

Ask the Expert: Best Practices for Hiring Development Staff

Provided by:



Why is it so hard to hire development professionals?

There are a number of reasons, including:

- Demand for good development people far outweighs supply. All nonprofits need to raise money and there's no easy route!
- There is no structured pipeline for talented people to enter the development field; most talented development professionals end up in the field by chance. There are beginning to be more certificate and graduate programs in development, but they are few and far between.
- Many people assume that all development positions require you to ask people for money, so they avoid the entire field. There are actually a great variety of positions available in development that utilize a wide variety of skills and competencies.
- In the last 12 months, filling development positions has been even more challenging as a result of the recession. Talented development professionals are putting a higher value on career stability and are less likely to enter a shaky job market and risk leaving their current roles.

What should I think about when hiring a development professional?

There are a few different profiles to consider when hiring a development professional. Before posting job descriptions and moving into full search mode, it is important to first understand what you are looking for. For example, development specialists are highly skilled and experienced in one particular fundraising strategy, such as major giving, foundation relations, events management, or corporate relations, while generalists have some experience in and enjoy a variety of different types of development work.

Generally, smaller organizations with development departments staffed by 1-3 employees will target generalists. Conversely, larger organizations with sophisticated development departments will target specialists with a depth of experience in one particular arena. In defining the type of candidate you want to target, think about where your organization is now and where it will be in the next 3 – 5 years and hire for the future. If 5 years from now you aim to double in size, staff your development department with a team that can get you there, rather than one capable of raising last year's budget. Similarly, think about where you'd like your organization's revenue to come from in the future (government, foundations, individuals, etc.) and hire towards that end.

Also consider the role that the development professional will play externally. Some are very skilled at "teeing up" the chief executive, who is the lead external face of the organization, while others want to have a more external role. Think about the external-facing fundraising responsibilities and how these will be shared by the development team and the chief executive. Delineating these responsibilities up front will prove to be beneficial long-term for your organization, and will help you in planning your search and targeting the right type of development professionals.

We are just starting a development department. Are there special considerations?

The skills needed to build a development department are different from those needed to lead an existing department. Generally, organizations in this stage are looking for professionals who can raise money while simultaneously building the systems necessary to ensure a sustainable and successful development department – or "building the plane while you're flying it." In addition to specific types of fundraising experience, organizations seeking this profile of development professional should target candidates who possess an entrepreneurial drive, strategic thinking skills, and demonstrated success operating without a great deal of staff support or resources. Sometimes organizations in the building stage say that they want someone who has already built a development department and wants to do it again, but be warned -- this type of candidate is very unusual. It is better to look for someone who has been # 2 or #3 in a larger organization, knows what a successful department looks like, and wants to build his/her own department. Also, think about what 'building the department' really means for your organization. Does it mean starting a donor-database and systematizing donor communication? If so, a candidate with fewer years of experience might do the trick. However, if it means growing from \$1 million to \$10 million in revenue in a short period of time and directly managing every funder relationship, then you're in the market for a higher-level professional.

When I am interviewing candidates, what should I look for?

While it depends on the level, scope and specialization of the position, development professionals with the most potential for growth and success should generally demonstrate the following competencies:

- Relationship-building/relationship management
- Results-orientation
- Oral and written communication skills, including targeting message to audience
- Project management
- Strategic thinking
- Staff management

In some cases, as noted above, systems-building will be important as well.

What are some common mistakes that organizations make when hiring development staff?

In an attempt to hire the strongest development professional possible, many organizations neglect to recognize the importance of finding a candidate with a connection to their mission. As most development professionals are external-facing and charged with rallying support for a particular mission, it is critical that they are able to project a passion for the work of the organization. We have found over and over again that the most successful development people are highly engaged in the work of the organization and partner closely with the program team in order to raise funds.

As you are reviewing resumes, remember that development professionals generally move between jobs more frequently than others do. More so than people with other functions, strong development professionals are heavily recruited and are frequently presented with new and exciting opportunities. Others move around because they specialize in an area that is project-based, such as capital campaigns. Regardless of the reason, if you are someone who generally won't consider candidates who have switched jobs frequently, recognize that you may be screening out some outstanding candidates.

Consider also whether the hire needs to bring his or her own contacts. Often, the value of a "rolodex" is overestimated. Funders generally don't just follow strong development professionals from organization to organization, and a good fundraiser should be able to research prospects, find leads, and cultivate relationships with anyone. If you do require a rolodex, this will most likely limit you to candidates in your local area. Commongood Careers recommends conducting a national search whenever possible.

Most of the candidates I am seeing come from large nonprofit institutions, but we are a smaller organization that is pretty resource-constrained. What should I do?

Many development professionals come from large institutions because these types of organizations simply have more opportunities available. Experience from a large institution can be extremely beneficial to a smaller organization, as the candidate will have been exposed to the full gamut of development activities and will know what successful large-scale fundraising looks like. However, it is important to communicate to these candidates what working in a resource-constrained environment really means. What kind of budget exists to support fundraising efforts? Will the position have any administrative support? What technology systems are in place? These are important drivers of organizational culture that need to be aligned with the candidate's interests. For the right type of candidate, working in a small department is an extremely exciting opportunity, so make sure you are 'selling' the exciting elements of the job while also being up front about the constraints.

How can we best retain our development people?

The best development people are recruited constantly. Ensuring their retention at your organization starts with making the right hire. If that person's skills, experience, and interests match with the needs of the position, s/he will be more likely to stay. In addition:

- Provide opportunities for growth. Can your development hire take on more and more responsibility? Can s/he have autonomy in building a portfolio of donors? Can you provide professional development, training, and mentorship?
- Understand the hire's long-term goals. Does s/he want to be a Chief Development Officer or a Chief Executive Officer? Structure the role and professional development to meet his/her goals.
- Recognize that Chief Development Officers are among the highest paid employees within an organization. Your compensation system must reward strong performance. More and more, nonprofit organizations are implementing performance-based bonuses for development professionals.