Encore Fellowship Program
A Personal Perspective

By Jere Brooks King

The Road Less Traveled

When I reached my mid-50s, I began to yearn for a change. Long hours on the job had meant too many hours away from my family and community. Doing something that mattered became more important than just doing the same thing. It was time to re-imagine a new phase of my career.

As I prepared to leave Cisco Systems, the company sponsored me in the Silicon Valley Encore Fellowship Program. An Encore Fellowship is a stipended, substantive position for employees who want to shift from their midlife business careers to encore careers in the nonprofit sector. Cisco knew that I wanted to transition to the nonprofit sector—and they wanted to pilot the program.

After considering a number of local nonprofit agencies, I was matched with Abilities United in January 2012. It was an ideal selection given my passion for the mission, its location two miles from home, and my previous experience as a board member and volunteer. I began my Encore Fellowship in February and completed 1,000 hours of service by November.

Something Old, Something New

With my extensive background in marketing, my Encore Fellowship assignment focused on marketing projects in brand strategy, messaging, and communications. It also included a few joint programs with my sponsor, Cisco Systems, to further their partnership with this nonprofit. As the fellowship progressed, my engagement expanded beyond marketing to include operations and finance, fundraising, campaign development, and competitive research.

With all my years in the high-tech sector, I had the executive skill set to effectively lead the design and completion of many projects. Still, I had to learn the ropes within the nonprofit world, with its wide range of stakeholders and strong mission orientation. The culture, pace, strategy, and financial foundation are similar to, yet different from, the for-profit world. It was at times both frustrating and exhilarating to be charting new waters, and the time passed quickly.

A Win for Everyone

As a retiring executive looking for personal renewal and a chance to give back, the program provided a smooth structured transition into the nonprofit world. During my fellowship, I shifted from full- to part-time work in an a more relaxed, less intense work environment. Participation in monthly cohort sessions allowed me to build relationships with other Encore Fellows and learn even more about the nonprofit sector.

At the same time, my nonprofit host benefited from the business and marketing skills that I brought to them—expertise they typically could not afford. I delivered results, new rigor, and a fresh perspective in marketing, operations, finance, and management. Plus, the agency was able to expand its relationship with Cisco by having someone who could serve as the “liaison” to the company. Whether working with the Cisco Special Children’s Advocacy Group, engaging volunteers, recruiting additional board members, or securing product donations, my connection to Cisco was a huge advantage.

As a sponsor, Cisco received a great deal of community goodwill and publicity—both in the agency and in the community. Agency employees, clients, donors, and board members all recognized the investment made by Cisco. It was one more way for Cisco to demonstrate its strong commitment to the community.

The Road Ahead

The Encore Fellowship Program was the right choice for me as a bridge to a new chapter of work. It is ideal for those who are retiring and aspire to an encore career in the nonprofit sector. If you or your employees are considering involvement as workers, board members, or volunteers in the nonprofit sector, this is a program to consider seriously. If you want to demonstrate your company’s willingness to give back, this is a great way to contribute much-needed talent. It offered me a path for renewal and reinvention, and made me believe that my best work is still ahead.

Marc Freedman is CEO and founder of Encore.org. He is author of The Big Shift: Navigating the New Stage Beyond Midlife.

Jere King Brooks was a vice president of marketing at Cisco for more than 15 years, retiring in November 2011.