

Gen Z Is Open to Nonprofit Careers — but on Their Own Terms

Ben Gose
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Sophia Lombardo has always felt like she was destined to work in the nonprofit world. Her mother gave birth to Sophia's older brother at 16 and later became the first member of her family to graduate from college, which gave Sophia firsthand experience with economic mobility and led to her interest in helping others.

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But Lombardo was still on the hook for room and board, and she borrowed to cover the cost. Shortly before graduating with a business and nonprofit-management degree, she learned about a [federal student-loan forgiveness program](#) that would eventually cancel her college debt if she worked long enough in nonprofits or public service.

At age 27, Lombardo is perched between Generation Z and the millennial generation. Now a volunteer-services coordinator at Columbus State Community College, in Ohio, she says she's committed to a social-justice career, either in her current job or at a traditional charity. "For me, tying in my passion to my career makes sense — it gets me up in the morning," she says.

Lombardo encourages the students she works with to consider nonprofit careers — and also tells them about the federal Public Service Loan Forgiveness program, which can make working at a nonprofit more financially attractive. Yet her pitch often fails. Many of the students she works with are eyeing positions at the \$20 billion manufacturing site that Intel will open near Columbus next year. What they want is a job that's contained to a defined schedule — not the all-consuming, often low-paying positions that remain common in the nonprofit sector. The same students might take time out of their weekends to volunteer or attend a political rally, but a career in nonprofits just seems too draining for them, Lombardo says.

"I have so many students that want to just have a job — go in at 8 and leave at 4 or 5 — and not have to think about work at home," Lombardo says. "With the nonprofit world, it's harder to do that — it has a lot of heart to it. My students have the heart, and they want to help, but they want to do it on their own time and not as a career."

The charity world has long attracted people who are passionate about causes or combating societal challenges but who aren't great at achieving work-life balance — and many remain underpaid and overworked.

Generation Z wants none of that. People born from about 1997 to 2012 have seen their parents whipsawed twice — first by the 2007-8 financial crisis and then by the sharp financial downturn during the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic. Some in Gen Z have spent their school years anxious about the nation's rash of school shootings, fearing that their own school might be next. And many were socially isolated during the early part of the pandemic, missing out on fun with friends.

“Young people prioritize their own health and happiness, and the health and happiness of their friends and family, over getting involved in politics, advocacy, or other efforts,” says a [2022 report on Gen Z](#) by John Della Volpe, director of polling at Harvard Kennedy School's Institute of Politics. “... They are choosing to make sure they are OK before considering anything else.”

Even so, many studies show that Gen Z tends to be idealistic and socially progressive. Kevin Peterson, an adjunct professor at Grand Valley State University who teaches a course on nonprofits, requires his students to identify a community need and then identify which sector — for-profit, government, or nonprofit — is best situated to address that need. Eighty percent of his students choose the nonprofit sector.

Peterson says that during the pandemic, many of his students viewed the government with distrust and saw for-profit companies falter.

“Students who are picking the nonprofit sector are seeing that nonprofits can be nimble and adjust,” he says.

Nonprofits will need to tap into that good feeling toward the sector to attract more young people. Simply put, charities need the workers, given the ongoing work-force shortage in the sector. Three-quarters of the responding charities in a [recent National Council of Nonprofits study](#) reported job vacancies.



Piper Carter - Young employees' demands for change at organizations are draining the energy of a new crop of more diverse nonprofit leaders, says Bianca Anderson, co-CEO of ProInspire.

“We have to be as competitive as the for-profits or the government, because we're going after the same people,” says Bianca Anderson, co-CEO of ProInspire, a nonprofit that helps fellow charities strengthen leadership focused on racial equity.

Not Easy to Integrate

It's challenging to broadly characterize generations — the Pew Research Center stepped back from doing so in 2023 after nearly two decades of generational research — but nonprofit managers say the latest crop of young employees may be the trickiest generation yet to integrate into the charitable world.

Gen Z workers favor an informal work style, want a tightly defined work schedule that reflects their awareness of work-life balance, are more likely than entry-level workers of the past to push for greater pay and benefits, and aren't afraid to confront their bosses about program changes they think could better serve people in need. And while every new generation pushes for change, there's more nuance this time around — the demands of young people are draining the energy of a new crop of more diverse nonprofit leaders, potentially derailing the very push for greater equity and inclusion that many young people support.

