



Why and How to Hire an Interim Executive Director

When a nonprofit experiences a leadership transition, hiring an interim executive director can be the most logical and positive action its board can take. Leadership change is an increasingly common aspect of nonprofit organizational life. It's not a matter of if, but when, the change is coming.

Don't be discouraged in the event that an interim is needed. Research and practice suggest that groups that plan well and use a skilled interim executive director emerge stronger, more fiscally sound, and with higher levels of optimism about the future impact of their programs and services.

Externally, some funders, donors and volunteers will take a wait-and-see approach before becoming involved and investing in the organization. This can create strain between needs and resources, further taxing administrative systems. It is important to continue with plans for new programming and public relations. A highly skilled interim executive director can temporarily take the helm of an organization, help the board and staff address important issues, and lay the groundwork for the following leader's success.

An interim will:

- Serve as a bridge, giving the board ample time to conduct a thoughtful search process, while managing the day-to-day executive responsibilities that include conducting an objective organizational review, leading anxious staff, reassuring wary funders and keeping finances and revenue generation on track.
- Tackle unique challenges related to the transition, building on strengths and addressing particular vulnerabilities.
- Help the board clarify its vision and future leadership needs.
- Model excellence in management and leadership.
- Mentor the new executive director once appointed.

Guidelines for hiring an interim executive director:

- Begin with the end in mind. Your board should determine what it wants and needs and what is most critical to success over the next few months.
- Identify urgent issues or challenges currently facing your organization.
- Review the current executive director's job description, determine priorities for the transition period and draft a job description for the interim executive director.
- Seek an interim executive director with solid management experience and a transition skill set. This takes precedence over familiarity with your organization or industry.
- Consider that the assignment is both temporary (four to eight months) and part-time (20 to 25 hours a week), and that the individual should not be a candidate for the full-time position.
- Realize that, due to the unique demands of the role, interim executives almost always are paid higher on an hourly basis than the agency's permanent executive (although most interims are part-time and do not receive normal agency benefits).
- Tap local resources for potential candidates, such as nonprofit-degree programs, consultants serving the nonprofit sector, industry-sector affinity groups, and nonprofit consortiums. These sources could potential be candidates to serve as the interim executive director or may know of qualified individuals to serve.

There is great potential in the space after the former director leaves and the new leader begins.

The organization is more open to change than usual and is poised to leverage that heightened opportunity.

And while systems and culture become a bit "unglued" during this period, they can be put together in new and exciting ways that leave the nonprofit stronger and more sustainable.