

EXPERT TIPS TO HELP YOU AVOID COSTLY MISTAKES

101 BIGGEST MISTAKES NONPROFITS MAKE

And How You
Can Avoid Them



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MISTAKES #2-#9

Not Being Candidate-Centric in Your Recruitment & Talent Management

By Jeff Rothman

The long-term success of the nonprofit sector depends heavily on its ability to attract and retain first-class talent. According to the Society for Human Resource Management, nearly 60 % of human resource professionals over the next decade see their greatest challenge to be in recruiting, retaining, and training the next generation of organizational leadership.

Outstanding talent is a limited commodity, especially in today's economic environment. Nonprofits are competing directly with the private sector for top talent. The data shows that for-profit enterprises are more likely to invest in achieving success in talent acquisition and talent management. Nonprofits that fail to improve their talent practices face the following unfavorable outcomes:

- Increased recruiting and recruiting costs
- Lost productivity
- Lost fundraising revenue while a frontline fundraising position is vacant

- Lower morale
- Increased turnover
- Decreased collaboration and teamwork
- Inability to scale up to meet increased fundraising needs
- Higher premiums for unemployment compensation

A nonprofit cannot achieve overall sustainability until it first achieves talent sustainability.

It's easier to appreciate the importance of talent acquisition and talent management to the long-term success of your organization if you consider how the dynamics of today's talent market impact your approach to them.

The Talent Market

The market for top talent is always competitive, but today's historically low rate of unemployment makes it even more so. As of September 2018, our country's unemployment rate had fallen to 3.6%. Drill down a little deeper and you'll find that it's only 2% among the professional and managerial sector!¹

Companies and nonprofits of all shapes and sizes are finding it more difficult to attract and retain high-impact talent. Unfortunately, not many are adapting their hiring and talent management practices in response to the challenge. They continue to utilize a talent surplus strategy when a talent surplus doesn't exist.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that the talent shortage is only temporary. Demographic data clearly points to an ongoing challenge. Addressing this reality may require a fundamental rethinking of your approach to talent acquisition and talent management. It would be a mistake to pretend you can get by

without making changes. Do you really want to take that risk with your organization's long-term sustainability? It's vital that your talent practices are aligned to these market forces.

Candidate-Centric Talent Practices

The talent shortage requires that you adopt a candidate-centric approach to your talent practices. This means increasing your focus on the value proposition you present to prospective and current employees. It means that what you can do to advance their career interests and aspirations should be a foundational element of your talent practices, and in the rest of this chapter, you'll get some tips on how to get there.

If you've already adopted a donor-centric approach to fundraising, this shouldn't be an unfamiliar concept. You appreciate the importance of connecting with your donors on an emotional level and creating meaningful relationships with them. You can take the same approach with your talent practices by putting as much effort into acquiring and retaining high-impact talent as you do with high-value donors.

Yet most nonprofits are not responding to this challenge. Here are a some of the ways in which they're getting left behind.

MISTAKE #2

Relying Too Heavily on Active Job Seekers

It's useful to think of the talent pool as containing two basic kinds of candidates: active job seekers and passive job seekers. Active job seekers are the ones who are scouring job boards,

fielding calls from recruiters, and sharing their résumé with anyone willing to take a look. Some might be looking for good reasons—perhaps they are underperforming and in danger of losing their jobs. Most studies show that they comprise a minority of the overall talent pool but are the easiest to attract. You shouldn't rely on them as your primary source of candidates.

Passive job seekers are the people who are not actively looking but are open to making a change if someone taps them on the shoulder with the right opportunity. Most experts agree they represent a majority of the talent pool and are more likely to be solid performers who are progressing well in their careers and are relatively happy where they are. With unemployment at historic lows and more job openings than highly qualified, active job seekers, passive candidates can be costly to ignore. Recruiting them requires a fundamentally different approach than you'd use with active job seekers.

Here are three suggestions on how to address that challenge:

- **Network, network, network:** Join professional organizations and become active in them. Attend meetings, speak at conferences, and get to know your colleagues. Ask around to see if they know any rising stars who might just be ready to take their next step, even when you don't have an opening.
- **Get active on social media:** As we'll cover in the next item, don't rely too much on job postings. While they can be effective with active job seekers, they don't work as well with passive candidates. Leverage social media! Promote your openings on Facebook and Twitter, in your LinkedIn news feed, on your blog, etc. Send messages to people in your network promoting the opportunity and asking for referrals.

