

Time for a change? Try a career in the not-for-profit sector

Graduates and career-changers alike are finding a vast array of roles – and job satisfaction – in the charity sector.

By Kate Hilpern

¹ Contrary to popular opinion, the charity sector is not full of 'soft and fluffy do-gooders', according to Jackie Weston-Davies, HR manager at the Royal National Institute for the Blind. 'In some ways the work we do here is more challenging than the private sector. That's certainly the case in terms of our contractual work, when we have to compete against commercial and public sector contracts,' she says. Add to this the fact that charities are becoming more business-focused, and you can see why they need top talent as much as any other employer.

² The good news for charities is that with more and more people wanting to work for them – either fresh from university or as a career-changer – the job of finding this top talent is becoming easier. The flipside, of course, is that finding a job in the sector is increasingly competitive. But if you have the right skills, attributes and attitude, you'll be snapped up, says Weston-Davies. While you may not get paid quite as much as you would in

the commercial sector, the overall rewards can be far greater. 'We are fantastic with flexible working, for example,' she says. 'There's also the corporate training that people can go on and the rewards of knowing that your daily work has a meaningful impact.'

³ Weston-Davies says the range of roles in charities is much wider than people often realise. 'In a charity like ours, there are fundraisers, care workers, teachers, campaigners, administrators, PR people – and a lot more besides. We are like a mini-local government.'

⁴ Debbie Hockman, director of the charity recruitment specialists forum3, agrees that there is often confusion about just how many jobs – which can range from accountancy to zoology – exist within the sector. 'Many of the jobs are ones you'd find in any sector, such as finance, admin, HR and marketing,' she says. 'Then there are the specialist charity jobs such as fundraising and charity officer and finally, there are jobs specific to certain areas of the sector, such

as social housing, where you get housing officers, care managers and other roles. But even with these specialist roles, employers see the skills and competencies gained in other areas as transferable.'

⁵ Jonathan Forrest, development director at the Royal Veterinary College, knows this all too well. Having worked in a bank until 1992, he decided he'd like to become a corporate fundraiser because he wanted to do something more consequential. 'My financial background, as well as my skills in relationship management – which is what I did in the bank – are very complementary to fundraising,' he says.

⁶ Hockman expects to hear many more such stories in the coming months. 'It will be interesting to see what happens with the massive fall out in the City,' she says. 'Things like this are often a catalyst for people deciding they want to do something more worthwhile.' Within the past seven years, Hockman has witnessed a dramatic change in the number of graduates wanting to work in ➡

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➡ charities, and says it's no longer a case of 'I can't get a job anywhere else, I'll work for a charity'.

⁷ Some charities – such as Barnardos, the NSPCC and Cancer Research UK – even run graduate recruitment programmes, which consist of four six-month placements, each offering unrivalled experience and the chance to decide which area of work you like best before committing. 'We take on between four and eight graduates a year, for which we get around 1,000 applications,' says Robert Farrache, resourcing manager at Cancer Research UK. Given the competition, you'll need at least a 2.1 degree, as well as drive, resilience and evidence of extra-curricular activity during your university years. 'We don't want people who went to university and did nothing else,' says Farrache. 'It might be a gap year, a work placement, running a club, experience of fundraising – anything that shows you've stuck your neck out and taken responsibility.'

⁸ Whether you are a graduate or a career-changer, there are specialist courses, run by organisations including the Institute of Fundraising, where you can pick and choose modules that you like the sound of the best. While some people decide to do them prior to joining the sector, others are subsidised by their employers once they've got a job.

⁹ Among the things that have most impressed Cher Platt about the sector are the speed with

which you can progress, the level of autonomy and the access you have to those at the top. 'I came in as an administrative assistant, but the job soon progressed into more of a co-ordinator role,' she says. Platt is now project co-ordinator at the international charity Project AWARE, which focuses on conserving underwater environments.

¹⁰ For those wishing to enter the sector, Platt believes swotting up on the bigger picture is essential. 'There are free e-publications such as *Third Sector* or *UK Fundraising*,' she says. 'Know your field and the work of the charity you are particularly interested in. Look for volunteer opportunities within your chosen field too – these are great on your CV and can be a gateway into a paid role.'

¹¹ Like many people who work for smaller charities, Platt's role is multi-faceted, ranging from looking after the regional section of the website to managing the grants programme and attending board of directors meetings. In big charities, on the other hand (and it is the top 200 charities that take on the bulk of staff and income in the sector), you can expect a more defined and specialised role.

