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Not all Wine and Roses: Nonprofit Consulting as Nonprofit-Sector-Adjacent Work

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This article examines the growing role of consulting as a form of **nonprofit sector adjacent work**, focusing on how consultants influence nonprofit organizations at individual, organizational, and sector levels. The authors position **nonprofit consulting as both increasingly prevalent and insufficiently understood**, particularly when compared to the more established literature on consulting in the for-profit sector.

Drawing on job board data and interviews with nonprofit consultants, the study explores who nonprofit consultants are, why they enter this work, and how their presence is reshaping nonprofit practice. The article ultimately argues that **consulting is not simply a support function, but a structural feature of the sector** with implications for workforce composition, leadership pipelines, and sector norms.

[#nonprofitconsulting](#) [#nonprofitsector](#) [#consultancy](#)

Background

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Context



- Consulting is now **structurally embedded** in the nonprofit sector. It is not peripheral support. Consultants shape leadership decisions, strategy, and organizational direction, often in ways that are **not fully visible**.
- The field itself is influential but **loosely organized**. There are few shared standards, limited transparency (especially in executive recruitment), and **weak professional infrastructure**. This is despite the growing reliance on this work.
- Consulting is **reshaping the nonprofit workforce**. Experienced nonprofit professionals are moving into consulting for flexibility, autonomy, and compensation. Which is **supporting the sector while also drawing talent away from it**.
- The work is relational, complex, and often constrained. Consultants act as **facilitators rather than decision-makers**. They are navigating client dynamics, uneven influence, and unstable work conditions, far from the idealized version of the role.

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The authors provide recommendations for nonprofit managers, organizations, consultants and researchers:

Take aways & Learnings



Nonprofit Consulting as a System



Designed from Walk, et al. (2025) by MFGartner for
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- **For nonprofit managers: visibility and networks shape access.**

Senior roles are often filled through closed processes rather than public postings. Managing one's presence, across platforms, relationships, and search firms, is critical. Advancement is less open than it appears; access is mediated through visibility and connection.

- **For nonprofit organizations: consultants shape both process and perspective.**

Engagements follow structured phases, but involve interpretation, such as defining roles, surfacing tensions, and guiding decision-making. Expect candid, sometimes uncomfortable input. Consultants do more than execute tasks; they influence how organizations frame and address their challenges.

- **For nonprofit consultants and entrants: accessible field, uneven practice.**

Entry is open and experience-based, with learning largely on the job. The work combines technical skill with sustained relational demands across shifting client contexts. Growth in the field comes with variability, placing responsibility on individuals to navigate complexity without shared standards.

- **For researchers and the field: a largely unmapped space.**

There is limited understanding of who consultants are, how they operate, and how they shape outcomes. Risks include network-based homogeneity and workforce shifts. Without clearer mapping, a significant part of how the sector functions and evolves remains underexamined.

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 12/2025 is published in June 2026 and has been written by Dr. Michele Fugiel Gartner from MFGChange Consulting. More information can be found at www.ernop.eu.