

The Young and the Relentless: Expectations of the Next Generation of Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leaders

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Much is written about aging in America and its implications for everything from Social Security solvency to easy-open orange juice. While the eyes of policy may be fixed on how the nation is getting older, the corollary is a reality, albeit a much less recognized one. A new generation of leaders is waiting in the wings to assume the leadership of organizations of all types, including those in the nonprofit sector. Indeed, more than half of nonprofit executive directors will be leaving or retiring in the next decade (R. Patrick Halpern, *Workforce Issues in the Nonprofit Sector*, American Humanics, May 2006). As we all (or at least some of us) keep a keen eye out for that Social Security check, what do those who are new to the nonprofit sector think of their careers, their jobs and their prospects?

Changing Our World Inc. in New York City (www.changingourworld.com) and Future Leaders in Philanthropy (FLiP), a special project of Changing Our World, set out to answer this question through a survey of young professionals, or those “young to the profession.” The survey was developed in the summer of 2010 and hosted on a Web-based survey tool (see sidebar). The results of the survey reveal a glimpse of what we can expect.

Disappearance of Traditional Sectors

Many young professionals in the sector do not describe their work using the sectors traditionally used to describe the field (education, health, human services, arts and culture, humanities, environment, animals, international affairs and religion). For decades data on nonprofits have been bucketed in the same, standard categories. Changing Our World used these categories to gather information on where these emerging leaders currently work. After “education,” the next highest selection that respondents chose was actually “other.” The self-defined descriptions given by these respondents in lieu of what was provided covered an incredibly wide range of themes: technology, youth development, women, social justice, advocacy, human rights, agriculture and economic development, to name just a few.

Moreover, a large portion of those who responded see themselves as reaching across all divisions, not just one

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cause area. If the analysis nets out consulting firms (which are usually multi-sector businesses), then it is clear that this tendency to think outside silos is more characteristic of those who are new to the nonprofit sector. More than one-third of those working in nonprofits for less than three years chose “other” or “multisector” compared with 20 percent of their more experienced peers. (See Figure 1.)

This unexpected tendency to select “other” and “multisector” actually may not be so surprising after all. In some ways it is a natural byproduct of the last two decades of growth and evolution in the field. On the one hand, complexity characterizes many problems on the societal commons. Violence, unemployment, discrimination, obesity and depression all have multiple causes that nonprofits are now addressing more than ever, taking action by integrating programmatic responses.

On the other hand, the very definition of a societal “problem” and its “solution” has evolved as well. Microfinance, for example, is a quasi-banking response to a capital problem. Those who work in microfinance may not see themselves as working for “social assistance” organizations, but for financial/banking organizations. As more and more social enterprise-type organizations emerge, and as variants of social entrepreneurship create entirely new approaches to problem-solving, it is likely that young professionals will de-

