

# PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS OF CONSULTANTS SERVING THE NONPROFIT SECTOR

FINDINGS OF A SURVEY OF 322 CONSULTANTS

**C**ONSULTANTS are a vital part of the nonprofit sector. Each year they help tens of thousands of nonprofits to more effectively pursue their missions. It is critical that these consultants have access to high quality, affordable professional development opportunities.

The past decade has seen a tremendous increase in the number of nonprofit organizations in the United States. Parallel to this growth, there has been a proliferation in the use of consultants by nonprofit organizations. Currently, there is no reliable estimate of the total number of consultants serving the sector. However, in a study conducted in 2000, CompassPoint Nonprofit Services and Harder + Company Community Research estimated that two-thirds of the 6,000+ nonprofits in the San Francisco Bay Area used consultants, and spent \$65 million per year on their services. If anything, these numbers have increased over the ensuing years.

Extrapolating from these figures, we estimate that more than a billion dollars is spent nationally in the sector each year on the services of thousands of consultants. Nonprofit organizations, often with the support of foundations, increasingly look to consultants to help them maximize their effectiveness in advancing their missions. They rely on consultants to provide expert advice and guidance, and they make critical strategic decisions based on this consultation.

This heavy reliance on consultants, and the large investment it represents, begs important questions:

- *How effective are these consultants?*
- *How well prepared are they to address the challenges of the nonprofits that rely upon them?*
- *What is needed to further their professional development?*

These questions were the focus of a research project conducted jointly by La Piana Associates, Inc. and Fieldstone Alliance, with funding from the David and

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Lucile Packard Foundation. As part of this project, we conducted a survey of consultants from around the U.S., asking them about their background, practice, affiliations, and professional development. The objective was to learn about the types of professional development opportunities available, how useful consultants considered them to be, and what opportunities consultants would like to have. Within this context, the survey also sought to learn about the role of online professional development opportunities.

## WHAT DID WE LEARN?

**T**HE RESPONSE was clear: there was a great expressed need for professional development. While the level of training and experience among consultants varied widely, everyone reported pursuing some sort of professional development, and almost no one was completely satisfied with the available options. In fact, only 7% of the 322 respondents described the range of professional development opportunities available for consultants serving the nonprofit sector as either good or excellent; most respondents described these opportunities as weak, limited, poor, of mediocre or inconsistent quality, or inappropriate for their needs.

Respondents told us they wanted opportunities that are focused, high quality, convenient, affordable, and primarily related to the substance of their work (such as strategic planning, capacity building, and board development) and/or to specific skills or competencies they could use in their work (such as organizational assessment, board retreat planning/facilitation, and coaching). They reported being interested in both online resources and small in-person gatherings of experienced peers who can share with, and learn from, each other.

In sum, it appears that both new approaches and refinement of the current offerings are sorely needed.

**WHO RESPONDED?**

**T**HE MAJORITY (66%) of the consultants who responded to the survey self-identified as sole practitioners, while 12% worked for a for-profit corporation, 10% for a nonprofit corporation, and 8% in a partnership. Of those who were not independent, just over half worked in an organization of only 2-5 people.

**EXPERIENCE:** The respondents were a fairly experienced group. One-third reported 6-10 years of experience consulting with nonprofits; another third had 11-20 years of experience. Only 12% had less than 3 years of experience. Almost 75% of respondents reported holding one or more advanced degrees relevant to their work. These were primarily masters' degrees (such as in business administration, social work, public policy, public administration, public health, nonprofit administration, and sociology). Respondents also mentioned certifications (such as in fundraising, nonprofit management/administration, and training).

**CLIENTS:** On average, respondents earned 78% of their revenue working with nonprofit clients, of which only about 14% were foundations. Respondents earned another 12% from public/government clients, and only 9% from business clients. Respondents worked with clients in a wide variety of sub-sectors.

**AREAS OF FOCUS:** Over half of the respondents focused on strategic planning, board development, and capacity building. Many also did work in organizational assessment, fundraising/fund development, and leadership development/coaching.

