



Insights about Nonprofit Executive Recruiters

Executive Summary

As a team of researchers who examine nonprofit work and career pathways, we conducted an online survey with a sample of executive recruiters who conduct nonprofit searches in the United States. The purpose of our study was to document who these recruiters are, as well understand the firms they represent and how they approach nonprofit executive searches. We heard back from 93 recruiters and in the following summarize our approach and findings.

Below are a few insights we draw from the data:

- **Nonprofit recruiters often work as generalists.**

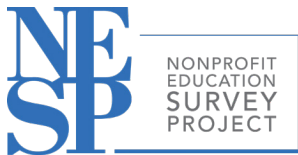
Many recruiting firms and their recruiters work across nonprofit mission sub-sectors, even across the three economic sectors. Further, many recruiters bring their own professional experience from beyond the nonprofit sector. These orientations and backgrounds have potential implications for how recruiters help nonprofits fulfill their value-laden expressive dimensions.

- **Nonprofit executive recruiters have significant experience.**

Most of the survey respondents had experience in multiple sectors and had a master's degree or higher. Further, nearly half had over ten years of experience as an executive recruiter. These characteristics imply that executive recruiters are highly professionalized, which may influence their preferences for the profile of executives they recruit.

- **The nonprofit executive search field is loosely structured.**

As we developed our survey sample, we identified no central affiliative association that connects the field of recruiters, and the majority of our respondents indicated that they had no affiliative membership. Further, the majority of respondents are operating following a proprietary approach to search and recruitment. Thus, evaluation of executive recruiter performance as a field may be challenging to isolate and understand.



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Background

The professionalization of the nonprofit sector and the blurring of sector boundaries have changed the sector's workforce and labor market dynamics. These shifts have carved out a role for executive recruiters with contracted responsibility for identifying, recruiting, and placing executive level nonprofit leaders. Postings on nonprofit job boards provide easy anecdotal evidence of the prevalence of recruiters as facilitators for nonprofit employment. Further, executive recruiters are no longer reserved for executive positions, as the dynamic labor market requires dedicated insights and access across all upper ranks of positions. Yet, the field of recruiters is fragmented with various affiliative groups and little compilation about who these recruiters are and how they do their work.

Nonprofit practitioners and researchers alike have critiqued the sector for its limited attention to leadership development. As researchers interested in understanding what equips nonprofit professionals for leadership positions, we saw merit in understanding the perspective of those who place nonprofit executives and other nonprofit leadership roles. Thus, we sought to document who these recruiters are, the firms they represent, and how they approach their responsibilities. During spring 2023, we designed and implemented a survey study targeted at nonprofit executive recruiters.

Postings on nonprofit job boards provide easy anecdotal evidence of the prevalence of recruiters as facilitators for nonprofit employment, but we have very little compilation about who these recruiters are and how they do their work.

Data Collection

Our data collection relied upon an online survey implemented in April 2023 using Qualtrics. The survey tool included questions capturing the profile of the recruiting firm, the recruiter's characteristics, the approach of the recruiter to their most recent search, and an assessment of higher education as a qualification for nonprofit executive appointment. For the sake of brevity, we only report on the profile of the recruiting firm and recruiter in this report. Future publications prepared for academic outlets, which we are happy to share, will make use of other subsections of the survey.

The sample was derived from publicly available sources such as executive recruiter profiles and from executive recruiter directories. In total, we compiled a sample of 1,596 recruiter email addresses. We distributed our initial survey invitation to and then sent two follow-up, reminder emails. Our survey included three eligibility criteria: consent to participate in the survey study, prior participation in executive searches in the United States, and nonprofit executive recruitment experience. As an incentive, respondents were offered a chance to be entered into a drawing for one of four \$25 gift cards.

By the close of data collection, 210 survey responses were started, and based on the eligibility criteria, 93 survey responses were collected. We infer from our response rate that many firms are comprised of recruiters working across the three sectors or with groups or recruiters designated for a specific sector. We also reflect that since we compiled our sample across a variety of sources that the executive recruitment field is a loose compilation with recruiters sometimes affiliated within smaller sub-groups but without the presence of a central infrastructure association. Thus, it is difficult to trace the landscape of nonprofit executive recruitment to assess what a representative sample or response rate would be. As we report our findings, response rates vary based on the number of responses to each particular question.

Findings

The unit of analysis for our study is the recruiters, but our findings relate to both the recruiters and their firms. We view the recruiting firms as the domains within which each recruiter operates, so whereas their personal and professional dimensions shape their approaches, the context of their firms does as well. To understand that context, we highlight some findings we draw from the responses, and then report on findings pertaining to their firms, followed by the recruiter characteristics.