If you have in-house social media expertise in your organization, get their help!

- Consider engaging a headhunter: Attracting passive job seekers requires a unique set of skills that are usually outside the expertise of your in-house HR team. This kind of recruiting requires selling skills, and that's where engaging a professional, experienced recruiter who specializes in your industry can be a good investment. Make sure you find one who will proactively reach out to the right candidates and effectively represent your value proposition. They'll increase the size and quality of your talent pipeline for mission-critical positions.

Takeaway: With a multi-prong approach to recruiting, you'll enhance the size and quality of your talent pool and increase your chance of making a better-quality hire.

MISTAKE #3

Absence of a Compelling Employer Brand

A nonprofit's brand describes your value proposition with stakeholders and the public. Your employer brand describes your reputation as a place to work. It encompasses your organization's mission, values, culture, and personality. Most importantly, it's what makes your organization a great place to work. A clearly defined, compelling employer brand will make your organization a magnet for top talent and should

permeate your entire hiring process. Everyone involved in the interviewing process must understand the brand, embrace it, and be able to showcase it with candidates. It'll also pay for itself—there's a LinkedIn study showing that companies with strong employer brands have half the cost per hire and a quarter less turnover than companies with poor or no employer brands.²

A strong employer brand:

- Makes a clear statement of your organization's values, the importance of your mission, and your commitment to the development and well-being of your team.
- Avoids hyperbole or overly generalized phrases like "our employees are our most important asset."
- Demonstrates a clear commitment to professional development (top performers are attracted to organizations that are sincerely committed to their long-term career growth).
- Lets them know you recognize that the employee/employer relationship is a two-way street.

Takeaway: Failing to invest in the creation of a strong employer brand will make it harder to attract and retain outstanding talent. If you look at it as an essential investment in your organization's future, you'll be better positioned to attract the best and the brightest at a lower cost for years to come!

MISTAKE #4

You Confuse Job Postings with Job Descriptions

Let's make one thing clear right up front: job descriptions are NOT the same as job postings. They are NOT interchangeable. Here's why.

Job descriptions are internal documents that capture the responsibilities, authority, complexity, judgment, and working conditions associated with a job. They are not intended to create excitement and motivate high-quality talent to apply or learn more. They represent what you, the employer, need from the person in that role. They are exceptionally boring and definitely not candidate-centric.

Job postings are advertisements meant to attract qualified job applicants. They are candidate-centric because they:

- Connect with your audience by answering the question: “What’s in it for me?”
- Convey excitement about your organization and the impact they’ll make
- Create interest and attract better talent
- Address how you will help the candidate advance professionally and make a difference in your organization’s success

How to Make your Job Ads Candidate-Centric

Not surprisingly, candidate-centric job ads incorporate many of the same principles as donor-centric fundraising. For example, it's important to:

- **Know your audience:** Put yourself in the shoes of the people you want to attract, and understand what might motivate them to work for your organization. Be able to help them answer the question: “What’s in it for me?”
- **Be purpose driven:** For a purpose-driven candidate, doing work that’s meaningful is at least as—if not more—important than money or advancement. Make sure they know what impact their success will have on your organization.
- **Create compelling copy:** Give the same attention to writing job ads as you would fundraising copy. Make sure they grab the reader’s attention, inspire them about your mission, and convey how your culture makes your organization a great place to work. Repurposing a position description as a job ad does little to create a sense of excitement. Avoid doing it at all costs.
- **Focus on professional advancement:** Be prepared to talk about how working for you in this role will be a benefit to them professionally.

Here’s an example of a compelling candidate-centric job ad with strong brand identity:

Director of Integrated Direct Response Fundraising

Work. Serve. Thrive.

Imagine a place where your talent can make a meaningful difference in people’s lives. Working at xxxxxxxx is a uniquely rewarding experience in which our employees

work together as vital parts of a much larger mission. We are innovative, mission-focused, diverse, collaborative, values-driven, and focused on results.

We are a national nonprofit organization and the nation's leading xxxxxxxx charity. Located in the heart of downtown xxxxxx, our mission is to xxxxxxxxxx through a nationwide network of xxxxxxxxxx, and engage our country in the fight to xxxxxxxx.

