Are you looking for more from your future career than just a steady income? Do you find the traditional employment track unappealing? Do you want the chance to make a real impact in your community or even the world? Then a career in the nonprofit sector may be the answer.

What Is a Nonprofit?
Nonprofits are organizations that promote a cause or provide a public service and are granted tax-exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service under section 501 of the Federal Tax Code. Nonprofits are often at the forefront of advocacy, social issues and scientific research. Some manage and promote the arts, culture or even history in communities across the nation. Political and labor groups are nonprofit organizations, as are professional and trade organizations. The broad category of nonprofits also includes non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that provide critical services to areas affected by war or natural disasters. Some promote environmental issues on an international scale.

With all these categories, it’s no wonder that over 1.5 million nonprofit organizations in the United States employ 8.7 million people or 5.9% of the total workforce. Amy Butler from the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that, “Health professionals, educators, other professionals, health technicians, administrative support workers, and service occupations account for the majority of paid workers in the nonprofit sector,” in her 2009 “Wages in the Nonprofit Sector” article.

Is a Nonprofit Right for You?
Most nonprofit employees are not motivated by money or a prestigious title. Instead, they find fulfillment in a career that contributes to the welfare of others or advances a particular cause. Depending on your interests and beliefs, working for a particular nonprofit can be both challenging and fulfilling. You often work with people who share your passion about an issue or cause. And there are usually endless opportunities in entry-level positions where related experience is not required.

But working for a nonprofit is not all bliss and passion, nor is it an escape from work-related stress. Nonprofit employees may not have to meet sales goals or make money for their owners or shareholders, but they are still held accountable for their decisions by their funding sources and constituents. Resources tend to be limited for staff development, bonuses or the latest equipment. Nonprofit workers must learn to work effectively with a broad range of people, including their clients, elected officials, volunteers, donors and local civic leaders.

Top management is usually held accountable to a board of advisors or board of directors. Instability in funding is often a frustrating factor among nonprofits, as it must be sought each year from a variety of sources. Today, receiving grants is becoming more difficult. Grantors are demanding increased accountability and results in exchange for their financial support.

Opportunities
Take a look at the current job openings in the nonprofit sector and you will see a broad range of jobs. Positions with arts organizations can include curators, writers, performing artists and event planners. Health agencies often hire counselors, researchers and lobbyists. All nonprofit companies require the services of grant writers, fundraisers, accountants, information technology workers and office managers. While idealism and passion may be the fuel to energize an organization, solid administrative skills including writing, strong interpersonal skills, multiple business and political contacts, and good business acumen are highly valued and required to ensure the stability and longevity of an organization.

But Will I Earn Enough?
Because of the wide variety of agencies in staff size, organization budget and scope of activities, it is nearly impossible to provide a salary range based on position. For example, the salary of the executive director of the Red Cross would be six figures, while the executive director of a two-person organization whose services are narrow and local may be in the low 30s. In general, the larger an organization and the wider its scope, the greater the salary—though it may still be below the national average. Career advancement is also more likely within a larger organization.

How and Where to Find Nonprofit Positions
If you are interested in working for a nonprofit organization, talk to others in the field to help you decide if the nonprofit sector is right for you. Ask about the types of people typically hired and the types of jobs available. Find out what makes the field satisfying—and frustrating. Ask about pay, advancement and the skills most highly sought. Read public literature about different agencies, and serve as a volunteer with an agency of interest to you to become acquainted with the staff and the agency’s services. Volunteer positions sometimes become paid positions or provide you with solid leads and the “inside track” to paid positions.

When you are ready to apply for specific positions, use local resources such as the United Way, your local newspaper and the Internet, using the key word nonprofit. Opportunity Knocks (www.opportunityknocks.org) provides a comprehensive print and online version of nonprofit job opportunities throughout the United States. Many organizations have their own websites that list job openings. Wherever you choose to look, a job with a nonprofit organization can be a great way to start your career—and do something good for your community.