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Article

Not all wine and roses: Nonprofit consulting as nonprofit-sector-adjacent work

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Abstract

Nonprofit organizations engage consultants for executive recruitment, strategic planning, and change management. Recent trends—including the growing reliance on consultants, the expansion of the nonprofit consulting industry, and the migration of nonprofit professionals into consulting roles—raise important questions about the roles consultants play and how they impact the nonprofit sector. Nonprofit consulting remains underexplored, with limited research into consultants' practices and their impact on organizations. We investigate the individual, organizational, and sector-level dimensions of nonprofit consulting and share recommendations for nonprofit managers, organizations, consultants, and researchers.

Key words

Executive recruitment, turnover, consulting, sector dynamics, nonprofit organizations

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Introduction

Nonprofits increasingly face operational challenges that may prompt them to seek episodic, external support. Consulting firms are frequently turned to for myriad reasons including support of executive recruitment, strategic planning, and change management. Contrary to the for-profit context, where the use of consulting firms has been accompanied by a long-standing research stream that establishes leading practices of the organizational – consultant process (e.g., [1], [2]), nonprofit consulting has generated relatively little research. For example, while many nonprofits perceive that consultants could improve organizational processes, they may not understand when the cost is worth its investment, how to find a consulting firm that is a good fit for their organizational mission or purpose, or how to best engage and manage the relationship. Without a comprehensive picture of the nonprofit consulting field, it is impossible

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to estimate the influence of this for-profit-oriented business model on nonprofit organizations (for examples [3], [4], [5], [6]).

Several interrelated trends raise considerations about the practical implications of nonprofit consulting.

1) *Nonprofit consulting is widespread*. A quick scan of US nonprofit job boards indicates the common role of consultants supporting executive searches. Aside from executive recruitment, consultant services include organizational development, such as strategic planning, and extends to other high level, high impact leadership roles. Yet, we do not know much about how consultants influence organizational practices or outcomes, including who is hired for nonprofit leadership positions.
2) *Nonprofit consulting field has grown*. Nonprofit consulting firms are accumulating more consultants and new firms entering nonprofit consulting [3]. However, it is unclear who those firms and individuals are, as well as how their profiles influence their consulting services.
3) *Nonprofit workers are leaving employment in the nonprofit sector to be consultants*. Both executives and other workers leave the sector to work adjacent to it [7]. These departures are reshaping the nonprofit workforce, as well as altering what we know about motivations to engage in nonprofit-related work.

In light of these converging trends, we seek to better understand the rise of consulting including the nonprofits who engage with consultants, who these consultants are, and how they are potentially influencing the sector that they work adjacent to.

The rise of nonprofit-sector-adjacent work

The benefits that consultants bring to nonprofit organizations seem to be clear. Short- to medium-term, discrete projects, such as strategic planning, translate easily as a scope of work that a consultant can engage, and even in longer term arrangements, such as fractional or interim leadership, consultants bring external insights and capable skill sets that nonprofits value and have a readiness to implement. The nonprofit consulting field has been documented as both valuable and prevalent with nonprofits relying upon consultans for executive searches and other services ([5] [6], [8], [9]). Moreover, consultants have even gained traction as preferred advisors, as is the case for US billionaire philanthropist MacKenzie Scott [10], or as a prescription from funders, who make suggestions about consultants to work with as capacity building support.

Nonprofit consulting can be considered as *nonprofit-sector-adjacent work* since the consulting services target nonprofit organizations yet are provided by firms, who typically reside outside of the nonprofit sector. Specifically, in a 2023 pilot survey of 93 executive recruiters [11], we found that nonprofit consultants direct their services to nonprofit organizations, but nearly all consulting firms are for-profit entities (97.53%) Other insights from this study include:

1) The field of nonprofit consultants is loosely connected with no standards or common frameworks shared among consultants nor is there a primary membership association
2) Nonprofit consultants offer a range of organizational development capacity services, in addition to nonprofit executive recruitment and search services.
3) Search firms may prefer to work with larger, more professionalized nonprofits since the consultants are typically paid based on a percentage of the executive's salary.

