

Fledgling Nonprofit Workers Love Their Jobs but Bear Financial Burdens

By Jennifer C. Berkshire

The newest generation of nonprofit employees strongly wants to remain in jobs that do good—even as many of the workers struggle to get by on low entry-level salaries and pay back their student loans, according to a new survey by *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*.

Eight out of 10 new workers want to continue working at a nonprofit, even though 40 percent say they are dissatisfied with their pay. And about 65 percent said they have college-loan debt.

The survey, which tracked more than 900 people who have worked at nonprofits for less than five years, was conducted with help from the Nonprofit Leadership Alliance and the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network.

In addition to showing the financial status of fledgling employees, the survey paints a picture of improving economic health for charities.

Nearly 40 percent of the recent employees surveyed said they had landed their new positions after a job search lasting three months or less.

Trish Tchume, director of the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network, says she's encouraged by signs of economic improvement but worries about the long-term toll that low pay and college-loan debt could take on new employees—and on nonprofit organizations over all, which may have trouble retaining young talent.

A survey of 1,100 charity workers that her organization conducted last year found that commitment to remaining in a nonprofit job weakened as employees got older. The average age of workers who responded to her group's survey was 31; the average age in the *Chronicle* survey was 27.

Says Ms. Tchume, "The older folks get, the more the reality sinks in that 'this is my life.'"

'I Made a Trade-Off'

When Kelsey Wolf was hired last February to coordinate special events at Southwest Human Development, an Easter Seals affiliate in Phoenix, the 26-year-old was happy just to have a job. Relief soon gave way to what she describes as a life on a tight budget: Once she pays her rent and monthly expenses, she says, there's little left over.

Ms. Wolf, who earns \$32,000 a year, says she and her friends often ruefully remind each other, "You don't go into nonprofits for the money."

They're not alone: Thirty-six percent of the people in the survey said they earned \$30,000 to \$39,000.

But like the majority of early-career workers, Ms. Wolf says she can't imagine swapping a job she loves for a position that pays more but means less: "I made a trade-off."

Adam Gardner, 23, says he was initially disappointed when he learned that his new job as the data coordinator for the Guthrie Theater, in Minneapolis, paid just \$27,000.

"I was very sad," says Mr. Gardner, who started his job in December after interning there for six months.

But he says that after speaking with peers, especially those who have recently begun jobs with arts groups, his perspective has changed. "I learned that actually I'm not doing so badly."

The Debt Dilemma

If the survey results are an accurate predictor, Mr. Gardner is likely to find himself earning more than his female counterparts.

The survey found that the gender gap in nonprofit pay starts early, with 26 percent of men earning at least \$50,000, compared with 15 percent of women. Perhaps not surprisingly, women were more likely to be dissatisfied with their pay—42 percent versus 33 percent of men.

For many fledgling nonprofit workers, though, the challenge of not just getting by on an entry-level salary but also trying to pay back college loans can seem overwhelming.

About 30 percent of those polled said they still needed to repay at least \$50,000 in loans. Courtney Myers-Keaton has worked for the past five years at the Healthy Homes Coalition, in Grand Rapids, Mich. With nearly \$80,000 in outstanding loans, Ms. Myers-Keaton, 28, says that almost her entire salary goes toward loan repayment. Fortunately, she says, her husband—who does not work at a nonprofit— earns enough to keep them afloat.

Of new workers with college-loan debt, 80 percent said that their obligation is influential in shaping their career decisions.

Ms. Myers-Kean is about to return to college to pursue a master's degree in public health in hopes of landing a higher-paying nonprofit job. But she concedes that there is no guarantee that her bet will pay off.

"My chances of finding a better job still don't look great," she says. "What if I end up with even more debt and I'm still only earning \$33,000 a year?"

Despite the number of new nonprofit workers who are grappling with debt, few employers offer any help paying back loans. Fewer than 3 percent of the people who completed the survey said their organizations offered a forgiveness plan that would decrease or wipe out a loan after some period of years.

Katherin Canton Titus, who recently started an administrative job at Pro Arts gallery, in Oakland, Calif., estimates that one-third of her income goes toward paying back her college loans.

She thinks that salary may be a more significant issue for her generation than for previous ones because of their college-loan obligations.

“We’re saddled with this incredibly high cost of education, and that means that one job isn’t enough, one degree isn’t enough,” she says.

Ms. Canton Titus, 24, says she’s sympathetic to the budgetary constraints that many charities face, particularly those in the arts. But she also thinks employers can do more to help workers who are struggling to remain afloat.

“Introduce me to other opportunities to supplement my income or my career path,” she says. “Help me be connected and passionate, but also help me make ends meet.”

The combination of low pay and student debt could cause many young people to flee nonprofits, worries Paul Schmitz, founder of Public Allies, a national youth-leader training organization.

“A lot of organizations are frankly turning away entry-level people by providing them with very little incentive to stay in the sector,” says Mr. Schmitz.

He urges charities to focus less on credentials—the degrees that so many young workers go into hock to attain—and more on training new employees and giving them a chance to grow.

“These jobs are a great opportunity for young people, especially the talent in our communities that hasn’t had the opportunity to be on the direct four-year college track,” he says. “People can earn and learn.”

A Service Society

The Chronicle’s survey demonstrates the growing attention to volunteerism by young people, including volunteer requirements in high school and college. Among the findings:

- About 82 percent said that they had volunteered before they found paid employment.
- Roughly 38 percent either were hired by an organization they had volunteered for or made connections through other volunteering that led to their present job.
- More than 20 percent of those polled are current or former AmeriCorps members.

Brooke Sinclair, 31, has been volunteering for the Greater Houston Coalition for Healthy Futures since June. She’s hoping to parlay her donated labor into a full-time, paid position in communications or marketing at a charity.

While the official unemployment level in Houston may be 6.5 percent—significantly below the national rate of 8.2 percent—Ms. Sinclair says it feels as though she and her job-seeking peers are all looking for the same jobs.

“I’m really surprised at how hard it’s been to find something permanent,” she says.

In addition to her volunteer position, Ms. Sinclair devotes most of her time these days to marketing herself. She attends as many networking events as she can find and is trying to join the board of a local marketing association.

Many other people new to the nonprofit work force are also seeking to forge professional connections, according to *The Chronicle’s* survey.

About 68 percent of people in the study who are members of professional networks belong to the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network. Nearly 14 percent are members of the Association of Fundraising Professionals, and nearly 44 percent belong to other professional networks.

Ms. Sinclair is one of a significant percentage of would-be nonprofit employees who have yet to benefit as nonprofit finances begin to recover from the downturn. Of the workers in the study still seeking a charity job, 39 percent say their job search has lasted seven months or longer.

Jobs Wanted

Angela London has been searching for work for more than two years since she was laid off from her District of Columbia work-force-development job in February 2010—despite having a master’s degree in public policy from Georgetown University.

“I think I’ve applied for something like 1,000 jobs,” says Ms. London, whose unemployment payments ran out in January.

Still, she says that she remains “painfully optimistic.” There are more jobs to apply for these days, she says, and in recent weeks she has gone on multiple interviews.

She also counts herself as lucky to have such zeal for nonprofit work—she wants to advocate for children, women, or elderly people—even if she has yet to find a position.

“You have to go where your passion is,” says Ms. London. “I know an awful lot of people who are working in fields they don’t care anything about.”

Noelle Barton and Emily Gipple contributed to this article.