

Temporary Fundraisers Can Ease the Strain of Rampant Turnover

By Holly Hall

When Jeffrey Mack stepped into his new job as chief development officer at the American Red Cross National Capital Region last year, the Washington position had been vacant for more than two years. Normally a new fundraiser in that situation has to reinvent the charity's entire fundraising operation, but Mr. Mack's path was smoothed by Emma Kieran, who had spent the previous 10 months temporarily filling the job.

"Emma came in, ran the department, and kept it steady until they found me," says Mr. Mack. "Rather than me starting over, Emma was the glue that helped the department keep going."

Without Ms. Kieran's introductions to the individuals, corporations, and foundations she had been cultivating during her time at the Red Cross, Mr. Mack would have been, as he says, "thrown in the deep end."

Linda Mathes, chief executive of the Red Cross chapter, was also pleased with the arrangement. "I had to think about whether it was a good idea to have a temporary person," she says, "but it worked very well."

A Temporary Team

As more and more nonprofits seek ways to deal with gaps caused by rampant turnover in senior development jobs, they are turning to people like Ms. Kieran, who works for Orr Associates, a company that provides teams of fundraisers who work on a temporary basis.

In the Red Cross job, Ms. Kieran was assisted by Orr colleagues who worked behind the scenes to conduct research to find new donors, among other tasks. The weak economic recovery has accelerated the demand for such services, experts say, because fundraisers are increasingly under intense pressure to increase donations, and many leave their organizations for that reason.

Finding a replacement can take several months, and often longer, so the temporary arrangement "gives the organization some breathing space, rather than having to get someone because the wheels are falling off," says Timothy Higdon, the former chief development officer at Girl Scouts of the USA, who has held several temporary senior development positions in his career. "It gives the organization a chance to do the search. You're not making the best decision if you rush."

Can Be Costly

While many organizations are grateful for an interim fundraiser's assistance, some people in that role have doubts about whether temporary positions actually do very much to



RICK FRIEDMAN, FOR THE CHRONICLE

Beth Garvin, who is now working at the Discovery Museum, in Acton, Mass., says groups that hire temporary fundraisers often suffer staffing weaknesses. "I have walked into some chaotic organizations."



Timothy Higdon says that applying for the permanent job when he was acting chief development officer kept him from having frank discussions with the executive director.

solve problems stemming from the revolving door in development offices nationwide.

"I'm not sure that the interim position helps minimize the ill effects of turnover, because the person is usually not there long enough to be fully integrated into the organization," says Beth Tishler, a Boston fundraising consultant who sometimes mixes consulting with interim development work. "It's a way to cope, not a long-term answer."

Still, many interim fundraisers say they do help charities improve their fundraising—and increase the chances that the permanent leader who ultimately takes over the development office will be successful on the job.

"I want to leave them better than I found them," says Betsy Tarlin, a Boston consultant who began taking interim fundraising jobs about a decade ago while working as a part-time development officer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "A lot of CEOs have very unrealistic expectations for their development officers," she says. "I come in and model what a good development officer does. A lot of teaching can take place."

To find a temporary fund-

raiser, charities can turn to professionals like Mr. Higdon, who operates as an independent contractor. Or they can contact fundraising consulting companies that offer an interim service. Usually such arrangements involve a fee for the search, though some consultants provide free referrals to fundraisers who fill temporary positions. Charities can hire a single interim development officer or use a company that provides teams of fundraisers, which in effect allows an organization to outsource its fundraising.

The fees aren't the only costly part of a temporary arrangement. Interim fundraisers usually command higher pay than other development officers, often charging a day rate that can be as high as \$1,500 or more. One reason is they have higher expenses, usually paying for their own health insurance and, in some cases, office space.

Interim development officers also tend to be longtime fundraisers, so they charge for their expertise. Interim fundraisers should have 15 to 30 years of experience because the charities they work with vary so widely in their missions and fundraising needs, says Jeanne Sigler, a

Philadelphia fundraising consultant who started a service called Interim Solutions that places temporary development officers.

Beth Garvin, an interim fundraiser who now works 20 hours a week for the Discovery Museums in Acton, Mass., agrees. "This should not be anyone's first job. I have walked into some chaotic organizations." When a charity reaches out to an interim fundraiser, she says, "it's a sign they have some weakness in staffing."

Sometimes the request comes after new leaders try to shift an organization's culture and face resistance, she says. Or the chief executive's position is vacant and the charity is reluctant to hire a permanent fundraiser until a new leader can select the person to fill that role.

Coaching Sessions

When temporary fundraising assignments work well, they usually have multiple benefits. For example, interim fundraisers can pave the way for more junior development officers to take over, keeping them from job hopping, says Ms. Tarlin.

"I often continue on as a coach," she adds.

After serving as interim development director at Grist, an environmental-news organization in Seattle, Ms. Tarlin provided one hour of telephone coaching a week to Erika Croxton, the new director of development. The coaching went on for several months after Ms. Croxton started, and she recently resumed the calls with Ms. Tarlin because Grist wants to expand the number of people and organizations that make large gifts.

The coaching sessions "definitely set me up for success," says Ms. Croxton, who's still at Grist three years after taking the job.