Search firm compensation varies according to the position's salary, implying that search firms may prefer to work with larger, more professionalized nonprofits.

Highlighted Findings

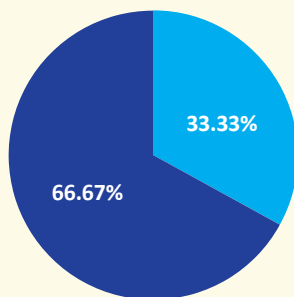
- Nonprofit recruitment follows the distinct approach of the search firm. Although search firms may share common procedural elements, most respondents indicate their approach to search and recruitment is proprietary to their firm.
- Search firm compensation varies according to the position's salary, implying that search firms may prefer to work with larger, more professionalized nonprofits.
- Most search firms employ support staff to aid in the research and identification of candidates. Thus, the gatekeeping function may be guided by the primary recruiter but is also influenced by these support staff profiles and approaches.
- Recruiters are not limited to the nonprofit sector, in terms of both their recruiting domains as well as their own personal work histories. This may be both a cause and effect of blurred sector boundaries.
- Nonprofit recruiters often work as generalists across multiple or all mission areas. Thus, recruiters may require orientation to the mission area when undertaking an engagement. This may also help widen the recruitment profiles and search criteria for positions.
- The field of nonprofit recruiters is a loosely affiliated field with many operating independently of any affiliated bodies or organizations. This limited affiliation makes for a very decentralized field of practice.
- Many recruiters are seasoned with prior experience to draw upon, but this prior experience may also influence assumptions that should be refreshed with each nonprofit engagement.
- While many firms approached their most recent search and recruitment from a lens of diversity, equity and inclusion, the profile of recruiters was not very diverse.
- The profile of recruiters implies that the leadership development needs of the nonprofit sector may extend beyond the current workforce, but also to those who recruit nonprofit workers as recruiters tend older with more experience, implying they may have retirement plans of their own.

About the Firms

Approach of the firm: Nearly two-thirds of respondents described their firm’s approach as proprietary (n=51, 63.75%). A similar percentage emphasized diversity, equity, and inclusion in their approach (n=51, 63.75%) with a quarter of respondents, 27.5% combining a proprietary approach with a DEI-emphasis (n=22). The Executive Transition Model forged by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2004 is a lesser used approach with only 13 recruiters engaging it (16.25%).

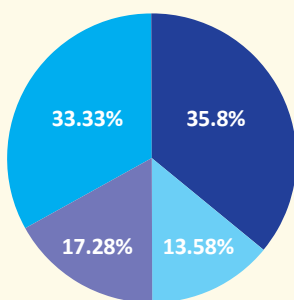
Service Scopes: Whereas recruiters work with strict recruitment and search firms (n=27, 33.33%), the majority of respondents represented firms offering a range of organizational development services (n=54, 66.67%). Respondents reported their firms mostly served only nonprofit organizations (n=29, 35.80%), followed by serving all three sectors (n=27, 33.33%). Respondents also most commonly working with firms that are national in scope (n=36, 44.44%), followed by international (n=34, 41.98%)

Firm Services



■ strictly recruitment and search ■ other services

Sectors Served by Firms



■ nonprofit only ■ nonprofit and public
 ■ nonprofit and for-profit ■ all 3 sectors

Firm Status: The majority of firms the respondents represented were for-profit organizations (n=79, 97.53%).

Payment Structure: Respondents worked for firms that were most commonly retained for their services (n=78, 96.3%) and paid using a flat percentage fee (n=39, 48.15%). These percentages ranged from 20-33.33% with a mean of 31.39% of the executive’s annual salary (n=42).



72.84% of respondents using a percentage-based fee.

Average fee charged was 31.39% of annual salary for the position (n=42).

The median fee was 33% with a range of 20-33.33%

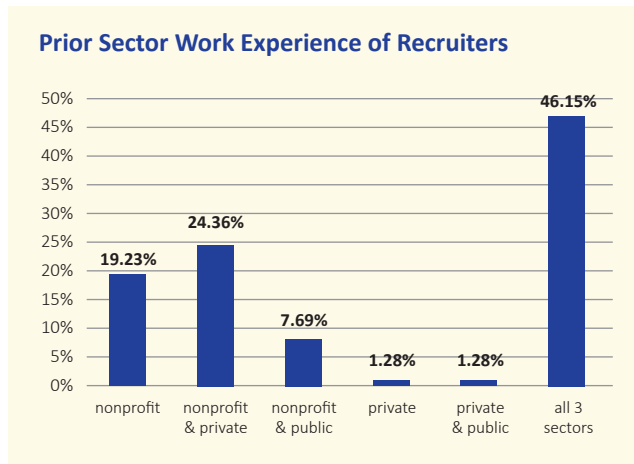
Engagement Style: The preponderance of respondents represented firms that engaged with clients following a hybrid style of in-person and virtual engagement (n=77, 96.25%). The majority of respondents also worked with firms that employed support staff who staffed the client relationship (n=70, 87.5%).

