
Making the Move from Profit to Purpose



By Antoine Tirard (INSEAD MBA '97D), founder, NexTalent and Claire Harbour (INSEAD MBA '92J), founder, Culture Pearl

Those searching for a role that challenges the status quo, colleagues of diverse backgrounds and a collaborative environment have all found fulfilment in the non-profit sector.

These days, more executives are making the transition into not-for-profit from the profit-driven corporate world than twenty or even ten years ago. Some aspects of the change are obvious, and others more subtle and unexpected.

We recently asked several leaders in the sector about their motivations to join the non-profit world and what they've learned since.

Searching for meaning

It would be tempting to believe that all or most executives working in non-profit today are and always have been driven by the passion to save the world. However, this is not always so, and many of our interviewees repeated phrases such as “it was never on my radar screen” or “I did nothing in

particular to search in the non-profit sector - it just fell into my lap”.

Nevertheless, in hindsight the signs were there all the time. Almost all speak of some sort of need for a test or a sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo before moving into nonprofit. Sometimes even one’s subject of study, focus of project work or charity giving can indicate readiness for change. Alternatively, the shift may be motivated by the chance to “step up” in terms of stature, size of organization, as it was for Anabel Hault.

Anabel says she had little experience in not-for-profit work, apart from a short project in Sierra Leone during her degree work in Human Sciences, as well as volunteer work in the U.K. with underprivileged children. She is perhaps too modest, as many of us have done far less than that.

When Anabel says that purpose work “was not on her radar,” perhaps she means she did not see it as a legitimate way to make a living. She had spent ten years building a massive capacity as a leader and motivator of teams at world-class companies such as Virgin and Carphone Warehouse, and so had developed a taste for being challenged and stretched in this context. Eventually, she went looking for another sort of test, leaving her job with no new role in place to search for an international role in an organisation that was challenging the status quo.

After a brief foray into a startup company, into which she was invited via her INSEAD MBA network, she was told of an opportunity to become the COO of Save the Children. Investigating further, she found all kinds of positive points, including a sense of pride at the work, and the fact that this was a step up in terms of responsibility, as she would be a member of the board.



Anabel Hoult

- Currently: Chief Operating Officer, Save the Children
- Previously held roles with: Bain & Co., Virgin Group, Carphone Warehouse, Best Buy Europe
- Advocates strongly for: “Solving problems at home first, and working in innovative partnerships to explore possibilities not yet thought of.”

Anabel talks with great enthusiasm about the quality of people at Save the Children and the challenge of working with them, as well as the variety of backgrounds from which they came. She speaks with reverence about how many of them are at the absolute top of fields ranging from technical or fundraising areas to marketing and communication. She has developed an ability to engage with different groups in a variety of ways, according to context and audience.

A recognition of her fundamental strengths is what keeps Anabel on track. She derives great pleasure from running a tight ship, so does not see herself moving into politics or government, preferring the simpler dynamic she works with now. She summarizes, “I would encourage more people to do it – you learn a lot.”

EQ growth

One crucial aspect all of our interviewees spoke of was how to bring the staff and others they work with “on a journey”. Few, if any, traditional relationships of hierarchy and power exist in non-profit structures, particularly when you are dealing with volunteers or sometimes unwilling partners or collaborators. When the old model does not apply, the leaders have to learn new and at times uncomfortable behaviours. This was a particular challenge for Dondi Joseph, whose background in traditional business in the Philippines meant that he was used to calling the shots with no questions asked.



Gordon Alan "Dondi" Joseph

- Currently: CEO, Philpacific Insurance & President, Cebu
- Previously held roles with: American Chamber of Commerce, Cebu, Corinthia Gourmet Inc
- Advocates strongly for: “Integrated planning, as opposed to band-aid solutions.”

Five years ago, Dondi decided “it was time to tackle the causes of poverty, as opposed to band-aid solutions”. He abhors corruption and poor governance, which contribute directly to the poverty of the Philippines. The decision to weigh in was not at all difficult, although he knew that he would be putting himself at odds with politicians and “pseudo-leaders”.

It took about a year to settle into his new “calling” but almost five years to learn to “engage for change” rather than to “just battle away”.

Dondi says his work in the non-profit sector has strengthened his patience and engagement, underlining the fact that he “listens more”. He has become more adept at persuasion alongside the authoritarian CEO approach that is particularly prominent in the Philippines, and feels that the work he does with the different organisations is stretching his communication talents.

Dondi lives in a country with a short-term approach to political thinking, and at the same time a resistant attitude towards change. He says, “As a businessman, these things just bug the hell out of me.” He feels that his EQ has grown immeasurably, as he has learned to motivate volunteers, the business community, stakeholders and government towards change, however painful that movement might be.

There is no question in Dondi’s mind whether he will continue his non-profit work. Indeed, when we spoke for this article, he had just spent a few weeks volunteering at a foundation run by friends, helping street children to find a new life. He may be “only” at 30 percent of his time just now, but as his children mature and his need for financial security lessens, Dondi plans to devote more time to “purpose” than “profit”. This is a man on a mission.

Cross-sector adventures

Many of the leaders we talked to were bullish on the prospects of moving across, among and around the “triselector” area – the cross section of profit, non-profit and government entities. Anabel Hoult told some extraordinary stories: reducing infant death levels in Africa by using mouthwash from a big pharmaceutical company on the umbilical cords of newborn babies.

Government campaigns about the importance of hand-washing, in partnership with Save the Children and a soap manufacturer. Each party could not have delivered such results independently. The collaboration is crucial, and still quite unusual, and Anabel is fiercely proud of being part of such powerful initiatives.



Chris Butler-Stroud

- Currently: Chief Executive, Whale and Dolphin Conservation
- Previously held roles with: Royal Air Force and Grey Advertising
- Advocates strongly for: “More ventures across sectors - leveraging skills to create opportunities for all.”

Chris Butler-Stroud, the chief executive of Whale and Dolphin Conservation also praises the power of the “triselector” area. Formerly of the Royal Air Force and Grey Advertising, he advocates for more ventures across sectors, leveraging skills to create opportunities for all. He believes those who can collaborate across the private, public and social sectors will increasingly be valued.

From the collection of portraits, opinion and anecdotes above, we can see that this is an area full of exciting change and personal growth potential. But what of the financial security of working in the non-profit sector? We asked that question too and will be dedicating our next post to this issue.

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