

WORKING FOR A CAUSE

A PRACTICAL GUIDEBOOK
FOR IMMIGRANTS ENTERING
THE NONPROFIT SECTOR

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INTRODUCTION

I arrived in the U.S. carrying more than just a suitcase. I brought dreams, experience in business and tech, a strong education, and a deep desire to contribute...But I had no idea where to begin...

If that sounds familiar, this guidebook is for you. It's here to help you find your way into the nonprofit world—a place where your skills and passion can make a real impact.

When I first arrived, I felt lost. I had so many questions. Where do I begin? How do I take everything I already know and make it matter in a new country with unfamiliar systems and unspoken rules?

If you're an immigrant like me, you've probably been there. You've worked hard. You've built something before. And now you're trying to rebuild it, and this time, in a new environment.

For me, the answers started to take shape in the nonprofit sector.

It began with small steps: volunteering a few hours, collecting documents, fixing a website, setting up a nonprofit's first social media page, and sitting in on strategic planning meetings with board members. One opportunity led to another. Slowly, I began to understand just how much I had to offer, and how meaningful this work truly was.

The nonprofit world became my new professional home. It welcomed my experience and gave me space to grow, while contributing to the communities around me. It showed me that the skills I brought weren't just useful — they were needed.

That's why I wrote this guidebook: to open the door for others like you and to help grow the nonprofit sector by welcoming more skilled, passionate professionals into it.

Inside, you'll find the kind of guidance I wish I had when I was starting out, a clear, honest introduction to the nonprofit sector in the United States. You'll learn how different types of nonprofits are structured, how they function day to day, and how to get started, even if you have no previous nonprofit experience.

You'll explore a wide range of practical topics:

- How to translate your skills into a nonprofit role.
- What nonprofit governance looks like, including boards and leadership structures.
- How to develop programs and manage volunteers.
- Basics of grant writing and fundraising.

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- Core business skills like project management, budgeting, reporting, and digital tools.
- How to grow your career and even step into leadership positions over time.

Throughout these pages, you'll follow my story and read about real journeys from others in the field. You'll find inspiration, useful tools, and actionable insights.

You'll see that it's possible, even if terms like "fund development," "community engagement," or "strategic operations" sound new or intimidating today.

No matter your background, whether it's in finance, education, IT, communications, or science, there is a place for you in the nonprofit sector. Your skills are valuable. Your perspective is needed.

In the chapters ahead, you'll learn how nonprofits are built, funded, and led, and how you can find your own place within them.

Because at its core, nonprofit work is about building up: solving problems, strengthening communities, creating opportunities, and turning hope into action. And if you've made it this far, chances are, you're ready to begin that journey too.

CHAPTER 1: UNDERSTANDING THE NONPROFIT SECTOR

When I first heard the word nonprofit, I pictured bake sales and borrowed office space and certainly not full HR departments, million-dollar budgets, or teams of professionals trained in marketing, finance, and law.

But once I began working in the nonprofit world, I discovered something much more complex and far more inspiring.

Nonprofits are all around us. They're behind the community health clinic where families get care. They power the local food pantry, the after-school literacy program, the environmental campaign, and the theater around the corner. While their missions vary, their purpose is the same: to serve the public good, not to generate profit for individuals.

That's what "nonprofit" really means. It doesn't mean an organization has no money; it means any money earned is reinvested into its mission. In the for-profit world, profits go to owners or shareholders. In the nonprofit world, every dollar is used to advance the cause.

And the sector is much bigger than most people think. In the United States alone, there are over 1.5 million registered nonprofits. Together, they form the third-largest workforce in the country, employing millions of people and contributing billions of dollars to the economy. And they're still growing.

A big part of that growth is thanks to younger generations. Millennials and Gen Z are not only donating to causes they care about: they're starting nonprofits, building movements online, and choosing jobs that align with their values. They want their work to matter. You can see this energy in movements like Charity: Water or Black Lives Matter—proof that powerful stories and clear missions can bring people together and raise millions.

Even traditional businesses have taken notice. Companies like Patagonia and Ben & Jerry's don't just sell, they advocate. Social enterprises like TOMS built entire business models around giving back. Buy a pair of shoes, and they donate a pair. Simple, effective, and meaningful.

Technology has made it easier than ever to support a cause. In just a few clicks, you can launch a fundraiser, sign a petition, or donate to a campaign. Remember the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge? It raised over \$100 million through viral videos alone.

And in moments of crisis, nonprofits often respond faster than larger systems. During the COVID-19 pandemic, while many institutions struggled to adapt, nonprofits were

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out delivering food, distributing PPE, offering shelter, and organizing mental health support. Still, it's important to understand: not all nonprofits operate the same way. Step inside a large nonprofit, maybe a university, a hospital foundation, or a global NGO, and you'll find entire departments dedicated to fundraising, programs, operations, and communications. Each role is clearly defined. A grant writer focuses only on grant writing. A stewardship officer focuses solely on donor care. There's infrastructure, funding, and time to build and maintain meaningful donor relationships.

Now, imagine a small, grassroots nonprofit. They may have an annual budget of \$150,000 and a staff of three. The development director might also be the event planner, social media manager, donor database administrator, and website editor—all in the same week. Everyone wears multiple hats, and the pace is intense. The passion is real, but the resources are limited.

And that has real consequences. A study by the Urban Institute found that in 2020, nonprofits with annual budgets under \$1 million experienced a 35% drop in donations. In contrast, larger nonprofits (those with budgets over \$10 million) saw only a 15% drop. Why the gap? Often, it came down to relationships. Larger organizations had dedicated staff making phone calls, sending personal notes, and checking in on donors. Smaller nonprofits simply didn't have the time or people to keep those relationships strong.

This experience taught me a powerful truth: people and organizations usually don't change when things are going smoothly. Real change often begins in a moment of discomfort, challenge, or crisis. And for many small nonprofits, that moment is now.

The good news? Change is possible. Some organizations are already evolving. They're investing in people who can build and maintain relationships. They're involving their boards more in fundraising. They're seeking unrestricted funding, money they can use for staffing, infrastructure, and sustainability, not just specific projects.

So, how do nonprofits get started in the first place?

No matter the size, the legal process is similar. Organizations first incorporate at the state level, then apply for a federal Employer Identification Number (EIN)—essentially a Social Security number for organizations. Then they apply for tax-exempt status with the IRS.

The most common status is 501(c)(3), which allows donors to make tax-deductible contributions and opens access to many grants. But it comes with responsibilities.

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Organizations must be transparent about their finances, submit annual reports, and avoid endorsing political candidates. These rules aren't just red tape; they're essential for trust and long-term sustainability.

And still, some myths about nonprofit work persist. People sometimes assume nonprofit jobs don't pay or that the work is disorganized. Or that it's all passion, with no professionalism. The reality? Many nonprofits are led by skilled professionals who manage teams, budgets, data, strategy, and long-term planning. They're every bit as organized and impactful as businesses, sometimes more so.

And they need people like you. Whether you're a data analyst, a designer, a teacher, a project manager or just someone looking for a more meaningful career, there's space for your skills in the nonprofit sector. You can join an existing organization or even start your own. The field is open and growing.

Big or small, nonprofits are built to make a difference, not a profit. They exist to solve problems, strengthen communities, and create a better world.

If you're still reading, you just might be ready to step into that world yourself.

Let's keep going and figure out where you fit in.

CHAPTER 2: MAKING YOUR EXPERIENCE WORK IN THE NONPROFIT SECTOR

When I first started exploring nonprofit job listings, I felt completely out of place. The titles sounded familiar: Operations Manager, Communications Coordinator, Fundraising Specialist, but the job descriptions seemed like they were written in a different language. Words like mission-driven, community engagement, and program impact appeared everywhere. At first, I thought I'd have to start over and learn a whole new career from scratch.

But the more I looked, the more I realized something important: nonprofits may speak with a different tone, but they need the same core skills used in business, education, healthcare, tech, or startups. The key is learning how to translate what you already know into nonprofit terms and understanding where your skills can drive social impact.

One of the easiest ways to start making those connections is by looking at a nonprofit's mission. In the business world, you might be working to hit revenue targets or increase market share. In nonprofits, everything is about the mission: why the organization exists and who it serves. If you've ever worked toward a goal, led a project, or improved a system, chances are you've already done mission-aligned work—you just framed it differently.

For example, in a corporate job, I focused on streamlining operations and boosting efficiency. In a nonprofit, those same project management skills helped improve program delivery and freed up staff to spend more time with the community. The context changed, but the value didn't.

Nonprofits often center their work on community engagement, which might sound like marketing or outreach, and in some ways it is, but it's also deeply relational. If you've worked in customer service, client relations, or even hospitality, you already know how to connect with people, build trust, and understand their needs. In the nonprofit space, that translates into showing up authentically, listening actively, and helping the community feel seen and supported.

Another area where business and nonprofit skills overlap is financial sustainability. Nonprofits don't chase profits, but they absolutely need stable funding. That's where skills like budgeting, pricing, donor communications, and even pitching come in. I once created a tiered tuition structure for an arts&cultural nonprofit that made the programs more accessible while keeping it financially viable. It reminded me of a pricing strategy, but with heart. Later, I helped secure grants using similar thinking I once applied to investor proposals.

And don't underestimate the role of technology and operations. Many nonprofits are still catching up on digital transformation, which simply means moving processes online, adopting CRMs, automating communications, or launching virtual programs. If you've ever implemented new systems or improved workflows, your skills are incredibly

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valuable here. Small tweaks can save hours and multiply impact.

One thing that might surprise you is how much emphasis nonprofits place on data and results. It's not just about good intentions. Funders, boards, and communities want to see outcomes. How many people were served? What changed for them? If you're comfortable with metrics, dashboards, or evaluation frameworks, you'll be a huge asset.

You'll also see references to boards of directors. Nonprofits are governed by these volunteer leaders, and while it might sound formal, it's really about accountability. Supporting board work through reports, planning, or compliance is not unlike working with an executive team. If you've ever reported to leadership, prepped for audits, or navigated strategic planning, you already know how this works.

Another thing I've learned: goal-setting is universal. Nonprofits often use SMART goals: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound to turn big ideas into actionable plans. If you've led projects or managed teams, you understand the importance of breaking things down and staying focused.

But what really defines nonprofit work, especially in smaller organizations, is versatility. One day you might be writing a grant, the next you're organizing an event, updating a website, or mentoring a volunteer. If you've ever worked in a startup or small business where everyone pitched in, you'll adapt quickly.

So, what does this all mean for you? It means that your experience, whether in project management, HR, finance, communications, tech, or sales, can absolutely transfer to the nonprofit world. Here's how the roles usually translate:

- Operations roles focus on internal systems, HR, compliance, budgeting, and vendor management.
- Communications roles involve storytelling, social media, branding, and donor engagement.
- Fundraising positions handle grant writing, donor relationships, events, and campaigns.
- Program staff run the services the nonprofit offers, from design to delivery and evaluation.
- Volunteer managers recruit and retain people who give their time.
- Analysts and evaluators track progress, assess impact, and support continuous improvement.

Still, you may be wondering: "How do I know where I fit in?"

The answer starts with your values. What matters most to you? What stories move you?

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What injustices make you want to act? Follow your instincts. Look for organizations whose missions feel right, the ones that spark your curiosity or align with your own life experience. You don't have to have it all figured out. Many people begin by volunteering, attending events, or joining a committee. These are great ways to learn how nonprofits work, build connections, and discover what kind of roles feel most natural. Let your curiosity lead, and trust that your gut will tell you when something fits.

Nonprofits may operate differently from the private sector, but they're built on many of the same fundamentals: leadership, systems, communication, and results. With a bit of translation and an open mind, your skills are relevant, and they're needed.

So ask yourself: What kind of mission feels meaningful to me? Where do I want to show up and make a difference? What kind of work makes me feel proud at the end of the day?

There's no perfect formula. But the clearer you are about your strengths and values, the easier it becomes to find a nonprofit role where you can thrive.

Let's keep going and figure out where you belong.

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Professional Map

Where do you see yourself in 5 years?

What do you enjoy doing most? What are you passionate about?

What are you good at? What are your top professional strengths?

What are you not particularly good at?

What are the places that have shaped who you are?

CHAPTER 3: GETTING STARTED

Starting a career in the nonprofit world can feel like stepping into unfamiliar territory, especially if you're changing fields, moving to a new city, or starting over in a new country. When I first arrived in New York, everything felt foreign. The people I used to rely on were far away. I had no local experience, no network, and no clear path. It felt like I was starting from zero.

At first, I believed I needed a specific degree. Something like public health, nonprofit management, or law to get started. But over time, I realized that wasn't true. I met people in the sector who came from finance, design, engineering, and even art history. They hadn't studied "nonprofit" in school, but they had something valuable to offer. Their experience mattered. What mattered most wasn't the degree; it was how they used their skills to support a cause they believed in.

Since my master's degree and professional background were from another country, I had to figure out how to "translate" them into something U.S. employers could understand. I looked into diploma evaluations and signed up for online courses in project management, nonprofit finance, communication, and many others (check my LinkedIn!). These courses helped me more than I expected: with technical skills, learning how people here approach projects, talk about processes, and use tools I hadn't encountered before. That made it easier to explain my experience clearly and confidently.

Still, even with new skills, I realized that communication (not just what I knew, but how I expressed it) would shape my future. When I first joined meetings in the U.S., I often stayed quiet. I wasn't sure if I was using the right words. I didn't want to sound unprepared. I didn't want to just be understood; I wanted to be heard.

That's why joining Toastmasters International changed so much for me. It gave me space to practice, make mistakes, try again, and grow: personally, professionally, and psychologically. I didn't have to be perfect. I just had to speak. Over time, I became more comfortable. I started enjoying it, found my "voice", and that this new voice resonated in the U.S. job market.

During that time, I also started asking myself what kind of mission truly mattered to me. What kind of work made me feel alive? It took a lot of reflection, conversations, and testing. I read job postings. I talked to people in the field. I tried volunteering in different settings, from education to the arts to community programs. Slowly, I learned to trust my gut. I paid attention to what excited me and what didn't. I noticed where I felt useful, energized, and connected. That's when things started to click.

Volunteering played a huge role in helping me understand how nonprofits work in real life. I found projects through websites like VolunteerMatch and even short-term

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remote opportunities with global organizations. These roles gave me experience, confidence, and clarity. They showed potential employers that I was serious and committed. They also introduced me to new people, some of whom became collaborators, mentors, or friends.

