

Foundation Strategies for Attracting and Managing Talent

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Executive Summary

Program professionals are the “engines of implementation” in staffed foundations. While philanthropic organizations accomplish their missions indirectly, by working *through* the nonprofit sector, their senior program staff—typically called “program officers”—are expected to provide the vision, the substantive knowledge of the fields of interest, the access to nonprofit networks, and the interpersonal and administrative skills to translate foundation missions into programs that make the intended difference. Selecting and managing the people who have the multiple skills and balance of personal qualities required for this work are the special human resource challenges of foundations.

Based on a study of the human resources practices of 13 large, national, private, professionally staffed U.S. foundations, these lessons emerged:

- Foundation program professional jobs are attractive and the supply of candidates is more than adequate. The difficulties involved in staffing stem from: inadequate understanding of what the program professional jobs entail; an essential combination of personal qualities and professional skills for the work that are typically not found in a single individual; and an emphasis on substantive knowledge and experience in the fields of grantmaking interest to foundations, rather than on the skills and experience needed for the process-oriented work of institution-building and field-building, and the administrative demands of a regular schedule of grants.
- Foundation human resources practices are not highly developed for planning the transition of individual program professionals to other careers, or to matching changes in grantmaking priorities to changes in staffing. In part, this is attributed to a culture in which direct confrontation and conflict are minimized and, in part, to conditions in which, because there are many highly talented people, it is difficult to make distinctions among them.
- The development of internal leaders out of people who are externally focused—because they are hired for their network contacts and substantive knowledge of fields they will likely

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return to—requires extraordinary internal leadership and persistence.

- Human Resources (HR) leaders are often underutilized by foundation CEO's, although they are potential strategic partners in attracting and managing the talent that foundations need in order to achieve their missions. In particular, HR leaders are often more highly attuned to and honest about the administrative and behavioral aspects of program professionals' work, and they are eager to get involved in the strategic planning needs of foundations, in particular, matching the activities required for attracting and managing talent to the broader goals of their foundations over time.

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