hiring panel, do proper outreach, and get to know the applicants.

Discuss equity with your hiring team: Because of liabilities, we train our teams on questions that are legal and illegal. But we rarely talk about equity and how it affects our processes and decisions.

Hire for passion and dedication: It is far easier to find someone who is passionate and willing to learn and teach them the required skills, than to find skilled people and teach them to be passionate about stuff. This view is not new, but we neglect it all the same.

Change the philosophy and definition of “qualification”: Qualification should be based on whether a person will do a good job or not in the position. Since we can't know for sure if they will, we use proxy characteristics, such as formal education, as a predictor of performance. But formal education, as mentioned above, leaves behind a lot of people. Unless you require a specialized skill, set it in the “Preferred” section if you have to use it. This opens up doors for people who have equivalent working experience.



Simplify the process: Really, do you need a ten-page application and four rounds of interviews? As burdensome grant applications are inequitable and leave behind organizations led by diverse communities, burdensome hiring processes are inequitable and may leave behind good candidates.

Get rid of instant disqualifiers: Although none of us are perfect, for some reason we expect job candidates to be. We seek imperfection and use it as an excuse to disqualify people. This would not be a problem if everyone had the same culture, upbringing, education, training, mentorship, etc. Eliminating candidates simply because their resume and cover are not the best increases the chance that you will miss out on diversifying your team.

Think long-term potential: Think about the ideal team you want to have in the future and whether candidates who do not have the skills now will, with support and mentorship, be an awesome team-member later on.

Finally: Be supportive and encouraging of candidates as they apply: I've seen too many hiring teams treat candidates like crap. These are people who want to work to make the world better and are likely current or future leaders in our field. Be appreciative of their time, give constructive feedback, and help connect them to other opportunities as relevant. Use the hiring process as another way to build community and strengthen our sector.

Taking all these steps will take time and resources, and it still doesn't guarantee an awesome hire. But applying principles of equity to hiring will not only move our individual organization, but our sector and profession forward. Let me know your thoughts.

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