I also started being more visible, even when it felt awkward. I showed up to events where I didn't know anyone. I posted on LinkedIn about things I cared about. I commented on articles that moved me. Slowly, things started happening. A message turned into a coffee chat. A workshop turned into a referral. A casual conversation opened the door to something more.

Along the way, I learned not to focus only on big, well-known nonprofits. Some of the richest experiences came from working with small, local organizations. I wore many hats. I made real decisions. I could see my impact immediately. And those experiences taught me more than any course or job description ever could.

It took patience, and there were moments when I doubted myself. But step by step, I built a path. Not a perfect one, but one that felt truly mine. The nonprofit world didn't ask me to be flawless. It asked me to care. To show up. To keep going. And eventually, to lead.

You don't need to have everything figured out. You just need to start somewhere, and trust that your passion, your skills, and your story all have a place here.

CHAPTER 4: HOW NONPROFITS OPERATE

Let's imagine this: you're walking through your neighborhood park on a sunny afternoon, enjoying the fresh air. You notice a group of kids gathered around, painting in a free arts workshop. Nearby, a volunteer is sorting canned goods for a food drive, while a local ballet school group sets up for an open-air performance open to all. There's laughter, movement, and a genuine sense of community in the air.

As you stroll past these scenes, you begin to realize something: none of this is happening by accident. The workshop, the food drive, the performance...they're all part of something bigger. They're the work of nonprofit organizations in action. And behind each smiling volunteer or excited child is a team of people making it all possible.

But how do they do it? How can organizations offer free programs, run community events, and deliver vital services while still paying their staff, keeping the lights on, and planning for the future?

The answer lies in a mix of creativity, planning, and resourcefulness. Nonprofits fund their work through a combination of donations, grants, service fees, sponsorships, and government contracts. A major piece of the puzzle is individual giving. People donate to causes they care about, whether it's \$5 or \$5,000, and in many cases, receive a tax deduction. It's part generosity, part civic duty, and part incentive. That's why Giving Tuesday, the global day of generosity after Thanksgiving, has become such a powerful movement. People want to give back, and nonprofits make that possible.

Giving can even become a habit, like grabbing your morning coffee or going for a walk. Many donors set up monthly contributions, volunteer regularly, or attend nonprofit events not just out of kindness, but because it gives them a sense of belonging. Others support nonprofits by buying tickets to performances, enrolling in classes, or participating in sliding-scale programs.

Some nonprofits also receive public funding through local or federal government contracts. In these cases, they often deliver essential services, things like job training, mental health support, youth mentorship, or housing assistance. These partnerships are critical, especially in underserved communities where needs are high and access is limited.

Regardless of how they're funded, one thing remains true: nonprofits work tirelessly to keep their missions alive and growing. And the feel-good moments we see in parks, classrooms, or shelters are just the visible tip of a much larger iceberg.

Behind the scenes, there's an entire ecosystem: board members setting strategy, executive directors making tough decisions, grant writers racing deadlines, staff

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coordinating volunteers and logistics, and teams managing budgets, tracking data, and communicating impact. There are policies to follow, people to support, outcomes to measure, and stories to tell. It's not always glamorous, but it's the engine that keeps everything running.

In this chapter, let's explore that engine: how nonprofit governance works, how programs are developed and evaluated, how funding is secured, and how staff and volunteers are led and supported. I'll pull back the curtain to reveal what truly makes a nonprofit successful: in spirit, and in structure.

Because in the end, it's not just the mission that makes a difference: it's the people, systems, and strategy behind it.

Nonprofit Governance: Boards, Advisory Committees, and Leadership

At the heart of every strong nonprofit is a shared structure of leadership. It's not a one-person show. Most organizations are guided by a Board of Directors, a group of volunteers who take on big responsibilities. They're the ones making sure the nonprofit stays true to its mission, spends its money wisely, and follows the rules. They don't run programs or events themselves, but they help set the direction. Think of them like the compass that keeps the organization pointed toward its purpose.

Board members often come from a mix of backgrounds and bring their knowledge, experience, and networks to the table. They're there to ask big-picture questions, approve budgets, help plan for the future, and sometimes even hire or evaluate the Executive Director. Their job is to see the forest, not just the trees.

Some nonprofits also have Advisory Committees, people who don't make decisions but offer guidance and expertise in specific areas like fundraising, program development, community engagement, marketing and many more. They're kind of like your wise friends who've "been there, done that" and are happy to lend a hand.

So who's actually running things day to day?

That's the Executive Director (or sometimes CEO). This is the person who brings the board's vision to life and keeps everything moving. They manage staff, support volunteers and interns, run programs, handle partnerships, keep things legal and ethical, and make sure the lights stay on. If the board is the compass, the Executive Director is the pilot flying the plane.

Within the board itself, you'll usually find a few key roles: the Chair (or President), who

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leads meetings and helps the board stay on track; the Treasurer, who keeps a close eye on the finances; and the Secretary, who organizes communication and keeps records. Everyone has a part to play, and knowing where those boundaries are helps avoid a lot of confusion.

Here's something that's often overlooked: running a nonprofit isn't just about heart. It takes discipline and structure, too. That's where policies and procedures come in. They make sure everyone's on the same page about what's expected and how things should be done: from how funds are spent to how staff are hired, how complaints are handled, or how programs are evaluated.

These policies are written down and often referred to as Standard Operating Procedures (or SOPs). But they're not meant to sit on a shelf collecting dust. For policies to actually work, people need to understand them, believe in them, and know how to use them. That's why training is so important, because even the best plan means little if the team isn't prepared to follow it.

And just like people, organizations grow and change. What worked when there were five people may not work when there are fifty. That's why policies and systems need to be reviewed regularly and updated as needed.

Nonprofit leaders have a lot on their plates. They oversee finances, guide strategic planning, build relationships with donors and community partners, and make sure the organization follows laws and ethical standards. But maybe most importantly, they shape the culture. They create a space where people feel heard and valued, where tough decisions are made thoughtfully, and where the mission always stays front and center, even when things get hard.

When governance is done well, it's like a well-choreographed dance. Everyone knows their role, communication flows, and the energy stays focused on what matters most: serving the community and driving impact.

I've seen this firsthand: how structure and heart together can move mountains. Behind every community program, every youth workshop, every outreach campaign, there's a team of steady hands making it happen. They might not be in the spotlight, but they're the reason the mission comes to life.

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Program Development and Management

When a nonprofit launches a new program, it often starts with an idea: to make something better, fill a gap, or support a community in need. But as inspiring as that idea may be, it takes more than good intentions to bring it to life. It requires thoughtful planning, structure, and the input of the very people the program hopes to serve.

Strong programs don't happen by accident. They begin with clear, specific goals that align with the organization's mission. Maybe it's improving childhood literacy, expanding access to mental health care, or delivering meals to low-income families. The first step is to name the goal and to be precise. A vague intention like "helping people" is noble, but a goal like "increase graduation rates by 10% in two years" gives the team something tangible to measure and strive toward.

From there, nonprofits need to truly understand the communities they serve. This means listening (really listening) to people's experiences, challenges, and priorities. Many organizations conduct community needs assessments through surveys, interviews, or focus groups. This helps ensure programs are grounded in lived realities. When programs are created with communities, not just for them, the impact is more meaningful and lasting.

Once the goal and audience are clear, the next step is planning. A helpful tool many nonprofits use is the logic model: a kind of roadmap that outlines what resources will be used, what activities will take place, and what short- and long-term results are expected. For example, a literacy program might offer after-school tutoring (activity), aiming to raise reading levels by the end of the school year (output), and boost high school graduation rates over time (outcome). This kind of structure keeps everyone focused and aligned.

It's also crucial to ensure that programs show results to understand what impact they actually have. Are families who receive weekly food boxes experiencing less food insecurity? Are students in a mentorship program feeling more confident about their future? This is where impact measurement comes in.

Good measurement combines data and stories. Numbers show patterns and progress. Stories give those numbers heart and meaning. And when things don't go as planned, it's not a failure, it's feedback. Maybe fewer people are attending than expected, or certain services aren't reaching the right audience. When nonprofits use that insight to reflect, adjust, and improve, their programs grow stronger over time. Another reason impact measurement matters is that it builds trust. Funders, donors, and community partners want to support programs that deliver real results, and they

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expect to see evidence of that impact. When you can show both measurable outcomes and personal stories (clear results backed by real voices), it becomes much easier to grow, raise funds, and strengthen support. I've witnessed how a well-crafted impact report can open doors that were once closed. It's not about self-promotion; it's about demonstrating the value and effectiveness of your work.

Behind every great program is a system of policies and procedures, the guardrails that keep things fair, efficient, and mission-driven. From financial protocols to staff conduct, from risk management to compliance, these systems allow an organization to spend less time fixing problems and more time delivering impact. And just like programs, these systems need to evolve as the organization grows.

Creating effective programs takes time, patience, and flexibility. Whether you're launching a community garden or a citywide campaign, the best programs are rooted in listening, shaped by evidence, and strengthened by reflection at every step.

A nonprofit is like a living, breathing organism. Its mission is the heartbeat, steady and vital. But what gives it strength and forward momentum are the programs it builds to serve the community. Program development is an essential process where nonprofits turn their values into action. It's how they move from saying "we care" to showing "we're making a difference."

Growth is exciting, but it comes with responsibility. Should a program expand? Should it serve more people or offer new services? These are big decisions, and the right pace matters.

Take Feeding America as an example. As one of the largest hunger-relief organizations in the U.S., it works with a vast network of food banks nationwide. During the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity surged. Instead of rushing to scale without a plan, Feeding America leaned on its existing partnerships, used real-time data, and responded strategically. They directed extra resources to local food banks, launched targeted initiatives in the hardest-hit areas, and adapted their operations to meet urgent needs while keeping communities safe.

They didn't just ask, "How many more people can we reach?" They asked, "Can we maintain quality? Are local teams ready? Will this expansion stay true to our mission?" That kind of thoughtful growth allowed them to meet a crisis head-on while strengthening their entire network for the long run.

In real life, program development includes a lot of moving parts: hiring staff, training volunteers, securing funding, forming partnerships, and measuring outcomes. It's like conducting an orchestra: every part must be in sync for the music to work.

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Flexibility is just as important. Even the best plans can hit unexpected bumps. A funder might back out. A key staff member may leave. Community needs may shift. Resilient nonprofits stay open to learning and ready to pivot when needed.

This brings us to evaluation: the step that never really ends. It helps nonprofits stay effective, responsive, and committed to the people they serve by learning, growing, and making a deeper impact. Programs must continually ask: What's working? What isn't? What can we improve?

In the end, growing a nonprofit program means amplifying impact while staying true to the mission. It requires thoughtful scaling, deep listening, strong teams, and a willingness to adapt. That's how truly impactful organizations thrive both in good times and in times of challenge and change.

So the next time you visit a food pantry, attend a youth workshop, or hear about a new community initiative, remember: behind every meaningful program is a group of people who asked tough questions, made thoughtful decisions, and stayed grounded in purpose.

Fundraising

From my first days in the field, I quickly realized one key truth: fundraising is essential. Without it, nothing moves forward: the programs, staff, events, and services that make a difference simply can't happen.

Let me take you through what fundraising really looks like, in everyday terms, so you can see why it's so important and how it all comes together.

First, every nonprofit has a mission: maybe it's to feed hungry families, teach kids how to read, or provide shelter to those without homes. But only mission, or like many new entrepreneurs think, dreams don't pay bills. To turn that dream into reality, you need to figure out exactly how much money you need to make this "dream" come true. This is the goal. Setting a clear goal is like choosing a destination before starting a journey — you wouldn't just get in a car and drive without knowing where you're going, right? The goal keeps everyone focused and gives purpose to your efforts.

Once you know your destination, you need to think about who's going to ride along with you. These are the people and groups who care about your cause and support your dream. Some might be longtime friends of your organization, others could be new supporters who just heard your story. There are also foundations, businesses, or even government agencies that might be willing to help. Knowing who these supporters are helps you figure out the best way to reach them.

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Now, you might wonder, who actually leads all this? In most nonprofits, the person in charge of fundraising is often called the Development Director or Fundraising Manager. Sometimes, especially in the early days, these responsibilities fall on the Founder or Executive Director. But ideally, there should be someone dedicated to fundraising. This person organizes the plans, coordinates, and keeps the fundraising efforts on track.

That said, it's rarely a one-person job. The nonprofit's board of directors plays a big role, too, especially board members who use their networks to connect with donors. Volunteers also often step up, helping with events or outreach. Every effort counts.

Planning how to reach these supporters is where the real creativity begins. There's no one-size-fits-all. Maybe you'll write heartfelt letters and send them in the mail to some people. Others might prefer a quick, friendly email or a post on social media. Some donors might want to chat face-to-face at an event or over coffee. And then there's the art of writing grants, where you carefully explain to foundations or government institutions why your project deserves funding.

You might even plan a fun event, a walk, a dinner, or an auction that brings people together to celebrate your mission and open their hearts (and wallets). Each method connects with different supporters in different ways. The key is to use a mix of these approaches to reach as many people as possible.

When it's time to ask for help, it's important to remember that you're not just asking for money. You're inviting people to be part of something bigger. You share your story, explain what their gift will do, and show them how they can make a real difference. It's much more powerful to say, "Your \$50 will buy books for a child for a month," than just, "Please donate."

As the donations start coming in, don't forget the magic words: "THANK YOU". Showing genuine gratitude is what builds lasting relationships. When people feel appreciated, they don't just give once; they come back again and again, becoming partners in your mission.

After the campaign winds down, it's time to pause and reflect. Did you meet your goal? Which ways of asking worked best? What can you do better next time? Learning from each experience makes your nonprofit stronger and your next fundraising efforts even more successful. Fundraising is one of the most rewarding parts of the nonprofit world. Beyond collecting money, it helps build a community of supporters who believe in your work and want to join you on the journey. When you understand how fundraising flows from setting clear goals, choosing the best ways to connect, you'll see that it's really about people coming together to create change.

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Grant writing

If you're someone who loves writing, the world of grant writing might seem like a natural fit. After all, it's about using words to tell a story. There is a kind of story that convinces others to support your cause. But let me be honest right away: grant writing is much bigger than just writing well. It's a process that requires understanding the rules, staying organized, and thinking strategically. That's why there are so many courses and certifications out there: not because people don't know how to write, but because writing is only one piece of a much larger puzzle.