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Given these preliminary findings, we are curious to better document the supply and demand of consultant services

Motivations for nonprofit consulting

In a meeting with a senior nonprofit consultant, we heard that "with nonprofit consulting you can still do good while also making money, lots of money actually." This sentiment echoed scholarly research that documented the shifting motivations for nonprofit work, especially among millennials and younger generations ([12], [13]). Whereas there is still a desire to engage in mission-related work, extrinsic motivations, including salary and work-life balance, are gaining importance as career drivers [13].

This trend of nonprofit executives "leaving to become consultants" may challenge leadership continuity for nonprofits [7]. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated difficulties in finding talented workers and also led workers to reconsider their priorities and own quality of life ([14], [15]). A shift from full-time employment in a nonprofit organization to consulting may appeal to those seeking employment flexibility or as a way to utilize their expertise in a particular organizational area or sub-field. Consulting is also relatively easy to enter into and may be a privileged prospect for senior executives who seek a path to retirement without working long hours as well as for workers who are able to accept contractual work relationships since they enjoy familial security of health and/or financial benefits. Nonprofit consultants may experience more respect and validation than those who work directly in an organization. Yet this is conjecture and anecdotal and we need a better understanding of the individual-level dynamics of who works for consulting firms and why, the organizational drivers of consultant engagement, and ultimately the impacts these may have on the nonprofit sector as a whole.

Making sense of multi-level dynamics

In the following, we explore the individual, organizational, and sector-level dynamics of nonprofit consulting, and how they influence one another. Why someone chooses a consulting career sheds light on how they make decisions as consultants. In turn, their decisions impact who nonprofit organizations hire, shaping nonprofit leadership. Thus, investigating the individual perspectives alongside organizational- and sector-level perspectives provides a fuller picture into how nonprofit work and its workforce are evolving. We make sense of these dynamics by drawing upon primary data collected from nonprofit job boards and interviews with consultants to offer recommendations for managers, organizations, consultants, and other researchers. When relevant we refer in our recommendations to the data source, even drawing upon direct quotations from interviews.

Recommendations for nonprofit managers

The use of nonprofit consultants to fill high-level organizational positions is common. Nonprofit managers seeking an executive-level position should be proactive to position themselves to be found by a nonprofit search firm. Nonprofit recruiters do not commonly use public job boards for publicizing positions they are recruiting for,[i] and thus, the public listings on public job boards may only be a portion of the open executive opportunities. Instead of using public job boards or placements to advertise open nonprofit executive positions or even publicly listing the searches they are conducting, recruiting firms are operating in a private manner, by conducting closed searches, not easily accessible to a nonprofit job seeker. Nonprofit managers

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could use tactics such as bolstering their public profiles on LinkedIn or other career social sites, as well as observing executive recruiter's proprietary job boards or social media channels.

Nonprofit managers seeking financial reward in their career opportunities should not rule out the salary potential of nonprofit executive leadership positions. Nonprofits have long had an associated stigma for low pay, and whereas there is a salary range present in the job postings we observed, about half of the salaries for open nonprofit executive positions exceeded $100,000 annual salary.

Recommendations for nonprofit organizations

Nonprofit organizations seeking the support of a nonprofit consultant should anticipate an approach that is both tailored, as well as standard. When asked about the process of executive recruitment, interviewees described the discrete assignments of executive search, elaborating that "search work is project based with a beginning, a middle and an end, and then you've got to have the next project" (IW1). However, while some elements are repetitive, interviewees agreed that "every search is different" (IW1), "it is not like a cookie cutter" (IW9). Specifically,

> *"while there are milestones along the way, and the basic things you do are pretty much the same, you adapt the search to the client, how they want to work, and, how many meetings they want to have, how they want information communicated all of that" (IW1).*

The approach a consultant takes is informed by the organizational context, preferences, and hiring goals of the organization. Another interviewee explained:

> *"You learn about the organization, you create the position profile, you develop a strategy for how you're going to find candidates, a research strategy. Then you go out and try to talk to potential candidates and you develop your elevator speech and kind of here's why you'd want to take this job." (IW9)*

This sentiment was echoed by others, one person indicated "I'm doing sort of a deep dive with every client. And I'm learning, they're teaching me. I don't come in to know what's going on, I look for them to teach me" (IW8). While some of the tools are the same, the context varies in which consultants apply their skills and services.

