

Things You Should Know About Developing Yourself as a Young Nonprofit Professional

By: Alina Prusak

I believe that there is no doubt that people like you and I are drawn to this important not-for-profit work as result of a desire to achieve, a drive for continuous improvement, or some other pesky emotion.

Often people ask me, so how did you end up with this job? I needed a paycheck. No, really, it's that simple. I finished college and needed a job, so about a month after graduation I had my first gig in nonprofits as a foster care case manager. I hated it, so I moved on to another nonprofit job. Six months later, I found myself asking, *why do I keep taking these low-paying, crazy-scheduling, hair-raising jobs?*

The answer is I needed more than a paycheck. And, that I love these crazy jobs. In 10 years I've moved from frontline, to behind the curtain to ahead of the curve. At year three, I had experiences that my corporate counterparts waited 10 years or more to get. And here are my take-aways:

Invest in yourself. Be your own champion. There will be times when the money "ain't in the budget," and you will be deciding between a [insert pricey object of your choice] and a plane ticket to the conference you secured a scholarship for. Remember, that the pricey object is not likely to get you any closer to your goals unless you can sell it for a pretty penny on eBay.

Share and network. Share what you've learned and build a network that stretches beyond the boundaries of your mission work and local colleagues. Today's young professionals have access to online networks and support that can give you advice, ideas, and connections in real time, gratis. Get plugged in to industry blogs and other young professionals who are doing their thing like Rosetta @ www.rosettathurman.com.

Be wet cement. Allow others to make their mark on you. Approach everything as a learning opportunity and listen, really listen. Ask others for their feedback your work, soak it in and invent your own philosophy. Worry less about decisions a more about the richness of the conversation.

Be wild. Be wildly consistent in innovating. Conjuring the energy for this on a regular basis can be exhausting, so commit you to a time management strategy. Make sure you include time for creative thoughts and inspiration. No matter how wild the idea, have the courage to present it.

Add value. Always ask yourself, how do I add value to the work I do? Knowing what you've contributed and its value helps you track your achievements and tell your story. When you can't find the answer, then move on, cut bait, and find a place that you can add value. Both you and your employer will be happier.

In 500 words or less, that's what I have to offer. I hope that some young professionals find this helpful, and I'm wondering where are your 500 words or less? Share your thoughts with me at apabinprusak@cnpe.org.

Alina Pabin-Prusak joined the team at the Center for Nonprofit Excellence in October of 2006. Prior to her work there, Alina worked for a Michigan-based health care quality improvement organization where she managed projects focused on improving patient outcomes and experience in long-term care and hospital settings. She has nine years of experience in nonprofit management that includes leadership positions such as the executive director of the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, Michigan Chapter, and the director of the Detroit Asthma Coalition. In 2007, she received the "Way to Go Woman" award from Today's Woman of Louisville.