Imagine applying for a grant from a government agency or a foundation. It hardly resembles writing a blog post or even a college essay. You need to prepare as if you're applying for a highly competitive job, except that the application is long, the language formal, and the process filled with many requirements. You might have to register your organization on multiple portals, upload budget templates, prove eligibility, and attach extra documents like letters of support or audited financial statements. Missing even one small requirement could disqualify your application before anyone ever reads it.

So before you even begin writing, you have to ask: Are we ready? Have we gathered what we need: our budget, program plan, required numbers, and team bios? Do we fully understand the guidelines? Starting with a solid plan is essential.

When you do start writing, one of your first jobs is to set clear, realistic goals for your project because funders prefer investing in outcomes. What will your project accomplish in 12 months? Who will benefit, and how will you measure success? It's tempting to reach for the stars, but experienced funders are more impressed by clarity and credibility than grand promises.

Organization is everything. Most grants follow a structure: needs statement, goals, methods, evaluation, budget justification, and your writing needs to follow that roadmap. Reviewers read many applications. If they can't find what they're looking for, they may assume it's missing altogether. So it's your job to make your application easy to follow. Use headings, short paragraphs, and plain language. Write like you're speaking to a smart person who's never heard of your program before. Be clear, be honest, and above all be human.

Remember, reviewers are people. Real people, with real lives, reading your proposal in the middle of a busy week. They're not looking for perfect grammar or fancy words. They're asking themselves, "Does this organization know what it's doing? Can they deliver on what they promise? Will this funding truly make an impact?" Sometimes, those reviewers are part of a panel, which is a group of experts, community leaders, or funder representatives who meet to discuss and score proposals.

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I've learned that behind every award decision, there are conversations, debates, and questions. Rejection is never personal, but it can still feel that way, especially for small nonprofits where a single grant can make or break a project. I've seen how one rejection letter can feel like a punch to the gut when that grant was tied to keeping staff employed or launching a much-needed service.

In large organizations, there might be full-time grant professionals to handle these challenges. But in small nonprofits, it's different. Founders or directors often take on this role themselves or share it with a Development Associate or Consultants. And while it's exhausting, it also builds a kind of wisdom and resilience you won't find in textbooks.

I had the privilege of learning from a seasoned grant writer with over 30 years of experience. Every time she reviewed my drafts, she'd gently say, "This is a good start. Now let's dig a little deeper." She'd ask questions I hadn't even thought of about long-term sustainability, measuring impact, or alignment with the founder's vision. At first, I found it frustrating. But then I understood: grant writing isn't about making something sound good. It's about making something real, convincing, and trustworthy.

Not every organization can afford a grant consultant. And sometimes, even when they can, they hesitate, because they feel like no outsider could really understand their story the way they do. That's valid. Grant writing requires more than just technical skills. It requires a heart. That's why, in many cases, the most powerful applications are the ones written by people who are living the mission every day.

Still, writing alone can be overwhelming. That's why collaboration is so powerful. In my experience, the best grants often come from a team effort, where the founder brings the vision, the Development Associate organizes the narrative, and an experienced reviewer offers edits and perspective. Everyone plays a part, and the application becomes a reflection of shared commitment. Over time, the questions become more familiar. The process gets a little easier. But even after years of writing grants, I still find value in having someone read over my draft. There's always a better way to frame something, a way to make the budget clearer or the outcomes stronger. That's the beauty of the craft: it's always evolving, and always the room to learn something new further.

At the end of the day, grant writing is about saying, "Here's who we are. Here's what we believe in. And here's how we'll use your investment to create something that matters." If you love writing, and you're curious about how systems work, if you care about making an impact and are willing to learn the rules of the game, then grant writing might be a powerful path for you. It's not always easy, but it is deeply meaningful. Because when a funder says "yes," you realize you've done more than write a proposal; you've helped make change possible.

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Managing Volunteers

In every nonprofit I've ever worked with, there's always been one group that carries more weight than anyone realizes: the volunteers.

They're the ones who show up early to set up chairs before an event and stay behind to sweep the floor. They bring food, sort donations, tutor children, plant gardens, stuff envelopes, and serve meals. Sometimes, they even lead organizations.

You've probably seen it in your own community: neighbors coming together after a storm to rebuild a home or newcomers helping each other navigate the school system. That's what volunteerism looks like: people rolling up their sleeves because they care. In nonprofits, that energy becomes part of the mission itself.

When you step into the nonprofit world, especially as an immigrant trying to find your place, you quickly realize something important: working with volunteers isn't optional. It's essential. And if your role involves any kind of leadership, coordination, or program management, chances are you'll find yourself managing volunteers, whether you planned to or not.

Now, you might think managing volunteers is easy. After all, they're here to help, right? But here's the truth: volunteers don't magically show up trained, available, and ready to jump in. They have questions, schedules, boundaries, personalities, and needs just like staff. Managing volunteers takes real work, strategy, and heart. You need to recruit them, prepare them, guide them, and thank them, often all at once.

I remember my first time leading volunteers. I thought, "This will be fun. They'll just do what I ask, and we'll get a lot done." But I quickly learned it's less about giving orders and more about building community. You have to earn their trust, listen closely, and help them feel like they belong.

In many nonprofits, especially smaller ones, there's someone called a Volunteer Coordinator. This person acts as a bridge between the organization and its volunteers: welcoming newcomers, assigning tasks, providing training, answering questions, and ensuring everyone's time is used well. In larger nonprofits, this might be a paid staff role. In smaller organizations, it could be a board member, a founder, or even a volunteer managing others. Whoever fills the role, it's a crucial one.

I often think of volunteer coordination as being like a community manager in shared housing or a cultural center, someone who creates a culture where people feel respected, included, and inspired to give their time.

People volunteer for many different reasons. Some want to give back to a cause that helped them. Others are looking to meet people, build skills, or try something new.

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Some bring years of experience; others are stepping into a nonprofit for the first time. The challenge (and the beauty) is that every volunteer is different. You have to understand what motivates each one. I once worked with a woman who came in every Friday afternoon. She was quiet, and at first I wasn't sure how engaged she was. Then one day, she told me volunteering helped her cope with loneliness after her husband passed away. She came not just to help, but to heal. From that moment on, I saw her in a whole new light. That's when I really understood what it means to manage volunteers: you don't just assign tasks, you see the whole person standing in front of you.

Of course, not every volunteer situation goes smoothly. Sometimes a person just isn't the right fit: they may be unreliable, disruptive, or not follow directions. It can be tempting to avoid dealing with it, especially when you're short on help. But having open, respectful conversations is part of the job. When you handle these situations with care, you protect the environment for everyone else and show that every volunteer's time matters.

Over time, you'll get better at structuring volunteer work. Maybe you create a binder with sign-in sheets, schedules, and contact info. Maybe you build a short orientation. Maybe you write quick thank-you notes that mean the world to someone. You start to notice who's great with kids, who loves organizing supplies, who steps up during a crisis. You learn by doing and by paying attention.

One of the most powerful moments is when volunteers become ambassadors. They tell their friends, bring their families, post online, and share their experience. They don't just help with tasks — they help spread your mission.

And remember: volunteers are learning from you, too. Many are curious about how nonprofits work. Some, like you, might be immigrants trying to make sense of a new system. Others may be future nonprofit leaders. By managing them with care, you're teaching them what good leadership looks like.

I always say: people don't volunteer for the money, they volunteer for meaning. But they stick around when they feel seen.

In the nonprofit world, it's essential to have clear strategies, something well-written that guides everyone in the same direction. One key strategy is creating a volunteer plan, and ideally, that happens as early as possible. This means setting up systems, writing down roles and expectations, planning training sessions, and thinking ahead about how volunteers will be welcomed and supported. And always, always make time to say the magic words - THANK YOU. Whether it's a handwritten note or a heartfelt conversation at the end of the day, appreciation goes a long way. And for those of us who've had to start over in a new place, that kind of community means everything.

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Independent consultants

Maybe you've never heard the term "independent consultant" before. Honestly, before I moved to New York, it sounded like something only corporate executives did. What I didn't realize back then is that nonprofits often rely on people with specialized skills to help solve problems and achieve their goals. You might not notice them at first, but they're often working behind the scenes, guiding organizations through big changes or complex projects.

In the nonprofit world, an independent consultant is simply someone with specialized knowledge brought in to meet a specific need. That could mean anything from designing a website or evaluating a program's impact to improving operations or running a fundraising campaign. They're not staff. They're not volunteers. They're professionals hired for a limited time to do focused, high-impact work, and yes, they get paid.

Consultants don't work a typical 9am-to-5pm schedule or receive employee benefits. Instead, they operate independently on a contract basis. They agree on the scope of work and the fee, complete the project, send an invoice, and then move on to the next opportunity. In the U.S., this type of work is known as being an independent contractor.

I didn't become a consultant overnight. I started by showing up, paying attention, and being useful. As I gained experience by managing projects, leading fundraisings, writing my first grant, I began to realize that my skills had real value. Eventually, I started offering those skills professionally.

If you're thinking about becoming a consultant, start where you are. You don't need a fancy degree or a perfect résumé. Maybe you speak multiple languages, are great with spreadsheets, can organize events, or know how to tell a compelling story for social media campaigns. These are all valuable skills, especially to nonprofits that often operate with limited staff and tight budgets.

Start by volunteering. Learn how organizations work from the inside. Be dependable, thoughtful, and consistent. Trust is earned, and once you've earned it, people will start turning to you for more. That's when you can begin offering your services more formally, with a clear project proposal that outlines goals, timelines, and compensation.

As a consultant, you'll typically be paid a flat fee or an hourly rate. You'll also be responsible for your own taxes. If you earn more than \$600 from one organization in a year, you'll receive a 1099 form at tax time. Since no taxes are withheld from these

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payments, it's important to plan ahead and set money aside.

One of the best parts of consulting is the freedom. You choose your projects. You control your schedule. You focus on what you do best. But with that freedom comes responsibility. You have to be clear, reliable, and self-motivated. No boss is looking over your shoulder. You're the one responsible for results, relationships, and organization.

Most consultants aren't hired through job boards. They're hired through relationships. People hire people they trust. That's why showing up consistently and doing good work is the best marketing you can do. Your reputation will often speak louder than your résumé.

Another great way to build credibility is by joining an advisory board. These groups support nonprofit organizations and are typically unpaid, but they offer a valuable chance to contribute your skills, build relationships, and demonstrate your expertise. Many consultants land their first paid opportunity this way.

If you want to be taken seriously, always use a simple contract. It doesn't need to be complicated, just something that clearly outlines the work you'll do, the timeline, your compensation, and how you'll communicate. Good consultants stay organized, meet deadlines, send invoices, and set expectations from the start.

One important note: in the nonprofit world, it's considered unethical to be paid a percentage of money raised, especially in fundraising. You should be paid for your time and expertise, not for outcomes you can't fully control.

As your confidence grows, so will your opportunities. Consultants are hired for all kinds of projects: strategy, technology, communications, community engagement, and more. You don't have to do everything. Focus on what you know, and do it well. You might decide to work independently or eventually join a consulting firm. Who knows? That's your choice. For now, concentrate on building trust, gaining experience, and offering real value with the skills you already have. You don't need to be perfect. You just need to be present, prepared, and professional.

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Strategic Communication

Communication often goes unnoticed, but it's one of the most critical engines behind a nonprofit's success. It's about translating the organization's mission into messages that people can understand, trust, and want to support. Communication acts as the bridge between the internal work and the public, like donors, volunteers, community members, and the media.

One of the first things to understand is that nonprofit communication must be strategic. Every message should have a purpose and align with the mission. Most nonprofits don't have the time or capacity to create content just for the sake of it or to follow every new trend. Communication should always help move the work forward.

A strong communication strategy supports broader organizational goals, whether that's raising funds, increasing event participation, building awareness, or shaping public policy. It defines your audience, key messages, tools, timing, and how success will be measured. Without this structure, communication can become scattered, reactive, and ineffective.

Just as important as the message itself is how it's delivered, and that's where your brand voice comes in.

A nonprofit's brand voice (the personality behind its words) reflects its values, culture, and mission in a consistent, recognizable way. Whether you're posting on social media, writing a donor letter, or publishing a report, the tone and style should feel unified. Is your organization warm and hopeful? Bold and direct? Calm and authoritative?

A clear, consistent voice helps build trust and familiarity. It ensures that everything your audience hears from you feels cohesive and authentic. If the tone constantly shifts or feels impersonal, supporters can quickly become confused or disengaged. That's why many nonprofits develop a brand voice guide - a short, clear document outlining tone, preferred language, and common phrases to use (or avoid). This helps everyone on the team communicate in a way that sounds like one unified voice, even when multiple people are creating content.

Unfortunately, many small or understaffed nonprofits skip this kind of planning. Communication becomes a scramble: rushed emails, last-minute flyers. Without intentionality, the message gets lost and opportunities are missed. With a clear strategy, communication becomes more focused, efficient, and impactful. It helps prevent missteps like launching a campaign that doesn't connect with the intended audience or using tools that aren't effective.

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Strategic communication planning starts with big-picture questions:

- What is the organization trying to achieve this year?
- Who needs to hear the message?
- What do they need to know?
- What's the best way to reach them?

From there, the communicator builds a roadmap, defining the content, tone, channels (like email, social media, or events), and timelines. This plan must remain flexible and adaptable to changes in the environment.

That's why context matters so much. Many communicators conduct an environmental scan: analyzing trends, risks, and external forces like new technologies, shifts in public opinion, the economy, or political changes. This helps keep the organization's messaging timely and relevant.

Another useful tool is a SWOC analysis: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges. This helps teams understand what's working and where there's room to grow. For example, a nonprofit might have great media relationships but a weak online presence. Knowing this helps prioritize efforts.

Day to day, communication work is incredibly varied. One day you might write an email campaign, the next you're designing a flyer in Canva, updating the website, or preparing press materials. You might be tracking open rates from an email platform or developing talking points for a community event.

Essential skills include strong, human-centered writing, not academic or corporate, but clear and persuasive. Digital fluency is also important, including comfort with tools like email marketing platforms, website editors, social media dashboards, and basic design software.