Nonprofit organizations should expect candid assessments and feedbacks from a consultant. Multiple interviewees commented that

> *"A lot of my energy is around those conversations, that sort of coaching and if you will, kind of therapy, to help bring people along, deal with sometimes intense conflict, […] because the outcome of that is with a client to agree in writing, in a position description, to articulate those choices, those challenges, and certainly those values, and goals. So, it's not just all negative, but to say we want to go here, we recognize we've got to solve this […] This is 99% of what I do, is to kind of work that through and it is, you can hear some, it's complex." (IW8)*

Although they are hired for a specific task – filling an executive position – consultants "have to be really real about the challenges, the deficits, where the organization has lapsed [and] to provide a good process and sometimes to speak real truth to the boards of what their organization is and what it isn't" (IW9).

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Recommendations for nonprofit consultants

Nonprofit consultants should scope the nonprofit sector as ripe with client prospects, as all types of nonprofits engage with consultants. There was no distinct trend of what type of organization utilized consultants for executive searches, including a range of organizational mission and size (based on annual revenues and expenses).[ii] Without any patterns or differences in who engages consultants versus who does not, consultants should conduct broad outreach to identify new clients.

Nonprofit consultants arrive to their position from four observed pathways. Those who seek to enter the nonprofit consulting field may reflect on how their own motivations to consider consulting aligns with these observed paths. For those already in consulting who are expanding their consulting practice to include more consultants, they should be open to how all paths equip consultants for the work.

A *meaningful work* path is described as a purposeful choice to engage more meaningful work by way of consulting. One person, who switched from the legal field stated that consulting "is a richer, if you will, more meaningful, more impactful way to spend my life and my skills than to be, you know, a law firm partner" (IW8). Similarly, another interviewee explained "I feel like I was contributing to society in a way that I wanted to contribute, that I am doing something positive" (IW2). This sentiment is continued during their consulting practice. Many consultants "love being able to be part of multiple organizations at one time rather than one" (IW7), because they "get to understand the work of many more nonprofits" (IW6). A related motive is the wish to learn "about new organizations, helping them figure out, 'here's how we could help you'" (IW9) in order to "find the right match" (IW9) and "providing value" (IW4). Referring to executive search, "finding the right match is not only fun" (IW4), but also comes with a lot of responsibility because the new person in the role may "change the trajectory of those organizations" (IW9). In engaging with nonprofits through leadership change, consultants "show up at these historic moments and do something and change history" (IW9).

A *graduating path* refers preparation from consulting from prior work experience, even if it was in different contexts or sectors. For instance, one individual referred to experience in banking industry

> *"In my career as a banker, I had worked with executive recruiters, and I'd hired a fair number of people and I'd had a lot of people working for me over time, so that, you know, I perceived myself to be a pretty good judge of character. And that's really an awful lot of what recruiting is all about" (IW5).*

Another interview partner elaborated that their experiences in government paved the road to opening a consulting firm. Given the focus on nonprofit consulting, other interview partners highlighted "years of experience in the nonprofit field" (IW6) alongside other work experiences as influential to their decision to engage as consultants. For instance, one person indicated that they "had done enough in terms of being an entrepreneur and starting businesses, but also had a pretty good familiarity from working in nonprofits of which was necessary" (IW2). Related, one interviewee shared that "when I went into consulting, I had quite a lot of experience, really, in every aspect of nonprofit management which has been super helpful as a consultant" (IW7).

A s*erendipitous path* is described as "a situation of circumstances" (IW5) that led to consulting. One individual who planned to move from abroad back to the US shared that "one of my contacts was involved in executive recruiting, and said, 'You know, I think a lot of what you've done would be very applicable to executive recruiting. Would you be interested in giving it a

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shot?', and I sort of said, 'Why not?'" (IW5). Another person described "Me coming into the consulting role was really a kind of happenstance, really" (IW6), elaborating:

> *"What really pushed me out the door was a bad leader […] I kind of gave myself a timeline to be like I can either work this out and stay here, or I'm gonna have to look for another opportunity. And right around that timeline I just started having a conversation with a friend of a friend who I'd hung out with socially who was a senior advisor for [Consulting Firm Name] (IW6).*

A *flexible path* was more personal in nature, alluding to the draw of flexible structure of consulting. Interviewees mentioned the lure of flexibility and autonomy that consulting provides, where "every week is different" (IW7). Individuals valued the "great work life balance in this work for my family's needs" (IW8) and the possibilities of "a very flexible schedule [which allows to go to] a doctor's appointment in the morning [and to] pick up one of my kids from camp from science class in the middle of the day […] versus having to go into an office every day" (IW9*).* The proposition of consulting as a relatively flexible profession with lots of autonomy allows consultants to also balance work and family responsibilities.

