



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE



IMPACT CAREERS INITIATIVE

Winning the Talent War, for Good: A Call to Engage, Retain, and Build the Market
for Top Talent in Impact Careers

INTRODUCTION

Our challenges are immense—from climate change and educational stagnation to health disparities and persistent incarceration rates. To flourish in the 21st Century, the best of the next generation must devote their time, energy, and skills to solving these problems in our local communities, in the halls of government, and around the world.

Today, there remains a striking disconnect between talented people and careers of social impact. There is little data on how and why young people choose their careers and limited understanding of what it would take to encourage a greater share to commit themselves to advancing the public interest. This makes it difficult for impact organizations, those organizations striving to achieve an explicit social mission, to effectively identify, recruit, and retain great talent—and for service-minded young people to find opportunities to make a difference.

Ensuring that the best talent is working to solve these critical social challenges is a shared responsibility. However, it is ultimately our responsibility as Millennials to create and commit to impact careers. Winning the Talent War, for Good includes a range of strategies created by and for impact practitioners and young talent alike to address this challenge. In addition to underscoring the need for top talent in this field, this Aspen Institute Impact Careers Initiative (ICI) report seeks to help practitioners better understand the drivers of career choices among top talent and undertake key strategies for engaging, retaining, and building the market for the next generation of top talent in impact careers.

We need top talent now. The social challenges we face are growing and already impose a massive cost to society. In the US alone,



48.8 Million Americans—including over 16 million children—struggle with hunger. Nearly one in five children in America lives in families that are considered “food-insecure.”¹ In 2011, 16.1 million, or approximately 22 percent of children in the U.S., lived in poverty.²



The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world.³ Federal and state incarceration rates have increased by 400% since 1980, while the annual cost of crime is estimated to exceed \$3 trillion.⁴



One new student drops out of high school every 26 seconds, exceeding one million students annually. In 2011 alone, the nation’s economy lost out on nearly \$154 billion in additional income due to the number of high school dropouts.⁵



68 million baby boomers have higher rates of chronic disease than their predecessors at the same age.⁶ The average healthcare cost for someone with a chronic disease is five times greater than someone without one; and we already spend \$432 billion on heart disease, \$174 billion on diabetes, and \$154 billion on lung disease each year.⁷

These crises, and many more, add up—both for the individuals directly affected and for taxpayers. The stakes are too high not to invest in addressing these challenges.

Over a million organizations across the country work each day to stem this tide of social and financial costs, and many social sector leaders acknowledge that talent is the key ingredient to their successfully meeting these challenges. As James Weinberg, Chairman of Achieve Mission, describes, “Prioritizing talent is the single success factor in an organization. That will determine, almost entirely, your success. And yet it is the lowest prioritized thing in the sector.” With a generation of baby boomers set to retire—and an estimated need for nearly a quarter million new senior managers by 2016—impact organizations need to engage top talent from the next generation now more than ever.⁸ The problem extends to government, too, and is brewing a long-term crisis. As Peter Orszag, Former Director of OMB said, “[The consequences of not having talented young people in impact careers] is not fully apparent yet because you have to wait until 15 or 20 years from now to realize that there is not enough talent to choose from who are qualified and interested in serving.”

Recognizing the need and steep competition for top talent, impact organizations have responded with their own efforts to recruit and retain these individuals. Since 2002, the federal government has worked with the Partnership for Public Service to attract, develop and retain more top talent in

public service. Other organizations, such as Teach for America, have aggressively targeted college students and young graduates. Foundations—from Annie E. Casey to Omidyar to Echoing Green—have realized that the future of impact organizations is directly tied to the caliber of individuals in impact careers and have invested accordingly.

Unfortunately, the current pipeline of top talent among the next generation is not yet sufficient to meet the need of impact organizations. A Partnership for Public Service estimate indicates that only 18% of college graduates intend to enter the nonprofit or teaching fields, for example, and only 6% plan on working in government.⁹ To empower practitioners to increase this interest, ICI conducted in-depth research to assess the drivers of career decisions among top talent in this generation and evaluate, propose, and develop strategies for better engaging and optimizing them in impact careers.

DEFINITIONS & METHODOLOGY

We define “top talent” inclusively; the term refers to individuals who have the extraordinary skills and capabilities to affect positive social change. For the purposes of this report, we focus on top talent from the Millennial generation. This could include “campus talent”—high-performers from top undergraduate institutions—as well as “community talent”—remarkable young people who may not have attended a top undergraduate institution, but have all of the skills and experiences required to effectuate the change badly needed throughout our nation. As Paul Schmitz of Public Allies points out, “There is other talent that didn’t get the connection to the sorting mechanism of college, but are naturally adept and talented. There are a lot of people that are off that track, but have talent far beyond that track.” We define an “impact organization” as one striving to achieve an explicit social mission; these organizations can range from community-based nonprofits to B-corporations to large government departments or private businesses. Finally, we define an “impact career” as any role served within an impact organization.