Soft skills matter just as much. Good communicators are good listeners. They understand different audiences, navigate feedback, build trust, and translate complex ideas into clear messages. Often, they sit across departments, translating leadership vision, program impact, and community voices into a single, powerful message.

And always ethics are non-negotiable. Trust is the foundation of nonprofit work. That means avoiding manipulative language, respecting people's stories, obtaining consent, and protecting the dignity of the communities being served.

Communicators also play a key role in managing risk. When a crisis hits like a data breach, leadership change, or public controversy, they are the ones crafting messages, sharing facts clearly, and protecting the organization's reputation.

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That requires calm, clarity, and integrity.

One important truth: communication can't fix a broken mission. That's why it must be rooted in the organization's core purpose and values. It's not an afterthought; it's part of the overall strategy.

In many ways, communication is the thread connecting every part of a nonprofit to the outside world. It's how stories are shared, trust is built, and action is inspired.

If you can listen deeply, write clearly, think strategically, and care about the mission, there's space for you in this work. You don't need to know everything on day one. Just stay curious, keep learning, and always ask: How can I help people understand what really matters? Because when a message lands in the right hands, it can truly change everything.

Program Coordinating

Before the press release goes out, before the grant report is written, before the board hears how many people were served this quarter, there's a team of people doing the quiet, relentless work of making it all happen. In many nonprofits, they go by titles like Program Coordinator or Program Associate.

But titles don't always capture what they do.

Step into any nonprofit program on a regular weekday, and you'll see them in action. Someone is checking that the sign-in sheet is ready. Someone is making sure the room is set up just right for a parenting workshop or youth group meeting. Someone is making last-minute calls to confirm attendance, making copies of a curriculum, or gently explaining to a nervous participant where to go and what to expect. That "someone" is often a coordinator or associate.

These roles are deeply connected to nonprofit programs. The work is hands-on, practical, constantly shifting, and so human because it sits right at the intersection of people and purpose. Program staff are the bridge between big mission statements and everyday realities. They make sure things don't fall through the cracks. When a program runs smoothly, it's because someone is obsessed with the details. And when it doesn't, they're the ones staying late to fix it.

Program Coordinators and Associates are often the first to know what's really going on. They hear what participants whisper under their breath. They see who doesn't come back. They are the quiet collectors of stories, signals, and needs. Because of that, they often become the unofficial translators between leadership and community, between the people making the plans and the people living them.

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This work isn't for everyone. It takes a special kind of flexibility, the kind where you plan everything and still expect most of it to change. You also have to be good with people. Not in a flashy way, but in a real, patient, can-I-help-you kind of way. You don't need to be loud, but you do need to be clear. You'll send reminder texts, answer confused emails, and walk someone through a process they've never experienced before. You'll have to repeat yourself, often, with compassion.

There's also a growing need to be comfortable with data and tech. Maybe you're entering attendance into Excel. Maybe you're uploading documents into a grant portal. Maybe you're the one updating a shared calendar or organizing photos from the last event for the development team. These tasks are part of the job now.

What makes this work so valuable is how much you learn and how much your lived experience brings to the table. If you've ever helped coordinate a community event, translated for your parents or neighbors at a doctor's office, or managed a classroom full of noisy kids, you already have pieces of this skill set. This is a role where your reliability, empathy, and adaptability matter more than a perfect resume.

And often, these roles are where leaders are made. Many Executive Directors and Program Managers started out setting up chairs, organizing sign-in sheets, or making sure the snacks arrived on time. The path begins here by doing the real work, by proving you can be counted on, and by learning how a nonprofit truly functions from the inside.

If you're thinking, "I'm not sure I'm qualified", take a breath. Nobody starts out knowing everything. What matters is that you care, that you're willing to try, and that you show up with an open mind. In a world where so much depends on connection and consistency, your ability to show up, with heart and with hustle, might be your greatest strength.

So if you ever find yourself standing in a room where a program is about to begin, whether it's a job readiness training, a cultural celebration, or a parent support group, know this: the people making it all come together are often the quiet champions of the nonprofit world.

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Nonprofits, like any other organization, rely on business fundamentals to survive. Things like project planning, financial tracking, clear reporting, effective communication, and digital tools. Just because the mission isn't profitable doesn't mean the work is any less rigorous. In fact, doing more with less often requires even stronger systems.

If you've worked in the business world or even just managed complex tasks in your daily life, you might already have many of the skills nonprofits need. The trick is learning how those skills translate in this new setting.

Take project management, for example. In a corporate context, it might look like Gantt charts, Agile sprints, and fixed deliverables. In a nonprofit, it often looks like juggling shifting goals, limited budgets, and tricky schedules while staying focused on the mission. Things may not move in perfect order, but they still need direction. Being flexible, people-centered, and mission-focused is key.

Financial management also plays a central role. Nonprofits need professionals who understand how to track budgets, forecast needs, prepare annual reports, and ensure compliance with government regulations. The work isn't just about numbers—it's about making sure every dollar is used wisely, especially when donors, board members, and the IRS are watching. Often, finance staff collaborate with CPAs to close out the fiscal year, prepare reports, and ensure transparency.

Then there's data and impact measurement, a growing part of nonprofit work. Gone are the days when "we tried our best" was enough. Now, nonprofits are expected to show how well their programs actually work. This might involve collecting surveys from program participants, hosting focus groups, or analyzing attendance and participation trends. Both quantitative data (numbers, outcomes, demographics) and qualitative data (stories, testimonials, community feedback) are used to build annual impact reports, which are a tool not only for evaluation but also for building trust with funders, partners, and the public.

Technology and digital presence also matter more than ever. A nonprofit's website is a hub for fundraising, event registration, volunteer recruitment, and storytelling. Social media, email newsletters, and online giving platforms are now essential tools. Knowing how to update a website, use Canva, set up an email campaign, or post on Instagram can make you an indispensable team member.

And through all of this, one skill quietly supports everything else: adaptability. Let's be honest, nonprofit life isn't always tidy. Budgets shift. Priorities change. A grant might fall through, or a new partnership could arrive suddenly. Plans that look good on paper may not match what's really happening on the ground.

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That's why being adaptable, open to change, willing to learn, and ready to adjust is one of the most valuable traits you can bring.

Maybe you've never held a formal title. Maybe you're new to this country or the sector. That doesn't mean you're starting from zero. Think about all the times you've adapted in your own life: learning a new system, managing uncertainty, helping others navigate unfamiliar situations. These are not small things. They are strengths. And in the nonprofit world, they matter.

Project Management in a Nonprofit Context

When people hear the term "project management," they often imagine someone with a clipboard, a strict timeline, and a thousand boxes to check off. But in the nonprofit world, project management is much more than that. It's about staying human while getting things done, holding on to purpose and compassion while navigating complexity, pressure, and sometimes chaos.

At its simplest, project management means planning and organizing people, time, and resources to achieve a specific goal. Those goals often mean delivering food, education, shelter, or emotional support to people in need, people who didn't choose their circumstances and who often have little control over them. That's why managing projects here is not just a matter of logistics; it's a matter of ethics, trust, and responsibility.

One way that many organizations keep themselves grounded is by following the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS), a set of nine commitments that keep communities at the center of any response. These standards remind us to listen, to be fair, to stay accountable, and to continuously learn and improve. They guide how we should behave as human beings in service to others, even while managing timelines and budgets.

Of course, things don't always go as planned. In fact, they rarely do. A project may be fully funded and carefully mapped out, but suddenly a crisis escalates, people are displaced, or a partner organization pulls out. When that happens, the plan must bend, not break. This is where adaptive project management comes in. Instead of sticking rigidly to the original course, a good project manager listens to what's happening on the ground, gathers feedback, and adjusts the activities to meet the real, changing needs of the community.

That flexibility isn't random. It's guided by listening to data, to team members, and especially to the people the project is meant to serve. You might hear a phrase like "triple constraint" in project management circles. It refers to time, cost, and scope: three factors that are always connected. If one changes, the others will too. For example, if the timeline shortens, you may need more money or a smaller scope.

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Balancing these moving parts is a core part of managing any project well. But in the nonprofit world, it's not just about balance; it's about making sure the most vulnerable people aren't left out or forgotten when those changes happen.

This is why collaboration and participation are essential. No one manages a project alone. Everyone involved brings something to the table, whether it's technical expertise, lived experience, local knowledge, or simply the heart to make a difference. As the actor Antony Starr once said, "Collaboration is the best way to work. It's the only way to work, really."

When you involve people in your project, you increase the chances that the project will succeed. People are more committed to something they've helped shape. And in humanitarian contexts, it's especially important to make space for the voices that are too often overlooked: women, children, disabled individuals, and LGBTQ+ communities. Participation it's about being seen and heard in decisions that affect your life. As a project manager, your job is to make sure that space exists.

That said, good participation doesn't happen by accident. It needs intention and care. In some communities, there are complicated social relationships you may not see right away. A community leader may not represent everyone. A loud voice might drown out a quieter, more vulnerable one. That's why it's important to ask questions, involve people at every phase, and check in with your team or supervisors when things feel unclear. Participation, when done right, builds trust and leads to more meaningful, lasting impact.

Another key idea in managing nonprofit projects is thinking of the project as something that has a life cycle. Just like people, projects grow in stages. They begin with an idea. They are carefully planned. They are launched, adjusted, completed, and finally closed. Thinking in stages helps organize the work, provides natural checkpoints to see how things are going, and makes it easier to change course when needed.

It all begins with identifying the need. What's the problem you're trying to solve? What are the urgent priorities? What funding is available? At this stage, the idea of the project starts to take form: a rough plan, a logic model, maybe even early indicators of success. Sometimes, the person who will later manage the project isn't even hired yet. But the foundation is laid.

Once funding is secured and the outlines are agreed upon, the project is set up. The team is built, resources are secured, and roles and responsibilities are assigned. Plans become more detailed. The schedule, budget, and monitoring strategies are all mapped out. This is the moment when the project officially begins to take on life.

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From there, the project moves into the planning phase. This is where every detail is thought through: how you'll monitor results, how you'll communicate with stakeholders, how supplies will be managed, and how you'll plan for sustainability. It may even include thinking about how the project will eventually close down or transition.

Then comes implementation: the doing. This is the phase where things get real. People are hired, activities begin, problems show up, and things must be adjusted. This phase asks the most of you. It requires decision-making, resilience, and constant communication. You keep your eye on the goal while managing whatever shows up along the way.

And eventually, the project winds down. You begin closing it out. That means documenting what happened, reflecting on what worked and what didn't, wrapping up finances, and communicating with all the people involved. Sometimes, projects are extended or passed along to another organization. Sometimes they simply end, but the learning continues.

One thing to remember is that between each phase, there are decision points, moments when you ask: Are we ready to move forward? Do we need to adjust? Should we continue at all? These checkpoints, often called "decision gates", protect the project from wasting time, energy, or resources on something that isn't working. And in emergencies, when things shift rapidly, there may even be an "emergency decision gate": a difficult but sometimes necessary conversation about whether to pause or end the project altogether. These decisions are rarely made alone. They involve teams, supervisors, donors, and communities.

Following the project life cycle carefully is about being smart. Making big changes becomes much harder and more expensive the further along you are. Imagine trying to change the foundation of a house after the roof is already built. That's why doing the hard thinking early (especially during identification, setup, and planning) saves time, money, and frustration later. Of course, in a sudden disaster, you might need to start acting before everything is fully planned. That's okay, as long as you're aware of the trade-offs and build in time later to correct the course.

Across all these phases, integration is the glue that keeps things working. A good project has parts that work together. Finance should know what the development or hiring manager is doing. Coordinators should understand program goals. Teams should talk to each other. Otherwise, people waste time, duplicate work, or miss crucial information. Integration means bringing all the moving pieces together into one clear direction. Communication is what makes that possible, especially in the first 72 hours of a fast-moving emergency. Quick stand-up meetings, shared documents, and simple check-ins can make all the difference.

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Finally, good project management depends on good governance. That means clear roles, fair rules, and the support of leadership when tough calls need to be made. As a project manager, you may carry a lot on your shoulders, but you shouldn't carry it alone. When the structure is sound, you can lead with confidence, knowing when to escalate, when to act, and when to ask for help.

To manage a project well is to see the whole picture while not losing sight of the small, human details. It's about being structured but flexible, caring as much about how you deliver as what you deliver. You don't need to be perfect. But you do need to be thoughtful. You need to care about people, ask good questions, and be willing to learn as you go.

You may have never called yourself a project manager before. But if you've ever coordinated a family move, run a small business, or helped a group solve a problem, then you've already practiced the core of it. Now, you're simply being invited to apply those same strengths, but your structure, your heart, your ability to keep things moving toward something even bigger: serving communities in need, building trust, and making change that matters.

Financial Management: Budgets, Reporting and Compliance

Handling finances in a nonprofit operates differently from a traditional for-profit business. Instead of concentrating on profits and losses, nonprofits prioritize being accountable to their supporters and ensuring that every dollar is spent in alignment with their mission. This approach means that managing money in a nonprofit goes beyond simply tracking figures: it embodies a profound commitment to responsibility, trust, and respect for donors, the communities served, and all stakeholders.

One of the key differences is how nonprofits use fund accounting. This system helps ensure that money given for a specific purpose, say, a program feeding hungry families, is tracked and spent exactly as the donor intended. It's a promise the nonprofit makes, and breaking it can cost more than just money; it can damage relationships and trust. Reporting back to donors on how their funds are used is as important as the program itself, and this requires clear, transparent accounting.

Nonprofits prepare a Statement of Activities, which resembles an income statement in business. It shows all revenues and expenses over a period, telling the story of whether the nonprofit ended with a surplus or deficit. Alongside this, the Statement of Financial Position, like a balance sheet, details what the nonprofit owns and owes, including net assets. Unlike companies with shareholders, nonprofits measure their health by these net assets, reflecting how well they can sustain their work over time.

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Budgets, often seen as overwhelming collections of numbers, become much more approachable when we connect them to the mission. Visual tools like pie charts or simple graphs help paint a clear picture of where the money goes. Instead of using jargon like “revenue streams” or “liabilities,” it’s better to say “ways we make money” and “debts the organization owes.” This makes financial information accessible not just to finance experts, but to everyone invested in the cause.