The preponderance of respondents represented firms that engaged with clients following a hybrid style of engagement, indicating that clients and recruiters can operate in distinct locales.

About the Recruiters

Mission Area Expertise: The majority of respondents reported being skilled for recruitment across multiple mission areas (n=71, 93.42%), and the few who had a specialization were focused on health (n=4, 5.19%) or education (n=2, 2.60%). The largest cluster of respondents described themselves as general to the nonprofit sector (n=58, 75.32%). 50.65% included education nonprofits in their portfolios (n=39), followed by philanthropy (n=37, 48.05%), health (n=35, 45.45%) and human service (n=31, 40.26%) mission areas.

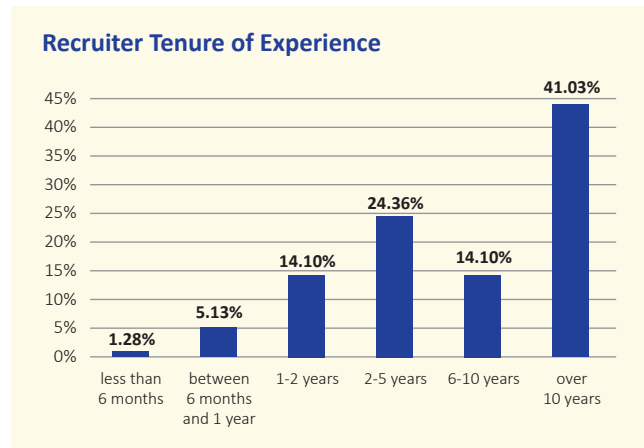
Sector Experience: Nearly half of respondents had worked across all three sectors (n=36, 46.15%), and only 19.23% had worked solely in the nonprofit sector (n=15).



Affiliations: Barely half of respondents reported an affiliation with an executive search association or group, and for those that had an affiliation, they were most commonly affiliated with the Association of Executive Search and Leadership Consultants (n=24, 25.81%).

Employment Status: Most respondents were directly employed by their firm (n=54, 69.23%). Indicating some autonomy, 12.82% were owners or principals with their firms (n=10), and 15.38% were contracted (n=12).

Experience as a Recruiter: Over 40% of respondents had worked as a recruiter for more than 10 years (n=32), and an additional 14.1% had between six to ten years of experience as a recruiter (n=11).



Demographics: Nearly two-thirds had a Master's degree or higher (n=51, 65.38%). The majority of respondents were over age 54 (n=43, 55.13%), female (n=41, 52.56%), and white (n=67, 88.16%).

The majority of respondents reported being skilled for recruitment across multiple mission areas, and the few who had a singular specialization were focused on health or education nonprofits.

Profiles of Recruitment Firms

In the following tables, we summarize indicators about the recruitment firms represented by our survey respondents.

RECRUITMENT PHILOSOPHY	n = 80	
Proprietary	51	63.75%
ETM Model from Annie E. Casey Foundation	13	16.25%
Diversity, equity and inclusion	51	63.75%
Other	5	6.25%

FIRM SERVICES	n = 81	
Strictly recruitment and search	27	33.33%
Other services	54	66.67%

FIRM LEGAL STATUS	n = 81	
Nonprofit	2	2.47%
For-profit	79	97.53%

TYPES OF ORGANIZATIONS SERVED	n = 81	
Nonprofit only	29	35.8%
Nonprofit & Public	11	13.58%
Nonprofit & Forprofit	14	17.28%
All 3 sectors	27	33.33%

GEOGRAPHY SERVED	n = 81	
International	34	41.98%
National	36	44.44%
Regional	7	8.64%
Statewide	4	4.94%

FIRM PAYMENT	n = 81	
Contingency	2	2.47%
Retained	78	96.3%
Other	1	1.23%

continued

Profiles of Recruitment Firms (continued)

FEE STRUCTURE	n = 81	
Flat Fee	12	14.81%
Combination - Flat & Tiered Fees	2	2.47%
Combination - Flat Fee & Flat Percentage	6	7.41%
Tiered Fee	5	6.17%
Flat Percentage	39	48.15%
Combination - Flat & Tiered Percentages	1	1.23%
Tiered Percentage	11	13.58%
Other	5	6.17%

ENGAGEMENT MODALITY	n = 80	
Virtual	2	2.5%
In-person	1	1.25%
Hybrid	77	96.25%

Profiles of Recruiters

In the following tables, we provide a summary of key indicators about the recruiters who participated in our survey.