What You'll Do

We need an experienced direct response fundraiser to lead a team of eager, talented, up-and-coming fundraising professionals who want to learn and grow, and keep your crack team focused and humming along.

Here are a few examples of the things you'll be doing on any given day:

- *Oversee the many details involved in developing and launching integrated, multi-channel campaigns.*
- *Distill direct mail, email, web, advertising, and social campaign results into the important lessons that could change how a campaign performs.*
- *Draft the best fundraising and advocacy direct mail, email, social, and web copy in the business.*
- *Manage your teams up and down to make sure they perform at a high level and have opportunities to continually develop their skills.*
- *Come up with about 14 new ideas for petitions, quizzes, fundraising, ads, video, implanted chips, Google Glass, or some other new technology or strategy that's rolling around your giant brain.*

- *Do your part to help us run smoothly and pitch in wherever you can to advance our mission.*

And then there's you . . .

- *You've benched your share of online advocacy and fundraising programs for nonprofits.*
- *Have 5+ years of fundraising experience under your belt.*
- *Want to be the best. You thrive in a fast-paced environment with tight deadlines, and are always thinking two steps ahead of everyone else.*
- *Not afraid to speak your mind—you continually suggest new ideas or ways to improve on old ideas or processes.*
- *Detail oriented! There are a lot of details. You are the person who finds the typo no one else sees.*
- *Wildly curious about what's next in the world-changing business, and game to help us get there.*
- *A true believer. You want to change the world. You are hopeful and helpful and ready to keep your boots on the ground and eye on the prize.*

Of course . . .

We are an equal opportunity employer and all applicants will be considered. We are committed to a diverse and inclusive workplace where we learn and work together to change the world. We are strengthened by our staff's diversity, including race and ethnicity, social class, national origin, culture, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, language, and so much more. We strongly

encourage folks from underrepresented backgrounds to apply. We love, respect, and welcome you!

Takeaway: When you write job ads, think like a fundraiser. Create a sense of excitement and accurately convey a sense of your employer brand. You'll not only attract better candidates, but in the long run you'll also improve your employer brand and continue to attract higher-quality candidates.

MISTAKE #5

Falling Victim to Rockstar Syndrome

You can't complain about "talent shortages" when you stubbornly wait for the perfect candidate. Are all of the items on your long list of "essential requirements" really essential? Rockstars are in high demand and the market for them is highly competitive. They know they're a scarce commodity and can afford to be pickier about who they work for; they also tend to hold out for more money. Once you hire them, they want to be constantly challenged and learning, and if they aren't, they'll soon be looking for their next job (which they'll find quickly) and leaving you in the lurch.

Rockstars are not essential for every position, so why do some hiring managers seem fixated on them? The primary reason is risk avoidance—a concern that a poor hire will reflect poorly on them. Recruiting is an art and a science. It's impossible to expect every hire to turn into a rockstar, and probably not necessary. Realistically evaluate where they're essential and

worth waiting for. Otherwise, focus on hiring people who have the potential to achieve rockstar status, and invest in their professional development. You'll fill positions more quickly, at a lower cost, and be able to invest more time providing the leadership and mentoring your team needs to contribute at a high level.

Takeaway: Rigidly holding out for rockstars will lengthen your recruiting process and cost you money. Be open to people who don't match up with every "requirement," but have the smarts and pluck to outperform that rockstar you think you can't do without. If you're realistic, you'll find your next rockstar, who—with a little bit of training and a reasonable amount of support—will exceed expectations.

MISTAKE #6

Providing a Poor Candidate Experience

Candidate experience has to do with how job seekers perceive and react to the interactions they have with you at every stage of your hiring process. Poor candidate experience will frustrate job seekers and negatively impact their interest in your organization, no matter how passionate they are about your mission. People who are more anxious to find a new job (active job seekers) might show more patience with your disfunction in this area, but those who can afford to be more selective will go elsewhere.