It’s important to recognize the emotional side of money in nonprofits. Donors give because they believe in the mission, and every financial report is a way to honor that belief. A missed report or unclear accounting can make donors feel their generosity wasn’t valued, even if the money was used well. Nonprofit leaders need to carry this emotional weight with care, knowing that financial stewardship is a form of respect for the community and the cause.

For many immigrants, discussing money openly can feel unfamiliar, since cultural norms around finances vary widely. Yet in the nonprofit sector, transparency is a legal requirement and a foundation of trust. Sharing detailed financial information publicly might seem uncomfortable at first, but it’s how organizations build credibility and invite ongoing support.

Managing expenses in nonprofits means understanding not only the direct costs of programs, but also indirect costs, such as office rent, utilities, and administrative support. Keeping a clear view of these helps avoid surprises and ensures the nonprofit can continue to operate smoothly. Regularly reviewing expenses and comparing them with the budget helps catch any overspending early, allowing leaders to adjust before problems grow.

A healthy nonprofit diversifies its income sources. Relying on just one grant or a few donors can be risky, especially when funding priorities change or emergencies arise. A mix of donations, grants, fee-for-service programs, and fundraising events can provide a more stable financial foundation. Forecasting income realistically, whether for a gala event or a new program, is a vital skill to align spending with expected revenues.

Nonprofits also navigate unique regulatory requirements, such as maintaining tax-exempt status. This status exempts them from paying federal and state income taxes and allows donors to make tax-deductible contributions, encouraging generosity. The government doesn’t judge the worth of a nonprofit’s mission but requires transparency through regular reporting on funding, activities, and leadership. Maintaining compliance means accurate and timely filings, internal controls to prevent misuse, and often external audits.

For nonprofit leaders, especially those new to finance, creating clear, manageable

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steps toward budgeting and reporting is key. It's not necessary to be a financial expert to make a difference. Being organized, curious, and committed to asking the right questions can transform an organization's financial health. Monthly financial reviews, reserve funds for emergencies, and thoughtful planning for both short- and long-term goals help nonprofits weather uncertainty and grow sustainably.

Using Data and Technology to Improve Impact

In the nonprofit world, where every decision can impact lives, communities, and causes, it's not enough to crunch the numbers and the data isn't just rows in a spreadsheet or a polished dashboard. It is all about recognizing the heartbeat behind the stats and listening closely to the questions the data and all these figures are trying to answer. Before diving into a report or running a query, pause and ask: What are we hoping to understand? What's the story here? What is this data trying to tell us? What patterns do we see? What surprises us? What questions naturally arise?

And that's a good thing, asking better questions leads to deeper insight. Let the data speak first.

Over time, you may notice that data analysis often takes on different storytelling voices. Each one helps illuminate a different kind of truth. Data can help us predict what might happen, categorize information for better planning, spot anomalies, identify themes, discover connections, and recognize consistent patterns.

But to do any of this well, you need to understand what kind of data you're working with, and what kind of insight you're aiming for. Data doesn't just show impact; it helps shape it.

There's a quiet but important difference between being data-driven and data-inspired. A data-driven decision might compare two donation pages and choose the one that converts best. A data-inspired decision blends those results with community feedback, staff insights, and on-the-ground realities. One trusts the numbers. The other trusts what the numbers can't always see. The magic happens when both approaches work together, when metrics meet meaning.

Behind the scenes of effective data use is data governance. If you think "data governance" sounds boring, stick with me. It's the hidden framework that keeps your information organized, secure, and ready to support your mission. It helps your nonprofit stay on track, make smarter decisions, and avoid unnecessary chaos. Just picture hosting a fundraising event without knowing who's coming, how many guests to expect, or what they need. Without data governance, your nonprofit can miss key opportunities, waste resources, and leave donors or volunteers out of the loop.

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With the right approach, though, data governance helps us plan and execute with clarity. By managing the data well, we can track donor relationships, assess program impact, and make timely decisions to drive the organization's mission forward.

Traditional data management models (where only the IT team had access) no longer work in today's nonprofit landscape. Enter the "data mesh" model: a decentralized approach that allows everyone in the organization to access and work with data quickly and securely. It's about democratizing data and removing bottlenecks so decisions can be made faster and with greater confidence.

Empowering the team with the right information at the right time transforms how you work. Whether adjusting a campaign or optimizing volunteer efforts, accessible data helps teams make better decisions and collaborate more effectively. It creates a shared sense of direction and purpose.

Data governance isn't just about neat spreadsheets. It's a strategic tool that connects your day-to-day operations to long-term impact. Clean, organized data lets you focus on delivering programs rather than fixing broken reports. When your data is aligned with the mission, you can track progress, build donor trust, and adapt in real time.

Building a strong data governance team isn't a solo task. It includes data stewards who ensure data quality and consistency, as well as everyday users (like program managers and fundraisers) who rely on that data to inform their work. When everyone plays a part, the data becomes more accurate, more accessible, and more powerful.

The good news? You don't have to be a tech expert to manage data effectively. Tools like Collibra or Alation can help track information, Talend or Informatica ensure accuracy, and platforms like OneTrust keep you in line with privacy regulations. These tools simplify the technical side, so your team can focus more on impact and less on spreadsheets.

Importantly, data governance isn't a one-and-done effort. It's an ongoing practice. Stay informed by connecting with industry groups, attending webinars, or following trusted sources. The more you know, the more resilient and responsive your organization becomes.

Just as important as structure is the kind of data we gather. Quantitative data (numbers and measurable facts) show us what's happening: how many people attended a program, how much money was raised, how often services were used. Qualitative data gives us the why behind the what. It captures stories, motivations, challenges, and feedback that numbers alone can't express. When combined, these two kinds of data offer a fuller picture. Quantitative data may show a decline in event attendance; qualitative data might reveal that a schedule conflict or cultural barrier

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kept people away. Understanding both is key to making changes that work.

Segmentation also plays a powerful role. By breaking your audience into meaningful groups: donors by giving level, clients by service use, volunteers by engagement, you can tailor communication, measure effectiveness more accurately, and respond to specific needs. It's not about putting people in boxes; it's about seeing them clearly.

And while tools and technologies matter, what matters most is how we interpret what they show us. Data in itself provides little value. To quote Jack Dorsey, the founder of Twitter and Square, "Every single action that we do in this world is triggering off some amount of data, and most of that data is meaningless until someone adds some interpretation of it or someone adds a narrative around it." That narrative is yours to shape.

Sometimes, the most powerful use of data begins not with a number, but with a question. What does this number mean in the real world? What story is hiding in this chart? Who is being left out? And what's possible if we listen more closely?

You don't need to master everything at once. Your relationship with data will evolve, as will your confidence. Each report you run, each story you uncover, each decision you inform brings you one step closer to becoming not just a nonprofit professional, but a steward of meaningful change.

Website Development and Digital Presence

This section isn't about teaching you how to design websites or run social media campaigns step-by-step. Instead, it's about creating a digital culture that's intentional, ethical, and creative that reflects a nonprofit's values and brings them to life online.

Going digital is changing how nonprofits work and serve. It helps you collaborate, innovate, and solve problems in new ways. By using data, technology, and fresh ways of working like design thinking and agile methods, you can meet the community's needs more effectively.

The future of nonprofits is digital, but it's also deeply human. By staying curious, ethical, and open to learning, you can help your organization build a better tomorrow.

Running a social media campaign might feel like any other outreach work you've done before, but the digital world adds new tools, new expectations, and new ways to connect. It's no longer just about sending a message out; it's about building relationships, starting conversations, and being where the community already spends time. That means your digital presence needs to be meaningful and flexible.

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Social media is full of content created by everyday people: posts, photos, videos, podcasts, and conversations. It used to be called just “media,” but now it’s social. This means everyone is both a creator and a viewer. For nonprofits, this opens a big chance to connect personally and directly with supporters. But it also means people expect honesty, relevant content, quick responses, and realness.

Before launching your campaign, take a moment to see what else is happening out there. What are other nonprofits asking your audience? Is there overlap or fatigue? Understanding this helps you avoid repeating the same things and gives you space to offer fresh, engaging experiences.

One popular way to engage people is through contests that ask them to share photos, stories, or short videos. These campaigns spread awareness and build community by encouraging people to talk about your cause and invite others in.

Podcasts are another great tool. While they don’t usually make a whole campaign on their own, they let you connect with people in a deeper way. When combined with blog posts, social media snippets, or live events, they help your audience really hear your mission.

The key to social media marketing is to meet people where they are. Don’t try to drag your audience away from their favorite platforms.

Instead, join conversations happening in Facebook groups, Instagram messages, or TikTok duets. Pay attention to how people behave on each platform and adapt. People won’t follow you somewhere new unless you’ve earned their trust on the platforms they already use.

Every campaign should start with a clear plan. Ask yourself: What exactly do we want to achieve? Are we introducing the nonprofit, engaging supporters, or raising money? “Make it go viral” isn’t a goal; it’s a wish. Instead, get specific: Where will this campaign run? Who are we trying to reach? How long will it last? How does it fit with everything else we’re doing?

A strong campaign tells a strong story. Go beyond facts and numbers. Explain why this campaign matters for you, your community and your supporters. What will they get by joining in? How will it make them feel seen, supported, heard, or part of something bigger?

Use visuals carefully. Choose images that show the diversity of your community and avoid stereotypes. Pick fonts, colors, and layouts thoughtfully; it’s the way you will be heard and how clearly you communicate. Make sure your digital content is accessible to everyone, including people with disabilities or limited access to technology.

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Use simple fonts, left-aligned text, clear headings, and descriptive links that clearly explain where they lead. Avoid sharing important information only as PDFs, since they are harder to search and navigate. Remember, every piece of content you publish is an added value, and should be optimized for search engines like Google.

Because knowledge and technology are always changing, testing your content is critical. Don't wait until your campaign launches to get feedback. Test early and often. Ask people to put your messages into their own words to check understanding. Watch how they use your website or materials and listen to what they think out loud. This helps you see what's clear and what's confusing.

Paraphrase testing helps catch unclear language or tone. It works well for short pages, surveys, or instructions. Usability testing shows if people can actually do what you want them to do, and if they can find the info they need. Understand what's expected? If not, it's your job to fix it.

When you share very important info, like health or legal content, it's best to do comparative studies with experts. This makes sure your message is clear and safe.

Once your campaign is live, use analytics to learn what's working and what isn't. But don't get overwhelmed by numbers. Focus on what matters most for your goals, whether that's awareness, action, or engagement.

Remember: you don't own social media platforms.

Algorithms change, accounts get suspended, and followers can disappear overnight. Your website and email list are your true digital home, platforms you control. Always find ways to bring people back to them.

As you grow your digital work, keep privacy and ethics in mind. Every click, signup, or donation creates data. Handle it carefully and be transparent. When people trust you with their info, it's a privilege, not just a transaction.

If your program and communications teams work separately, now is the time to bring them together. The best digital stories happen when both teams collaborate. Programs bring depth. Communications bring reach. Together, you create messages that truly matter.

Finally, give yourself permission to try and learn. Your first version won't be perfect. Test, adjust, and improve. Digital work is always evolving. When you stay curious, responsive, and focused on your community, you won't just keep up, you'll lead.

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Continuing Education and Professional Development

In my home country, no one ever asked me about my “network” or whether I’d done a certificate in leadership. People knew who I was. My work spoke for itself. But here, everything was different. I needed to learn new systems, new languages, and sometimes entirely new frameworks. And that’s when I started exploring what professional development could really look like.

Some of my immigrant professional friends went back to school for a bachelor’s or master’s degree. Others joined certificate programs or community training. There’s no one-size-fits-all path, but here are some of the journeys I’ve seen, and what they’ve taught me.

A close friend of mine studied political science and now works for an international aid organization. She says understanding global relations, policy, and humanitarian systems gave her the tools to advocate on behalf of displaced families. Another volunteer I met came from a sociology background; she was brilliant at analyzing social dynamics and designing programs that felt truly community-centered.

I’ve also seen people with degrees in finance lead successful fundraising campaigns and budget planning efforts for nonprofits. One woman I met through a Ukrainian women’s group had a background in women’s studies. She now runs outreach programs for immigrant mothers navigating the public school system. Her education helped her understand intersectionality and gave her language to advocate effectively.

Languages matter, too. I once saw a candidate get hired over others simply because she was fluent in Spanish, Ukrainian, Pashto, French and/or Creole and could connect directly with the organization’s client base. Learning a second language, or improving the one you speak, can open doors far beyond translation.

Then there are the social workers, the public health graduates, the international relations experts: each bringing unique skills, perspectives, and insights. Some chose degrees like public administration or nonprofit management. Others specialized in human rights or education. What they all had in common was a desire to grow in impact.

Of course, with education comes cost. Tuition varies depending on where and what you study, whether it’s a community college, state university, or private school. And while the numbers can be intimidating, there are many ways to make it work.

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When I started looking into school options, I was surprised to learn that not all financial aid is the same. Some money, like scholarships or grants, you never have to repay. Others, like loans, come with strings attached.

Scholarships are often merit-based, and they come from schools, nonprofits, or even private donors. Grants are usually based on financial need. If you're in the U.S., the Pell Grant or TEACH Grant might apply to you. And then there's work-study — federal jobs offered on campus to help students cover costs.

Loans can help, too, but they require more planning. Make sure you understand the interest rate, repayment terms, and whether you're responsible for interest while still in school. If you're lucky, you might qualify for a subsidized loan where the government pays the interest until you graduate.

Don't forget that some loans can be forgiven if you work in public service or join a program like AmeriCorps. And it's always worth comparing financial aid packages from different schools. Sometimes, a more expensive college ends up being cheaper because it offers better aid.

And then there's the personal statement. I've helped a few friends write theirs, and I always tell them this: tell your story. Why do you want this degree? What personal experiences led you here? What kind of impact do you hope to make? Your authentic voice, your passion, vision, and purpose matter just as much as your GPA or test scores.

I remember one woman who wrote about helping her family during a natural disaster back home. That essay got her a full scholarship. Another friend described growing up in a refugee camp and how she wanted to support other displaced youth. She's now finishing her degree in human services.

The bottom line is this: education can be your ladder not just to a better job, but to deeper impact, stronger leadership, and a more sustainable career. Whether it's a full degree, an online course, or a weekend training, don't be afraid to invest in yourself and don't stop learning. Make it a routine.

I have a Coursera account and use Udemy too - both are great platforms to sharpen my skills, improve my professional language, and even meet like-minded people.