Nonprofit consultants need to be well equipped with both technical skills, as well as softer, relational skills. A search consultant elaborated about relating to the nonprofit's team, as well as the position candidates, describing: "Similarly to having a group of actors and the director and the producer, or the whoever's running the organization you're working with, as a stage manager, you're working with all of the people "(IW1).

Consultants who work across sectors, such as the for-profit and nonprofit, should be prepared for added dimensions when working with nonprofit clients.

- Requires complex relational skills: Nonprofit searches were described as "taking more time than for-profit searches [since] a for-profit is likely to pull the trigger much faster than some of the not-for-profits" since you have to deal with a "broader audience" in a nonprofit since there is a board and search committee (IW5). The volunteer-nature of the board provides another challenge since volunteers "want to love their organization and they do love their organization, but that also means they need to see the flaws and what their role has been in fomenting those flaws" (IW9).
- Cost-effective dimensions: Additionally, since funds tend to be more limited in nonprofits, some consultants offered different pricing options to their nonprofit clients, viewing their lower nonprofit rate as a way to "contribut[e] to society" (IW2). Other interviewees charged a set fee, but felt the responsibility to do high-quality work, since nonprofit budgets tend to be smaller. Yet some reflect on how their fee structure limits their gain from a nonprofit consulting engagement since they "tend to really not sort of generate as much income as some of the for-profit roles, and that does influence sort of how much not for profit business that you might do. I mean I'm, you know, a mercenary at the end of the day" (IW5).
- Job satisfaction: The reward of nonprofit client work goes beyond the financial compensation though. As one consultant described,

> *"It wasn't (that) working with nonprofits is harder, but it's also when you place the right person and that person has impact, it's very satisfying it is, and you feel like you're contributing to the field" (IW9).*

Nonprofit consultants should be intentional about equipping themselves for their consulting work, and firms with multiple nonprofit consultants should consider how they onboard and

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equip new consultants to engage with clients. Since consultants arrive at this role from different paths and rarely start out their career to be a consultant, they often engage consulting as "an apprenticeship [which means] you only learn how to do search by doing search with others" (IW 9). This "learning on the job" (IW4) consisted of "shadowing" (IW4), "sitting and watching" (IW1). One participant elaborated:

> *"So, I started out working with [senior consultants] on searches. […] it was every step of the search from the very hearing them do an initial conversation, we got the search, what are we looking for? That's how people learn this work. It's like the old guild system, right? You apprentice to, you know, master in some field, and that's how you learn search" (IW1).*

Consultants can also seek their own avenues for learning such as forming a "learning community" (IW2), being a member at support associations, consulting websites (IW2) or attending specific trainings such as at the "AESC [The Association of Executive Search and Leadership Consultants] certificate" (IW4).

As a project-based work environment, newer consultants should also be equipped with the self and project management skills necessary to navigating client engagements. These are skills that are not easily observed from "on-the-job" training, but requires persistence and self-discipline on behalf of the consultant to adopt skills that had not previously been required in their prior workplace settings.

Nonprofit consultants should anticipate even with the flexibility and autonomy of consulting work, it "is not all wine and roses" (IW8).

