

Careers + Leadership: Transitioning Into Philanthropy

*Barbara Chow of the Hewlett Foundation
Evaluating Candidates Based on Five Criteria*

Trilogy Search recently placed Barbara Chow as education program director with the [William and Flora Hewlett Foundation](#), one of the nation’s largest private foundations. She assumed this influential role after 25 years of public policy work, most recently as policy director for the House Budget Committee.

Trilogy’s Chuck Pappalardo, who handled the search on behalf of the Hewlett Foundation, said Chow’s understanding of policy structure and development as well as her passion for education reform made her an exceptional candidate for the Hewlett position, even though her background wasn’t a direct match. When working on behalf of his clients, Pappalardo typically extends his reach beyond a single sector, explaining, “Often the best candidates are found at the edges of a network, not within it.”

In discussing her transition from government to philanthropy in a conversation with [Bridgestar](#), Chow stated, “My work had always been about resource allocation, making decisions around the use of money to advance social purpose. That’s how I always thought of what I did in government. In many ways, philanthropy was a natural next-step culmination of that work.”

Understanding who can effectively make the transition to nonprofit work—and who cannot—is critical and Trilogy incorporates 5 key criteria into an assessment process when evaluating candidates:

Parallel Experiences - Of course, comparable or complementary core competencies are important. For example, if we’re considering candidates for a development position, a business executive who’s raised money for a start-up might be a good fit. Typically, we’ve found that private sector professionals are best suited to—at least initially—“on the ground” nonprofit organizations, those which execute or “prove” policy. Areas where these executives can gain entrée and excel are operations, finance, technology, and development, as well as serving as a board member or executive director/president.

Those coming from academia or government, like Barbara Chow, are far more likely to successfully transition into a policy role within a foundation or other philanthropic organizations responsible for determining how resources can best be allocated to advance social causes.

Rhythm & Temperament - The tempo and pace of the nonprofit sector can differ vastly from that of other industries as decisions and processes are typically consensus driven. Taking action on matters, even something seemingly minor, can be quite slow, requiring a significant amount of conversation and planning. For business executives seeking to transition to philanthropic work, the cultural shift can be a shock. It’s important to assess just how important the adrenaline and competitiveness that typically trigger private sector motivation and success is to a candidate.

Interestingly Chow, who came to philanthropy from a government background, found the pace at the Hewlett Foundation to be brisker than her previous place of employment. As she stated in her Bridgestar interview, “... her career shift has allowed her to have a bigger impact and put more of her ideas into action more quickly than she could in her government career, where proposals can take several years to make it through the federal review and budget process—if they survive at all.”

Compensation - Transitioning executives have to be compensated properly; not meaning the same as private sector, but properly. Candidates do understand that there’s a difference in

compensation between the two sectors. Additionally, it's critical for candidates to recognize that the business-centric equation—pay is commensurate with complexity of job—no longer computes. Rather, the new math demonstrates community impact achieved is commensurate with complexity of job.

The hiring organizations must also understand the compensation issue as it relates to private sector candidates and be prepared to have the conversation.

Mission and Passion - When making the initial leap from for profit or government to nonprofit, it's critical for the executive to be passionate about the organization's mission/cause. Once an executive has achieved success and experience within the philanthropic sector, he or she may then be more comfortable seeking other nonprofit/foundation opportunities for reasons such as more responsibility, better pay or preferred geographic location, along with commitment to the cause.

Additionally, both the organization and the executive's role within it has to lead to what the individual wants to do in his or her life in terms of meaningful and fulfilling work.

Shared Vision and Values - In business, there's "stickiness" to the end game, a definitive measure. This may mean making more money or selling more product, and while all company executives need to work together to achieve the corporate objectives, it often involves a straightforward strategy. In the philanthropic world, the issues at hand may be more amorphous, the problems more complex. It's absolutely essential that the candidate can foresee committing not only to the organization but to its vision and the individuals charged with implementing the vision. A key question he or she should be comfortable with is, "How can we achieve results together?" .

Given the unique requirements of the nonprofit sector (really, any sector), the character study portion of the search process is critical vis a vis the need to be certain which individuals can truly operate inside a particular cultural paradigm and which cannot. Read more about [Trilogy's Character Screen](#), a unique approach to interviewing candidates.

Read the full Bridgestar [interview](#).

We'd love to hear your comments, experiences, and questions about transitioning into philanthropic work. Please email us [here](#).

Kindest regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'CP', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

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