

Encore talent meets the citizen sector

Commentary by Diana Wells

Diana Wells is president of Ashoka, the world's largest association of leading social entrepreneurs. A nonprofit organization, Ashoka has 200 employees worldwide.

At Ashoka we believe that all people can be changemakers when they grant themselves full permission to fix the key elements of our society that are broken. Yet we know that the most common barrier to more people doing so is the lack of permission they give themselves to make this life change—a barrier frequently related to preconceived notions of which kind of people drive change at which times in their lives.

Fortunately, more and more people are challenging these preconceived notions. As Marc Freedman argues in his insightful book, *Encore: Finding Work That Matters in the Second Half of Life*, a new life map is emerging, one that allows today's 30-year-olds to see multiple careers stretching out for decades and today's 60-year-olds to see 15 years or more of productive, engaged work ahead. The advent of the encore career is indeed a cornerstone in unlocking changemaking for Americans across a wide range of ages.

Another historical piece is falling into place as well. A new and vibrant sector is emerging to attract many encore career professionals and entrepreneurs and vie for their talent. In America and in many parts of the world, the emergence of the “citizen”—or social purpose—sector is creating an enormous shift in the way people organize themselves to tackle some of the world's most intractable human and environmental challenges.

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The last 30 years demonstrate this global phenomenon. For example, Brazil had fewer than 5,000 citizen organizations in 1980; just 20 years later, it had over a million. A similar recent surge is evident in societies across the developed and developing world. Once a demoralized sector with a reputation for inefficiency, the citizen sector is gaining in productivity and vibrancy, and now attracts the best talent—from recent university graduates to mid-career and encore career professionals and entrepreneurs.

Citizen sector employers are uniquely equipped to deliver to those entering encore careers what they are looking for—the chance to plug into truly meaningful work, from staffing a new energy sector to mentoring new citizens. And there are so many roles and jobs to fill—from creating new organizations to working within existing ones, from marketing to mobilizing to management.

Employers in this sector also stand to reap enormous benefits from this new talent pool. Let's look at Ashoka as an example.

As an organization devoted to transforming societies by supporting entrepreneurial, sector-bridging approaches to social change, Ashoka has designed a focused talent-searching strategy. Knowing the power of entrepreneurs to create systemic change, we are building a team of entrepreneurs from all different sectors and walks of life.

We seek out candidates who have been successful entrepreneurs or innovators within existing institutions and are now transitioning to encore careers—some are in their middle forties, others are later in life. They have been management consultants, business entrepreneurs, finance professionals, and so on, but all share the quality of having started or built a significant movement, innovation or institution. Here, they find a high-quality community of peers, allowing them to have greater impact than they might have as solo actors in the world. And Ashoka gains from the wealth of perspective, talent, and life as well as professional experience that these individuals bring. The cross-generational empathy that encore career entrepreneurs bring has provided Ashoka with critical insights to team-building, scaling institutions, and social change processes—to give just a few important examples.

Ashoka is hardly the only citizen sector employer recognizing and capitalizing on the trend toward encore careers. Citizen sector employers are harnessing encore talent for a host of critical roles—mentoring young entrepreneurs starting their first ventures, training a new workforce to retrofit homes for solar, serving as nurses or doctors in inner cities here and conflict zones abroad, and teaching math and science in public schools.

It's becoming clear to many employers that tapping encore talent offers a key competitive advantage as encore talent increases employers' efficacy, extends their reach and impact, and strengthens a team to deliver a desired result. This has certainly been Ashoka's experience—and one that doesn't surprise us as it so clearly fits with our commitment to build a world where everyone is a changemaker. ■

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