



## **The Pursuit of Social Sector Employment**

Developed by the Center for the Advancement of Social Entrepreneurship at  
Duke University's Fuqua School of Business

[www.fuqua.duke.edu/case](http://www.fuqua.duke.edu/case)

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There are numerous topics that could be explored under the topic of pursuing social sector employment. For the sake of brevity and hopefully in seeking to offer a small bit of useful advice, we have organized this short guide around the questions we hear most often from MBAs considering the possibility of working in the social sector.

### **Three Critical Questions Facing MBAs Contemplating Working in the Social Sector**

There are many questions facing MBAs contemplating working in the social sector, but three that seem to be universal are the following:

- *When Should I Pursue a Social Sector Job/Career?*
- *How Should I Pursue a Social Sector Job/Career?*
- *Can I Afford to Pursue a Social Sector Job/Career?*

#### *When Should I Pursue a Social Sector Job/Career?*

For many MBAs, the question of when is the best time in their lives and careers to pursue employment in the social sector is often a pressing and confounding one. Many second year students who have an interest in the sector often struggle with the decision whether to go directly into the sector after graduation or to earn a higher salary and gain more business experience in a traditional business job first. This decision is a highly personal one that must take into consideration not only your professional background, experience, and ambitions, but also factors related to your personal family, lifestyle, and financial needs and goals. Each individual must assess the trade-offs he/she is willing to make directly out of business school.

In her HBS Guide, Stephanie Lowell does an excellent job of laying out some of the pros and cons of entering the social sector or a traditional MBA job right after business school<sup>1</sup>:

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<sup>1</sup> Slightly modified Table 2-1 from Stephanie Lowell, *The Harvard Business School Guide to Careers in the Nonprofit Sector*, (Harvard Business School Publishing, 2000), p. 9

<b>Choice</b>	<b>Pros</b>	<b>Cons</b>
Directly into social sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Move into area of responsibility early; work with very senior level people in the organization and on the board</li> <li>• Do what you love; have impact on the community</li> <li>• Develop community contacts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May be harder to go from nonprofit/social sector to traditional business organizations in your later career (<i>but definitely not impossible</i>)</li> <li>• May miss out on some business management skill development opportunities</li> <li>• Lower salaries than most traditional MBA jobs</li> </ul>
Working for a traditional business first	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learn on practical level the strategic/business skills that are needed in the social sector (e.g. marketing, finance) – and apply the theory you learn in cases to real-life situations</li> <li>• Earn more money/pay off loans</li> <li>• Establish contacts/network in business world (for later fundraising and partnerships)</li> <li>• Possibly enter at higher level once you do make the transition to the social sector</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why wait to go into the social sector if you know it's what you want to do?</li> <li>• May signal less commitment to social sector community; may be harder to enter later on (<i>but definitely not impossible</i>)</li> <li>• Corporate culture can be stifling or offer less responsibility early on than many social sector organizations do</li> </ul>

Lowell's analysis highlights several of the issues to consider. Additionally, we recommend networking and talking to as many people as possible about their experiences and your situation. Seek advice from classmates who may have come from the social sector, alumni who went straight into the social sector or made a transition later in their

careers, and also senior managers whom you know and trust in both the social sector and traditional business world.

Another common approach for MBAs is to work in the social sector during the summer between first and second years. This experience often offers a low risk way of testing the waters and exploring what it really might be like to work full-time in the social sector. However, even pursuing a summer internship in this sector raises concerns for some students – how will it look to recruiters during their second year? Can they afford to make less money than most of their classmates over the summer? Will they really be able to use and sharpen their business skills in a social sector internship? Will they receive any training, mentorship, or other benefits associated with traditional MBA summer internship programs? These are legitimate questions, and once again, this decision is a highly personal one. We can only recommend thinking about the following issues:

- *What experience did you have before coming to business school?* Do you need a traditional MBA summer internship to gain credibility, experience a new working environment, and/or demonstrate and enhance your business skills and acumen? Or do you already have significant business experience?
- *What are your career goals post-MBA?* Are you fairly certain that you want to work in the social sector upon graduation? Are you looking to transition into another traditional business field, such as from investment banking to brand management, where it would be helpful to have some concrete summer experience in the field into which you want to transition? Or are you planning on going back to your previous employer or field and feel like you have some flexibility for the summer?
- *What are your goals for the summer?* Are there specific skills or expertise you want to gain over the summer? Are you looking to build your network in a particular field or location? Are you seeking a position that has a strong chance of leading to a full-time position or are you primarily seeking a new or different experience? Are you interested in a very structured program and environment, or are you comfortable with a more flexible position with more emphasis on hands-on experience than training and development and where you might be the only MBA intern? Are there social sector internships that might offer the right types of opportunities to meet your specific goals?

If you choose not to pursue or accept a social sector summer internship opportunity but do think that you might want to seriously consider doing so upon graduation, make sure that you display your commitment to the sector by getting involved in other ways during the summer and academic year. Also, continually think about how your traditional MBA work experience and skills will be applicable to social sector work after school. The same advice applies to those who decide to pursue social sector careers later in life – get involved with the social sector now and think about how your current and previous work experience might be valuable to the social sector down the road.

### ***How Should I Pursue a Social Sector Job/Career?***

Once you have made the decision that pursuing a social sector job or career is at least a potential option for you at this time, the next question on your mind might be how to go

about it. While some social sector organizations recruit on campus, post jobs through ICON, or participate in the CASE Summer Internship Program, quite often students and alumni interested in these types of jobs must rely heavily on a self-directed search. Regardless of the means of finding a position, following are some tips on the job search process itself, presenting yourself, and finding the right fit.

### **The Job Search Process Itself**

While not entirely different from other self-directed job searches, the job search process for social sector positions does have some unique attributes.

*Timing and Recruiting:* Even for those organizations that may participate in on-campus recruiting or post jobs for MBAs, many social sector organizations do not have standard recruiting seasons and processes. Most notably, most do not know many months in advance whether they will have positions available, especially for full-time jobs. Thus, the social sector “recruiting season” is often much later than traditional MBA recruiting, taking place primarily in the spring for both summer and full-time positions. Some summer internship programs that are more established may start posting positions earlier, possibly in late January/early February, but especially if you are doing a self-directed search, the process may start later and take longer than standard MBA recruiting.

*Open Positions:* Few social sector organizations looking to hire MBAs will have more than one or possibly two positions open. Additionally, if you are focused on a self-directed search, many nonprofits that you contact will not necessarily have “open positions.” You will have to be much more proactive in reaching out to organizations that interest you and engaging them in conversations that may lead to defining an internship or job opportunity that suits both of your goals and needs.

*Passion:* On the positive side, many (but certainly not all) people who work in the social sector are passionate about their jobs and very open and willing to talk to others who share similar passions. MBAs who have found a good niche or position in the social sector are often particularly open to speaking with other MBAs about their experiences, so be sure to seek out other MBAs in the sector when beginning your search.

In addition to understanding some of the differences when searching for a social sector job, you should consider the following:

*Take advantage of resources at Fuqua* Whether you are a first or second year Daytime MBA or an alum, Fuqua has several resources for those interested in jobs in the social sector, including CASE, the CMC, and the MBA Nonprofit Connection. This guide is meant to provide you with an introduction to the field, the opportunities, and the process. For more information on the various other resources available, see the [CASE MBA Career Resources](#) website.

### *Get involved in the social sector*

One of the best ways to learn more about the social sector, start building your own network, and demonstrate your commitment is actually to get directly involved with the

sector on a volunteer basis, as an extracurricular activity, or as part of your education. *The Continuum for Involvement in the Social Sector* should help you get started with this process.

### *Network, network, network*

Since most nonprofits do not have formal MBA recruiting programs and those that do tend to recruit at several top schools and be highly competitive, networking becomes extremely important. Start developing your contacts in the social sector as early as possible. Just like networking for any job, you should talk to anyone whom you think might be helpful to you in defining your interests, goals, and opportunities. Potential candidates for helping you build your network include classmates, alumni, friends, CASE MBA, the CMC, the MBA Nonprofit Connection, professors, friends of your parents, guest speakers, local social sector leaders, volunteer centers, and anyone you can identify who has career, board, or volunteer experience in the areas that you think might interest you.