- Good advice may go unheeded: Within the dynamics of nonprofit-specific search, consultants are "never the decider" (IW9), but rather "a facilitator, […] a mediator" (IW1), that is "not necessarily executing the plan" (IW6). This can be challenging in situations where "clients see you just as the mean, as the vendor, and they don't want to hear what you have to say, this is what they want. You're going to fulfill, you know, their desires, and they're going to make the choice" (IW1). Another consultant elaborated:
  "The most dreary or frustrating part is when you have a client that has hired you, but doesn't listen to us consultants. So, when we have a client that is particularly difficult, or let's say it's a search committee member who wants to put their own needs above others, above the rest of the committee or above the institution, they've got their own agenda. That can be frustrating" (IW9).
- Communication may be challenging: Clients can go "radio silent" (IW5), failing to respond to consultant contact or trying to coordinate schedules and access necessary information can be akin to "pulling teeth" (IW6). One consultant described "you can be as on top of your project plan as you want to. But you're really just stuck with their timing and responsiveness" (IW6).
- Surprises should be expected and investigated: Engaging with clients may go as expected, but "problems that nobody will talk about until you get in there" (IW2) may also arise. A consultant's role is to do their "best to try to find out what's really going on. (IW 2). For example, a consultant should seek to investigate further if solvency issues emerge or if the executive's turnover is for voluntary reasons.
- Consulting can be a grind: Consulting may not be a "everybody's cup of tea" (IW9), as a steady effort to business development must be applied in order to ensure that they have work lined up when a project finishes. Some consultants may miss their previous work where a future payday was assured. One consultant described:

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> *"For many people being a consultant, it's just hard to build up a client base. And then there are times where you feel like you can't say no. So you're working 60 hours per week, and then the reason why you feel you can't say no comes through, and you're working 10 hours per week, and you're wondering how you're gonna pay the bills. So, for a lot of people having to pay your own insurance, having to worry about where the next job or dollar was coming from, especially in the first two or three years. I think, is a real problem"* (IW2).

- Stamina may be necessary: Consultants promise to stay with a client "until the end" (IW1), which implies accompanying the whole recruitment process, "no matter how long it takes until they decide to fire us if it's not working out, or they decide not to hire someone, or if we go through several rounds of finding candidates till they find the person that they want to hire" (IW1). Even when the right candidate is identified, the search may still not have a happy ending, as consultants described winding roads full of "so many nuances" that do not "always work out the way we hope," ending with a situation that was "a bummer" (IW6).

Recommendations for researchers

Future research should map the field, proposing a typology of consultants that provides some structured understanding of the nonprofit consulting landscape. Nonprofit consulting firms are for-profit entities, operating adjacent to the sector and also in the shadows. Consultants and consulting firms vary according to their sub-sectors or mission areas serviced, as well as the number of consultants per firm. Without broader documentation or cohesion from an infrastructure organization, we do not sufficiently know who are these consultants and their firms. Both our pilot study, and the sector-level results indicate that approaches and preferences do differ according to the profile of the consultant and their firm. We are joined by Reisman (2024) calling for a broader effort to document the field of nonprofit consulting that would help sort among these firms, and inform the nonprofit organizations and leaders who retain consultant services [16].

Researchers should help understand how the background of nonprofit consultants help inform, even influence, their approach to consulting. Nonprofit consultants come from a variety of different educational backgrounds ranging from liberal arts (English, Spanish, art history), public administration, international relations, or business (management, economics, accounting) to nonprofit management but have a common background connected to work or volunteer service in the nonprofit sector. One interviewee summarized what was observed across interview participants:

> *"No one goes to college saying 'I'd like to be a recruiter, let alone just a recruiter for nonprofit organizations. So, like most of us, I started out working in some aspect of the nonprofit world." (IW1)*

Research could explore how these paths to nonprofit consulting shape the approach and outcomes of the delivered services. For example, our finding about a closed labor market for nonprofit executive positions could be cause for concern since the sample of recruiters that we first surveyed and later interviewed was racially and ethnically homogonous and highly educated. Research from organizational behavior articulates common attributional errors in hiring such as similarity-attraction bias that could lead executive recruiters to favor candidates

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whose characteristics and backgrounds are similar to their own [17]. This is another dynamic future research should tackle to understand how the profiles and logics of consultants influence the services they provide.

Future research can help inform how nonprofits think about their own capacity, and when they assess that more support is needed. Unlike Stewart et al. (2021), we found no relationship between organizational size and likelihood to engage an external recruiter, which is especially interesting, given that our sample contains a higher percentage of "large" organizations than is found in the sector as a whole [5]. We expect that the use of executive recruiters may be predicated on the capacity of the board or the extent to which the organization has engaged in succession planning. It would be interesting to uncover what motivates nonprofits to seek outside support for executive recruitment or other organizational development needs.