Linda Nguyen, founder of Movement Talent, a nonprofit dedicated to transforming the way charities hire and recruit, says so much marketing today centers on informal youth culture that many young people, including her own Gen Z children, smell hypocrisy when employers — both for-profit and nonprofit — demand a more formal approach on the job.

“Their perspective is, ‘If you’re going to use the way I write to gain more followers and put out cool messages on social media, then why do I have to transition to a more formal way of writing when you want it?’”

Amanda Litman, co-founder of [Run for Something](#), a political-action committee that encourages young progressives to run for office, is currently working on a book about Gen Z and millennial leadership. Litman says young people are making more noise in the nonprofit workplace than their predecessors because social media has given them a wider view of alternate career paths and ways of working.

“Twenty or 30 years ago, you were limited in exposure to what you could learn about from movies or from friends,” Litman says. “Now you can go on TikTok and see a warehouse employee, followed by a fashion designer, followed by a fisherman. You have more exposure to more ways of living. It makes you think you can make more out of your life.”

When members of Gen Z choose to join the nonprofit world, they're seeking real careers. A generation ago, many new college graduates merely flirted with the sector, maybe spending a few years at Teach for America before heading back to business school, says ProInspire's Anderson.

“Folks today are saying, ‘I want this to be my career — I want a 401(k), I want real pay,’” she says.

The desire for better pay and benefits is driving many young nonprofit workers to join unions. The Nonprofit Professional Employees Union now has 900 dues-paying members at more than 50 nonprofit organizations, up from just 66 dues-paying members in 2016.

Venus Eltaki, a 26-year-old UCLA graduate, has been the volunteer and community-engagement coordinator at the Alameda County Community Food Bank for the past two years. She is one of about 90 workers at the food bank who joined a new union last fall to push for higher wages and benefits and a greater collective voice in how the nonprofit operates.

“A lot of us are aware that if we took a job in the corporate world, we'd be paid more for the same kind of work,” Eltaki says. “It's been like that for a while, but it doesn't have to be that way. We can take care of our own while working for the common good.”

Lots of Ways to Make Change

Even the most driven and socially conscious young people aren't necessarily going to nonprofits. With corporate social-responsibility programs in full bloom and governments exploring innovative approaches, young people see multiple pathways to making a difference in the world.

Justin Tinker grew up in Cleveland and stumbled into a passion for computer science after his middle school gave him a cheap computer and he found *C++ for Dummies* at his local library. While earning bachelor's and master's degrees in computer science from Stanford University, he narrowed his focus to exploring how computing technology can enhance public transportation.



Ricardo López - Nonprofit board member Justin Tinker can see himself working in the charity world someday, but right now he's applying for federal policy positions.

Stuck at home as a Stanford sophomore during the early days of Covid, Tinker led the first project at [Develop for Good](#), a charitable start-up that has since connected more than 2,000 computer-science students with 155 nonprofits that need assistance on tech projects. Tinker later served as the volunteer chief technical officer at Develop for Good and has completed internships focusing on technology and transportation at Uber, the U.S. Senate, and a company based in Senegal.

Now seeking a full-time job, Tinker has chosen to interview for federal policy positions in Washington. But he also recently agreed to join Develop for Good's board, and he says he's open to the idea of joining a nonprofit in the future, perhaps to do computational research on concepts like "universal basic mobility" — the notion that free access to transportation like buses, subways, and e-bikes can help improve a person's economic standing.

"Research is something that interests me," Tinker says. "I could see myself being involved in the same kinds of work on the nonprofit side. The important thing to me is the work itself."

Generational Tensions

Not all so-called Zoomers bring a résumé like Tinker's to their first job. Some nonprofit managers say they worry that young job applicants aren't prepared for the professional workplace.

Gen Z is often described as a "digital native" generation — but to Peterson, the Grand Valley State professor, that also means that many of them have spent so many years texting that they never bothered to master punctuation. Peterson, who is also the advancement manager at Family Promise of Grand Rapids, says the concept of a deadline is increasingly being called into question by some of his students, too. The pushback from students may be fed by the many high schools that have moved to more-flexible deadlines, based on research that such flexibility reduces stress and improves academic performance.

Peterson says that a preference for informal writing and a disdain for deadlines may not set students up for successful careers in fundraising. Of the 80 foundations that Family Promise seeks support from every year, only two have rolling deadlines.