Our research process included an extensive literature review and meta-analysis, qualitative interviews with thought leaders, and focus groups with top talent. In 2012, our team conducted more than 150 interviews with leaders in the social sector, academia, the government, the private sector, the media, and talent organizations. We also conducted focus groups with diverse top talent to surface key drivers in their career decision-making processes. Lastly, we conducted a systematic and thorough review of national service to surface strategies specifically for recruiting and leveraging community talent in impact careers.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Our research revealed a diverse set of incentives by which top talent is driven. Four themes emerged among the fourteen drivers identified: they seek to find professional roles 1) in which they can make a significant contribution, 2) that are perceived well by their mentors, parents, and peers, 3) that provide adequate financial or experiential compensation, and 4) that offer a satisfying professional culture.

Table 1. Drivers of Career Decisions Among Top Talent

Contribution	<p>Impact: Desire to make an impact at an organization and to society, which is critically guided by an understanding of how one’s work fits into a larger context and is measurably making a difference.</p> <p>Skill Fit: Desire to leverage one’s skills in their work.</p>
Perception	<p>Advice: Input from role models that guide an individual’s decision making or vision of careers.</p> <p>Parental or Peer Pressure: Influence from peers or parents in career decision-making processes. The latter tended to drive towards stable, safe, and well-compensated careers.</p> <p>Prestige: The brand of a firm or industry.</p>
Compensation	<p>Optionality: Opening up as many doors to future career opportunities as possible.</p> <p>Pay: Sufficient financial compensation to meet basic needs and future plans.</p> <p>Skill Building: Providing the opportunity to develop “real-world” professional skills.</p>
Culture	<p>Quality of Colleagues: Highly-talented and diverse individuals.</p> <p>Collaboration: A highly collaborative workplace where mistakes are welcomed as learning opportunities.</p> <p>Urban Location: An urban center where the professional and cultural opportunities are ample.</p> <p>Work-Life Balance: Ability to engage in meaningful work, as well as explore personal opportunities outside of work.</p> <p>Interest: Alignment with an individual’s personal and/or professional interests.</p>
Information	<p>Awareness: Knowledge of nonprofits and job opportunities beyond major brands.</p> <p>Impact Assessment: Ability to determine social impact of organizations.</p> <p>Ease of Recruitment: Processes of applying for jobs that are fairly easy to access, such as through on-campus recruiting or career office support.</p>

CONTRIBUTION

Top talent in the next generation seeks roles in which they can contribute—both to society and to the day-to-day operations of the organization. Eighty percent of Millennials reported “helping other people who are in need” as either one of the most important goals in their lives or a very important goal, indicating that the opportunity to help others is a key factor in Millennials’ choices.

In addition, many participants sought careers that would make the most use of their unique talents and abilities. One rising senior saw her career choice as an optimization problem: “I discovered that what I was doing was trying to solve this optimization problem where I want to use my best skills and do something that can make the most impact [using those skills].”

First experiences in nonprofits sadly frequently reinforce the fear that young people will not have an opportunity to truly contribute. As Derek Ellerman said, “If you’re top talent, and you’re a superstar, and you’re put in some dysfunctional nonprofit as an intern and you’re getting coffee and doing busy work, it can kill your excitement for doing this work instead of being the transformative experience it could and should be.”

Some young people have the perception that the social sector as a whole is not the best place to make a contribution. Rafael Lopez, Associate Director for Talent Management and Leadership Development at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, says that young talent does not understand the impact that the social sector has. “There is a misperception that nonprofits don’t have their act together. Young people don’t think that we are changing the world.” Young people see the opportunity to contribute, as it drives their decision making.

PERCEPTION

A diversity of social perceptions and pressures motivated career decision-making among top talent. Peer pressure around career choices on the college campus was often subtle and implicit. As one participant illustrated, “...I really respect this senior who I spent a lot of time with in my dance group. He was smart and I liked him. He went on to go do consulting and he makes good decisions, so maybe I ought to consider [that career]. And when there’s that volume of people doing it, it kind of makes it inevitable for me to take a second look.” On many college campuses, consulting and finance are so widely pursued that to deviate from those paths is to accept “strange looks” from peers. For many, peer pressure is inextricably tied to prestige and social status, which many focus group participants reported as a “decisive” factor in their decision-making.