To improve candidate experience, take a hard look at your hiring process and try to avoid the following pitfalls:

- Long and redundant application process: After uploading their résumé, do you ask applicants to manually enter the same info on another form?
- Being inconsiderate of their time: Treat candidates like any other valued visitor to your office. Don't schedule their interview at 9 am, make them fight rush hour traffic to get there on time, then make them wait for 30 minutes before ushering them into your office.
- Asking irrelevant questions: The best candidates will expect you to ask insightful questions that demonstrate a clear vision for their role and what you'll be expecting them to accomplish. Otherwise, they'll assume you didn't put much time into preparing for the interview.
- Leaving them hanging: Failing to follow up within 48 hours after an interview, then regularly at a good cadence, sends a message about your organization's culture that can be damaging.
- Low-balling an offer: Candidates will think you don't fairly value their skills and experience. Even if they accept, you'll be starting off on the wrong foot and make it more likely they'll leave as soon as someone offers them more money.

Takeaway: Outstanding talent is tough to find. Poor candidate experience will cause the best candidates to question how well-managed your organization really is, and make it more likely they'll withdraw from your hiring process, leaving you with fewer, less-desirable choices.

MISTAKE #7

An Inefficient Hiring Process

This might be one of the most overlooked, least understood, and most problematic recruiting challenges. As with rockstar syndrome, it's symptomatic of an imbalance between how you view the risk of a bad hire versus the potential cost of losing outstanding talent. Putting too much emphasis on avoiding mistakes can lead to a hiring process that involves too many steps, too many people, and drags on incessantly. There are many reasons why this can be extremely problematic:

- The best talent will drop out, causing a decline in the quality of the people you hire: A slow, methodical interviewing process won't necessarily result in better hires—it may actually do the opposite. When a highly qualified passive job seeker decides to interview for your opening, it's likely they're also looking at other opportunities. Someone will snap them up quickly, thereby diminishing the quality of your talent pool.
- Vacancies remain open for longer than necessary: The economic damage caused by having a fundraising position vacant longer than necessary results in lost revenue and productivity that will be difficult to recover.
- Salary costs will increase: Top performers are likely to receive multiple offers, especially in a tight labor market. If you offer them a position before other organizations have had a chance to bid on them, you're more likely to hire them with little or no haggling.

- You'll become known as a slow decision-maker: Your hiring process provides a window into your corporate culture. If it drags on for weeks, you will appear indecisive, bureaucratic, and risk-averse. Top performers tend to be fast and accurate decision-makers and are more likely to gravitate toward companies that demonstrate the same.
- Candidates will lose interest: Keeping candidates engaged and excited about your opportunity is vital to your recruiting success because their level of interest will inevitably decrease as your hiring process drags on, making it more likely they'll wind up working elsewhere. It also increases the possibility that they'll receive a promotion, raise, or counteroffer from their current employer and withdraw their candidacy.

Takeaway: A slow and cumbersome hiring process is costly. It'll turn off top talent, cause them to withdraw from your interviewing process, and result in you repeatedly starting searches over from scratch.

MISTAKE #8

Failing to Address Compensation Early in the Process

Have you ever had a candidate turn down your offer because the salary was way less than they expected? Wouldn't it have been better to avoid wasting time and resources on someone

who probably wasn't going to accept your offer in the first place?

Don't wait until the end of the interviewing process to have a frank discussion about money. The first time to have that conversation is at the completion of your initial qualifying interview, prior to deciding whether you want to move the candidate to the next step. Don't be bashful about reconfirming your understanding of their compensation needs at each stage of the interviewing process.

Here's an example of how to open that dialog:

“Before we go any further, let's make sure we're at least in the right ballpark with money. If we decide this is the right job for you, what do you think is a fair salary?”

If the amount they give you is outside your range, you don't have to accept it at face value. The candidate may not have an accurate feel for their market value and/or doesn't want to make the mistake of asking for too little and leave money on the table. Here's how you can follow up:

“So, if we make it all the way to the offer stage and you are confident this is the right opportunity for you, are you saying you won't accept any offer below that amount?”

Perhaps the candidate will show some flexibility. If not, it's time to move on. But if the two of you are close, it may be worth going to the next step.

And don't forget about benefits. You may be able to compensate for a less-attractive salary by offering more generous benefits (lower out-of-pocket costs for medical insurance, higher retirement plan match, more paid time off, free parking, etc.). Make sure you get candidates to evaluate

your offer based on the total compensation package, not just salary.

