

PHILANTHROPY

Want to Parlay Your Passion Without Losing a Paycheck? Think About Running a Not-for-Profit

The opportunity to pursue a passion without sacrificing a meaningful business role and salary has been the impetus for many business leaders to swap careers.



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GUEST WRITER

President and CEO, The NHP Foundation



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According to the [National Center for Charitable Statistics \(NCCS\)](#), more than 1.5 million nonprofit organizations are registered in the United States. However, during most of my career in real estate private equity, had someone had told me that I'd leave that world to oversee the not-for profit [NHP Foundation](#) (NHPF), developing low-income housing, I wouldn't have believed it.

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But being involved with a nonprofit helping people in desperate need wasn't alien to me, either. For a number of years, I had been on the board of Project Hope, which operates a shelter and provides services for homeless women and children in Boston. There, I'd found it highly gratifying to help raise women out of poverty and find them work and affordable housing.

That's why the foundation's approach made me reflect back on the positive impact made by Project Hope. I could use my prior experience to address the critical shortage of affordable housing for people in need.

However, like many executives transitioning to the nonprofit world, I knew I couldn't make this decision lightly; I needed to bring my "A-game." The organization [Nonprofit HR](#) notes that, "Nonprofit sustainability occurs when a nonprofit attracts and effectively uses enough, and the right kinds of money necessary, to achieve [its] long-term outcome goals." Overall, sustainability comes from achieving talent sustainability, the article said.

As for my own transition to the nonprofit sector, the question was, could I parlay my experience and acumen to bring in the right talent to manage millions of dollars' worth of complex private-public partnerships, resulting in thousands of affordable rental units for the working poor, families and seniors?

I finally decided that the answer was yes.



Related: [When It Makes Sense to Turn a Passion Project Into a Nonprofit](#)

We are continuously creating innovative ways to increase our nation's supply of housing and to bring a robust array of services to improve the lives of our residents. Because of federal regulations, we also get to reinvest our net income and development fees in new projects.

Affordable housing truly is an "impact investment" -- a term that covers any socially meaningful investment. We make the most of available government programs and incentives to create affordable units, even as we provide a return to our social impact financial partners.

I'm hardly alone in this: The opportunity to pursue a passion without sacrificing a meaningful business role and salary has been the impetus for other business leaders to swap careers. The impact investing industry, after all, is a [\\$114 billion sector](#), and success stories abound:

Katy Sherratt

While leading global projects for management consultancy Accenture, Katy Sherratt began volunteering for [Back on My Feet](#), a national organization operating in 12 major cities coast to coast combatting homelessness through the combined power of community support and essential employment and housing resources.

Sherratt became connected because Accenture had a workforce development partnership with the nonprofit. After a few months of volunteering and after almost 10 years in corporate/private industry, Sherratt was given the opportunity to join the executive team at Back on My Feet.

"I jumped at the chance," Sherratt told me; and six years later, she holds the title of CEO and has had a tremendous impact on the organization's success. Since she was appointed to her leader post, the organization's programming has increased by more than 75 percent, and funding has increased by over 50 percent. Said Sherratt: "We are particularly proud that Back on My Feet has gone from early-stage startup to sustainable organization and is now a leader in the workforce development and homelessness services space nationwide."

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private Catholic college preparatory high school that educates children of all faiths.

For the last seven years he has served full-time as president of [Cristo Rey Brooklyn HS](#), which educates minority students, mostly immigrants or first-generation Americans of modest means. Although all families contribute something to the cost of their child's education, the school's innovative Corporate Work Study Program covers most of it. All students work one day per week in real jobs at companies like American Express and JPMorgan Chase, with their earnings going to the school.

Henson told me he fell in love with the Cristo Rey mission and model "of a hand up, not a handout." He said he knew he could translate his corporate experience and connections to provide tangible benefits to his young beneficiaries. The proof is in the results: Cristo Rey kids from low-income neighborhoods like East New York, Brownsville, Crown Heights, East Flatbush and the South Bronx are attending college at Princeton, Duke, Cornell, Georgetown and other prestigious institutions.

Is the nonprofit world right for you?

There are as many paths to passion and profitability as there are professions. But I believe that there are some simple things to know whether as a socialpreneur you could help make a positive change:

1. Decide whether you have the passion for a nonprofit organizations. While their salaries and bonuses have to be competitive to get the talent they need, these operations typically run differently. There are rules of governance for a [nonprofit or not-for-profit](#) (there are small legal differences, but the terms can be used interchangeably) that are different from those of a for-profit company; someone new to these enterprises will have to get to know them.

2. Get immersed in the industry you're entering. Whether founding a nonprofit or considering joining one, get educated about the various options where talented people can find rewarding careers. Start by volunteering, to get a hands-on experience. But also read books and articles by experts in the field, particularly those on aspects of social impact investment. Sign up for industry trade subscriptions (many are free for a trial period), and set up Google Alerts to stay on top of daily industry news.

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mingle with like-minded individuals. Find ways to discuss career opportunities with management people in nonprofits whose missions interest you.

4. Appreciate the mission and the steps it will take to accomplish it. Correcting societal ills or achieving specific outcomes by working collaboratively can make for an extremely rewarding career, but these missions require long-term thinking and strategy. Embrace the process and be part of the team that creates a plan, with benchmarks and course-corrections when necessary, to help the organization advance.

Related: [Should You Structure Your Business as a Nonprofit?](#)

5. Become an evangelist for your cause. Passion ignites more passion. Once you've embarked on the path toward "socialpreneurism," share it with the world. Post to social sites, pen articles, offer to speak at gatherings. "Mission" has its own rewards. Reach out to acquaintances and strangers alike to interest them in your cause. You never know what doors you might open.

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