

## Volunteers discover another path in job hunt

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### Nonprofits offer way to rechart careers

By Tripp Underwood, Globe Correspondent | August 3, 2009

When Claudia Deane, a research director at a Boston executive search firm, was laid off last year, she decided the best way to improve her odds of landing a new job was by working for free.

Deane wanted a position in records management but lacked the experience to get hired in a market flooded with out-of-work records managers. She started doing volunteer record keeping for the Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership, a nonprofit agency that helps low-income families find affordable housing.

At a time when companies aren't likely to consider inexperienced applicants, more professionals are seeking ways to beef up their resumes by volunteering for work at nonprofit agencies. Many of them are unemployed, or worried about job security. Some have well-polished skills to offer, while others, like Deane, see volunteering as an opportunity to steer their careers in a new direction.

"Being able to say I worked on records management projects for a large housing agency is a major plus," she said. "I'm hoping an organization will see my resume and say, 'She already knows how to do this; let's hire her right now.'"

Deane's goal is to parlay her stint at the housing agency into a paying position as an archivist or records manager after she finishes graduate studies at Simmons College.

Andrew Brown, president of Career Ventures Consulting Services Inc., a Boston career management firm, said skill-based volunteerism lets job seekers stand out.

"The more relevant work experience you can put on a resume the better, even if it's from a volunteer position," Brown said. "In this kind of slow job market, you want to do whatever you can to get experience."

But Brown said that adding random charity work to a resume isn't likely to bring job offers.

"You want to be as precise and focused as possible," he said. "If you're looking for work in finance, try to volunteer in a capacity that will let you use those types of skills."

That's what Brian Glazer tried to do - sort of.

Glazer worked as a stock trader at Fidelity Investments for just under a decade before he was laid off last year. Always good with numbers, he has spent the past year as a volunteer teaching assistant in a fifth-grade math class at the Harvard-Kent Elementary School in Charlestown.

"People have always said I would be a good teacher," he said. "I figured this might be a good way to marry my business background with the math they teach kids."

While Glazer is apprehensive about switching careers, because of the time and money it would cost to go back to school to earn his teacher certification, he is seriously considering it.

"Teaching would be far more fulfilling for me than finance," he said.

For the organizations on the receiving end of the volunteerism, the benefits are obvious.

"Volunteers like [Deane] allow us as a nonprofit to keep costs down, because we get their expertise without having to pay for it," said Mark Edge, chief records manager for Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership. "But it also gives experience to the volunteer, which can be hard to get. It helps both parties."

Also, skill-based volunteerism can be a way for job seekers to explore a field without making a major commitment.

"Better to get your feet wet first, than dive in head first and find out it's not the water you want to be in," said Theresa

Ellis, cofounder and managing director of Common Impact, a Boston agency that connects local businesses and their employees with nonprofits in need of skill-based volunteers.

“ ‘Do I really want to work for a nonprofit,’ or ‘Do I really want to be a consultant?’ This is a way for people to ask those questions of themselves before they invest the time and money in getting a degree that might help them get there,” Ellis said.

Heidi Busch, a second-year graduate student studying international education at Boston University, recently finished a five-month stint as a volunteer case manager for the Refugee and Immigration Services department of Catholic Charities, run by the Archdiocese of Boston. Busch, who is considering a job in refugee service after she graduates, said she volunteered not just to help people, but to make sure she really wanted to pursue a career in a field with long hours, mountains of red tape, and sometimes overwhelming caseloads.

“I definitely had some ulterior motives,” she said. “I wanted to help people who were new to the country, but for myself I also wanted to make sure I really wanted to work with this population, and get a better idea of how the system functioned.”

Busch said volunteering made her confident that a career in refugee service was the right choice for her, but not in the capacity she originally imagined.

“I got to see the results of immigration policies in action. It made me realize that if changes were made a little higher up it could help so many more people down the line,” she said. “The whole experience made me want to go up the ladder a little bit and get a job creating policies that could really affect the people I was working with.” ■

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