Figure 1. Primary Area of Work by Length of Time Spent in the Sector

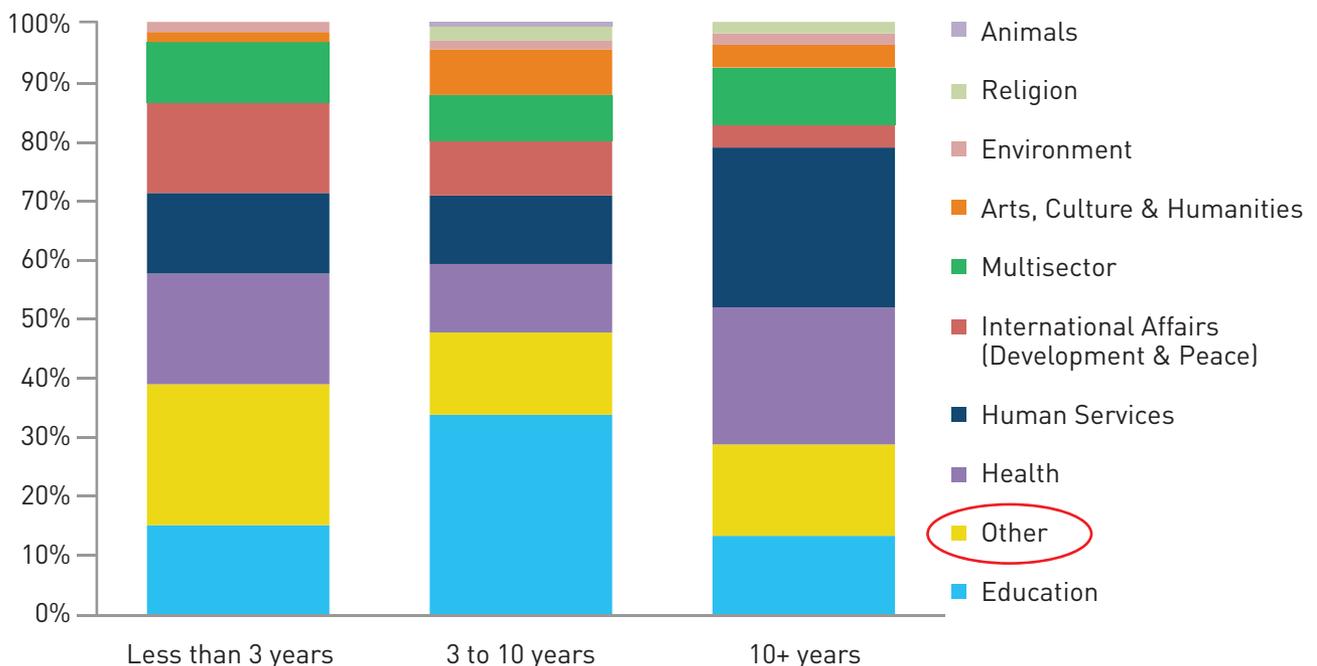
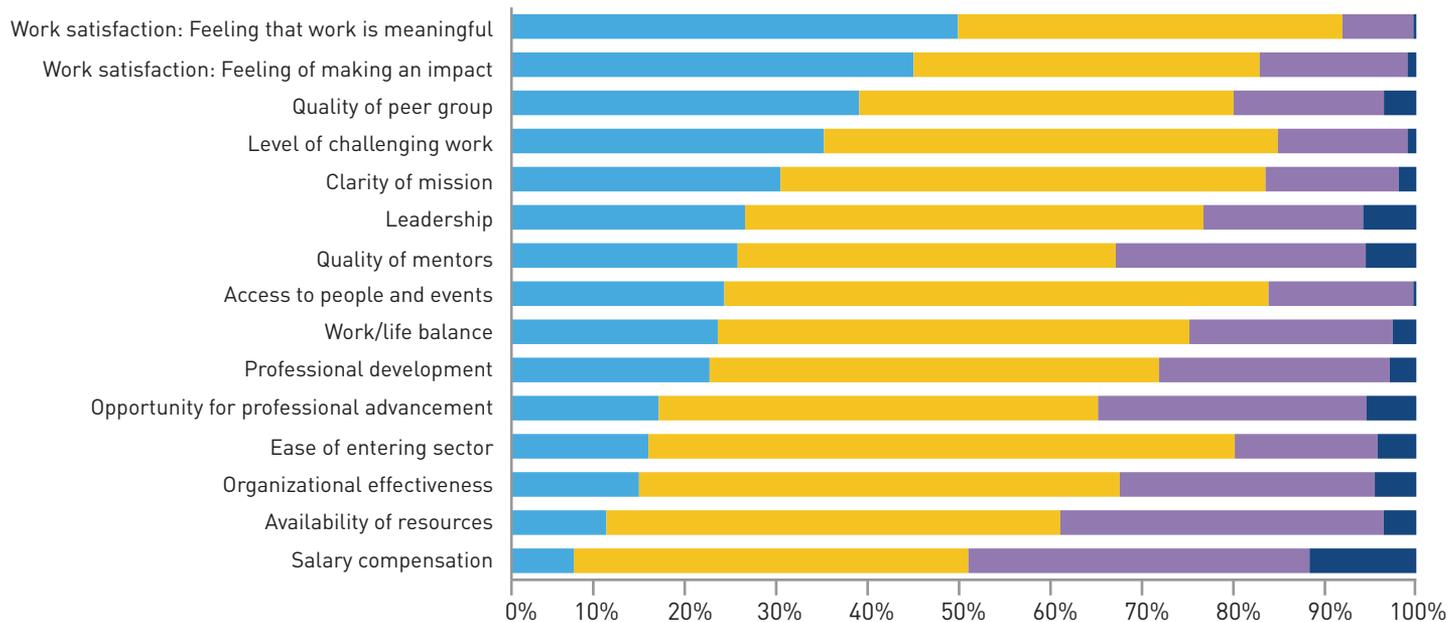


Figure 2. Levels of Satisfaction



creasingly find a sector that is “home” for themselves in the old categories and definitions.

