

Voluntary Action-**Leeds** Working in the voluntary sector

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The first thing to note about the voluntary sector is its sheer size and scope. There are over 180,000 charities registered with the Charity Commission in England and Wales. These range from small groups with no paid staff to large multi-national organisations with multi-million pound budgets. Some organisations focus on a very small area of the country while others are multi-national¹. It can be very different working in a small organisation with a restricted budget to working in the headquarters of a large well known charity.

Likewise the range of jobs in the sector is also immense. Some idea of this can be seen by looking at a few of the jobs advertised in one edition of the Yorkshire Evening Post and an edition of the Yorkshire Post in July 2001.

Post	Salary	Location
Admin. & Information Assistant	£13,764	Leeds
Administration Worker	£13,299 (pro rata)	Leeds
Asian Women's Outreach Worker	£18,718	Wakefield
Campaign Manager	£17,000 - £20,000	York
Development Worker	£19,770	Leeds
Experienced Groundsperson	negotiable	Harrogate
Freelance Social Research Interviewers	'competitive'	Leeds
ICT Support Worker	£15,741 (pro rata)	Leeds
Manager	£25,473 - £27,713	Leeds
P/t Personal Assistant	£15,270 - £17,637	Leeds
Project Worker	£15,741	Leeds
Recreation Assistant	£10,500	Tadcaster
Runner	Salary not stated	Leeds
Senior Care Officer	£12,775	Leeds
Service Manager	negotiable	Leeds
Sports Apprentice	£7,000	Tadcaster
Support Worker	£10,000 (pro rata)	Leeds
Training Instructor (Care)	£16,504 - £19,972	Bradford
Translator/Interpreter	£18,718	Wakefield
Under Fives Playworker	£16,178	Hull
Volunteer Trainer	£16,178	Hull

Needless to say this is only a snapshot rather than being representative. Posts range from manual jobs through to highly professional jobs. Like many other sectors of the economy there may be a sudden glut of particular types of jobs in one month followed by a scarcity for the next couple of months.

¹ Likewise organisations may take a number of forms including registered charity, limited company, co-operative or a provident society, or even more than one at the same time.

Like any other sector, the voluntary sector has skills shortages, but these may differ according to region. There are much more likely to be skills shortages in London, for example, than there are elsewhere. Likewise, an IT shortage in Reading – where there is a large concentration of IT companies – is hardly surprising.

Areas where there are particular shortages often include management, finance, fundraising and IT. Some of these shortages can appear to be a little surprising. For example, whilst it is common to hear of IT skill shortages within the voluntary sector, there are comparatively few IT jobs advertised. However, one area where the shortages arise is in the number of small-medium organisations that lack staff with general IT skills, rather than specialist IT staff.

If you are considering a job in the voluntary sector it is worth asking why the voluntary sector seems to be attractive. There are three myths, in particular, that surround the idea of working in the voluntary sector.

Myth number 1: Job Satisfaction

It can be very rewarding to work for an organisation where you can make an obvious difference to somebody's life. In one sense that includes working for just about any charity as they must be run for the public benefit if they are to register as charities².

The other side of this is that while working to relieve poverty - for example - can be rewarding, it can also be hard work and emotionally demanding. If this is combined with a lack of resources and suspicion from the community you are trying to help, another picture can emerge.

This is not an attempt to try and put anybody off; working in the voluntary sector can be very rewarding. If somebody is just looking for those rewards though, they may find themselves disappointed.

Myth number 2: Working Conditions

The voluntary sector is often seen as having better working conditions than the private sector, perhaps to make up for pay which is seen as being lower. So, for example, it may be seen as being more understanding of the needs of child care, more aware of equal opportunities, more understanding of cultural differences, or more 'touchy-feely'.

In many cases there will be some truth to this, but it really depends upon the organisation and who works there. It is just as possible to encounter a 'control freak' within the voluntary sector as it is outside it. Likewise, racism is unlikely to be unknown, but when encountered is perhaps covered with more of a veneer of either politeness or ignorance. Also, it is perhaps less common to encounter male dominated organisations, but just as common to encounter male-led

² Public benefit includes education, the relief of poverty, religion and other purposes beneficial to the community.

organisations. These are perhaps extreme examples, but the point is that being in the voluntary sector does not automatically change everything, it is still down to the people within an organisation.

Another point to bear in mind is that as unemployment drops, competition for staff increases and more progressive organisations will look to improve the working environment as they seek to retain and recruit good staff.

It is very hard to generalise about the sector. As a sector it employs a higher proportion of graduates than other sectors³, but within small organisations there is also more learning on the job as well. The result is both well run organisations and organisations that are struggling.

Myth number 3: Values

Another reason people look to the voluntary sector is because they are looking for work in an organisation that is more in line with their own values. This is very creditable. Unfortunately it is even possible to encounter unforeseen problems with this.

