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How to Profit Modestly by Moving to a Nonprofit

By **KERRY HANNON** MARCH 17, 2014



Steven Elson worked in commercial real estate in Connecticut. Education in the nonprofit sector led him to develop affordable housing. Of his job, he says, “I can’t stop smiling.”

WHEN he was 5 years old, Steven Elson built pretend skyscrapers out of blocks. It was the start of a love affair with buildings.

At 60, his passion hasn’t subsided. Today, after being laid off from a top commercial real estate job in Connecticut in 2008, he is working in the nonprofit sector, overseeing the development of affordable housing projects.

“Every day is fascinating, and every day is a new problem,” Mr. Elson said. “It’s like Rubik’s Cube. And I can’t stop smiling. We’re helping people rebuild their lives.”

For the reconstruction of his career, Mr. Elson can partly thank EncoreHartford, a 16-week fellowship program he completed last summer. Begun by the University of Connecticut's Nonprofit Leadership Program and now in its fifth year, it has helped more than 100 unemployed corporate professionals, mostly older than 50, make the transition to professional and managerial jobs in the state's nonprofit sector. The average salary: \$50,000.

Mr. Elson's pay is significantly less than what it was when he was senior vice president of finance at a major regional commercial real estate developer in Farmington, but the other rewards make up for it.

"You know what? I don't care," he said. "I'm so happy and learning so much, and, thankfully, the youngest of our three children is through college now."

As baby boomers like Mr. Elson face downsizing, layoffs and mandatory retirements, a growing number are enrolling in programs like EncoreHartford at colleges to learn ways to convert their corporate expertise to the nonprofit world.

And nonprofit jobs are on the rise. Forty-five percent of nonprofit groups plan to hire more workers this year, up from one-third three years ago, according to a new survey of more than 400 organizations by Nonprofit HR, a human resources consulting firm. A wide array of jobs is in demand, including finance, fund-raising, management and marketing, according to the report.

Encore.org, a nonprofit group based in San Francisco that promotes "Second acts for the greater good," reports that 31 million people ages 44 to 70 are interested in making the leap to a new kind of work with some kind of social purpose. To help them do that, the organization is working to increase learning opportunities through its Encore College Initiative and a limited number of fellowship programs outside the classroom.

In November, Pace University in New York started the Encore Transition Program, aimed at helping executives and professionals explore changeovers from midlife careers to nonprofit and public service organizations. (Pace's program, like the one at the University of Connecticut, has no ties to Encore.org.) The tuition is \$1,250, and classes are limited to about a dozen students.

The five-session program provides an overview of New York's nonprofit and public service industries. Leaders in the arts, education, health care, social services and government meet with the group to share stories and allow students to make connections to tap for possible job openings or informational interviews.

"This is not a job placement program, but an exploration of opportunities," said Joan K. Tucker, the program's director.

"What I learned is that when you think that you might be at the end of one career, that's not necessarily so," said Patricia Carroll, who enrolled in the inaugural course.

For the last 20 years, Ms. Carroll, 56, a Rutherford, N.J., nurse has held executive-level positions in health care administration. But, she says, she is ready to explore all alternatives. So she signed up for the Pace program.

“The course helped me explore what my ‘next step’ might be,” she said. “Hearing from people working in the nonprofit sector who have already made the transition showed me that I’m not too old to have five-, 10-, 15-year goals just like my children in their 20s do.”

Students are also encouraged to check out complementary programs at the university. For instance, Pace offers a Master of Public Administration with a track for nonprofit management, as well as certificate courses on topics like grant writing.

On the West Coast, LA Fellows was created in 2010 at Los Angeles Valley College to offer unemployed midlevel managers an opportunity to find a job at a nonprofit or commercial organization. Fellows receive seven weeks of training covering executive-level topics like critical thinking, advanced computer skills and generating business leads.

Each fellow volunteers 100 hours as an intern at local nonprofits, which eliminates gaps on résumés and provides networking opportunities with potential employers. The program was originally financed by Los Angeles’s Community Development Department and is now supported by local WorkSource Centers.

Leadership Pittsburgh Inc., another nonprofit, offers a 10-month program in which participants spend about a dozen hours a month exploring ways to make a difference in the Pittsburgh area.

Afterward, graduates are offered 10-month stints on nonprofit boards. Their interests and skills are matched with the needs of local nonprofit organizations and state commissions that serve the region. Tuition for the current program is \$4,900 a participant.

The EncoreHartford program costs \$2,850, though grants are available, and it includes a crash course in nonprofit management and finance: 64 hours of classroom training held in local nonprofits and two months’ full-time work at the managerial level at a Connecticut nonprofit. A searchable list of nonprofit management courses offered at universities across the country is on the website of Seton Hall University and includes undergraduate, graduate and noncredit courses.

Sometimes, all that is needed is a course or two to bolster skills and catch a hiring manager’s eye. For example, Betsy Werley, 58, an “innovation fellow” with Encore.org, spent 26 years working first as a corporate lawyer and then leading projects at JPMorgan Chase.

When she decided to move to the nonprofit industry, she took courses at New York University in areas where she felt she needed some help — technology for nonprofits, for instance, and an introduction to fund-raising.

That training gave her the boost to land a job as the executive director of Transition Network, a nonprofit based in New York that helps women over 50 explore new career options, a post she left last year.

“You get in the door with your for-profit skills and experience,” Ms. Werley said. “But those are just the starting point. You have to demonstrate that you understand nonprofit culture, by taking courses and doing volunteer work.”

There is also, however, a secret ingredient. “You must truly be passionate about the organization’s mission,” she said.

Mr. Elson with his building blocks can attest to that.