Future research should seek to understand more about the distinctive dynamics of the nonprofit sector by inquiring with those who consult across sectors, as well as those who are strictly nonprofit consultants. Whereas nonprofit consulting has relatively low barriers to entry, business development in the resource-constrained sector, as well as the engagements themselves, may contribute to dynamics in nonprofit consulting that are uniquely challenging. Consultants who have portfolios across sectors may develop preferences, even biases that influence how they engage with nonprofits since they are ostensibly more challenging to work with combined with a lower financial profit compared to other organizational types.

Nonprofit research should seek to understand how nonprofit consulting help people find work that fulfills individual's intrinsic motivations, allowing them to find meaning in their work [13], while at the same time allowing them to work outside the sector. Consultants we interviewed had all worked in the nonprofit sector, but each ultimately opted to leave. We question how nonprofit sector-adjacent careers might ultimately attract individuals away from nonprofit roles. Consulting offers the opportunity for greater work-life balance, flexibility, and prestige and many consultants belong to the gig-economy [18], which generally is on the rise. Our interviews confirm our initial hunch that a shift into consulting may be appealing for those seeking more flexibility and alternatives to traditional workplace settings. In the current policy environment in the United States that is further pressuring and constraining nonprofits, the draw of consulting might be even more appealing since these pressures are not felt as acutely when your work is indirectly attached to the sector. The phenomenon of nonprofit consulting is not limited to the United States. A recent article brings attention to similar tendencies in the German context [19]. Thus, we are curious to understand more about the appeal of consulting from those working on the front lines of nonprofits, as well as those who have already left for nonprofit sector adjacent work.

Conclusion

Nonprofit consulting is a growing field with an increased number of individuals leaving the nonprofit sector to become consultants. This study examined individual, organizational, and sector-level dynamics of nonprofit consulting, with a focus to executive recruitment. Our recommendations consider broadly the implications of this workforce dynamic for those who work in the sector, nonprofit organizations, those who consultant, as well as nonprofit researchers. Consulting often appeals to former nonprofit workers seeking flexibility, professional autonomy, and impact without the constraints of direct service roles—potentially drawing talent away from frontline nonprofit work. Taken together, our recommendations point to the need to pay more attention to this line of work developing adjacent to the nonprofit sector.

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Appendix: data collection

We used several data sources to inform our analysis and recommendations: job board postings and interview data from executive recruiters.

Sector- and organizational level: job board data

Primary data was compiled during October-November 2024 from all job postings from each job board managed by state-level members of the National Council of Nonprofits. From each job posting, we collected the position title, organization name, organizational website, the posting link, point of contact, educational preferences, and salary information for the position. We aimed to identify if and when the search was being supported through a consulting firm, and if applicable, information of that firm was recorded. A PDF copy of each job ad was saved for reference. The initial compilation included 1388 job postings. Next, we isolated the executive positions (e.g., executive director or chief executive officer) from all postings (n = 108) and merged with the 2023 IRS 990 information of the hiring nonprofit organization (via EIN). We also gathered data on the search firm from their websites, including the number of employees or partners and their specializations. Our analysis focused on 1) estimating the % of organizations that use consulting firms for their executive searches 2) comparing trends to the original study by Stewart and colleagues [9], and 3) to provide a profile of the kind of nonprofit organizations that are utilizing recruiting firms.

Organizations seeking a new executive ranged in size from $62,664 to $568,252,445 in 2023 total revenue, with an average of $12,655,610.15. A t-test was used to determine if there were significant differences between firms that utilized an executive recruiter to those that did not across revenues, expenditures, and assets. No significant differences were found. The organizations also ranged across subsectors, with 21 different National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE) major group categories represented. There was no discernable pattern for using executive recruiters across subsectors, with seven different subsectors represented by the 10 organizations.

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A summary of these findings is included in Table 1(A).