Yes, there's a lot of uncertainty, and it can feel scary, and that's okay. Knock on doors. Explore opportunities and always remember: your background, your culture, your story — they're not obstacles. They're your strengths. Bring them with you, wherever your education takes you next.

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Jobs, Journeys, and the People We Meet

You wouldn't believe how many versions of my resume I've written since moving to New York in the spring of 2022. I started with 76 versions that year. Then came 2023, the year I graduated from the LEAD program (a workforce development program for immigrant women facilitated by New Women New Yorkers). That year alone, I wrote over 250 resumes. And by now, I've sent more than 500 along with countless messages to people working at companies I dreamed of joining.

Each resume was crafted carefully, tailored to each job posting. I rewrote bullet points, rehearsed for mock interviews, and did everything I could to prepare. And still, most of the time, all I received was silence. No reply. No feedback. Just an empty inbox and growing doubt.

At first, the rejections or worse, no response at all, felt deeply personal. I questioned everything: Is my English not strong enough? Is my resume font wrong? Maybe I'll never make it here. But the truth was, I wasn't doing anything wrong. I just hadn't landed in the right place yet.

In Ukraine, we have a saying: "Prosto prodvzuy lóupaty v tu stínu". It means, "Just keep digging at the wall". It sounds a little harsh, but it's honest if you keep showing up, eventually the wall will crack. Eventually, something will open.

Over time, I began to believe that each "no", each unanswered message, was a quiet redirection. A closed door simply meant I was being pushed toward another one. I even started whispering "thank you" in my head to the rejections. I knew something better was waiting.

This mindset became my secret strength, and if you're starting fresh in the U.S. without connections, I want you to know it can be yours too, especially in the nonprofit world, where people tend to be mission-driven, kind, and collaborative. You may not be the right fit for one role, but your skills might be exactly what someone else in their network is looking for. Sometimes your experience is needed like air — you just don't know where yet.

I'm not here to give you a standard resume tutorial. You already know how important it is to show your achievements, not just your duties. You understand the value of using numbers to tell your story. You know your resume needs to be clear and concise.

But let's talk about something just as important, something that changed everything for me: connection. There was a time when the word "networking" made me uncomfortable. It sounded fake, transactional, or something reserved for people with MBAs. But now, I see it differently. Networking isn't about collecting business cards.

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It's about building a community around shared values and mutual support. Especially in nonprofit work, success often comes from the people you meet along the way. The more connections you have, the more doors begin to open, not just for jobs, but for collaborations, partnerships, and support you didn't even know you needed.

That's why I started showing up more. I introduced myself, even when it felt awkward. I said "yes" to events that made me nervous. I realized my LinkedIn profile wasn't just a resume; it was my voice. It was a way to share my story, talk about what I care about, and show the path I'm building. I started writing posts, sharing reflections, and connecting with people whose work inspired me. I reached out. Sometimes I asked questions that felt too simple. Sometimes I just said, "Hi, I admire what you do." Not every message led to a job; in fact, most didn't. But many led to something better: a conversation, an idea, a new direction, or even a friendship.

When you're new in a city, a country, or a field, having someone who can guide you just a little is a gift. So don't wait. Volunteer. Say hello. Show up. The path will unfold, I promise.

Along the way, I picked up a few lessons, not just about resumes or interviews, but about life and work in the USA.

Stay flexible. You might have one plan, but life will show you something else. A job you never imagined might become the one that changes everything. Be open to it.

Stay curious. Ask questions, even the ones that seem obvious. Your perspective matters. You might see a problem differently. That's often how innovation begins.

Stay humble. In the nonprofit world, relationships matter more than titles. Be generous with what you know, and open to learning from others. Trust builds when we show up as our full selves.

Find your people. Your support system is everything. For me, it was other immigrant professionals, people who understood the challenges firsthand. We helped each other, cheered each other on, shared job postings, reviewed resumes, and celebrated every small win. These aren't your competitors. These are your future collaborators, mentors, and maybe even lifelong friends. Some of the most meaningful connections I've made came from casual conversations, unexpected introductions, or helping someone else just because I could.

Let me say one more thing, something many people avoid: money. It's not always easy to talk about money, especially in mission-driven work. But it's important. Passion is beautiful, but it doesn't pay rent. You have to know how your work will support your life.

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I remember the moment vividly: standing in line at the ATM, holding that first nonprofit paycheck of \$400. The amount felt both underwhelming and monumental. As the machine whirred, counting my earnings, I felt a swell of pride. It was just the start, a small symbol of my dedication and dreams. But as time passed, reality set in. I had to sit down, laptop open, notes scattered around, and reevaluate. Creating a budget became a necessity, one that had me questioning: "Could I build a sustainable future on this path?" The challenge of aligning passion with living comfortably became ever more pressing.

Being realistic about your finances doesn't mean you're greedy. It means you're grounded. When your basic needs are met, your passion can truly shine, and it won't feel like a burden you're carrying alone. Don't chase "more" just for the sake of it. Chase what feels right for you. Know your worth. Value your time. Find the balance between purpose and stability.

And finally, especially to women reading this: speak up. Own your accomplishments. Too often, we hide behind "we" when talking about our work. But your contributions matter. That moment when you led the meeting, saved the project, came up with the idea – name it. Share it. You've earned it. Even the small things add up. They tell your story. They help future employers see your value.

So keep going. Keep showing up. Even when doubts whisper questions like, 'Is this worth the effort?' or fears creep in about stalling progress. Keep hitting the wall with your shovel gently, steadily, patiently.

Something will break through. And when it does, you'll know it was worth it.

Advancing to Leadership: Board of Directors Positions

You might wonder why a section about board leadership appears in a guide for people just starting out in the nonprofit world. That's a fair question. But sometimes the best way to understand where you're going is to get a glimpse of what's ahead.

Joining a board of directors might not be your first step, but it's often closer than you think, and it can become one of the most meaningful ways to grow, contribute, and lead.

When I moved to the U.S., I didn't plan to join a board right away. But as with many things in the nonprofit world, opportunities can appear through connection and curiosity. A friend who knew me from Ukraine invited me to join a local branch of the Ukrainian National Women's League of America (UNWLA).

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I became a member, shared my experience and ideas, and expressed my willingness to help. I began attending regular meetings. Later that year, during an election for new board members, I was surprised to be nominated to serve as Second Vice President of Branch 1.

At the time, our branch needed fresh energy. Membership was low, and activities had slowed down. With a small but dedicated team of six board members, we began organizing cultural events, exhibitions, and fundraisers. We built a social media presence from scratch and launched small outreach efforts. Slowly but surely, people began to notice our work.

The following year, I was elected Treasurer. The branch was going through a restructuring period, and my interest in fundraising, along with my growing understanding of nonprofit budgeting and numbers, made it a natural next step. With each new role, I gained valuable skills and deeper insight into how nonprofit organizations operate. We weren't a large team, but we worked closely together, often wearing multiple hats as many people in nonprofit work do.

Through consistent collaboration and care, Branch 1 became known as a strong and active group, a model of how younger professionals can breathe new life into a long-standing organization.

Around the same time, a friend of mine became President of UNWLA's New York Regional Council and invited me to take on a new role: managing social media, communications, and outreach at the regional level. This council includes representatives from various branches and plays a key role in shaping the direction of the entire New York region.

I accepted the role, and it turned out to be a valuable learning experience. I deepened my knowledge of nonprofit marketing, community engagement, and digital storytelling.

I also wrote articles, helped plan events, coordinated larger-scale fundraising initiatives, and continued building connections across branches and with external nonprofit partners.

Later, I decided to challenge myself in an area that's essential for building connections: public speaking. I joined the Brooklyn Toastmasters Club, a nonprofit organization focused on developing communication and leadership skills. I started as a regular member, following the Strategic Relationships learning path. Within a year, I was elected as Vice President of Membership. This role gave me the opportunity to put my skills into practice: welcoming new members, creating outreach systems, strengthening internal communication, and helping the club grow.

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I saw firsthand how a volunteer-run organization can thrive when everyone takes ownership and works toward a shared goal. At the end of each year, we reflected on our progress, celebrated milestones, and prepared reports. It became clear to me that strong leadership is built on trust, collaboration, and consistency.

What I've learned through all these experiences is that board service isn't about being perfect or knowing everything. It's about being willing to try, to ask questions, and to support a cause you care about.

Serving on a board teaches you how organizations make decisions, plan budgets, launch programs, and stay focused on their mission. It also gives you a chance to grow professionally and personally as you work alongside others who share your values.

You don't need to wait years to get involved in nonprofit leadership. Many organizations are looking for new voices, fresh perspectives, and real-world skills. You might start by volunteering or joining a committee. From there, it's often a natural step into a board position.

If you're not sure where to begin, just ask. Attend a meeting. Talk to board members. Share your interest. Many nonprofits are happy to involve people who are committed and curious.

And if you're new to board service, there are plenty of ways to learn. National organizations like BoardSource offer excellent tools and resources. Local nonprofit associations host training and webinars. Peer-to-peer learning, even just listening to someone else's experience, can be incredibly helpful.

Serving on a board is a serious commitment, but it's also an incredible opportunity. You get to support a mission, strengthen your skills, build meaningful relationships, and become part of something bigger than yourself.

APPENDICES

Glossary of Common Nonprofit Terms

Advocacy – Speaking up or taking action to support a cause or change a law or policy.

Annual Giving – Asking for donations once a year, usually from regular supporters.

Annual Report – A report that a nonprofit publishes every year showing what they did, how they spent money, and the impact they made.

Board of Directors – A group of volunteers who lead and make big decisions for the nonprofit.

Bylaws – The official rules that explain how a nonprofit is run (like how often meetings happen or how leaders are chosen).

Capacity Building – Activities that help a nonprofit get stronger, like training staff or improving systems.

Case for Support – A message that explains why a nonprofit's work matters and why people should donate, also called a fundraising pitch or appeal.

Constituents – The people the nonprofit helps or serves.

CRM (Constituent Relationship Management) – A tool or system used to support mission-driven efforts in donor management, fundraising, and community building (keep track of programs, initiatives, supporters, donors, and volunteers).

Community Engagement – Building relationships and involving community members in your programs, decisions, or events.

Collective Impact – When multiple organizations work together toward a shared goal. (Often across sectors like health, housing, or education.)

Development – Another word for fundraising; building relationships and bringing in donations.

Direct Mail – Letters or postcards sent to ask people to donate.

Donor – A person or group who gives money or items to a nonprofit.

D&O Insurance (Directors & Officers Insurance) – Insurance that protects board members and staff from legal trouble while doing their jobs.

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Evaluation – Checking if a program or project is working well and helping people.

Fiscal Sponsor – A larger nonprofit that supports a smaller project by sharing its legal and tax status.

Form 990 – A yearly tax form that nonprofits send to the government to show how they use their money.

Fundraising – Any way of asking for and collecting money to support the nonprofit's work.

General Operating Support – Donations that a nonprofit can use for any part of its work, not limited to one project.

Grant – Money given by a foundation or government to support a program or idea.

Grassroots – Projects started and led by local people in a community.

Impact – The real difference or change a nonprofit makes in people's lives.

In-kind Donation – A donation of things like food, clothes, or services instead of money.

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) – Numbers that show how well a nonprofit is doing, like how many people they helped.

Logic Model – A visual plan showing how a program works, from what you put in (inputs) to the changes you want to see (outcomes).

Matching Gift – When a company gives the same amount of money as an employee donates, doubling the gift.

Mission Statement – A sentence that explains what the nonprofit does and why it exists.

Nonprofit – An organization that uses its money to help others or support a cause, not to make a profit.

Operations – The daily tasks that keep a nonprofit running, like budgeting, planning, and managing staff.

Outcome – The result or change that happens because of a nonprofit's work.

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Output – The number of services or activities done, like meals served or people trained.

Overhead – The basic costs of running a nonprofit, like rent, electricity, or internet.

Planned Giving – Donations arranged for the future, often as part of someone’s will or estate.

Program – The services or activities a nonprofit offers to carry out its mission.

Program Officer – A person at a foundation/government agency who works with nonprofits to give out grants.

Restricted Funds – Donations that must be used for a specific project or program, as the donor requested.

Stakeholders – People involved in or affected by a nonprofit, like staff, donors, volunteers, and those served.

Strategic Plan – A roadmap that shows a nonprofit’s goals and how it plans to reach them over time.

Stewardship – Taking care of relationships with donors, volunteers, and supporters by keeping in touch and saying “thank you”.

Unrestricted Funds – Donations that can be used however the nonprofit needs (the most flexible kind of support).

Volunteer – A person who gives their time to help a nonprofit without being paid.

Vision Statement – A sentence about the big dream a nonprofit is working toward.

Youth Program – Activities or services designed especially for young people or children.

Year-End Appeal – A special fundraising request made near the end of the year to encourage donations.

Zero-Based Budgeting – A way to plan a budget starting from zero, where every expense must be justified instead of assuming past spending will continue.

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Questions to Ask Nonprofit Management

These questions are grouped into themes to help you explore the key areas of a nonprofit's work, including finances, operations, programs, leadership, and culture. Use what fits your role or interest, whether you're interviewing, networking, volunteering, or consulting.

Organizational Mission & Strategy

- What is your mission, and how do you measure success?
- What are your top three priorities this year?
- How do you decide which programs to start or stop?
- How does your strategic plan guide day-to-day work?
- What are the biggest challenges your organization is facing right now?

Programs, Impact & Evaluation

- What are your core programs, and who do they serve?
- What does it cost per person to deliver this service?
- How do you know if your programs are working?
- Are you collecting feedback from participants?
- How do your programs compare to others in your field?

Operations & Organizational Capacity

- What are your biggest operational needs right now?
- Do you have the right tools and systems to support your work?
- How do you track and manage staff or volunteer time?
- Are there areas where you feel under-resourced?
- Do you have systems in place for knowledge-sharing and documentation?

Financial Health & Sustainability

- What are your main sources of revenue?
- Do you have both restricted and unrestricted funds?
- How do you plan for long-term financial sustainability?
- What is your process for budgeting each year?
- Do you have a reserve or contingency fund?

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Accounting & Compliance

- How do you track restricted vs. unrestricted funds?
- How often do you generate and review financial reports?
- What internal controls do you have to prevent fraud?
- Do you undergo regular audits? Who conducts them?
- Are you currently in compliance with IRS Form 990 and state regulations?