COMPENSATION

Pay—particularly the growing wage differential between public and private work—factored as a major consideration for our participants. For many, these concerns stemmed from the burden of student loans. One public service professional spoke emotionally of how she and her partner, who have together accrued half a million dollars in student loans from their undergraduate and graduate education, are now just beginning to pay them down. Lack of debt was a clear driver for two Rhodes Scholars interviewed. Both were fortunate enough to receive full scholarships for their post-secondary pursuits and attributed their willingness to take bigger career risks to the lack of debt burden.

However, notions of compensation often extend beyond the financial. Participants placed a high premium on prestige, professional development, and roles that open doors to future professional opportunities. Many reported a willingness to forgo higher financial compensation by taking a “prestigious” role, a role that built new competencies, or a role that led to compelling options later. A number of focus group participants cited Teach for America (TFA) as an example of this opportunity. Despite the relative low pay of teaching, TFA was viewed as a career that opened doors to future opportunities while also making a significant social impact. For them, these benefits outweighed the downside that stemmed from tolerating a high pay differential.

Other participants, particularly those trained in the liberal arts, struggled to identify an ideal career because they perceived themselves to be without adequate or sufficiently employable skills. Many participants strongly valued a measure of professional training that would be useful in the “real world” and accordingly placed a premium on selecting first jobs that would give them a set of professional skills that would be of more practical utility in their work lives.

CULTURE

The work culture, quality of colleagues, and overall fit between employee and employer were also important to top talent’s decision to pursue and retain a given career. Diversity, team-orientation, transparency, and learning were all mentioned as qualities of an ideal work culture. Many cited the high-talent, diverse student bodies of their undergraduate institutions as one of the most rewarding components of their college experience, and affirmed a strong desire to be surrounded by similar people in their careers. They feared they would not find this in nonprofits.

INFORMATION

The above categories are only relevant in as much as young people even know about potential opportunities in the social sector. We heard time and time again in our focus groups that young people don’t know what organizations are out there, don’t know how to judge which are quality, and don’t know how to navigate the confusing recruitment processes. Tom Tierney of Bridgespan shared, “This is not a supply problem, but [one of] information asymmetry.” Becca Bracy Knight of the Broad Residency noted, “There are people who are absolutely hungry to put their skills to use in something that is more meaningful to them... The demand is there.” The above constraints keep people from selecting jobs, but even those who seek to do this work are too frequently stymied by poor information about how to access jobs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Armed with a better understanding of drivers of career choices among top talent, we have identified critical low-to-no-cost strategies that impact organizations can implement to more effectively engage, retain, and build a market for top talent.

ENGAGE TOP TALENT

The first step is to ask. Throughout the course of our study, impact organizations identified this as a critical, yet undercapitalized, piece of the puzzle. As Rosanne Haggerty, CEO of Community Solutions, remarked in our interview, “My observations, after spending my career in this work, is that we have the wrong recruitment and staff development model.” The following steps would broaden the pipeline of talent entering the social sector.

Step Up Recruiting Efforts. Impact organizations need to adopt more active recruiting techniques. Many top consulting or finance firms recruit talent up to a year before their start date, which in turn creates a sense of security for top talent. It also forces talent to make a decision on an offer months in advance of when many impact organizations even begin posting a single job opportunity. In short, impact organizations need to match this timeline. Not all HR needs can be forecasted far in advance, but those that can must be publicized in the fall when top campus talent is assessing opportunities.

Many top impact organizations have found in-person recruitment efforts to be effective ways to compete for top talent with other organizations. Wendy Kopp, CEO of Teach for America, explained, “We have 40,000 one-on-one meetings every year.” In her experience, these in-person talks have been very successful in persuading individuals to apply and seriously consider opportunities.

At top organizations, recruiting top talent is each and every employee’s responsibility – from the CEO to the entry-level staff member. At technology and financial firms, staff members are routinely encouraged to leave the office to recruit in-person on campus, and senior staff dedicate 10-20 hours per week to recruiting during the formative years of the company. In the course of our research, such commitment was observed even in resource-constrained start-ups.

Tim Shriver, CEO of Special Olympics, commented, “I think we have lost the national messaging around asking young people. A lot of them don’t feel like anybody’s asking them to do something, that the offer isn’t there. No one is posting billboards. Are we, meaning me, out there in places where 20-35 year-olds hang out saying I need you? We’re desperate for your talent, ability, innovation, and ingenuity? No. the sector is not prominently enough saying, We Need You.” Based on our research, we strongly agree.