**WHAT OPPORTUNITIES ARE THERE?**

**W**HILE RESPONDENTS in general were not satisfied with the depth

**FIGURE 1  
IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS HAVE YOU ...**

	OFTEN	OCCASIONALLY
<i>Read/reviewed articles, publications, newsletters, and/or books relevant to your practice area(s)?</i>	77.8%	21.9%
<i>Sought out/monitored Web sites offering information relevant to your practice area(s)?</i>	67.0%	32.1%
<i>Conducted other networking with nonprofit professionals?</i>	39.7%	53.4%
<i>Attended in-person workshops and/or training sessions?</i>	28.5%	60.5%
<i>Attended meetings of a professional association?</i>	24.2%	50.0%
<i>Participated in a discussion forum or listserv with other nonprofit consultants?</i>	22.3%	42.6%
<i>Attended conferences?</i>	14.8%	70.1%
<i>Participated in online workshops and/or training sessions?</i>	5.7%	21.1%

and breadth of professional development opportunities available, numerous resources do exist. Just over 50% of respondents were affiliated with various networks and associations (such as the Association of Fundraising Professionals and the Alliance for Nonprofit Management). Satisfaction with these affiliations varied. None was considered extremely helpful, though many were believed to be at least somewhat helpful, and to provide opportunities for networking.

About a quarter of those responding also reported some sort of affiliation with one or more academic institutions. These were also considered to be only somewhat helpful in terms of professional

development. Least helpful were affiliations with networks or associations that were cross-sectoral or business-sector focused. We asked respondents about their participation in a variety of other professional development activities.

With regard to specific activities, almost all reported having read or reviewed articles, publications, books, and/or newsletters relevant to their practice area, as well as visiting/monitoring relevant Web sites. (See Figure 1. Figure 2 displays the top five publications read

**FIGURE 2  
THE TOP FIVE . . .  
PUBLICATIONS CONSULTANTS  
READ TO INFORM THEIR WORK**

- Chronicle of Philanthropy*
- Harvard Business Review*
- Nonprofit Times*
- Nonprofit Quarterly*
- Fast Company*

**WEB SITES CONSULTANTS  
VISITED REGULARLY**

- BoardSource*
- CharityChannel*
- Foundation Center*
- Association of Fundraising Professionals*
- CompassPoint Nonprofit Services*

and the top five Web sites visited by consultants.)

Networking was common, though not done as frequently as other activities.

Over three-quarters reported that they attended in-person workshops or training sessions and/or attended conferences at least occasionally. Most of the workshops and training sessions referenced were not directed specifically at consultants in the nonprofit sector. Indeed, only about one-quarter were described as such. Half were directed at nonprofit professionals in general, and another quarter at professionals in either sector (nonprofit or for-profit).

The conferences attended by respondents were even more broadly targeted: 64% were directed at nonprofit professionals in general, with only 10% designed specifically for nonprofit consultants, and the rest intended for professionals in both the for-profit and nonprofit sectors.

In sum, it seems that professional development opportunities tailored specifically for nonprofit consultants are in short supply.

#### WHAT DO CONSULTANTS WANT?

**T**O ANSWER this question, we began by asking how important professional development is to consultants. We asked respondents to rate several types of professional development opportunities. (See Figure 3.) The findings indicate that consultants are interested in professional development and want to keep developing their skills and expertise.

We then asked consultants to indicate the areas in which they would most like to see additional professional development opportunities made available. Those who responded were most interested in opportunities related to the substance of their work – such as information on the latest thinking in strategic planning. Within this category, five areas stood out as being of most interest: strategic planning, capacity building, board development, organizational assessment, and leadership development/coaching.

Only slightly less compelling were opportunities to develop specific skills or competencies. The most common interest areas were how to conduct/facilitate organizational assessment, board retreat planning/facilitation, coaching, and group facilitation.

With regard to opportunities related to the business of consulting, the most common interest areas included marketing and communication, business planning, setting

rates, client retention, and developing contracts.

Consultants also had strong opinions about the format they preferred for professional development opportunities; they were most interested in short (one day or less) workshops or training sessions, free online resources / materials, and small local meetings.