Not an Insider

Interim fundraising jobs can be difficult, even for development professionals with years of experience. "You sit in management meetings, but you are not an insider, and you may not have time to develop those relationships in the short time you are there," Ms. Tishler says.

Says Ms. Garvin, the interim fundraiser at Discovery Museums: "There are things I'm doing I haven't done in 20 years, like run my own reports. You have to relearn some things,

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Temp Jobs Offer More Flexibility

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But for experienced fundraisers, temporary assignments offer attractive benefits, including flexible or part-time hours in many cases and the chance to work with an ever-changing cast of organizations on different fundraising goals.

“I like being an interim. It’s like trying on new hats,” says Ms. Tishler, the Boston fundraising consultant.

In other cases, fundraisers take interim assignments because they want to pursue writing novels, painting, or some other personal interest, says

Some people take these jobs because they want time for other pursuits, like painting or writing.

Ms. Sigler of Interim Solutions. “They appreciate gaps between assignments to focus on something else.”

Candid Conversations

Others like the fact that interim fundraising work, which often combines aspects of consulting with a position on staff, allows them to be more candid with the chief executive and other leaders than they could be as a permanent development officer.

As an interim fundraiser, Mr. Higdon says, he is almost always asked to take the job permanently, but he has learned to refuse.

In one interim position, he agreed to apply for the permanent position of chief development officer. But he says his candidacy interfered with his ability to discuss issues frankly with the chief executive, such as underperforming colleagues in the development office.

“The benefit of having an interim is that person has fresh eyes and no dog in the hunt,” he says. “If you are trying to get yourself into the organization, you may not say the things that need to be said. If the organization knows right upfront you’re not a candidate, you can have the tough conversations.”

Another thing Mr. Higdon insists on when taking an interim fundraising position is that the organization have a search under way for his replacement, preferably one led by a professional recruiter. “I would not go in without there being a search teed up,” he says. “I don’t want them to become complacent and just coast. I want there to be an end in sight.”

How to Succeed as Acting Head of Fundraising

ASK LEADERS TO ARTICULATE JOB DUTIES

Emma Kieran, who recently served as the interim chief development officer at the American Red Cross’s regional office in Princeton, N.J., says the first thing she does in a temporary assignment is ask the charity’s leaders to stipulate the top three to five things they want accomplished.

She also asks that everyone else at the organization knows the priority list. “Everyone should be on the same page, instead of having push and pull and stuff being added onto your job,” Ms. Kieran says. “Do not dilute the interim’s time.”

BE A QUICK STUDY

Fundraisers in permanent positions generally take several months to a year to learn their organizations and all of its nuances, but interim fundraisers don’t have that luxury, says Timothy Higdon, a fundraising consultant who has held several temporary senior-level development positions.

“The learning curve is much shorter,” he says. “You parachute in and you’re expected to be performing on Day One. There’s not a lot of latitude.”

IDENTIFY FUNDRAISING NEEDS

The biggest task facing any interim fundraiser, Ms. Kieran says, “is to assess where the fundraising operation is, where the skill gaps are.”

Then the interim development officer must figure out how to fill the missing needs, such as visiting and soliciting donors or seeking corporate sponsors, and identify people who can take on those roles after he or she leaves.

“Delegating is as important as being part of the team,” she says, “whether it is a mailing or a million-dollar ask.”

Mr. Higdon says that he asks the people who hire him: “Are you in start-up, turnaround, or maintenance mode? The way you approach the job is very different for these three scenarios.” Turnaround is the hardest outcome to achieve in an interim position, while maintaining the status quo is easiest, he says. Starting a new type of fundraising, or raising money for an organization that has not pursued private donations before, is somewhere in between.

PUT THE CHARITY’S PERMANENT STAFF IN FRONT

To strengthen the organizations they serve temporarily, especially in the eyes of donors and employees, some interim fundraisers meet with donors only when accompanied by a senior executive or board member.

“You want the donor to see a stable organization,” says Mr. Higdon. “I might go out with the president or a major gift officer, but I am not initiating donor relationships.”

Mr. Higdon also makes sure that major decisions such as hiring workers or signing new contracts are finalized by a senior official who can take responsibility for the decision.

“If I have staff I need to deal with, I will lead the process all the way up and then someone from human resources says the words,” Mr. Higdon says. “If I bring in a new vendor, the CEO signs the contract.”

EXPECT EXTENSIONS

Interim fundraisers say that more often than not, they’re asked to extend their stay at the charities they serve. “I have learned you should at least double the tenure they state at the beginning,” says Beth Garvin, an interim fundraiser now working at the Discovery Museums, in Acton, Mass.

“Very often it is like a Pandora’s box,” says Beth Tishler, a Boston fundraising consultant who has worked as an interim development director. “The hiring person says they only need two days per week, and you get in there and see that a lot more work needs to be done.”

DON’T STAY TOO LONG

Some overlap in the tenure of an interim fundraiser and his or her permanent replacement is a good idea, but too long an overlap can be detrimental, Mr. Higdon says.

“A week or so is good, but not much longer,” he says. “I did one where the overlap was a couple months, but that was way too long. It confuses staff.”

Instead of transferring authority to the permanent fundraiser, he says, staff members are likely to keep deferring to the interim fundraiser, and that can undercut the new leader’s authority.

—HOLLY HALL

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