As funding is such a big issue within the sector there are a number of temptations that organisations face. Temptations such as chasing funding, not tackling issues that could potentially upset funders, and avoiding work that doesn't attract funding. There are also potential obstacles with sponsorship, especially if sponsorship is offered by an organisation with very different values. When combined with other members of staff with different values, the potential for conflict increases. All of these are issues that may never develop into a problem. At the same time, funding is so important that these temptations can remain.

Answers to some Frequently Asked Questions

How do I move from a job in the private/public sector to one in the voluntary sector?

Look at what skills you can offer, particularly transferable skills. New staff within the voluntary sector are usually expected to be able to get on with their jobs straight away. The amount of time spent on induction is often quite short and limited to the basics. It is not unusual to find little in the way of re-training to equip somebody to take on a new role. This may change in the future and doesn't apply to all parts of the sector. Larger organisations that employ graduates may offer some training, but there is also a tendency for them to recruit from their pool of volunteers, so they are again recruiting people that can make an immediate impact.

One way of gaining experience is to volunteer. Many organisations will welcome volunteers for as little as a couple of hours a week. Depending on the type of work, it may also be possible to volunteer outside of normal working hours. Volunteering is a

³ See <http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/main/gateway/jobs.html>

good way of finding out about different jobs and different organisations without all of the commitment that a paid job would bring. For some parts of the sector experience of volunteering seems to be almost mandatory.

Another approach is to network. Many organisations hold open days or welcome people to their AGMs. There are regular Charity Fairs held each year in both Manchester and London which provide a good means of finding out more about an organisation. Starting this year Forum3 are organising a joint job fair / volunteering fair which will be run in conjunction with one of the larger recruitment agencies covering the sector.

Finally, it may be worth thinking of doing some relevant training. Both Bradford University and the School of Continuing Education at Leeds University offer courses relevant to the Voluntary Sector. In addition, there are a number of other training providers, such as Councils for Voluntary Service that will offer suitable courses⁴.

Where are jobs advertised?

Try looking in the Yorkshire Post / Yorkshire Evening Post on a Thursday. There are often 9+ jobs advertised in each paper each week.

The Society supplement in Guardian on a Wednesday is another good source.

Leeds City Council vacancies supplement carries a number of adverts at the back; many of these are from voluntary organisations. The supplement is available in many public libraries or online at www.leeds.gov.uk

Also, try looking at websites, for example, www.charityjob.co.uk and www.societyguardian.co.uk both carry adverts from voluntary groups and charities.

Many organisations will also have notice-boards displaying vacancies e.g. VA-L library. Some umbrella or membership organisations may also have newsletters carrying job advertisements, e.g. Voluntary Action Leads.

Finally, make contact with the sort of organisations that you would be interested in working with. Parts of the sector are quite closely knit and vacancies are often quite widely known.

Are there any other websites where can I find further information?

Volunteering opportunities throughout the UK are covered by www.do-it.org.uk, or details of general volunteering can be found at www.volunteering.org.uk .

More details of careers in the voluntary sector is covered at www.wfac.org.uk and www.vsnto.org.uk/careers.html .

⁴ These courses are usually aimed at voluntary organisations though, so you may find that fees are higher for an individual.

NCVO carries a lot of information on the voluntary sector, including salary scales, on their website (www.ncvo-vol.org.uk).

Volresource carries both job adverts and material on the voluntary sector. They also have a section on working within the voluntary sector at www.volresource.org.uk/workopps/worksect.htm.

For jobs in overseas development, try <http://www.oneworld.net/jobs/index.html>.

Many organisations will post details of jobs on their websites, so if there is an organisation you like the sound of, visit their website.

It might be worth having a look at the websites of charity recruitment agencies, such as:

- Charity People www.charitypeople.co.uk
- Charity Recruitment www.charec.co.uk
- Charity Job www.charityjob.co.uk

Finally, Forum3 can be found at www.forum3.co.uk

What about career progression?

Career progression is one of those things that the voluntary sector traditionally has not done very well; people have progressed in their careers by changing jobs. In one sense it is easy to see how this has come about. As there has been a focus on meeting whichever need the organisation is facing, the needs of staff have come second. However, as the sector has become more professionalised, this failing has now been recognised and things may be beginning to change. This is a lot easier though for some jobs than for others and with very specialised jobs career development may continue to be an issue.

Conclusion

Working within the voluntary sector can be both very challenging and rewarding work. It probably does tend to be more people focused than many other sectors. It is probably also true to say that working conditions are more flexible; but these are generalisations and will not necessarily apply in every case.

Working in this sector may have its downside though. There are often issues that need facing over resources and funding. As a result working conditions and job satisfaction may not be all that were hoped for. The expectation of being more people focused can also bring its problems – people are not always predictable.

The point to note is that it is important to have a balanced view. Anybody looking to make a career change just because they do not like their current organisation may find that they are little better off. However, for somebody looking for work more in line with their own values, it just might be the best thing they ever did.