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Evolution of Leadership Roles at Family Foundations: Insights from the UK

Michele Fugiel Gartner, Tobias Jung, Alina M. Baluch; Centre for the Study of Philanthropy & Public Good, University of St Andrews Business School

This study explores the changing nature of the structures, processes, and norms of employment at philanthropic foundations. The categorization, examination and evolution of these internal dynamics is often overlooked in the field of foundation research. This gap contributes to the mystery surrounding foundations- their talent sourcing, culture, operations and ultimately how they give. Understanding the historical context behind these changes and their present-day manifestation can help shape more effective, equitable, and transparent field-level initiatives for philanthropic professionals.

This article delves into how foundation work changed through the years by focusing on the individual experiences of senior foundation leaders at UK family foundations.

Conclusion: Foundations are undergoing a shift from informal, amateur traditions toward sophisticated, codified and operationalized structures and influences. CEOs are navigating tensions between these influences amid competing expertise, inconsistent formalization, and a professionalizing context. These tensions have implications for how foundation work is undertaken and how practices may struggle to spread across the field.

[#FoundationProfessionals](#) [#PhilanthropyLeadership](#) [#NonprofitGovernance](#)
[#Professionalization](#) [#UKFamilyFoundations](#)

Background

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Context



- Before World War II, most private foundations operated with very few or no paid staff. **Recruitment** was often done through **personal connections** from various backgrounds. Professionals received minimal training and support, focused more on administrative tasks and left their roles sooner as most were not seeking long-term careers in philanthropy.
- From the 1960s, there was evidence of increasing staffing. In the 1980s, the Council on Foundations began publishing comprehensive manuals for private foundations. By the **1990s**, there was a clear **shift in perspectives as foundations started to move away from hiring just administrative roles towards more charitable sector experts**.
- The codification of foundation work is therefore a relatively recent phenomenon. Today, **foundation professionals operate in a professionalizing but fragmented context**. While organizational level research on the phenomenon exists, this study focuses on the entry-to-exit experiences of individual professionals at UK family foundations.

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Take aways & Learnings



- **Foundation roles are becoming more structured**, but inconsistencies in formalization persist. The interviews revealed **three underexplored themes** that today influence senior leadership and have potential for field-building initiatives: competing expertise, inconsistent field formalization, and a professionalizing context.
- Competing Expertise: While expectations for expertise are growing, many **professionals lack formal philanthropic training**. Ambiguity about role expectations and tensions with trustees remain: CEOs are increasingly expected to take strategic leadership roles rather than just executing trustee decisions; At the same time, CEOs face challenges in asserting their expertise.
- Inconsistent Field Formalization: Unlike other fields, there is still a lack of standardized career pathways, education, and certification. This creates both flexibility and unpredictability in leadership development. Hiring practices are still largely informal, with personal connections playing a key role. **This limits opportunities for diverse candidates and reinforces exclusivity in the sector.**
- A professionalizing but fragmented context: Private, public, and charitable sectors influence the adoption of strategic approaches. **While these professionalization efforts enhance expertise and legitimacy, they risk reinforcing traditional power structures and may unintentionally limit diversity and innovation** by favoring established networks and skill sets over alternative perspectives. Succession and turnover remain limited. Many professionals stay in the field long-term, making entry and advancement difficult for newcomers.
- Similar influences are observed in adjacent fields, indicating that **foundation professionals are not unique in facing these dynamics**. These insights are crucial for making philanthropy more transparent, fair, and effective, ensuring that leadership opportunities are accessible to a wider range of people. By understanding these dynamics, future efforts can better support foundation professionals, improve diversity in leadership, and create more structured pathways for career growth in the sector.

ERNOP Research Notes provide easy-to-read, practice-oriented summaries of academic articles on philanthropy and are written by practitioner experts. This ERNOP Research Note 2025/9 is published in March 2025 and has been written by Maliha Hasan, Director Foundation Relations at University of Toronto. More information can be found at www.ernop.eu.