MISTAKE #9

Avoiding a Discussion About Counteroffers

You've finally found the perfect candidate and offered them the position. Then, even though they've confidently told you they love your opportunity and are committed to leaving the other organization, they decide to turn you down and stay put. While it's impossible to completely avoid this situation, it's important to start assessing the risk during the first interview.

First, make sure you clearly understand why the candidate wants to make a change. If money is high on their list, proceed with caution. In those situations, the easiest way for an employer to keep someone from leaving is by increasing their salary. If they mention lack of advancement opportunities, a poor relationship with their boss, or dissatisfaction with the organizational culture, you're in a much stronger position because those issues are more difficult to fix quickly, and candidates will be less likely to react positively to a counteroffer. Listen carefully for any indication that they may not be serious about making a change. As with compensation, address this during the first interview and revisit it at each stage of the interviewing process.

Here are a few suggestions on how to initiate the conversation:

“Have you talked with your boss about those issues? Have they been addressed to your satisfaction?” (If

the candidate hasn't discussed their concerns with a supervisor, it could be a red flag. Consider suggesting that they have that conversation before you go any further.)

“Besides more money, is there anything they can do to keep you from leaving?”

“What if they offer you more money? How much would it take?”

“Have you given any thought to how your boss might react when you tell them you're resigning?”

“Have you thought about how you'd react to a counter-offer?”

Takeaway: Don't wait until late in the interviewing process to assess the risk of a counteroffer. Do it early and often. You'll minimize the risk of investing valuable time with candidates who will ultimately disappoint, putting you in the position of starting your search over from scratch.

TALENT MANAGEMENT /TALENT SUSTAINABILITY

What is Talent Management and Why Does it Matter?

Talent management is an ongoing, organizational process that optimizes a nonprofit's ability to attract, develop, and retain its most important employees. An effective talent management strategy protects your investment in key employees, makes it easier to recruit new ones, reduces turnover, will make you more effective at competing with the private sector for skilled,

in-demand talent, and enables you to scale more easily. In short, it is vital to your long-term success and sustainability.

High-achieving employees are always challenging to recruit and retain, but even more so in today's competitive talent market. The demand for talent in the private sector will make it increasingly difficult for nonprofits to hold onto their best employees—top performers are always in demand and often have multiple career options available to them.

Most nonprofits aren't investing in developing a retention strategy.³ The longer you wait, the more expensive it'll be to fix and the longer it'll take. Furthermore, doing nothing will inevitably impact retention, morale, individual performance, recruiting costs, and your ability to develop future leaders. While these may not appear as a line item on your 990, they'll eventually impact your long-term financial health.

Putting talent management front-and-center will require the full commitment of everyone in your organization, from senior leadership and your board down to front-line managers.

Here's a list of 6 steps you can take to build an effective talent management infrastructure and create a more sustainable and stable workforce. If you're doing some of them already, even on an ad-hoc basis, you're off to a good start. Keep adding more pieces and look for ways to turn them into standardized, organization-wide policies and procedures. If you're behind the curve, start small. Pick the most attainable, impactful items and start building momentum.

6 Ways to Improve Your Talent Management Practices

1. Onboard More Effectively

A comprehensive onboarding program offers a way for new hires to become fully immersed in your culture and creates a

sense of belonging. It enables new hires to become productive more quickly, reduces retention, increases performance, and improves your employer brand.

Onboarding is much more than new hire orientation. It's a deliberate strategy that accelerates a new hire's understanding of high-level strategies, current projects, and organizational culture. It also helps them start off on the right foot with developing effective working relationships with their colleagues. Onboarding doesn't have to be time- or resource-intensive, but it's important to make it a priority that doesn't get crowded out by other activities or daily crises.

Have a plan for making sure new employees get the tools they need to hit the ground running. Introduce them to their colleagues, make sure the technology they need is ready to go on day one, and begin assimilating them into your organizational climate and culture right away.

You can find great onboarding roadmaps and checklists on [Glassdoor.com](https://www.glassdoor.com).

2. Create a Performance-Driven Culture

Embracing and nurturing a performance-based culture has been shown to be a powerful driver of success. It will benefit both your organization and its employees, and from a talent management standpoint, help you attract and retain your most effective employees—the ones who strive to be at the top of their profession. Here are some steps you can take to get started:

- **Clearly define organizational and individual goals:** Let your team know what you expect from them and make sure they understand what it'll take to get there.
- **Identify productive behaviors:** Spell out what behaviors get rewarded, which are unacceptable, and provide positive reinforcement whenever possible.

