



STARTING A CAREER IN SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

The following excerpts are from a roundtable discussion of development professionals, titled "How to break into a Career in Social Enterprise," held on July 28, 2013 and moderated by Alex Counts, CEO of the [Grameen Foundation](#). Some passages have been edited for readability. [Click here](#) for the full transcript.

What advice would you give to someone trying to break into the social / development sector?

Kate Griffin, Corporation for Enterprise Development or [CFED](#): The social sector is such a heterogeneous field with so many ways to tackle it, so go do your homework. Figure out who does what, what they're trying to achieve, and find an organization that really fits your passions. Whether it's the type of organization or type of approach, but getting a better understanding of their work makes you much more sellable as a potential employee, because, you can say what speaks to you, and how you can contribute.

Brian Weinberg, Founder of Justgood.org; Director of Operations at [SPARK International](#): I think the best advice I received was to look at the employee bios on the company's website where you'd like to work and have an honest conversation with yourself as to what you are missing. What are the skills and tools that you need to be competitive and have strong talking points in those interviews? You need to be able to weather the storm, to take extra time and volunteer and learn whatever skills you need to become competitive.

On Networking:

Khuloud Odeh, Director of IT, Grameen Foundation: My advice is, in this economy with the difficulty of finding jobs, to network. To network any time, any event. A great example - last night I was going from the airport to the parking lot and it was one o'clock in the morning. I was wearing my George Mason t-shirt, and the driver of the shuttle said "Oh you went to Mason!" He asked about what I studied and where I worked, I told him IT and that I worked at Grameen, and he asked if I was looking for anybody in IT. He said he had a friend with a contractor looking for IT work. You never

know what your next lead on a job is, it could be in the supermarket line, it could be in the elevator. Networking doesn't need to happen at specific events, networking is anywhere at any time.

Nicole Stubbs, CEO of [First Access](#): There are tools available now that make it so much easier to do these kinds of things. I think social media is overrated in a lot of ways, but Twitter in particular is a powerful tool for tracking jobs and organizations. When I think of all the time I spent after college just looking for different organizations on Google, digging through websites, figuring out what they were actually doing, that's all in short sentences on Twitter now, and it's live. For young people in particular, that is an amazing tool that you should be taking advantage of regularly. Follow every organization you're interested in, look at who they're following and who is following them. Everything is represented on there, and I actually use it all the time for work now. To figure out what's happening in your field, there really is nothing parallel to that.

Kaveh Azimi, CEO of [Encite Capital](#): It's important to have a pitch of yourself and your skills and how you brand yourself. At a conference or having a cup of coffee, you should be able to say who you are, your interests, and your accomplishments. In terms of getting in touch with people, I've found if you know the people and you email them, even cold email, very few people will not take a fifteen minute meaning.

Brian Weinberg: When you meet someone important at a conference you need to be creative and make yourself useful to him or her. One thing I learned is to make what you are hearing from the person the most important thing in the world, to act like they are the one person in the world when you're talking to them.

[Alex Counts](#), CEO of Grameen Foundation: [On Brian's comment] I don't agree with that totally. I think you need to be credible, and true to yourself. When someone is saying something worrying, or wrong, or offensive, they are not the most important person in the world. People have difficulty putting themselves in the chair of the person they're trying to get to. You all spend your days doing things that are boring or exciting or wonderful or bad, and you're busy but maybe not as busy as people would figure you were, and people appreciate being affirmed, and there are times where being affirmed by another human being is really satisfying. Putting yourself in their shoes and thinking like they do can make a really big impression. You need to think about what can make that person come away, in a conversation, feeling better. I think each interaction is its own creative moment, and sometimes you're very intimidated, nerves can make it hard. It can be hard to start a conversation. A lot of it takes serious practice. Just relax, and try to have a value-added human interaction with people you're networking with, and practice that.

On Graduate School:

Kimberly Davies, Grameen Foundation: There are a lot of people who work for a few years and then go to graduate school for more skills without knowing quite what they want to do.