Staff & Volunteer Engagement

- How do you support staff growth and development?
- How do you prevent staff burnout?
- What are some ways volunteers contribute to your work?
- How do you recruit, train, and retain volunteers?
- How do volunteers describe their experience here?

Board Governance & Leadership

- How does your board support the organization's mission?
- What are the board's main responsibilities?
- How often does the board meet and review progress?
- What skills or experiences do you look for in new board members?
- How do board members stay informed and engaged?

Diversity, Culture & Accessibility

- How do you approach diversity, equity, and inclusion in your work?
- What steps have you taken to create a welcoming space for immigrants or non-native English speakers?
- How do you adapt your communication to different cultural backgrounds?
- What does your staff or board look like in terms of diversity?
- What is your workplace culture like? How would a new person feel joining your team?

Technology & Communications

- How strong is your digital presence?
- How do you use social media or email to connect with your audience?
- Are there new tools or platforms you're exploring?
- How do you protect donor and participant data?
- What kind of content gets the most engagement from your community?

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Growth, Innovation & Learning

- What's something your organization is proud of that others might not know about?
- What recent changes have improved your work?
- Are there innovative ideas or partnerships you're exploring?
- What are you learning from your data, community, or mistakes?
- How do you stay informed about best practices in your field?

APPENDICES

Fundraising Strategies: Tools and Tactics That Work

This is a practical breakdown of the core fundraising strategies you can implement or advise on when working with a nonprofit. Each approach is designed to be clear, flexible, and actionable, especially for those new to fundraising in the U.S. nonprofit sector. Start small. Pick one strategy, maybe peer-to-peer or a simple email campaign. Track what works. Celebrate even modest success. Fundraising is a skill anyone can learn, and with practice, you'll become a confident, ethical, and effective fundraiser.

Three Enduring Truths of Fundraising

People give because there is something in it for them.

Example: A donor may want recognition, networking, or tax benefits.

People give because someone they trust asked.

Example: Peer-to-peer fundraising or a board member personally reaching out.

People give because they've been personally affected.

Example: Cancer survivors supporting cancer-related nonprofits.

1. INDIVIDUAL GIVING

Tools to Use:

- DonorPerfect or Little Green Light (CRM tools to track donor engagement)
- MailChimp (email automation)
- Canva (to create story-driven visuals)

Quick-Start Checklist:

- Create a donor database
- Segment donors by type: small, recurring, lapsed, major
- Send quarterly impact updates (not just appeals)
- Ask for monthly giving: smaller amounts, more stable funding

First Campaign Tip: Run a birthday fundraiser:

Ask friends and family to give \$10–\$50 instead of buying gifts.
Use Facebook or GoFundMe.

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2. MAJOR DONOR STRATEGY

Essentials:

- Identify potential major donors by analyzing past giving (e.g., anyone who gave \$500+)
- Offer exclusive access to success stories, behind-the-scenes tours

Truth: People who give big want to feel like insiders.

Action Tool:

- Use a simple Google Sheet to track touchpoints: phone calls, lunches, and updates sent.

3. PEER-TO-PEER FUNDRAISING

Tools:

- GoFundMe, RallyUp (easy campaign setup)

Strategy:

- Recruit 10 friends or volunteers to raise \$500 each
- Provide templates for emails and social media posts
- Celebrate top fundraisers publicly

Truth: People give to people. Empower your champions.

4. INSTITUTIONAL FUNDING

Key Areas:

- Foundation grants
- Government grants
- Corporate giving

Tools:

- Candid/Foundation Directory Online for research
- Canva for infographics in your case statement

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Grant Application Template Outline:

- Mission alignment
- Problem statement (with data)
- Proposed solution
- Budget and timeline
- Outcomes and metrics

Truth: Always follow the funder's instructions exactly. Customize every application.

5. CROWDFUNDING

Platform Suggestions:

- Indiegogo for creative causes
- Kickstarter for time-bound projects
- Givebutler for flexible, nonprofit-focused campaigns

Campaign Tips:

- Set a deadline (30 days max)
- Share one compelling story with video or photos
- Update donors frequently: what's happening, how much raised, what's next

Truth: The first 48 hours determine your campaign's momentum.

6. FUNDRAISING EVENTS

Ideas for Beginners:

- Trivia night
- Community picnic
- Talent show or cultural showcase

Event Tools:

- Eventbrite for tickets
- GiveSmart or BidPal for auctions
- Canva for flyers

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Checklist:

- **Set a goal: how much to raise and why**
- **Secure in-kind donations (food, venue, raffle prizes)**
- **Promote early and often via social media**

Truth: Small events can build relationships just as effectively as big galas.

7. CORPORATE SPONSORSHIPS

Pitch Strategy:

- **Focus on shared values**
- **Show audience reach (email subscribers, followers)**
- **Offer tangible ROI (logo on shirts, shoutouts at events)**

Toolkit:

- **One-page sponsorship deck in PDF**
- **Tiered sponsorship packages (e.g., Bronze = \$250, Gold = \$1,000)**

Truth: Make it easy for them to say “yes”. Offer value, not just ask for a donation.

8. MEASURING IMPACT & TELLING THE STORY

Tools:

- **Google Forms to collect testimonials**
- **Canva to design simple impact reports**
- **Excel to track KPIs (donor retention, event ROI, gift size)**

Storytelling Formula:

- **Problem + Person + Solution + Result**
- **Include emotion, data, and a clear call to action**

Truth: People give from the heart, then justify it with facts.

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Voices from the Field: Stories and Advice from Nonprofit Professionals

Martha Arbelaez, Program Associate, Job Readiness Trainings / New Women New Yorkers

2 years of experience in the nonprofit sector.

Why did you choose to work in the nonprofit world?

I would say that the nonprofit sector chose me, and I accepted. When I arrived in NWN's community, I was giving up my job search. I received many rejections that made me feel it was not worth it to try to pursue a career in the field I have experience in. Then a friend shared a flyer with me about a workforce development program and insisted I should attend the informational session. After completing the LEAD program, I felt inspired and expressed my interest in volunteering for the organization as a way to give back while learning new skills to later continue with my job search. To my surprise, an opportunity to co-facilitate one of our job readiness programs opened up, which led me to step into my current role.

What's the best part of your job?

Witnessing the transformation of our participants upon completing the program, the confidence they build, the connection they form with other participants and the new paths they begin to walk. My role involves constant learning from both colleagues and participants, and it allows me to continuously practice and develop my technical and interpersonal skills.

What's the most challenging part?

Reminding myself that I'm doing well and that I am enough. And learning not to feel guilty when I say "no".

What surprised you most when you started working in this sector?

That you can learn anything you need in order to perform well, especially when you're surrounded by people who believe in your potential and are willing to support you along the way.

What skills or qualities help you succeed in this work?

I would say that all the technical and interpersonal skills developed in previous jobs have helped me succeed in my role. Additionally, a growth mindset and always being open to learn and hear other perspectives is essential.

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How do you take care of yourself and avoid burnout?

This is something I'm still learning. It sounds simple in theory, but putting it into practice is not always easy, especially when you're passionate about your work. I've been working on listening to my body and recognizing when I need to pause or slow down, and giving myself permission to do so without guilt.

Have you ever faced language or cultural challenges?

Yes, I have faced language and cultural challenges. What really helped me was sticking to our organization's mission and values, and also getting support and guidance from my team.

What helped you understand the workplace culture in U.S. nonprofits?

I've come to understand the workplace culture in U.S. nonprofits through direct experience. Being involved in programs, trainings, and day-to-day coordination is helping me learn how decisions are made, how everyone steps in to support when needed, and how communication is value-based.

How do you balance your passion for the mission with your professional responsibilities?

For me, the mission is not separate from my professional responsibilities; they are connected, and there is no way to accomplish one without the other.

What advice would you give to someone just getting started in this field, especially an immigrant professional?

I'd love to share a piece of advice I once received during an HR panel from our guest speaker, Neema Mbonela: "Be mindful of your energy when making a job decision". I'd also add: Listen to yourself, your well-being matters just as much as your performance.

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Dorothy Onwuemene, Associate at Junior Achievement Finance Park

Over 2 years of experience in the nonprofit sector.

I never planned to work in a nonprofit organization, but I was connected to JA through NWN Y when I was searching for a job. I didn't really understand what working in the nonprofit sector would entail, but it's been a positive learning curve for me because I enjoy working with students.

The best part of my job is the reaction of the students after a simulation, that light bulb moment where they realize the value of the financial literacy education they just received. It is the satisfaction of knowing that we are adding value to the lives of young people.

The most challenging is wearing more than one hat and multi-tasking on days where we are short of volunteers. When I started working with the nonprofit organization, what surprised me was how nonprofit organizations source for funding and support projects, that alone is a tough job.

In my job, the skills that helped me succeed are soft skills: commitment, hard work, developing the right relationships, and keeping a positive outlook on life. The passion for the work I do and not stressing over the things that do not go according to the script keeps me from burnout. It's also important to get a lot of rest during the peak season. I haven't really faced language or culture barriers because I work with a multicultural team. The lead program and other programs provided by NWN Y were what prepared me for the US workplace culture. When you have a passion and are on a mission to accomplish something important, you must find the balance between your passion and professional responsibility by accepting that both of them go together.

My advice to professional immigrants who want to work in the nonprofit sector is that you must know that working in a nonprofit is not a job, it is a service and a calling to reach people who are seemingly unreachable by other organizations.

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Karen Ruiz, Community Health Worker, Grameen America (former position)

Over 3 years of experience in the nonprofit sector.

Why did you choose to work in the nonprofit world?

As an immigrant and a professional woman, I've personally experienced many of the challenges faced by the communities I now support. I chose to work in the nonprofit sector because I want to contribute to meaningful change by providing access, information, and tools to those who need them most—especially immigrant and Latina women striving for a better life.

What's the best part of your job?

The best part is seeing the women I support discover their power and voice. I create workshops on health, environment, and technology, and seeing them apply what they've learned to improve their lives is deeply fulfilling.

What's the most challenging part?

The hardest part is staying emotionally balanced when working closely with people facing serious hardships or injustices. It's also challenging when there aren't enough resources to support everyone in need.

What surprised you most when you started working in this sector?

I was surprised by how many roles one person often has to take on. In addition to being an educator, you become a community organizer, cultural bridge, and sometimes emotional support. It's deeply human work.

What skills or qualities help you succeed in this work?

Empathy, organization, and bilingual communication skills have been essential. My background in environmental engineering also helps me bring strategic thinking and structure to social programs.

How do you take care of yourself and avoid burnout?

I've learned to set healthy boundaries, make time for myself, and reconnect with what fuels me. Walking, writing, and talking with other women doing this work helps a lot.

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Have you ever faced language or cultural challenges? How did you handle them?

Yes, especially early on. Even though I spoke English, I didn't always feel confident in professional settings. I took classes, practiced with colleagues, and most importantly, gave myself permission to make mistakes and learn from them.

What helped you understand the workplace culture in U.S. nonprofits?

Paying close attention, asking questions, and having mentors helped me a lot. I also read about leadership and social justice in the U.S., which gave me important context and understanding.

How do you balance your passion for the mission with your professional responsibilities?

I remind myself that to keep helping others, I have to take care of myself and work with intention. I focus on doing high-quality work without losing sight of the mission: dignity and well-being for our communities.

What advice would you give to someone just getting started in this field, especially an immigrant professional?

Your story and background are your strengths. Don't feel like you have to hide them to "fit in" — they are your superpower. Surround yourself with people who believe in you, seek out mentorship, and never stop learning.

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Maria Isabel Dient, Workshop Facilitator at New Women New Yorkers / Writer/ Poet
Over 5 years of experience in the nonprofit sector.

Why did you choose to work in the nonprofit world?

When I began studying justice systems, I wanted to become a criminal lawyer. But after visiting a prison called Oso Blanco in Puerto Rico, everything changed. I realized that my true path was not in courtrooms, but in communities — connecting with people and offering support. That moment helped me discover my passion for volunteer work. Since then, I've worked with several nonprofit organizations in Puerto Rico, including Crearte, Puerto Rico CONCRA, Albergue Los Peregrinos de Caguas, Hogar CREA, and underserved communities with the Special Community Office of the government of Puerto Rico. Each of those experiences helped shape my heart and my commitment to serve others.

What's the best part of your job?

The best part is feeling that I can make a positive impact. I love helping immigrant women feel heard, empowered, and supported. I try to remind them that no matter the situation, there is always light — a bit of sun that brings hope again.

What's the most challenging part?

The hardest part is that I find it difficult to disconnect emotionally. I've never been good at ignoring people's pain, and sometimes I carry those feelings deeply.

What surprised you most when you started working in this sector?

What surprised me the most was realizing that I was not alone in my fear. At the beginning, I was full of doubts — maybe because of insecurities from my past — and I thought it was just me. But soon I understood that many women, especially immigrants, carry the same fears: fear of not being enough, of not speaking the language perfectly, of not belonging. I saw that fear doesn't make us weak — it makes us human. And when we face it together, we grow stronger. I surprised myself by doing things I never thought I could. And I learned that courage doesn't mean being fearless — it means moving forward even when we are afraid.

What skills or qualities help you succeed in this work?

I think my strength is being real. I show up as I am. And when it's time to act, somehow I find the courage to move forward — even when I didn't think I had it.

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How do you take care of yourself and avoid burnout?

Writing early in the morning is my biggest therapy. I also go for walks and listen to music as soon as I wake up. These simple things help me recharge.

Have you ever faced language or cultural challenges? How did you handle them?

Yes. Even though I was born in New York City, I was raised in another country. I used to feel embarrassed about my English. But through a workshop with the organization I now volunteer with, I realized I had to speak with my accent and all. I understood that my voice matters, and that improvement comes with practice and self-acceptance.

What helped you understand the workplace culture in U.S. nonprofits?

I'm still learning every day. I try to observe, ask questions, and absorb everything that can help me grow and also help others.

How do you balance your passion for the mission with your professional responsibilities?

Writing has always been a part of me, even since childhood. It's how I process my thoughts and emotions, and it helps me stay connected to what I love. Writing gives me peace, clarity, and energy. What's beautiful is that my passion for writing has also become part of my professional journey. Through my writing, I've been able to participate in different work activities — like sharing reflections, supporting group conversations, or creating content related to my work. It has also helped me grow in the area of storytelling and develop myself as a writer and poet. In this way, my passion and my responsibilities don't compete — they support and inspire each other.