This is a significant wake-up call for the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. The young are moving beyond the definitions of the past and are thinking of themselves and their careers in new ways and focusing with wider lenses. There is need for reconsideration of old definitions and old silos if there is to be any future understanding of the structure and directions of the sector.

Satisfaction

Beyond understanding how young people categorize the work they do, why do they choose to do that work in the first place? Nearly three-quarters of survey respondents cited the “idea of working for a socially mission-driven organization” as the primary reason for their choice. The importance of that reason held true for men and women, young and old, experienced and inexperienced, domestic and international. Of all the reasons to work in the nonprofit sector, money ranked last. Only 4.6 percent of respondents cited salary

as a motivating factor. However, this does not paint the full picture regarding compensation.

Being motivated to take a nonprofit path is one thing; being satisfied with the result is apparently something else altogether. While the majority of respondents declared they were generally satisfied with the state of their work, in only the areas of meaningfulness and impact of the work, however, were even half the young extremely satisfied. (See Figure 2.) Indeed, for most dimensions of experience in the sector, less than

one-third of respondents were “very satisfied.” The general view seems to be “It’s OK,” which hardly constitutes a ringing endorsement and is unlikely to generate strong organizational loyalty.

Dissatisfaction and the erosion of commitment were linked, with professional development and opportunity and organizational effectiveness eliciting the low satisfaction scores and correlating with a declining commitment to the issues that initially drew a person to nonprofit work. Both survey responses and written comments emphasized

The Young and the Relentless Survey

The survey was available online for completion between Oct. 7 and Nov. 5, 2010. Awareness regarding its availability was broadcast through social network outlets, such as Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook, as well as through the FLiP blog. Additionally, survey links were available on Changing Our World’s website and through onPhilanthropy.com. A total of 403 individuals accessed the survey, and 377 individuals completed the entire document, for a completion rate of 93.5 percent. The survey was not intended to be a definitive study of the issues raised, but rather to suggest trends in the sources of young professionals entering the sector. The full report, *The Young and the Relentless*, can be viewed in the Changing Our World Resources at www.changingourworld.com.

and reemphasized this point. When a young professional feels neither he or she—nor the organization—is actually going anywhere, the nonprofit bloom quickly leaves the rose, no matter how deeply committed that person was at the beginning.

Salary

It is impossible to leave out salary when talking about job satisfaction. The literature is mixed in assessing the actual state of salaries in the nonprofit sector and their levels relative to equivalent jobs in the for-profit sector. Salary may not be why young professionals enter the sector, but it is a big part of what they think about on the inside, irrespective of gender, length of time in the sector or area of work. The concern is present even among graduate students. More than half (54.2 percent) of graduate students responded that pay levels comparable to those in the for-profit sector would be part of their motivation to work in the nonprofit sector.

However, the story is not that simple. While everyone worries about salary levels, not everyone thinks that salary is a litmus test. Indeed, 43 per-

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cent of respondents felt that a nonprofit salary level that was lower than those in the for-profit sector was actually acceptable, compared with 46.4 percent who felt it was never acceptable. Nearly as many people are willing to accept lower salaries in nonprofit work as those who are not, whether because those lower levels reflect “working for a greater cause” or because the nonprofits themselves are “strapped financially for resources.”

Interestingly, a higher percentage of men than women find salary divergence acceptable. Moreover, those who come to the nonprofit sector from for-profit employment are more likely to find a lower salary acceptable than are those whose work experience has been only in the nonprofit sector. The willingness to consider salary disparity may provide a ray of hope to nonprofits looking for talent among those exiting (or being ousted from) the for-profit sector in tough economic times. (See Figure 3.)