Table 1(A): Summary Statistics

Total Executive Search Job Listings	108		
Job Listings Posted by Executive Search Firms	10		
Search Firm Expertise			
All Sectors	Nonprofit and/or Social Enterprise	Nonprofits and Governmental	Nonprofits and For-Profit
3	4	1	2
Search Firm Size (By Number of Team Members)			
Min	Max	Mean[1]	
4	230	12.9	
Executive Compensation from Position Ad (n = 92)			
Mean	$107,120.79		
	Min	Max	
Range, Lower End	$24,000	$475,000	
Range, Upper End	$27,000	$550,000	
Mean	$98,823.54	$113,015.25	
Organizational 990 Data (n = 103)[2]			
Revenues			
Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
$62,664.00	$568,252,445.00	$12,300,211.99	58,564,640.160
Expenditures			
Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
$58,989.00	$613,214,094.00	$12,562,751.89	62,956,091.671
Assets			
Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
$46,033.00	$411,850,433.00	$16,329,604.90	52,057,200.829

Note: [1] Does not include largest firm, [2] Five organizations were not included in the IRS dataset and did not have their financial data publicly accessible online.

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From our review of job board postings, only 10 of the 108 public jobs ads (10.8%) were posted by a search firm or it was clear from the contact information that a search firm was conducting the search. From our follow up analysis, only five of the 15 firms had public open searches for nonprofit executive positions. Of the 25 job ads that were accessible, we found evidence that even these public searches were not uniformly public. For example, none were listed on the National Council job board, and only one was listed on their state association's job board. Moreover, eight were listed on the nonprofit's website, but only one was listed on the LinkedIn profile of the nonprofit.

After the initial list of job ads was finalized, a follow-up comparison analysis was conducted due to the seemingly few executive positions being advertised on national job boards when compared to Stewart's 2021 findings. We prepared a list of the five largest recruiting firms in the United States as well as 10 top firms that are known to specialize in nonprofit executive recruitment as identified by Donor Search and Forbes. We then examined their websites to identify open executive director searches. We noted that only five of the 15 firms had public open searches for nonprofit executive positions, and when the firms openly listed nonprofit executive searches, we cross-checked these searches for their public listing on the National Council of Nonprofits' job board, the affiliated state association job board, the LinkedIn of the search firm, the organization's personal LinkedIn, and Indeed. The intention of this analysis was to further investigate the public (or private) nature of nonprofit executive searches. The results are included below as they contribute to our discussion of nonprofit sector adjacent work and add weight to our supposition that additional research on executive recruitment is needed.

Individual Level: Interview Data

We also conducted exploratory interviews with executive recruiters to learn about their professional backgrounds as well as their motivations for entry into consulting. Consultants who participated in our pilot survey in spring 2023 were asked to provide their contact information if they were willing to be contacted for future research. Of 93 executive recruiters responding to the pilot survey, 20 indicated their interest. We invited all 20 individuals to participate in an interview study in spring of 2024, offering a $25 gift card incentive. After two reminders, 12 individuals were interested but due to scheduling and availability for a Zoom interview, we conducted 10 semi-structured interviews. Interview questions focused on their career paths before entering nonprofit consulting, their current work (including type of work, outline of their day, satisfying and challenging aspects of their work), as well as the support mechanisms they have for their work. Interviews ranged from 22 to 68 minutes with an average of 40 minutes. Refer to Table 2(A) for a profile summary of interview participants. All interviews were conducted virtually (over Zoom), all but one were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were deidentified, uploaded into Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software, and subsequently analyzed using a modified grounded theory approach [24]. Initially two coders engaged in a first round of in-depth coding allowing codes to emerge inductively from participants utterances, adhering closely in this phase to the participant's language. In a second round of coding, we combined several first order codes into second order codes while also assigning labels to those codes that were informed by our knowledge as engaged researchers in this area.

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Table 2(A): Profile of Interview Participants (n=10)

Demographics		Career Characteristics	
Gender		Tenure as consultant	
Male	4/40%	<2 years	2/20%
Female	6/60%	2<5 years	1/10%
		>10 years	6/60%
Age – Over age 54	7/70%		
		Affiliation with firm	
Race – White	10/100%	Owner	2/20%
		Employee	5/50%
Education – Graduate/post-graduate	8/80%	Contractor	2/20%
		Work experience	
		Nonprofit sector work	10/100%
		Private sector work	6/60%
		Public sector work	2/20%

Note: only 9 individuals could be matched to survey data, thus we do not have full information for all interviewees.

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