Nicole Stubbs: I think one of the best pieces of advice I heard before going to graduate school was "Figure out what kind of organization you want to work for. If you had to decide today what you were going to do for the next five or ten years, who would you want to work for?"

I thought of the Gates Foundation because they have almost unlimited resources to put towards some of the world's most intractable problems. I called different schools and asked if they had anyone who was working at the Gates Foundation who was a recent alumnus, and I talked to several people. It turned out nobody cared where your degree came from; they cared what you got out of it, that you had one, and what kinds of practical things you had done before, during, and after that degree.

Kate Griffin: I often get asked for advice on graduate school courses, and as much as I loved getting a degree in international development at American University, I would say don't get a degree in international development unless you really know what you want to do. If you know where you want to go, and what you need to get there, go ahead and get the graduate degree that helps you fulfill that path. There are multiple paths, and you are the best judge of what you are missing.

I am still paying off student loans, ten years after graduate school. I was offered an amazing unpaid internship right out of undergrad that I had no way of doing. It can be tough, and sometimes the best thing you have is internships and temp jobs to get your foot in the door, and you have to look for whatever you can get that works financially. On hiring, I know when I look at an ideal candidate what are the skills I am looking for; it's all in the resume. Sometimes there's nothing about microfinance, but the best people read the job description and know the skills I'm looking for and what we need, and sell me on that.

Jordan Nelson, Development Consultant: I would just add that all the classes I took at Georgetown, probably the basic introduction to finance and the Spanish courses are the ones that got me my job. I wrote fantastic term papers on women's' weaving cooperatives in the Andes, and I don't think that mattered a bit. People think too much about what they want to do and not about what the employer wants them to do.

On “Hard Skills” and passion for your work:

Kate Griffin: Passion alone isn't enough. Everyone I talk with wants to help the poor. My eyes glaze over, because this is tough work, and people forget that you need hard skills to do this stuff, particularly when we're talking about working in microfinance. You're trying to work with financial institutions and businesses that need people with skills in accounting, IT, HR, and marketing.

This notion of “I'm going to save the world” glosses over what you actually need to bring to the table. I want to know what you're going to offer. What piece of this world do you have influence over, what is your specific contribution to making it a better world?

Kimberly Davies: Someone that comes to me really interested in mobile technology in emerging markets for the purposes of micro transactions, and knows something about mobile payments, that's much more engaging than just having passion. The more specific you can be, even when there are a bunch of things you could be interested in, I think talking about one thing you are specifically interested in and why is important. Narrow it down.

Brian Weinberg: One of the things I always found helpful when thinking about where I wanted to be or when offering suggestions to people was to think about thinking both thematically and functionally. Thematically, you need to know what kind of organization you want to work for, and functionally you need to know what you want to do on a day-to-day basis. And I would actually suggest that people think functionally, because the way you interact with that organization is what you do on a day-to-day basis. And the thing that is going to keep you inspired and fulfilled is feeling like you're making a contribution, and I think that's a function of your role with that organization.

Kimberly Davies: I'm going to agree, but also disagree in that I think the function is incredibly important and you need to bring that value to the organization to feel fulfilled but a lot of the time I think you also just need to get your foot in the door, I think a lot of people are very proud and think they've studied or worked for so many number of years and they have a vision of what should be happening and not seeing things as stepping stones to what should be happening.

Khuloud Odeh: I usually challenge anyone who comes to me and says "I really love what you do, and I want to be a part of it," especially people from the IT field. The first thing I usually say is "First you really need to be passionate, and really have the desire to help and not care as much about how much money you're going to make." Because for somebody switching from IT to the social sector, you have to be fulfilled and satisfied doing the same work you did before for a different purpose, for less money.

That sometimes is an interesting reality check to start with, and I've even started saying that to other people, from other fields. International development looks cool from the outside, you think you can travel, go interesting places, get great experience, which is true, but it's also very difficult. For people coming in at a junior level they have to know it might be several years before they even get to go to a field office, or to really go and directly be part of a development program. Sometimes people are instinctively curious, but they don't really consider the details, and, I won't call them sacrifices, but the reality of being less comfortable. So I usually offer the advice that you should make sure you're ready in terms of what you can get.