However, if any organization thinks it can get off on the cheap by hiring young people, it had better think again. A much higher percentage of young people consider for-profit/nonprofit salary parity a motivating factor in choosing nonprofit employment than do older workers. In fact, 58.6 percent of respondents aged 23–29 look for such parity compared with 47 percent of those aged 30–35 and no one responding who was aged 36–40. Considering the data collected surround the “salary issue,” it is clear that there are conflicting feelings, suggesting a certain level of ambiguity when considering the importance of salary.

Figure 3. Importance of Salary When Considering a Job in the Philanthropic Sector

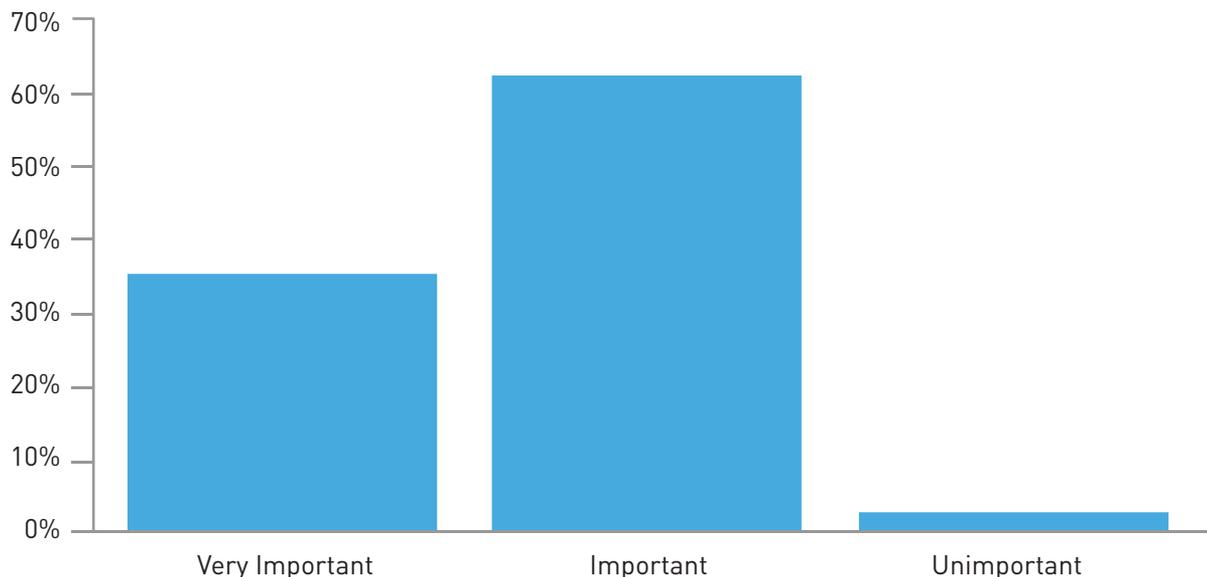
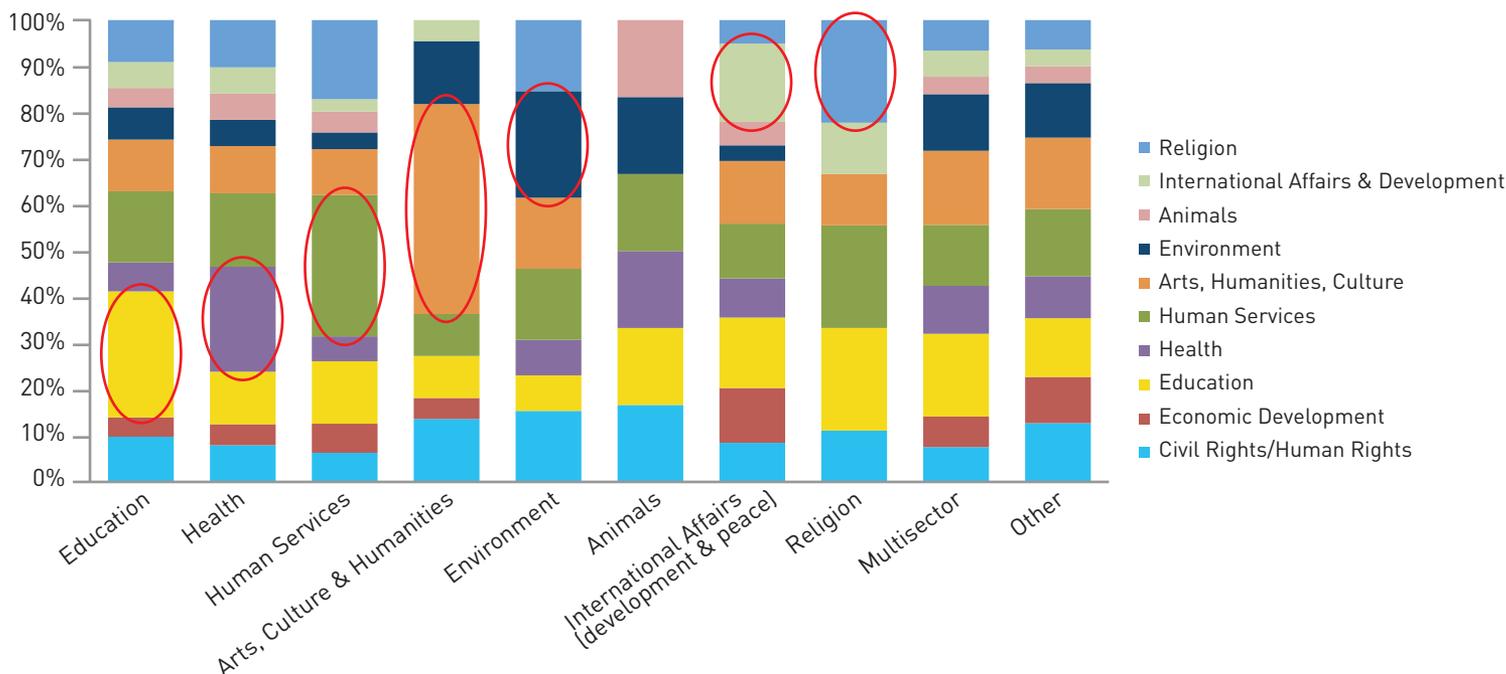