They also indicated that not all workshops are equally valuable. To be effective, workshops must be small, highly interactive, high quality, and tailored to the skill level and experience of the audience. Consultants felt strongly that their peers – and they themselves – bring much experience and wisdom to their work, and they would like a forum to draw upon that collective wisdom.

Given these preferences, it is not surprising that large conferences and multi-day workshops or institutes were rated as the least desirable format for professional development opportunities.

When asked what kinds of professional development have been least helpful in their careers, respondents most frequently mentioned conferences, sessions that were not interactive, and sessions that were not tailored to the audience.

Most of those who responded to the survey did not regularly participate in online meetings, seminars, or training sessions. Only 38% had ever tried them. Of those, 26% found them very useful, 43% found them useful or somewhat useful, and 17% found them not useful. However, 87% of those responding indicated that they would consider participating in an online meeting, seminar, or training session. It seems that – if such forums were available, and structured in such a way as to be sufficiently interactive, focused, and of high quality – this might be a useful way to approach professional development in the future.

#### FIGURE 3

HOW IMPORTANT ARE THE FOLLOWING TYPES OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES TO YOU? (1=not important, 5=extremely important)

<i>Ongoing learning and skill-building</i>	4.50
<i>Keeping track of what is “new” in the field</i>	4.39
<i>Learning / understanding different approaches to the various types / areas of nonprofit consulting</i>	4.15
<i>Networking with peers</i>	3.83
<i>Knowing who else provides consulting services in my area</i>	3.51
<i>Learning / understanding how best to manage the business of consulting</i>	3.32

## WHAT BARRIERS DO CONSULTANTS FACE?

IT IS CLEAR that consultants want more and better professional development opportunities. What is also important, however, is understanding the extent to which consultants could or would take advantage of new opportunities if these were offered.

To learn this, we asked consultants what they saw as the greatest barriers or challenges they faced in pursuing professional development. Those rated most highly were also rated very similarly: lack of time, lack of quality, lack of money, and lack of opportunities in their area(s) of interest. Only “inability to travel to workshops/training programs” was rated below the midpoint on the scale provided.

We also asked to what extent respondents would invest more time and money if more or better opportunities were available. The answers were:

- 62% would invest *slightly* more time
- 31% would invest *significantly* more time
- 8% would *not* invest more time
- 70% would invest *slightly* more money
- 17% would invest *significantly* more money
- 13% would *not* invest more money

Thus, it appears it would be easier to get more of people’s time than more of their money.

How much money is “slightly more?” It is hard to know. However, given that, on average, those responding to the survey spent slightly over \$1,600 on professional development in the previous 12 months, it is likely that most consultants would invest at least a few hundred more dollars each year if the appropriate opportunities were available. Further, if the quality of, and access to, professional development opportunities were improved, consultants could most likely shift some of the funds they currently allocate to these new opportunities.

## WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE NEXT STEPS?

AS THIS survey’s findings show, more work is needed to ensure that high quality, affordable professional development opportunities are widely available to consultants serving the nonprofit sector. Unfortunately, the need cannot be met by developing a few additional training sessions or a new periodical. Given their potential cost-effectiveness, ease-of-access, and interactivity, more rigorous online resources will help a great deal.

The ideal would be to combine such efforts with the design and creation of smaller and more

interactive experiences where consultants can push themselves to delve deeper into the theory behind their work, and learn from others who have a different base of experience.

Finally, simply creating new resources – or improving existing resources – will not, in itself, suffice. A surprising number of those who responded to this survey, especially those in less populated areas, said they were not really aware of what was available. Thus – to help ensure that all consultants in the nonprofit community are aware of what is available – opportunities must be aggressively marketed, preferably through established communication channels such as the most-visited Web sites and most-frequently read publications.

Given the increasing reliance of nonprofits on consultants, and the potential that consultants present for helping these organizations improve their effectiveness, it is imperative that the sector consider how to help consultants improve and maintain their professional knowledge, skills, and competencies. Offering high quality, appropriate, accessible, and affordable professional development opportunities will benefit not only the consultants who take advantage of these opportunities, but – most importantly – the nonprofit organizations that they serve. ♦

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