- **Connect to the big picture:** Make sure your team knows how their performance is tied to the overall success of your organization.
- **Discourage micro-management:** Your team will perform at a higher level when managers set clear, challenging goals, give them the freedom to decide and act, and treat mistakes as learning opportunities instead of failures.
- **Celebrate success:** Find meaningful ways to acknowledge your team's hard work. It'll boost morale and keep them motivated.

3. Pay Competitively

The belief that nonprofits can hire highly talented people at a discount because of their affinity with your mission isn't a viable, long-term strategy. To compete effectively with the private sector for the best talent, your employees need to be compensated competitively and know that a medical emergency will not bankrupt them, that their children can see a doctor when they need to, and are able to save for retirement through a competitive 401(k)/403(b) matching program. Even if you can't pay private sector salaries, top-notch benefits have a monetary value and can level the playing field.

4. Give Consistent and Constructive Feedback

A former mentor of mine used to say that feedback is the breakfast of champions. Top performers will make mistakes, and when they do, they like specific, constructive feedback that enables them to improve. If delivered effectively—not as criticism, but as a genuine attempt to help improve performance—they will respond favorably, be motivated to make sure they don't make

the same mistake again, and reward you with higher levels of performance.

5. Make Professional Development a High Priority

Professional development is one of the most important benefits you can offer. Make it a top priority to work collaboratively with each member of your team to create a meaningful personal development plan. Your team will be happier, more motivated, and perform at a higher level if you demonstrate a strong commitment to supporting their career progression. They'll see that working for your organization can be a career builder, not a career detour. You'll have higher rates of retention and increase your capacity for attracting high-impact talent.

It shouldn't be surprising that the most ambitious, talented people will be more interested in working for your organization if you provide them a realistic career path. Ensure that employees at all levels understand what it takes to get to their next step, and demonstrate that promoting from within is an organizational priority.

6. Offer Flexible Work Arrangements

Flexible work arrangements (FWAs), especially the ability to work remotely, have become increasingly common across all sectors of the economy. Studies show that they encourage work/life balance, resulting in higher productivity, greater employee engagement, and increased retention.⁴ FWAs are particularly important to millennials, on par with financial rewards.⁵ If you haven't developed at least an informal FWA policy, don't hesitate to get started.

The primary reason FWAs fail is due to lack of communication. People who work off-site should feel like they're no different from someone in an office down the hall. It's vital that

you set clear expectations on this for everyone in your organization. Supervisors should schedule regular calls with their off-site employees and make it clear to their team that they'll be expected to do the same. Under no circumstances should anyone ever let other priorities crowd out those important communications. If your organization's leadership doesn't make it an important, non-negotiable priority, nobody else will either.

Video conferencing can be a particularly effective tool for this. Encourage its use and make sure everyone in your organization is trained to use it effectively. Lastly, recognize and reward those who communicate effectively with people who work off-site.

For more information on dealing with remote employees, The National Council of Nonprofits has published a white paper and other resources that might be helpful to you.

A Last Word

Happy, challenged employees who feel like they are making a purposeful contribution to the success of your organization and are appreciated for their contributions will be happier, more productive, less motivated to test the market and see what another organization can offer them, and will engender the kind of positive culture you need to thrive.

For more information on the state of talent practices in the nonprofit sector, the consulting firm Nonprofit HR publishes their Annual Employment Practices Survey which you'll find at www.nonprofithr.com.

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, October 5, 2018; <https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cpseea30.htm>

- ² The Ultimate List of Employer Brand Statistics, LinkedIn Talent Solutions; https://business.linkedin.com/content/dam/business/talent-solutions/global/en_us/c/pdfs/ultimate-list-of-employer-brand-stats.pdf
- ³ Nonprofit HR 2017 Nonprofit Employment Practices Survey
- ⁴ Gaskell, A. (2016, January 15). Why A Flexible Worker Is A Happy And Productive Worker. Forbes.
- ⁵ Millennials at Work; Reshaping the Workforce. A study by Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2011.