Figure 4. Area of Employment by Volunteering Cause Area



Volunteerism

While it is crucial to pay attention to the prevailing attitudes that exist within the nonprofit workplace, it is also important to consider how these feelings extend toward civic responsibility. An inventory of existing research shows that the relationship between volunteerism and those working in the philanthropic sector has been largely overlooked. In 2009, 10.8 million Millennials (individuals born after 1982), representing 21.6 percent of their population, volunteered (Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Policy Development, 2010). In comparison, an overwhelming 94.8 percent of “under 30” FLiP survey respondents working in the sector reported that they volunteer, indicating that those new to the sector are taking action in more ways than one.

Moreover, many respondents do, in fact, volunteer in the same cause area in which they work. In effect, the nonprofit sector is getting a double benefit. Nearly 50 percent of those working in the arts, humanities and culture also

volunteer within the same sector. (See Figure 4.)

Interestingly, the FLiP survey revealed that there is a correlation between individuals who volunteer and those who become more committed to the field in which they work. The connection between commitment level and willingness to volunteer serves as a litmus test of engagement. Although the data show a strong interest in volunteering, nonprofit management should recognize that initial willingness and involvement do not guarantee ongoing loyalty to jobs. When we asked survey respondents what their plans were for the upcoming year, of those who volunteered more than twice a week, more than 40 percent were planning to leave their current jobs. This suggests that although an individual is connected and committed to a cause, commitment to a particular job or organization is not guaranteed.

The Beginnings of Change

Of the many takeaways from the survey, one of the most compelling is that it is time for senior executives and human

resources managers of nonprofit organizations to go beyond past assumptions. Young professionals think about their work differently. They begin with passion, but that passion remains intact only with performance. They come to care about compensation, however much they come for commitment.

Economist John Kenneth Galbraith, who aptly coined the term “conventional wisdom,” once observed, “Faced with the choice between changing one’s mind and proving there is no need to do so, almost everyone gets busy on the proof.” If today’s senior managers are to groom tomorrow’s leaders, they would do well to worry less about the proof and more about understanding the changing arc of the expectations of tomorrow’s leaders. 📍

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