NONPROFIT MISSION AREAS OF PRACTICE	n = 77	
General, works across multiple mission areas	58	75.32%
Arts, culture and humanities	29	37.66%
Education	39	50.65%
Environment & Animals	17	22.08%
Health	35	45.45%
Human Services	31	40.26%
International	12	15.58%
Philanthropy	37	48.05%
Religion-related	13	16.88%
Membership / Associations	24	31.17%

AFFILIATIONS	n = 40	
Alliance for Nonprofit Management	3	3.23%
National Association of Executive Recruiters	2	2.15%
Association of Executive Search and Leadership Consultants	24	25.81%
Network of Nonprofit Search Consultants	5	12.5%
Other Affiliation	11	27.5%

continued

Profiles of Recruiters (continued)

EMPLOYMENT WITH FIRM	n = 78	
Direct employee	54	69.23%
Contract	12	15.38%
Owner /Principal	10	12.82%
Other	2	2.56%

PRIOR SECTORS OF EMPLOYMENT	n = 78	
Nonprofit only	15	19.23%
Nonprofit & Private Sectors	19	24.36%
Nonprofit & Public Sectors	6	7.69%
All Sectors	36	46.15%
Private Sector only	1	1.28%
Private & Public Sectors	1	1.28%

LENGTH OF EXPERIENCE AS A RECRUITER	n = 78	
Less than 6 months	1	1.28%
Between 6 months-1 year	4	5.13%
Between 1-2 years	11	14.10%
2-5 years	19	24.36%
6-10 years	11	14.10%
Over 10 years	32	41.03%

Personal Demographics

In the following tables, we present the demographic summary of the recruiters who participated in our survey.

HIGHEST EDUCATION	n = 78	
Associates	2	2.56%
Bachelors	25	32.05%
Masters	46	58.97%
JD or PhD	5	6.41%

GENDER	n = 78	
Male	32	41.03%
Female	41	52.56%
Agender	1	1.28%
Decline	4	5.13%

AGE	n = 78	
18-24	1	1.28%
25-34	8	10.26%
35-44	12	15.38%
45-54	14	17.95%
Above 54	43	55.13%

RACE AND ETHNICITY	n = 76	
African American / Black	6	7.89%
Caucasian / White	67	88.16%
Some other race	3	3.95%
Hispanic or Latino (n = 72)	3	4.16%

Conclusion

Nonprofit executive searches have a range of influences. A nonprofit executive search is understandably influenced by the people and organizational context of the nonprofit seeking a new leader. Engaging the services of an executive recruiter introduces other additional factors, which encompass the recruiter's profile and background, as well as the profile and orientation of the firm, including their own proprietary approach to search and recruitment. The factors also extend to the orientation and assumptions of the firm's support staff who assist with research and candidate screening. Each of these influences are layered into approach the nonprofit takes to conducting the search and the profile of the executive hired. Our insights offered here are preliminary and we look forward to examining any relationships that exist among the survey responses that might predict how these factors have bearing on preferences and ultimately outcomes of these searches.

Acknowledgements

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About the Research Team

The Nonprofit Education Survey Project engages research questions related to both the practice of nonprofit education and work in the nonprofit sector. Our research investigates what prepares nonprofit professionals for their work and how those who place and employ nonprofit workers think about worker qualifications. More about our research at nonprofiteducationsurvey.com.

Amanda J. Stewart is an Associate Professor at North Carolina State University in the School of Public and International Affairs, Department of Public Administration. Her research centers on nonprofit organizations, including leadership continuity, career development, and organizational capacity. Amanda received her Ph.D. in publication administration from American University.

Kerry Kuenzi is an Associate Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. She researches and publishes on public and nonprofit management topics including nonprofit executive careers, public and nonprofit education, and collaboration and networks. Kerry has her Ph.D. in public affairs from the University of Colorado, Denver.

Marlene Walk is a faculty member at the School of Business and Economics at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg (Germany). She previously was an Associate Professor at the Paul H. O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs at IUPUI. Her research interests are human resource management, volunteering, and volunteer management as well as the impact of organizational change on employees. Marlene received her Ph.D. from the School of Social Policy and Practice at the University of Pennsylvania.

Jo'ann L. M. Holder is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Public Administration at North Carolina State University. She has work experience in both the local government and nonprofit sectors where she served as an advocate for underserved populations. She prides this experience as inspiring her research which focuses on social equity, public engagement, and citizen participation in political life.

For more information about this study or the Nonprofit Education Survey Project contact:

Amanda J. Stewart, ajstewa5@ncsu.edu