### **Presenting Yourself**

MBA students and graduates can bring a strong set of skills to the social sector, but they must be thoughtful about their approach. We have a few general words of advice on this front:

*Do your homework* Regardless of the type of job you are seeking, you should always do your homework before sending a resume, cover letter, or email, picking up the phone, or walking into an interview. But this situation is especially true when looking to enter the social sector. Many social sector organizations are skeptical of MBAs or outsiders, and you must be able to convince them that you are sincerely committed to and understand their organization, its activities, and its mission. Make sure you understand the organization well enough to speak comfortably and convincingly, but naturally and sincerely, about it.

*Strike a healthy balance between passion and business* While demonstrating a strong passion for the particular social issue the organization addresses, also be sure to convey that you are professional, motivated, and interested in challenging, productive work. Have some ideas about the specific skills you can bring to the organization, and possibly even some thoughts on how you can help the organization make good use of scarce resources in order to better serve its mission.

*Tailor your cover letters and resume* Do not submit a “cookie cutter” cover letter. Be explicit in describing your interest in the relevant social issues; how your views have been shaped through related experiences; and what value you have to contribute to the organization. Demonstrate your understanding of the organization’s mission, vision, and activities. On both your resume and cover letters, be sure to highlight any involvement in the social sector and social issues, including volunteer experiences or independent activity or research. And do not bury your volunteer experience under “additional information” on your resume.

*Be humble and show respect* One of the biggest concerns many social sector organizations have when contemplating hiring an MBA is that MBAs will be arrogant and come into their organization with a “know-it-all” attitude and assumption that their way of doing things is inherently superior. While this characterization may be unfair, it is not an uncommonly held belief. In interacting with social sector organizations, be confident but humble, seek to understand their culture and way of doing things, and make sure you show respect for the people who work there and the good work that they do.

### **Finding the Right Fit**

Finding the right fit is important in any job search. Following are a few things that you might want to pay particular attention to when deciding upon a job in the social sector:

*Your belief in and commitment to the mission of the organization* It may seem obvious, but make sure that you believe in the organization’s mission, as well as its approach to achieving its social objectives. Why do you think the issue or area the organization is targeting is important? Why and how do you think their activities actually make a difference and have the desired impact?

*The organization’s willingness to commit resources* Many social sector organizations have scarce resources, and few are able to demonstrate their commitment to hiring an MBA through offering a competitive MBA salary. Be realistic in your salary goals, but don’t sell yourself short, and even for the summer, try to avoid presenting yourself as free labor. Requiring the organization to commit some resources to you and your position, be it through housing or travel assistance, computer and office space, training opportunities, or other means, will increase their commitment to your having a good work experience.

*The organization’s understanding of and appreciation for MBA skills* Try to make sure that the organization values the skills and experience you bring without pigeon-holing you into a very narrowly defined position (such as the MBA can only do finance and accounting). Ask if they have ever had any MBAs on staff in the past and whether there are any board members with MBAs. If so, try to speak with these individuals. If not, at least be sure you have a frank discussion about your role and how it will be presented to the rest of the organization.

While the above factors are equally relevant for any social sector position, there are some criteria that are more important depending on whether you are considering a summer internship or a full-time position.

### Summer internships

In evaluating summer internship opportunities, you should make sure that the position is **well-defined** and that you have an identified **mentor and supervisor**, preferably an MBA or someone with some business experience. Summer internships are incredibly short, and without these two things in place from the start, valuable time may be wasted trying to identify what you will do. Additionally, a well-defined internship, whether around a specific project or a particular role, will better enable you to demonstrate your skills and value, come away at the end of the summer with a feeling of accomplishment,

articulate what you did and learned over the summer, and position yourself strongly for a variety of jobs and interviews during your second year.