Leverage Internships. Too frequently impact organizations utilize interns simply as cheap labor. This approach leads to a huge missed opportunity to attract and assess top talent. Impact organizations should invest in internship programs that build leadership pipelines.

The private sector has learned this lesson. 50.5% of interns in the private sector were offered full-time permanent positions last year. In contrast, in 2007, only 6.6% of student interns (59,510 in total from the Student Career Experience Program and the Student Temporary Experience Program) were hired permanently.¹⁰

These internships should be paid. A significant portion of top talent is unable to consider unpaid internships. Recruiting for these internships should be taken as seriously as recruiting for full-time jobs, as a well-executed strategy will make these interns a talent pipeline. The internship period should be viewed as a pitch in both directions. Courting talent during their internship will encourage interns to consider careers with the organization in the future, which will cut down on the amount of investment organizations must make to find full-time top talent. Internships should not be wasted on young people who are not serious about working for the organization in the long run. This may yield strong short-term results, but it does not yield the talent pipeline so badly needed within the sector.

These strategies will open up impact careers to a higher percentage and broader range of top talent, allow impact organizations to compete with other organizations, and increase the return on investment in internships by building a real pipeline of top talent for the future.

Make It Selective. Top talent likes a challenge. They like prestige. For this reason, these individuals are more likely to apply to a competitive selection process. A process that requires early resume drops, work samples, early interviews, and multiple interviews can pique the interest of serious candidates and allow impact organizations to both build a robust community of prospective talent and select the best talent to meet their needs. Bobbi Silten of the GAP Foundation spoke to the importance of building such a community of prospective talent, noting that it can pay dividends over the long term as the firm enjoys consistent access to top talent through the years.

Clarify the Career Path. Impact organizations need to show recruits that they have a future beyond their first job in either that specific organization or within the field generally. Many young people pursue work in finance or consulting with the stated goal of transitioning to impact careers. Others avoid impact-oriented work because they perceive themselves as lacking the skills necessary for high performance and impact organizations as ill-equipped to provide the training and mentorship necessary for developing those skills.

As resources for professional development are limited among impact organizations, it is important to help talent adopt a “systems perspective” and highlight opportunities across the field that talent could consider in their career journey. Regularly present other opportunities available and encourage young talent to stay within the space to acquire those critical skills under the tutelage of leaders in other organizations or fellowship programs. Help employees find their next opportunity for personal growth, even if it is outside of their current organization. By encouraging “search” time, building strong alumni directories, and cultivating organizational norms that encourage senior leadership to make introductions on behalf of junior staff exploring their next career move, leaders can help ensure that more talent is retained within the sector. In

the long-run, this helps every organization: when recruiting talent, organizations operating in this context can point to the diverse and impressive activities in which their alumni are engaged. This contributes to the perception that employment with a given impact organization opens professional doors in the future.

RETAIN TOP TALENT

To improve retention and return on investment, top talent needs to be better leveraged in the workplace. They want to work in organizations that encourage and reward high-performance. When this is done well, such as in the military, talent will stay. As Admiral Michael Mullen said, “Our retention numbers in the military right now are staggering, for a lot of reasons. Not least is a willingness and desire to serve and be involved in something bigger than themselves.” But too few organizations create the context that retains talent. The following steps would have great impact to this end.

Foster Growth and Invest in Mentorship. While formal training programs can be costly, internal mentoring relationships can be created at low to no cost and can offer critical learning opportunities for young talent. Young talent will not grow—or come in the first place—if they are not provided ‘stretch’ opportunities. Top talent will be attracted to entry-level positions with greater opportunities for challenge and responsibility. This is an area in which dynamic, nimble impact organizations can differentiate themselves from many of their competitors.

Involve Top Talent in the Big Decisions of the Organization. Top talent is motivated by exposure to decision-making and high-level work. While this could be perceived as arrogance on the part of this generation, the bottom line is that including young talent in decision-making will not only increase top talent’s desire to serve, but it will also increase their retention and more rapidly develop their abilities.

Promote from Within. In order to build a robust pipeline of talent, we must more intentionally reward those who serve within our own or other impact organizations. Many organizations seek to hire individuals from finance or consulting because of the real or perceived skills they can bring to mission-driven work. However, this creates a disincentive for top talent to pursue mission-driven work early in their careers. Alison Powell of Bridgespan crystallized the problem: “Looking at the paths of foundation CEOs, most of the time they come from outside, from the private sector, according to the Center for Effective Philanthropy. So what’s the pipeline? Is there a destination for top talent entering those organizations? Will a young person get in, move up within the foundation or nonprofit, and then be knocked out by someone coming from the private sector? It’s a big concern.” Promoting from within the sector will help build a sustainable pipeline of top talent for impact organizations.

