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## OPINION

# The 'Show the Salary' Campaign Is the Wrong Battle for Achieving Nonprofit Workplace Diversity

By *Vincent Robinson*

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Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok are valuable tools for activists crusading for racial and social justice. They played an important role in shaping public opinion following George Floyd's murder last year and have helped call attention to organizations and individuals that need to reform their ways.

But not every racial-justice effort that catches fire on social media is worth supporting. Some, in fact, wrap good intentions around ideas that carry unintended consequences.

Such is the case with the [#ShowTheSalary](#) campaign, which pushes foundations and nonprofits to publicly report the salary details for every job they advertise.

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The campaign has a noble mission: to promote equity in hiring in a field that has a long track record of not paying people of color and women fairly or recruiting diverse leaders. To advance their mission, the

[anonymous people behind the campaign](#) believe that publishing salaries is critical to leveling the playing field.

“Show the Salary was born out of frustration at the lack of action being taken to address pay gaps and inequity in the charity sector,” the group states on its website. “At the heart of our campaign is a commitment to fairness and equity and to the people with lived experience of the impact of salary secrecy.”

It all sounds good. After all, transparency is almost always better than opacity. But while the campaign is fighting the right war, it has chosen the wrong battle.

For nearly two decades, I’ve run an executive search firm that specializes in recruiting and placing diverse candidates in leadership positions in foundations and nonprofits. Fully 90 percent of our placements are people of color, women, LGBTQ, and people with disabilities. The organizations that we work with report a 95 percent retention rate.

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However, we have found that publishing salaries upfront both hurts our ability to assemble a diverse candidate pool and fails to result in higher salaries for those who receive job offers. In fact, the opposite is the case: It actually scares away some diverse candidates who might otherwise apply for a position. I’ve counseled numerous candidates who, when informed of the salary range for a position, ask whether they should even apply because the role paid substantially more than they currently earned, and they didn’t want to waste anyone’s time.

Here’s a typical, if unfortunate, scenario: A potential candidate earns \$60,000 a year working at a small environmental nonprofit. She sees a job opening for a vice president at an environmental foundation that pays \$150,000. She is fully qualified for the position but decides not to apply because the salary is so much higher than her current pays. She believes falsely that she must not be a good match even though she has the skills and experience to succeed.

The painful reality is that many candidates — particularly women and people of color — are [less likely to apply for jobs](#) if they think the listed salary is a stretch based on their current compensation.

To attract diverse candidates, organizations need to do everything in their power to develop a broad candidate pool. Posting the salary can create additional barriers. It's also worth noting that salary is only one factor in determining compensation. Health care, retirement packages, paid time off, bonuses, and other incentives are often important parts of the equation that can't be quickly summarized in job-recruitment postings.

Of course, nonprofits and foundations have many other ways to attract more diverse leaders, although those methods don't easily fit into an alliterative hashtag. Here are a few:

**Don't stop looking until your candidate pool is diverse.** Too often, organizations say diversity is a priority, but they end up working from a largely white candidate pool because it's easier to assemble applicants from familiar backgrounds and organizations. My firm guards against such an outcome by making sure our pool of candidates includes at least 60 percent women and people of color. And we don't move the process forward until we reach that threshold. Organizations that want to ensure an equitable hiring process should consider setting and sticking to a similar threshold.

**Go beyond mainstream job posting platforms.** Building a diverse pool often requires moving outside an organization's normal networks. In addition to posting jobs on mainstream websites and asking people to share them in their LinkedIn networks, nonprofits should publicize openings where more diverse communities congregate, including identity-based affinity groups and constantly emerging online discussion groups.

**Build a diverse search committee.** Diverse candidates will feel more welcome if they see others who look like them. That starts with a diverse search committee. If possible, organizations should recruit diverse members of the staff beyond the executive team to meet with candidates. This will help candidates get a more informed read on what it will be like to work for the nonprofit or foundation. Adding diverse members will also help bring perspectives to the search process that might otherwise be overlooked.

If an organization lacks diversity but is actively working to change that, it's important to acknowledge that fact upfront to job candidates rather than ignoring the obvious truth. The issue can be addressed with a simple, direct statement: "We've put together a slate of people with whom you will interview. We know it's not diverse. We're not diverse. But we are committed to changing that."

**Set compensation objectively and fairly.** Ultimately, what matters isn't the advertised salary range but what the person who is hired ends up getting paid. Before starting the search, organizations should work with a compensation consultant or invest in reliable compensation data. Once an accurate and competitive salary is set, the organization needs to stick to it — regardless of the color, gender, background, income history, or sexual orientation of the person offered the job.

That, after all, is the goal of the Show the Salary campaign — to ensure all people working for nonprofits and foundations are paid what they are genuinely worth. The campaign’s push for equity and accountability should be commended. Changing the status quo isn’t easy, especially when it comes to fighting societal systems and ideologies that have existed for centuries.

But it’s unrealistic and potentially harmful to apply a social-media hammer to a complex and nuanced topic like equitable compensation. Publicizing salary information upfront can ultimately stifle the progress the campaign’s creators hope to see. Even worse, it can lead some organizations to tout their pledges to post salaries as evidence that they are committed to equitable hiring — without doing the real work needed to change an inequitable hiring process.

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