"My suggestions haven't been adopted," Peterson says. "Students are going to continue to operate how they prefer to operate. Sometimes you have to have a lesson that's hard learned. That's probably true of every generation."

Another hot topic are the loud calls by Gen Z and millennial workers for abrupt changes in the operating strategies at many charities. A 2022 [story in the Intercept](#) argued that such internal disputes were making many progressive charities unmanageable. In a [recent column in the Chronicle](#), Eboo Patel, the president of Interfaith America, says older nonprofit

workers are now afraid to mentor younger workers, at a time when “relatively new employees feel it’s their right to question virtually every aspect of what their employers do and how they do it.”

New workers may feel even more emboldened at a time when more women, including women of color, are taking on leadership roles, says Anderson, the ProInspire co-CEO. She believes the “mammy stereotype” — racist and sexist imagery of Black women as caregivers — prompts young workers from all backgrounds to seek more concessions from Black female leaders. She advises charity leaders to call out the bias inherent in such pleas. “Are you saying that because I’m a woman or a Black woman, my job is to take care of you as opposed to running this organization?”

Anderson calls the agitation in the sector “righteous rightness” — young workers digging in their heels with calls for change, even on topics they may know little about, like accountability to donors or the board or the challenges of making payroll.

The complaints by young workers are contributing to burnout and turnover among leaders at many of the charities she works with, Anderson says.

“The message ‘Change it now or else’ can be dehumanizing for a leader,” Anderson says. “You can’t fix all these things overnight.”

Getting the Word Out

Nevertheless, nonprofit managers still need to find ways to woo Gen Z to address the ongoing work-force shortage.

Colleges and universities need to do a better job of promoting the nonprofit world when providing career advice, says Peterson, the Grand Valley State professor. Many students, he says, have little idea about the kinds of careers that charities offer.

“People are shocked when they hear that it’s the third largest sector of employment in the country,” Peterson says. “We have to champion that: ‘Hey, if you’re looking for a job, there are opportunities here for you.’”

There’s hope that the revamped Public Service Loan Forgiveness program — the program that Sophia Lombardo hopes to benefit from — may stimulate more interest in nonprofit careers among Gen Zers. Lombardo signed up shortly after she graduated from Earlham in 2019, when she took a full-time job overseeing a scholarship program at another college.

Lombardo had about \$25,000 in debt from Earlham, but additional borrowing to earn a master’s degree, plus interest charges, have led to a balance now near \$50,000. The program offers student-loan forgiveness to nonprofit and government employees who have been repaying their debt for a decade; Lombardo has only six more years to go.

She says the program would draw more interest among Gen Z if the federal government made it simpler. “The process has gotten better, but it’s still a bureaucratic process,” Lombardo says. “That’s a turnoff for people who are used to having tech just work for them.”

Small Is Beautiful

If some students know almost nothing about the nonprofit sector, others enter college with romanticized views that may set them up for disappointment.

Shai Dromi, a sociology lecturer at Harvard University who teaches an undergraduate class on nonprofits, says he goes over the power dynamics involved in giving — making sure students know that not all donors are benevolent and that some attach unreasonable conditions to their gifts. He also makes clear that most charities survive on a shoestring, frantically writing grant applications and downsizing when money gets tight.

“Most of the things that students imagine doing are run by small nonprofits — and those tend to be very precarious,” Dromi says.



Jahnvi Rao, center, meets with high school members of the New Voters organization at her home in Berwyn, Pennsylvania.

Some newcomers are attracted to the smallness. Sara Coello, who is pursuing a master’s degree in public administration at North Carolina State University, has worked for three small nonprofits in the past few years — a group that helps victims of sexual violence, another that provides employment and life-skills training, and Alliance Medical Ministry, a Raleigh, N.C., charity that provides primary care to uninsured patients.

At Alliance, Coello worked with the development team, but doctors and nurse provided medical care just down the hall. “We were seeing the effects of our work day to day, meeting patients and families,” Coello says. “You could see the impact.”

Meanwhile, some of her friends were complaining about feeling disconnected as they worked remotely for big companies with co-workers they had never met in person.

But what about the downside, the way a small nonprofit can take over your nights and weekends? Not for this member of Gen Z. Coello recalls her parents constantly working, especially her dad, who spent many weekends working at a car dealership. When her work shift is done, Coello says, she’s “logging off” — before her Gen Z friends call her out.

“We hold each other much more accountable for boundaries,” she says.