BUILD A MARKET FOR TOP TALENT

While these strategies can help practitioners more effectively bring and retain top talent in impact careers, there are a few key structural changes that could drive this impact even further.

Encourage More Investment in Solving this Challenge. While the strategies outlined above can be utilized at low to no cost, more investment is needed in human capital management in impact organizations. We seek to encourage universities, foundations, and even social sector rating systems to do their part to engage and retain top talent in impact careers.

One reason organizations do not invest in top talent is the misguided push from rating systems to keep overhead as low as possible. Well-meaning efforts seeking to provide guides for donors frequently measure the success of impact organizations, particularly nonprofits, through their overhead – how many dollars are spent on administration versus given directly to beneficiaries. This provides an incentive to pay little for staff, making it even harder to attract the best talent. Impact organizations must work to underscore how critical investment in the organization itself is to delivering the most effective services possible to beneficiaries. Stacey Stewart, Executive Vice President of Community Impact at United Way, argued this point by saying, “We don’t produce anything. We’re not like the private sector. We have no products, no machinery, no gadgets. It’s people. We are the asset.”

A few foundations stand as prominent outliers for their commitment to addressing this challenge. The Annie E. Casey Foundation and Omidyar Foundation are two such examples. The James Irvine Foundation emphasizes investing in leadership through The Fund for Leadership Advancement. The American Express Leadership Academy is another wonderful example of a foundation taking on this challenge. Finally, the fellowships offered by Echoing Green, Draper Richards, Ashoka, and others recognize the importance of talent. More funders must follow their lead.

Address Pay Differential and Debt. Student debt is a major driver of top talent’s inability to engage in impact careers. Leaders can and should be the chief advocates for favorable debt policies, particularly for those young people who opt for impact careers. Loan forgiveness programs and microfinance models can have a catalytic impact on the availability of top talent for positions at impact organizations.

During the recent Democratic Convention, former President Bill Clinton spoke to the vital importance of Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) to future public servants: “Think of it. [The PSLF] means no one will ever have to drop out of college again for fear they can’t repay their debt. And...it means that if someone wants to take a job with a modest income, a teacher, a police officer, if they want to be a small-town doctor in a little rural area, they won’t have to turn those jobs down because they don’t pay enough to repay their debt. Their debt obligation will be determined by their salary. This will change the future for young America.” While the PSLF can have a major impact on the careers and debt burdens of future public servants, top talent is currently grappling with inordinate, and often private, debt burdens. Privately organized programs such as SponsorChange deploy microfinance models to crowdsource funds to forgive the debt of young Millennials in public service.

We hope that these models will be emulated, strengthened, and scaled across the nation.

Expand National Service Opportunities. As the “front door” to impact for hundreds of thousands of young people, National Service is a critical investment in both the nation’s infrastructure and human capital. Research shows that those who participate in National Service programs are significantly more likely to engage in a career of public service.¹¹ However, despite demand upwards of a half million, there are only 82,000 AmeriCorps spots available each year and fewer than 40,000 of these spots are full-time positions.¹² Young leaders in our focus groups echoed this research - they found initial opportunities in public service extremely difficult to attain. The nation’s national service programs are still too small, and funding constraints make it difficult for national service programs to recruit and support community talent at the scale desired by the program leadership.

In light of the nation’s massive youth unemployment crisis and the generation of young people from all walks of life lining up to serve the nation, a significant expansion of National Service is needed. We seek to identify effective strategies for expanding and enhancing National Service opportunities.

Build a System to Better Match Top Talent with Top Impact Organizations. An “information gap” currently exists in the impact career recruiting process for young top talent. This gap prevents mutually beneficial matches in impact careers. A number of organizations are already working to remove this friction from the job placement process. Idealist.org is one shining example. ReWork is another promising model for for-profit social ventures. Commongood Careers, OnRamps, and others have developed impressive headhunter models for mid- and senior-level hires in impact organizations. We propose to build on these efforts and create a system to facilitate improved recruitment of junior talent among impact organizations.

Specifically, we envision creating a selective system that 1) identifies top talent from communities and campuses across the country, 2) identifies career placement opportunities at excellent impact organizations, and 3) facilitates optimal employee-employer matching.

At ICI, we are committed to advancing these efforts with our colleagues at impact organizations. We ask innovators, funders, and practitioners interested in collaborating on any of these ideas to contact us.

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