

How to Find Public Interest Jobs and Nonprofit Jobs

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

If you have a passion for a certain issue, such as civil rights, the environment, helping the poor, or animals, public interest can be an excellent career choice. In public interest you will be working with others who share a passion for an issue like you do. In addition, you will be making a difference in your chosen field. People who work in the public interest find a tremendous sense of satisfaction that they are making a difference to their careers.

When you work for most companies, you are helping the company and its stock holders make money. For many people, this sort of work leaves them feeling bored and uninspired, and they would rather be working on things that advance a cause. If you have some very strong beliefs about the way the world should be, you might want to consider a public interest career.

Before you think about a public interest career, however, there are a few things you should be aware of.

- **The salaries in public interest careers are typically much lower than in the private sector.** In fact, the salaries may be "shockingly low" and barely enough to live on. People who go into public interest work do not do so for the money. Instead, they do so because they have a passion for the cause and want to work around people who share their passion. If money is your object, you should not be going into public interest work and would be better serving in a private industry. For most people in the public interest, they are happy as long as they are making enough money to survive.
- **When you work for a public interest organization, you need to share the beliefs of the people you are working for.** For example, if you are not against pollution, then you would probably have a very hard time fitting in with an organization that was fighting to keep the environment clean. You do not want to simply apply to a public interest job because you are looking for a job. Virtually, regardless of the job you hold in the public interest organization, if you do not share the "core beliefs" of the people you are working with, you will not fit in and, in all likelihood, will be ejected like a virus. You need to fit in with the people you are working with.
- **The training, feedback, and work environment inside of public interest organizations tend to be extremely unstructured—and in many cases nonexistent.** People are typically "thrown in" and expected to do whatever it takes to get the job done. There may be no performance reviews and the work environment may be chaotic. For example, you may be expected to do a lot of multitasking. It is not uncommon for lawyers who might make \$250,000 a year in the private sector, to be expected to clean the kitchen and answer phones in a public interest organization (while being paid \$30,000 a year). Because of limited budgets—and just the overall work climate—public interest organizations expect a lot of multitasking from the people who work there. If you are the sort of person who takes structure, titles, and so forth seriously, you should not be working inside of most public interest organizations.

Public Interest Jobs are Difficult to Get

One of the most interesting things about public interest work is just how competitive it is to get the jobs. Public interest organizations are generally populated by some of the smartest people around. It is not unusual to see a public interest organization almost exclusively made up of graduates of Ivy League schools. People who come from privileged backgrounds often feel the need to give something back and are not interested in traditional careers. People working in public interest organizations also tend to be quite passionate, which may be another reason for their historical high levels of achievement.

Finding public interest jobs can be difficult.

- **Many talented people are interested in public interest work. The people who go into public interest are typically not doing so for money.** They are often people who come out of privileged backgrounds and have strong educations. The pool of people you are competing against for these jobs is in many cases more "accomplished" than people who might be applying to companies paying several times more than the public interest organization for a similar job.
- **People who are interested in public interest work typically are very passionate about the subject matter.** When you are competing for public interest jobs, you are competing against others who typically have a similar level of passion. These people may have been volunteering and doing other work in a related field for years prior to applying to a public interest organization. In fact, many of these people are so committed that they would often do the work for free if they did not need money to live on.
- **Public interest jobs are not typically promoted well. Public interest and nonprofit entities typically have no budget for promoting their jobs.** Since public interest organizations are [typically] supported by donations, they try and keep their expenses as low as possible. Accordingly, they do not spend a lot of money advertising their open positions. This makes finding the public interest jobs very difficult.
- **Public interest organizations tend to have few openings at the most, and most of the openings they have, are filled "informally" and without advertising.** Public interest organizations have a network of volunteers at most times and lots of these volunteers are consistently asking the management and others in the public interest organization for jobs. Accordingly, the public interest organization typically has groups of people who are trying out at all times for various jobs. They are showing their commitment by working for free even prior to the organization having an opening. I would estimate that most public interest jobs are filled this way.