On the Job Application Process:

Khuloud Odeh: One resource I found very useful as a place to find all the jobs you are looking for is Devex. It is a great help for people who want to understand who the players are, even if you just look at the members' directory you will stay up to date. It's interesting how the focus in some areas has changed; Peace Corps doesn't get your foot in the door as much as it did. Where I used to work I would guess that 80% of people were former Peace Corps. Now I think that's less so, because there are many different skills needed in international development. Other technologies have become more readily applicable to development and that is changing the entire sector. Technical skills are more relevant.

Kimberly Davies: Sometimes I talk to people that are job hunting who say "I've sent my resume out to ten places today, or one hundred, and no one has responded." How can you accurately represent yourself to one hundred places? When I was unemployed for over six months, I actually applied to only seven jobs, and I was among the top three applicants for three of them. It really should take a long time to understand what work people were doing, learn the industry language, and write a cover letter. It can be hard, but I think a lot of people just apply with a resume that doesn't change. You need to adjust what's on top, what bullets are used, and sometimes it just comes down to luck. When people get frustrated they try for quantity in their applications instead of quality.

Jordan Nelson: I agree with that. If you're going through all the effort to get a job in the social sector, why not find a job that really pulls you in and makes you excited to come aboard? You want to be able to say "Everything I've ever done has led me to your doorstep, and to this job."

On Landing an Entry-Level Job in the Sector:

Khuloud Odeh: Sometimes when you apply for jobs that may be entry level, it may not be that exciting, it may not be exactly where you want to be, but having an entry point in an organization is always great if you're interested in that organization. You can always meet more people, get more connections inside the organization, and then work your way to the job you want to be doing even if you came in at an entry level.

Jordan Nelson: I wish I would have taken basic web design. I don't think there's a single organization that doesn't have to do something on the internet and wants to improve their online presence, and that's a real practical skill that would have made me much more attractive to a lot of employers.

Nicole Stubbs: You can go to codeacademy.com to learn coding, it's a massive online open course (MOOC), and you can take a look at coursera.com too, both are great resources for learning new skills.

Brian Weinberg: In terms of the skills you need, I think web design, fundraising, and graphic design, maybe social media, those four things can make you very effective if you match them with research skills or writing ability, you're locked to be an intern or volunteer at the very least. I think every organization can use people doing those things, and they're a great way to get in.

Alex Counts: In the not for profit sector there are typically a lot of organizations hiring fundraisers and willing to train people from scratch.

Kate Griffin: I think that fundraising, once you start in it, is hard but not impossible to get out of. But I will say that fundraising is a diverse field. There are a lot of different types of fundraising, and you can learn the organization really well doing fundraising. It's really just about how, when you're in that role, you're soaking up information about how the organization runs that you can utilize for the next opportunity.

Inspiration to Stay Excited:

Nicole Stubbs: Always have something you're excited about, that you are helping someone or some organization do, formally or informally. You don't have to answer "What do you do?" with "I'm looking for work." Or "I'm unemployed." You can say "I'm helping so-and-so build this great thing..." even if it's a few hours a week. Nobody asks if you're getting paid for it or how much—what matters is that you're doing it, you're proactive and you've got a great conversation starter. Use your weekends, your evenings, reach out to people and organizations you like and ask if there's anything you can do to support their work. Always have something on your calendar that you

care deeply about, get out and do things and get experience outside of your job or school.

Alex Counts: People I have stuck with the most are excited about what they're doing, and don't talk about it to the exclusion of figuring out what's exciting to me. In a sense the topic is secondary, people just really respond to the energy of a conversation. In some cases I've made notes saying, you know, this person may not be right for the job but I'm going to track this person, to see what they end up doing. You know when you're around someone who isn't excited, even when they have the exact skills you need.