¹² 'Neither is better or worse – it's just a case of individual preference,' says Kieran McGorrian, account director at the charity recruitment consultancy Acquilas. Roles can be more uncertain in smaller charities, he admits, which is basically down to resourcing and funding issues

but on the upside, you may prefer working across a whole spectrum of duties and being closer to the cause than you would be in a larger charity.

¹³ Russell Eaton, head of finance at PDSA – a charity that cares for the sick and injured animals of people in need – says the sector is alive with creativity, energy, professionalism and dedication – and has far exceeded his expectations. Having trained as a chartered management accountant, he worked for subsidiaries of several multinational companies in senior financial positions. But three years ago, after 19 years in industry, he felt like a new challenge.

¹⁴ 'Moving to another multinational would have presented very similar challenges to the ones I'd already faced. Also, I was concerned about the long-term outlook for that sector,' he says. 'On an emotional level, a big draw was the opportunity to make a contribution to society. That might sound a little worthy, but it was clearly in my thoughts. Industry is important and contributes to society, but does it in a different way, and less immediately.'

¹⁵ Eaton also liked the independence and small size of many charities which enable the individual manager to make an impact. He was also attracted to the long-term vision of the sector. 'The role I took had its own particular appeal and the fact that it was with PDSA, a unique charity in that it ➡'

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➡ helps both animals and people, made me want to switch,' he says.

¹⁶ Sash Daly, policy and parliamentary manager at TreeHouse – the national charity for autism education – is another career-changer. Having worked for the General Medical Council, initially working on investigating complaints about doctors and later moving into policy, she decided to make the move after volunteering for a children's charity. 'I thought it would be perfect to combine working in an area like policy with a cause I believe in,' she explains.

¹⁷ And she hasn't looked back. 'Working with MPs to raise questions for debates in Parliament, to influence policy and legislation, can be very exciting, particularly when you see changes in attitudes and awareness of autism through the course of a debate.' One of the best things about the sector, she says, is that it enables you to approach issues in different ways. So, if nothing else, you'll need plenty of flexibility, determination and innovation.

'It's like being paid to do your hobby'

¹⁸ **Amanda Golding is in charge of sales, marketing and PR for Jamie's Computers, part of the Society of St James, a homelessness charity**

¹⁹ 'In 2002, I was made redundant from an insurance giant, much to my delight. I had an administrative role and, to be perfectly honest, I couldn't think of anything worse than being stuck there pushing paper for all eternity. Being made redundant gave me the push I needed to head in another direction. Then I happened upon an advert for the Society of St James in my local paper. Though I initially viewed it as a stop gap while I figured out my future, I quickly realised this was the challenging and rewarding career I'd been looking for.

²⁰ I began as an administrative assistant and I was then seconded to the social enterprise division, Jamie's Computers, which is a collection and disposal service for local businesses and their unwanted computers – which are then made suitable for re-use and sold where possible. I became a project worker and then refurbishment co-coordinator and as it has grown, one of the main parts of my job now is in sales, marketing and PR.

²¹ Coming to work each day now is like being paid for a hobby. That's not to say I don't work very hard, but my work is thoroughly enjoyable and rewarding – and I'm being paid for it. I can also see the difference I am making to people's lives every day. The culture is quite different too, and because of the commitment the organisation has to its staff, I have developed enormously in the six years I have been here.

²² When I was younger, I suspected the sector was less professional than commercial sectors but I've found that the same rules apply. A large part of my role is ensuring that we are hitting our commercial targets through systems management, sales and marketing – the same as you might expect in any commercial management role. The difference at Jamie's is that surplus is generated to benefit the local community, namely socially excluded adults, and that feels good.'

'We get lots of training opportunities'

²³ **B Andrew Knowles is a graduate trainee in corporate and scientific services at Cancer Research UK**

²⁴ 'Having done a biology degree, one of the attractions of working here is that it is a science organisation. I like the fact that the work they do is fantastic. Also, because it's quite a large organisation, there is good scope for career development and the graduate training scheme in particular gives you such a breadth of things to try out.

²⁵ 'The focus in the recruitment process seemed to be less on experience in charity work and more on potential in business. It was competitive but it never felt intimidating.

²⁶ I joined last September on a scheme that took six people. The early weeks involved a recycling ➡

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➡ project so the company could see how we ran projects, and we could see how the business works. Then came my first six-month placement which was in risk management. It was quite strategic and involved me reviewing and updating the way we go about eliminating risks.

²⁷ I've just finished my second placement, which was in science information. This involved a whole host of things: most importantly, redesigning the intranet site. My next placement will involve business analysis for fundraising. Soon the time will come for me to choose an area to work in more permanently.

²⁸ I'm really enjoying it here. The level of responsibility we get is huge and there are lots of training opportunities to support you. I don't think there any downsides at all.' ■