What advice would you give to someone just getting started in this field, especially an immigrant professional?

As immigrants, we carry within us a deep and powerful identity — our culture, our voice, our stories. Sometimes we are made to feel small because of our accent, our background, or simply because we are “different.” But the truth is, those very things are our strength. Even when the sea feels wild and uncertain, we must look toward the horizon. There will always be dreams, hope, and light within us — even in the darkest moments. So don't hide who you are. Speak your truth, even if your voice shakes. Be proud of your roots. Trust that your story has value, and that you belong in every space you step into.

APPENDICES

Reema Saleh, Digital Engagement Coordinator at The People's Lobby

Over 5 years of experience in the nonprofit sector.

Why did you choose to work in the nonprofit world?

My family fled war and persecution in Ethiopia and Eritrea to begin new lives in South Carolina, probably the last place you'd expect. Starting over in America meant there were the borders I knew and the invisible ones I didn't understand, but determined life outcomes anyways.

Like when my principal told us we could all escape our zip code with enough grit, or how the four deadly highways that cut through my hometown always carved through Black neighborhoods. Why did my family "deserve" refugee status compared to other immigrants, when it was mostly a combination of luck and arcane paperwork?

As a teenager, the lines between the "haves" and "have-nots" seemed random but entirely by design, something built into the very environment, even when my family had made it from war in their homelands to their version of an American dream. I came to college aspiring toward a career in nonprofit advocacy or public service, which pushed me toward studying public policy, leading political education and community service programming, and founding my school's Partnership for the Advancement of Refugee Rights. My career journey has taken me from policy research and international development to journalism and communications, always interested in structural inequality, the communities it harms, and how to disrupt its patterns. I don't know if it was ever a conscious choice, but it's something I keep choosing.

I graduated during the 2020 pandemic, which was such a chaotic time to be alive. Back then, I went to graduate school for public policy at the University of Chicago, working as a fellow with organizations like the Pearson Institute, Freedom House, and the Institute for Governance Reform in Sierra Leone. I came intending to pursue a career in international development. But oddly enough, I graduated as a journalist, covering housing, transportation, and local news in Chicago. My writing fellowships at the Chicago Reader, City Bureau, and Reparations Media fueled my passion for mission-driven community journalism—the kind that could showcase the impact of public policies and highlight solutions that made cities better.

This fall, I took my journalism toolkit to digital engagement and communications strategy at The People's Lobby, a grassroots advocacy organization building community power for environmental justice, criminal justice reform, workers' rights, and health care justice campaigns in Illinois. For over a decade, they've been devoted to rallying support for the policies and candidates that put the needs of people and

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the planet before the interests of big corporations and the very rich in the Chicagoland area. Outside my day job, my writing has graced the pages of newspapers like Block Club Chicago, the Chicago Reader, and the Chicago Sun-Times. I'm a daily editor for the Chicago Review of Books, and previously, I produced the Pearson Institute's Root of Conflict podcast and Reparation Media's Change Agents: The Podcast.

What's the best part of your job?

Communication and copywriting, especially for social impact organizations, became my bread and butter. At the end of the day, I want to create impactful storytelling that helps educate people, spurs them to take action, influences public policy, or simply confirms what some communities have always understood about the world, so more people can help change it. Working in nonprofit communications means getting to do that every day.

What's the most challenging part?

The work can be demanding, and nonprofit communications means you often wear many hats. What might be a traditional social media content creation job at an agency might get blended with copywriting, public relations, fundraising, multimedia, events, or organizing work when you're in-house at a nonprofit. Sometimes, that means you're doing more with less.

Your "why" can also be different. At a company, your goals are usually about making money and delivering a good product or service. At a nonprofit, it's a lot more tied to your organization's "theory of change," or essentially their roadmap toward achieving social or political change. How many people is your organization serving? What communities or populations are you trying to reach? How do you measure your impact? It's a bit more complicated, especially when you have to demonstrate all this to funders.

What surprised you most when you started working in this sector?

What surprised me the most is often how much of it is truly relational. It's not necessarily a question of who you know that determines your career, but I often find that you run into the same people over and over again—that's been the case for me in journalism, advocacy, and communications. Even being a nonprofit professional in Chicago can feel like a small world—not because it actually is, but because people keep choosing to be in the same space.

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What skills or qualities help you succeed in this work?

It feels cliché to say strong writing skills, but it's been the most helpful so far. The skills I built up as a journalist help me translate public policy or academic research into something that anyone can understand, but also something people will find engaging enough to read. Whether that's newsletters, articles, or social media, that's always been handy for me. If you can write well, you can go anywhere. Project management skills and adaptability are golden at most nonprofit jobs I've had as well. There isn't really a set career or educational pathway for people to get into nonprofit work. One helpful step is to identify the types of work you prefer, and then find a nonprofit where you can do that kind of work (and if you need training or technical skills to do that). Finding out the kinds of work you don't like to do is also helpful; while studying public policy in graduate school, I realized early on that I would not enjoy doing the quantitative work that goes into evaluating nonprofit programs, and I'm grateful I did.

How do you take care of yourself and avoid burnout?

Setting boundaries on how often you're engaging with work in your off-hours is key. The cool thing about working in nonprofit and social impact fields is that your job is helping make the world a better place. The less cool thing is that it's hard to unplug. If you clock off to rest but end up doomscrolling about climate change, you'll come back to work just as stressed.

If you're advocating for a new policy, and it gets killed or indefinitely postponed, sometimes it's hard not to take that personally; what if there was one more thing you could've done that would've changed things? Even if there was, it's best not to dwell because social and political change do not happen overnight; you want to be in it for the long haul, which means resting now. Some people do not take this advice and will operate 24/7 for the mission, but it leads to a poor organizational culture. It's important to take care of yourself.

What helped you understand the workplace culture in U.S. nonprofits?

When I was in college, I started out interning and volunteering with nonprofit organizations in my area. Meeting practitioners at networking events or talks helped me learn a lot, especially about topics that would not come up in a classroom. Workplace culture can differ a lot between nonprofit organizations and fields, so just talking with folks who have the career journey you want can help a lot.

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How do you balance your passion for the mission with your professional responsibilities?

The goals of nonprofits are different than those of private industry, but at the end of the day, you're still an institution. It's not enough to say we need to do everything we can to pass a bill or build pressure against a politician. You still have to collect data on your progress, foster a positive organizational culture, and build good relationships with folks in your network. Everything is project management, and you're one very small actor within a large ecosystem.

What advice would you give to someone just getting started in this field, especially an immigrant professional?

Speaking as the children of African immigrants, there is often a saying that you must become a doctor, lawyer, or engineer — or risk disappointing your parents. It's a joke, but also completely serious. There is often a lot of pressure to pursue careers that provide financial stability, job security, and social status, and that's not unfounded.

But we literally cannot all become doctors, lawyers, and engineers! While I was going through school, I saw myself become attracted to careers in journalism and policy communications, and it felt worth the risk. My advice? Don't close off your mind to career paths that offer less stability.

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Sandra Wilson, Senior Manager at Junior Achievement of New York, the local chapter of JA USA

Over 8 years of experience in the nonprofit sector.

I have long believed in education's power to transform society, and I am convinced today's generation has the resources to build a better world. Since graduating from college, I have sought roles in organizations that create meaningful impact across diverse communities.

One of the best aspects of my role is the flexibility to apply my skills with the autonomy needed to reach both organizational and personal goals. Each partnership with a company or school presents unique challenges, and success requires adaptability and the ability to align their needs with JA's objectives. I continue to be inspired by the many ways our programs touch different communities.

Working in the non-profit sector has polished both my technical and personal abilities. I regularly use PowerBI for reporting and Excel for project tracking, while strengthening my communication, public-speaking, and teamwork skills are the pillars for maintaining strong relationships with stakeholders and colleagues.

To avoid burnout, I set clear boundaries between work and personal life. I take my responsibilities seriously, but I still make time to do activities that keep me energized and balanced. For example, I take time to run, meet friends, and spend time with family.

Moving to the United States has been a significant chapter in my life. Beyond learning a new language and adapting to a new culture, it has allowed me to apply my sociology training to understand how U.S. non-profits operate and create impact. Language remains a challenge I continue to work on, alongside deepening my knowledge of the sector.

I recommend the nonprofit area to anyone who believes in humanity's potential to create positive change. It is a space where hard and soft skills alike are put to meaningful use, allowing you to see the difference your work makes in the communities you serve.

APPENDICES

Blanche Luisa Norman, Director of Institutional Giving/Grants

Over 20 years of experience in the nonprofit sector.

Why did you choose to work in the nonprofit world?

I could never imagine myself in a corporate job or doing anything that didn't make an important difference in people's lives. Prior to getting a master's degree to become a non-profit professional, I was an actress, and if I could no longer be an artist, I wanted to do something that would have a positive and profound impact on people.

What's the best part of your job?

The feeling of accomplishment and gratification that comes from getting a large grant. It's always done as a team, but knowing that your work played an integral part in making it happen feels great.

What's the most challenging part?

Getting foundations and corporations interested in your organization. There are so many organizations competing for funds, so you constantly have to challenge yourself and find new ways to try and engage professionals in the work of your organization. Sometimes just getting a meeting can take a long time.

What surprised you most when you started working in this sector?

The incredible work ethic that exists in most nonprofit professionals. When you are working for a cause that you believe in and that can transform people's lives, you work hard - very hard. And the money isn't great, which is why I think there is also burnout in this profession. You have to pace yourself. Some workplaces get this. Others will take advantage of your passion for the mission by overworking you.

What skills or qualities help you succeed in this work?

A combination of people skills and analytical and strategic thinking skills. And writing. I have been doing this work, with a focus on institutional (foundation and corporate) giving for over 20 years now and I am still learning how to write. Every organization requires a different approach and has its own language and it can take some time to learn it. I think that must be even more difficult if English isn't your native language.

APPENDICES

How do you take care of yourself and avoid burnout?

I take most if not all of my vacation time each year, allowing time to actually travel, but also just to sit at home and unwind. Also engaging in other things that you are passionate about and enjoy helps. For me, that's often time spent with my two dogs or friends. I try to let go of work when I'm not working. Even if I'm just reading a good book or streaming something it can be helpful in keeping me focused when I am at work. I also work out at least once a week, and that makes me feel more centered.

Have you ever faced language or cultural challenges?

Yes. Not many language challenges, but definitely cultural ones. What might be acceptable or common behavior in one culture may not be so in another, and you have to always remember that you are "a guest in someone else's house" when being in another country or just communicating with someone outside of your culture. And sometimes even within. I work for a large organization, and we are such an enormously diverse population with different backgrounds, religious upbringing and even ideas of what it means to "be Jewish" so you have to remember to respect a variety of perspectives that may be different from your own.

What helped you understand the workplace culture in U.S. nonprofits?

Those are the only nonprofits I have ever worked for. I am a third-generation American. I spent several months working in England during a semester abroad in college. It was a special school for children with emotional difficulties. By the time I started to learn how to adapt, it was time to come home.

How do you balance your passion for the mission with your professional responsibilities?

The wonderful thing about nonprofit work is that you don't have to balance them. They are the same thing. You follow through with your professional responsibilities with that mission to guide you. But as I said before, at times you have to be careful not to let your love of the mission work you too hard.

What advice would you give to someone just getting started in this field, especially an immigrant professional?

I am lucky to have had advantages. I was able to get a graduate school education that taught me a lot of the ins and outs of the nonprofit sector. However, there was no learning experience as valuable as actually doing the work. The first year at any job I have ever had has been 85% a listening and learning experience.

APPENDICES

This is true of every type of position I've had, from being a development assistant to what I do now. I think this is probably even a more challenging period for someone who is an immigrant. First, a lot of other cultures don't even have a nonprofit sector, so getting to understand how the organization functions is added to trying to understand how the entire sector functions.

On top of that, a person must get used to the norms of a work culture that might be very different from the one they are used to. When I was in graduate school, I trained in conflict resolution.

I remember we spent some time learning how people in different cultures behave at business meetings. In some cultures, it is considered rude not to spend time getting to know each other personally before diving into the matter at hand. In American culture, too much time on "chit-chat" can be seen as a poor use of time. While I don't necessarily agree with this, it is the way it is. There are lots of those kinds of differences.

My best advice to any immigrant would be to listen, learn and ask questions. There are no "stupid" questions, and anyone who hires you should have that mentality and be open to guiding you.

CONCLUSION: MAKE AN IMPACT

Thanks for reading, for sharing, and for being part of this journey. I truly believe the nonprofit sector grows stronger every time a new voice, a new story, and a new set of hands join the work.

My goal is to keep this guidebook free and easy to share, especially for nonprofits that support immigrant resettlement and job placement. If you read it and thought of someone who could benefit, please pass it along. Honestly, word of mouth is so much more powerful than any paid ad, and it's how I hope this guidebook will reach the people who need it most.

I also want to take a moment to say THANK YOU! To everyone who shared their stories, offered guidance, encouraged me, and taught me along the way. I'm beyond grateful, and I know the lessons you passed on will ripple out to many others who pick up this guidebook.

For me, "Working for a Cause" isn't just a passion project; it's a way to give back, to open doors, and to make it just a little easier for the next person starting out in the nonprofit world.

If you'd like to support this effort financially (in addition to simply sharing the guidebook), here's a list of organizations that mean a lot to me. Contributing to them is a powerful way to keep this kind of work alive and growing:

- **New Neighbors Partnership** – newneighborspartnership.org
- **New Women New Yorkers** – nywomenimmigrants.org
- **Working for Women** – workingforwomen.org
- **Ukrainian National Women's League of America** – unwla.org
- **The Moth** – themoth.org
- **Toastmasters International/Ralph C. Smedley Memorial Fund** – secure.toastmasters.org/forms/donate
- **American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC)** – jdc.org
- **Junior Achievement of New York** – newyork.ja.org
- **The People's Lobby** – thepeopleslobbyusa.org
- **Grameen America** – grameenamerica.org
- **Feeding America** – give.feedingamerica.org
- **Brighton Ballet Theater Co., Inc. /Scholarship Program for newcomers** – bbtballet.org

With gratitude,
Kateryna Vynohradova