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# In Search of Unicorns: Finding & Hiring Grantwriters, Part 1

By Jan Masaoka &bull; June 17, 2008

Part 1 of 2

My small agency can't afford to hire a full time fund developer. How do I look for a grant writer? I have talked to a few who either want to be paid by the hour or receive a percentage of the grant. I am perplexed. Any suggestions? --Wes Mukoyama, Yu-Ai Kai, San Jose, California

Everyone's heard of unicorns, but almost no one has ever seen one. Like Wes, almost everyone in community nonprofits thinks it would be great to have a grantwriter. But it's rare to find and work successfully with this rare creature. Why is it so hard?

In this issue of Blue Avocado we'll explore why hiring grantwriters seems to be a hit-or-miss proposition, and what to think about doing instead. In our June 1 issue, Part 2 will lay out a blueprint for finding and contracting with outside grantwriters.

Why it doesn't work very often

Community nonprofits have a harder time succeeding with grantwriters than institutions with large fundraising departments. For example, a nonprofit university seeking research grants has a well-worn groove to follow, a trove of written materials on which to draw, experienced staff for the grantwriter to work with, and can afford to pay tens of thousands of dollars per proposal.

While some community nonprofits have strong staff fundraisers and good grantseeking track records, many lack one or more of the elements (besides a grantwriter) to support successful efforts. And grantwriters can be reluctant to work with organizations that lack "readiness": good written materials, a wide reputation, established connections to funders. Even the best cook will have trouble making a delicious meal when the refrigerator is empty and the stove is broken. No wonder many grantwriters are reluctant to work with the agencies that have the fewest resources.

At the same time, nonprofits are often disappointed and frustrated with their contract grantwriters. When paying by the hour, the cost per proposal may be more than the chance of success is worth. And the grantwriter may request backup materials the agency doesn't have--and needs to come up with fast, or pay the grantwriter to produce.

And sometimes community nonprofits feel that the grantwriter is inappropriately trying to change their whole organization--its programming, mission statement, board, and messages--because otherwise "you won't get this grant."

If and when a grant is denied, it's easy for both sides to be resentful. The grantwriter might think, "If only this agency had listened to me!" while the agency people might be thinking: "What a waste of money!" The executive director often doesn't know whether to blame herself for hiring the wrong grantwriter, or for being an agency that isn't ready to get grants.

And when good grantwriters find clients with whom they work successfully, they quickly don't have time for new clients. [Career change idea: maybe you should go into freelance grantwriting?]

When should you hire contract grantwriters?

But contracting grantwriting often does prove to be a big help to community nonprofits. What are some of the circumstances in which it is most likely to succeed?

- Proposals for government grants and contracts and responses to RFPs often have very particular formats and requirements than an experienced grantwriter already knows. Work with someone who not only knows government funding, but knows Colorado State Department of Education or National Institutes of Health (NIH). The grantwriter may also help you identify good candidates for your organization, and do some intelligence work to see if a contract is "wired" (unofficially designated in advance for a particular agency).

- All-volunteer organizations can consider part-time grantwriters and fundraisers as alternatives to hiring their first director.

- If you already have good written materials you use to obtain corporate sponsorships to an event (or are stuck with some not-so-good pieces), a grantwriter can help you freshen the content, and produce more of them.

- Although some nonprofit folks can express their ideas brilliantly in a conversation, they're frustrated when faced with putting these thoughts into proposal-like languages. In these cases, a writer--not necessarily a grantwriter--can interview program leaders using a journalistic approach, and write up staff thinking into compelling proposals.

- If you're unfamiliar with grantseeking, consider asking a grantwriter to work with you to develop some proposals and to teach and tutor you through the grantseeking process.

- When you're without grantwriting staff for a period of time (such as for illness), a contract grantwriter can be very helpful in an interim position to shepherd work in progress and maintain proposal production.

Working with contract grantmakers is more likely to succeed when you:

- Already have a track record of successful grantwriting. You have written material that the grantwriter can build on. You have solid relationships with foundations and other institutions to support the proposal process.

- "When you're responding to government RFPs that aren't wired and have a grantwriter knowledgeable in that field

- You have a track record of working successfully with consultants (it's a skill that takes experience to develop), and know how to contract with them, support them, get results from them

- When the grantwriter is based in your area so that face-to-face meetings can occur easily, and she can visit your office to get a feel for your mission and commitment

### Alternatives to hiring a contract grantwriter

Hiring support staff instead: Letting program managers write their own grant proposals brings an authentic voice to the documents, and provides your staff with a meaningful sense of investment in the proposal and the program. Learning to write proposals and work with funders is a critical skill set that they will value developing, and will result in greater bench strength in your organization. Rather than hiring an outside expert, make it possible for your inside experts to flex their fundraising muscles by hiring support staff that allow your staff leaders to shine.

Grow your own staff grantwriter: Grantwriting is a learned (not inherited!) skill, but for those who are already good writers, the process is not that hard to master. Take advantage of grantwriting and fundraising classes and mentorships in your area. Work with people who are already in tune with community nonprofits and their constituencies. And as part of the African American community, for instance, or the deaf community, you'll be growing African American and deaf grantwriters who can be parts of your leadership in ways that a contract grantwriter never can be. And finally, the newly trained grantwriter will have gained professional skills that he or she will take into both paid and volunteer work for years to come.

Next issue in Blue Avocado: How to find a contract grantwriter, contract with one, and how much to pay

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