

Nonprofit Executive Transitions: Permanent CEO Search or Interim Executive? More Than a Matter of Time



By [Hannah Helsby, CAE](#), Interim Executives Academy Class #22

The [Interim Executive Academy](#) recently kicked off its 22nd Interim Executive Academy class with more than 60 nonprofit professionals in attendance.

The class represented a diverse range of experience, with seasoned interim executives as well as tenured nonprofit professionals just entering the interim profession. During the course, facilitators posed the question: **“What sets an interim chief executive apart from a new permanent chief executive?”**

In the larger nonprofit community, it is common to hear a response such as “They serve as an organization’s CEO for a short period of time, during the transition between outgoing and incoming chief executives.”

Beyond this broad observation, the discussion may diminish, as numerous nonprofit professionals and board members have limited experience working with an interim leader. However, amongst a cohort of interim professionals asked to differentiate between an interim and a new permanent executive, the conversation delved much deeper.

Comments from academy participants emphasized the importance of board members and staff understanding that interims are not temporary figureheads, sitting in the CEO's chair for a few months until a new chief executive is hired. The author of *Interim Executive Directors: The Power in the Middle* describes [interim executive directors](#) as **highly skilled managers who temporarily take the helm of an organization, help the board and staff address important systems and capacity issues, and lay the groundwork for the permanent leader's success.**

While both an interim and permanent chief executive are responsible for maintaining ongoing operations of the organization, the core purpose of the two differs greatly.

Traditional chief executives are focused on the long-term vision and success of the organization, while the interim leader's approach is uniquely transition-focused.

As described in the *Study of Interim Leadership in Nonprofits*, interim leaders act as **agents of organizational change** and evaluate closely the functionality and viability of the organization to build sustainability and success for the next permanent leader.

When leadership transitions take place, **nonprofits face a dilemma**: speed up the executive search to hire quickly—potentially choosing someone who isn't the best fit—or extend the period of transition, investing additional time in stabilizing the organization and identifying the next ideal leader.

Interim executives conduct organizational reviews, develop workplans, create community relations strategies, and address core areas like workplace culture, fiscal accountability, program quality, and governance.

Additionally, **interims work with search committees** to draft scopes of work for the incoming chief executive, help define organizational success, support executive searches, and implement transition strategies, ensuring an effective onboarding for the new permanent chief executive.

In March, [Fortune Media reported CEO turnover in 2025](#) had hit a record level, with the government and nonprofit sector leading in CEO exits.

During this time of increased turnover, it is critical for nonprofit professionals to receive comprehensive training and tools that support effective leadership transitions. Additionally, to **ensure that nonprofit organizations continue to maintain a meaningful influence on the communities they serve**, boards should consider seeking qualified interim professionals when undertaking the significant responsibility of hiring a new chief executive.

For nonprofits looking for stability during a leadership gap, Interim Executives Academy provides trusted interim leaders to support the board and the organization until the permanent leader is in place.

With over 700 graduates nationwide, the models and methods of Interim Executives Academy ensure continued service and impact for organizations facing a leadership transition.

Learn more about **one of the most comprehensive interim executive support programs** with an impressive list of customer benefits:

<https://interimexecutivesacademy.com/find-nonprofit-interim-executive-director/>

Third Sector Company supports **search committees and boards** of nonprofit organizations for interim executive recruitment and placement. The graduates of our Interim Executives Academy offer nonprofit organizations proven methods to ensure staff support, operational best practices, and continued mission impact during an executive search and transition.

About the Author: Hannah Helsby, CAE, is a nonprofit consultant specializing in executive leadership, organizational health, and mission-driven communications. She helps nonprofits navigate growth and change with clarity and purpose. Hannah holds the Certified Association Executive designation from ASAE, recognizing her commitment to excellence in association management.



Third Sector Company is a nationally recognized pioneer in leadership continuity solutions for community impact organizations including charitable causes, professional associations, congregations and foundations. The organization offers interim executive training, placement, coaching, support services, and job advertising and counsel.

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