How to Get a Public Interest Job

If you are interested in working for a public interest organization, there are some things you need to do that are different from the way most people look for jobs.

- **You should apply to the public interest organizations you are interested in even if they do not have openings.** When you apply, it is generally a good idea to enclose a letter of a few pages explaining your enthusiasm for the cause the public interest organization supports. You should explain the reasons for your passion and any experience and volunteer work that you have that is relevant.
The reason you need to apply to public interest organizations even if they do not have openings is because many times the organizations do not even advertise their openings and fill them with their own volunteers. One of the most important components of getting a public interest job is having passion for the subject matter and if you look like you have that passion, the organization may bring you in. Identify the public interest organizations you are interested in and then apply.
- **You should apply regularly to the public interest organizations you are interested in. Continuing to apply shows your interest and passion for the organization.** The people you are applying to typically share your passion and like seeing people apply often. Unlike other employers, I do not believe it is bad to appear "aggressive" when applying to a public interest organization: Public interest organizations are themselves typically aggressive in advancing their causes, and like people who share this passion. In addition, public interest organizations are often quite disorganized (they have so many people doing multitasking) and may even miss your application when it comes in. If you have a particular interest in working for a certain public interest organization, it might make sense to apply as often as every few months. Persistence pays off when searching for a job in a public interest organization.
I recommend calling people who are receiving your application inside of a public interest organization, and sharing your interest in working there, and establishing a rapport with them. I know someone who had to do this for over 10 years before getting his dream job with a public interest organization. This is important. When you speak with the people inside of the public interest organization, you should also ask them if they have any volunteer opportunities. This shows your commitment as well and makes you stand out. People inside of public interest organizations are less likely to be annoyed by your calling and pestering than a private employer in my opinion. They want to see your commitment to what they do: Remember, you will be taking a very low salary in exchange for working on a matter that you consider very important. Commitment is what it is all about.
- **If you are interested in working in the public interest you need to get involved in any organization that deals with your cause and network with people there.** If you are interested in the environment, for example, you would want to get involved in environmental organizations as a volunteer and/or go to their environmental-related talks and events. You want to network and get to know people who are involved in the cause that you are interested in. Remember that most public interest jobs are filled informally. Most public interest causes are made up of "informal groups" who share an interest in the cause. You want to get involved in the community and be seen as a contributor.

There are two methods that I recommend to find public interest employers and jobs. First, I recommend simply identifying the public interest employers you are interested in, and applying to them regardless of whether they have openings. Second, I recommend visiting various websites where you can locate these jobs.

Lists of Public Interest Organizations You Can Apply To

<http://search.dmoz.org/cgibin/search?search=Public+Interest+or+Non+Profit+or+Charity+or+Philanthropy>

<http://search.dmoz.org/cgibin/search?search=Public+Interest+or+Non+Profit+or+Charity+or+Philanthropy>

http://charity.lovetoknow.com/List_of_Nonprofit_Organizations

<http://www.hud.gov/offices/oir/oirpublicinterestgroups.cfm>

List of Public Interest Job Sites

<http://www.PublicInterestCrossing.com> (aggregator of job sites and jobs)

<http://www.nonprofit-jobs.org/>

<http://www.nonprofitcareer.com/>

<http://www.Hound.com> (aggregator of employers including public interest employers)

<http://www.idealists.org>

<http://www.dotorgjobs.com/>

<http://www.hscareers.com/>

<http://www.hscareers.com/>

<http://www.jobsgopublic.com/>

<http://www.opportunityknocks.org/>

<http://www.ncpg.org/pals/?section=11s>

Conclusions

Working in the public interest can be extremely rewarding. In fact, very few people who go into the public interest ever go back to working in the private sector. I hope the suggestions and links above are of assistance to you in your career.

THE LESSON

Public Interest and nonprofit jobs can be excellent career choices if you are passionate about a certain issue, such as civil rights, the poor, or the environment. Public Interest jobs will place you among colleagues who share your interest, and enable you to make a difference in your chosen field. Public Interest work can be intensely gratifying, so much so that few people who enter such jobs ever return to the private sector.