### Full-time positions

In considering full-time positions, you should make sure that you understand and are comfortable with the **organization's culture** as well as the available **opportunities for career development and progression**. The culture of many nonprofits may be very different from the corporate working environments to which you are accustomed. Beyond being mission rather than profit-driven, these organizations are often more used to decisions being made by consensus and may also move at a slower pace than many businesses. Moreover, some individuals may be uncomfortable with the language and practices of business, which could create a difficult environment for some MBAs. Additionally, just because you are considering a social sector job does not mean you should sacrifice your expectations for career development, networking, and progression; rather you should make sure that your needs and expectations are in line with what the organization can offer. Finally, most MBAs will be happiest if they can make sure that they are **involved at a strategic level**. Even if you are being offered a primarily functional position, such as finance or accounting, discuss upfront any broader skills and interests that you have and ways you may be able to contribute to more strategic aspects of the organization.

### ***Can I Afford to Pursue a Social Sector Job/Career?***

One of the most difficult questions to address, and one that is often at the top of MBAs mind as they consider their loans, the opportunity cost of working in the social sector, and their short and long-term financial goals. There is no denying that salaries in the social sector are generally lower than those offered for traditional MBA jobs. Additionally, there are rarely comparable incentives, bonuses, and opportunities for dramatic growth in income over time. However, some social sector organizations do offer respectable salaries. Others are able to make up somewhat for lower salaries by assisting with housing; providing unique networking or travel opportunities; offering flexible work schedules, generous vacation time, and a family friendly lifestyle; or other means of reducing your expenses or enhancing your quality of life and job satisfaction. But given the financial realities of social sector employment, many business schools, Fuqua included, have developed programs designed to help reduce some of the financial barriers to employment in the social sector.

### Summer Internship Financial Assistance

- [CASE Summer Internship Program in Social Entrepreneurship](#)  
The CASE Summer Internship Program provides students with an experiential learning opportunity by placing them in new, emerging, or growing social enterprises. This experience will expose them to social entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial organizations as well as to the unique challenges, opportunities, risks, and rewards associated with pursuing social impact in an entrepreneurial context. With funding from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, CASE will pilot this program in Summer 2003 by matching four (4) students with four (4)

social enterprises, offering each student intern a stipend of \$5000 to be supplemented by the host organization. 3 of these 4 organizations have already been selected by CASE. The fourth opportunity will be awarded to a student who has secured an internship position with a social enterprise, provided that both the organization and the position fit the program criteria.

- [CASE Field Research Internship Program](#)  
CASE has developed a field research internship program for students interested in gaining a deeper understanding of particular social entrepreneurship issues and strategies. Made possible as a pilot project in Summer 2003 by funding from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, this program will provide students with opportunities for field-based learning and exposure to front-line social entrepreneurs while also honing their analytical and strategic skills. If the pilot program is successful, the issues explored in the field research program will vary each summer to match the current research priorities of CASE.
- [Class of 1990 Nonprofit and Small Business Internship Award](#)  
The Class of 1990 established an endowment to provide assistance to current first year students who choose a summer internship with a nonprofit, public sector, or small-to-medium size firm. Awarded through a competitive application process, the total amount of available funds varies depending on the endowment earnings but has historically ranged between \$7500-\$13,000. In recent years, anywhere from 5-10 students have applied, with 1 or 2 recipients being named each year. A selection committee of relevant Fuqua staff members reviews applications and selects the award winners, with priority going to 1) Nonprofit 2) Public 3) Small-to-medium size firms. Should the selection committee decide to name more than one student to receive the award, the committee will determine the amount awarded per student.

#### Full-time Employment Financial Assistance

- [Class of 2001 Loan Forgiveness Fund](#)  
Thanks to the generosity and vision of the Fuqua Daytime Class of 2001, the Fuqua Not-for-Profit/Public Sector Loan Forgiveness Fund (LFF) has been established to provide financial assistance, in the form of semi-annual loan forgiveness awards, to qualified Fuqua Daytime students and alumni who pursue employment with eligible not-for-profit and government organizations.