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From The Sunday Times

April 19, 2009

How charity work became sexy

Charities are being inundated with job applications from high-flyers who are keen to ditch the rat race and do something more honourable instead



(Henrik Sorensen)

Fleur Britten

There was a time, not so long ago, when working for a charity meant socks with your sandals, lunch with the ladies, and celebrities with skeletons to hide. Then St Bono and His Bobness joined forces, raising millions for needy causes, as well as charity’s fashion stakes. Brand guru Jane Shepherdson left Topshop for Oxfam for a 100% pay cut (yes, we know, she now also runs Whistles). And then, last year, when the capitalist skies started to fall in, white-collar disillusionment soon followed. Charity recruitment agencies report a threefold increase in job applicants this year, as droves of young professionals opt for more honourable careers, taking their commercial expertise with them. The once slow, square world of charity is starting to resemble mini advertising agencies and dynamic, fast-paced dotcom start-ups. Charity’s got sexy.

Rachel Trayner, 25, is one such career-hopper, moving from “fluffy” consumer PR, working on champagne bars and sportswear, to her new job as a media officer for Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO). Her Damascene conversion struck on holiday in India. “I saw at first hand the people most affected by the rich/poor divide,” she says, “and wanted to do something more worthwhile. If you can’t answer the question — with your hand on your heart — ‘Why do you do your job?’, it’s not worth doing.”

Trayner started at VSO three months ago. The switch changed her life. “It’s nice to feel I’m contributing. I have much more impact now.” And less money? Apparently not. “People think that charities pay badly,” she says, “but it’s just like any other job.” At the lower end, at least. Charity recruitment experts Flow Caritas point out that while junior roles are competitive with the commercial sector, there’s a cap. The top dogs earn around £120K, which doesn’t compare favourably. “But,” says Rory White, Flow Caritas’s director, “there are added benefits, such as a better work-life balance and the chance to feel passionate about your job.”

Unsurprisingly, it’s all smiles in the charity office. Aggressive competition is out — it’s all about collaboration. “There’s a real sense of solidarity,” adds Trayner. “Of course it’s challenging, but without all the rivalry and targets, I feel more joy. I’m much more chilled out.” No wonder so many jobless City folk are knocking on charity’s door. Eleanor Hirsch, 28, was made redundant last November from her high-powered job — “with all

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