

# Building a career in schools' fundraising

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## The Sector

In the context of increasing pressure on school budgets across the country, philanthropy is becoming ever more important to the sector. This isn't just the case in schools: universities, charities, and arts organisations are all facing the same squeeze on their resources. As a result, we have seen a huge growth in the number of schools looking to start up or expand external relations, fundraising and alumni relations departments.

It is traditional for independent schools to have some form of fundraising and/or alumni relations programme. This sometimes comes under the remit of 'external relations' but increasingly schools see the value in having a separate department wholly dedicated to 'development'. Interestingly, there has been a rapid rise in the state sector looking to establish philanthropic income streams to help counteract the extensive government funding cuts being imposed. More and more state schools are seeing the value in having dedicated members of staff for raising major gifts from high net-worth individuals (often parents and alumni), trusts and foundations, and even corporates. As these schools anticipate further cuts to funding, this looks set to continue.

Schools are unique places to work. As well as the exceptionally rewarding environment of providing education for young people, every school has its own values, ethos and sense of community. Schools are also often able to offer better employment benefits than other organisations, ranging from flexible working arrangements to fee remission options. These additional benefits are becoming increasingly common as schools seek to attract the very best candidates.

At Execucare, we have noticed that the shortage of experienced fundraising professionals across all sectors has led to a job seekers' market: this is therefore an excellent time to become a fundraiser.

## Finding the Right Role

When considering a first step towards or a next move in your schools' fundraising career, it is crucial to think about how your experience matches the prerequisite skill set, and how you can stand out above other candidates. Schools will provide a person specification as part of the job description for any advertised position; in order to secure an interview it will be necessary to demonstrate that you have the required experience, or be able to explain that your skills are transferable. We always advise candidates to establish whether or not the school is open to considering transferable experience, before putting time and effort into an application.

There is an unprecedented demand for fundraising and alumni relations professionals with strong track records of raising philanthropic gifts, and so gaining experience in similar not-for-profit sectors might be worth considering. For example, charities, the arts, and higher education institutions often have large and established fundraising offices where valuable

experience can be gained. After all, being a good fundraiser is about the ability to build long-term relationships, being adaptable, independent, persuasive and reliable, and having a discernable and infectious passion for the cause.

There are also practical things to consider. If possible, being flexible on location would be advantageous to your job search; schools are spread across the length and breadth of the country, and even internationally. If you do not live locally to a role you are applying for, you may want to make it clear that you are prepared to relocate. What salary are you prepared to accept? We always advise candidates to be clear and upfront about salary expectations from the beginning, in order to ensure that there is a match between this expectation and the school's ability to meet this. Some schools may not have the capacity to negotiate above their advertised range.

At Execucare, we get to know our clients very well and every school has its own individual ethos; you will need to share in this in order to represent the school appropriately to potential donors. You will need to feel comfortable working with the leadership team as well as the Governing Board, and build relationships across the school community: staff, parents and alumni. This takes time; schools are looking for candidates who can demonstrate 'stickability' and stay in post for a significant period of time. It is therefore necessary to find somewhere where you feel you will be supported, challenged and fulfilled in your role.

## **Getting the Top Jobs**

Traditionally, the very 'top job' within education fundraising departments is the 'Director of Development' role. Different schools have different organisational structures, but generally this person reports directly to the Head and is answerable to the Governing Body. Whilst education fundraising is definitely a job seekers' market, there are a limited number of these very senior positions, particularly as some schools still have fairly young programmes and small departments.

With this in mind, it is necessary to demonstrate that you can stand out from the crowd. Don't expect to 'come in at the top' without previous experience in fundraising. Most importantly, be sure to have demonstrable examples of the amounts you have raised in previous roles. What was your strategy? How did you perform against targets? Do you have any examples of where you were able to be particularly innovative or creative? Many of the top development professionals in the sector have grown their own programmes and teams from scratch: could you do the same?

Don't be afraid to seek specialist advice. Finding fundraising professionals is Execucare's specific area of expertise and we keep in touch with everyone that we place. These individuals go on to build strong teams and establish successful programmes. Please don't hesitate to get in touch with us to discuss questions or concerns about a specific application, or to seek guidance more generally about finding the right role for your skill set and experience.