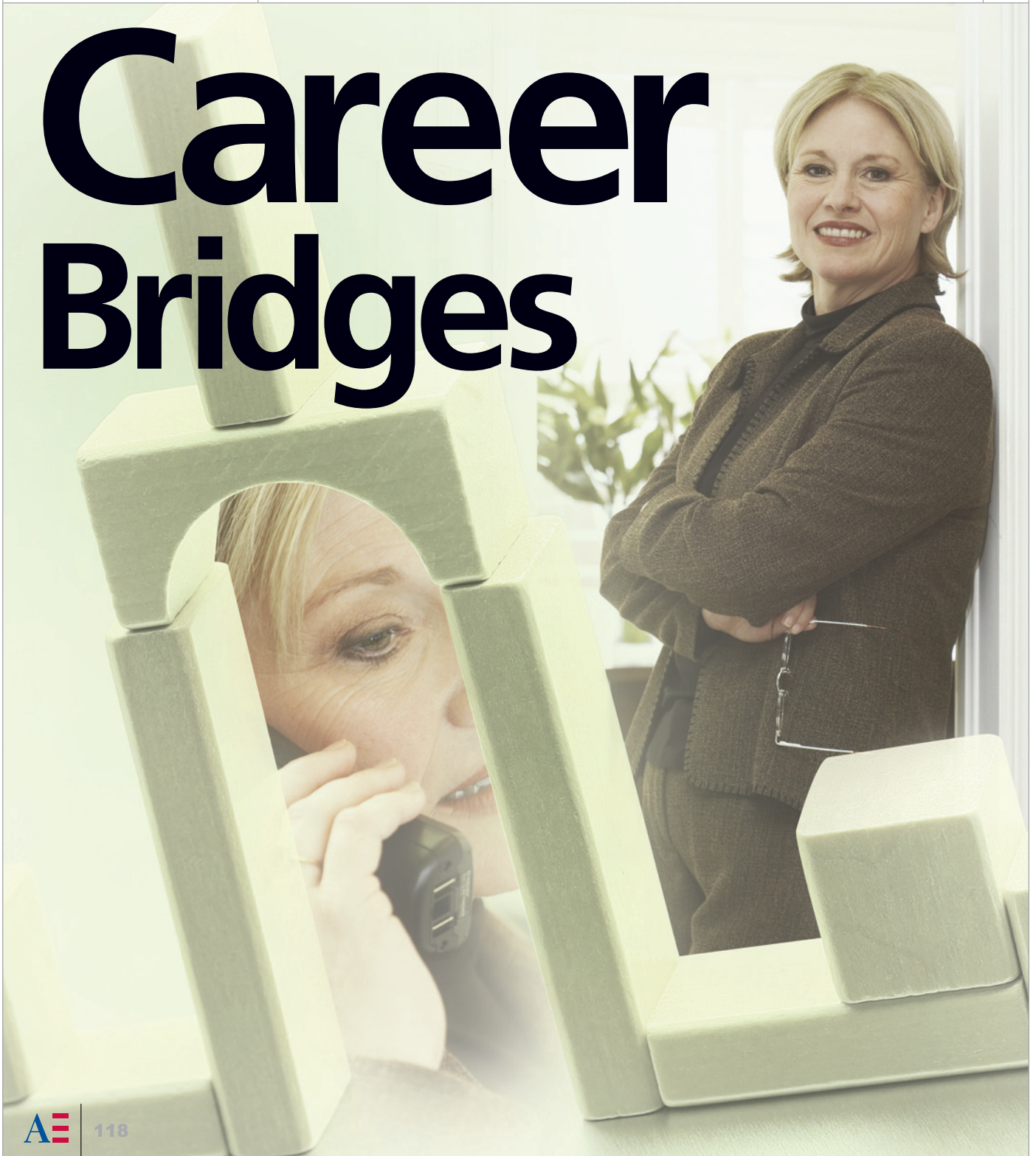


**Terry Del Percio talks with two executives who successfully moved from a high-powered corporate position to a more gratifying nonprofit role.**

# Career Bridges



**M**artha Mueller Cook remembers having an epiphany while lying on the bed in her hotel room during a business trip. “I have to change my life. I’m bored,” she said to herself. She meant it. Cook was ready to disengage from her job as COO.

One might say that Cook is on her fourth career. She started out in academia, having earned a PhD in political science. She also ran an educational travel company. Soon after, at age 30, she moved into business. After several years, she secured a position as COO at a large law firm. Today, Cook is COO of Crittenton Women’s Union in Boston, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to transform the journey of low-income women toward economic independence.

Bridgestar, a Boston-based organization that connects management leaders to non-profit opportunities coined the term “bridgers” for leaders who have moved into the nonprofit sector from other businesses.

Cook is forthright in describing the process of becoming a bridger. “I wasn’t like some executives who are able to retire financially and go into nonprofit purely for altruistic reasons,” she said. “I still needed to earn a decent salary, but not as much as I made with the law firm.”

Most bridgers remember a key moment in their career transition. Hank Schmelzer, now president and CEO of the Maine Community Foundation, vividly remembers the day he turned 55. “On that day, I met with the guy I worked for and told him I wanted to take a different approach to my life,” he said.

Schmelzer was able to take advantage of corporate restructuring at the New England financial services firm where he was president. “We came up with an exit strategy, and I left the company with no regrets,” he said.

The community foundation he now leads was started in 1983 and currently has \$175 million in assets and a simple mission: to help Maine become a better place to live. The foundation provided \$16 million in grants to other nonprofits and educational institutions just last year.

## Finding a fit

Cook and Schmelzer have two things in common as bridgers. They took their time in finding the right nonprofit role, and they felt a definite financial sacrifice.

“It was more than a year before I found the place I wanted to be,” said Schmelzer. “When I left financial services, I took a year off and had a blast. Now, I spend my time trying to make things better for people who live in Maine. I still work 10 to 12 hour days, but the level of pressure is very different. I’m happier and more satisfied.”

Cook thought about her transition for a couple of years. “I did a lot of research and talked with a lot of people,” she said. “At age 52, I decided to attend the Harvard Graduate School of Education, which turned out to be a good move because I made a lot of great connections. I can’t say I’m happier now. I loved my work before, and I love the work I’m doing now. I did this when I was ready to do it. I understood what motivated me, and then found an organization that would be a good fit.”

Another theme emerges when these two executives talk about the shift to nonprofit. “I do miss the cash flow,” Schmelzer said, “At first, it’s somewhat gut wrenching to let go of the financial security, even though I was already financially sound on a personal level. But I have a real sense of contribution now.”

“There are definite financial sacrifices,” said Cook, “but I’m not driven by logic. I knew I could manage financially on less than I was earning, and I knew I could be contributing to a larger cause.”

When it comes to business practices, Cook and Schmelzer see through somewhat different lenses. Schmelzer sees the decisionmaking process in nonprofits as very different from for-profit organizations. “There is much more consensus building needed in nonprofits if you want to succeed as a leader. The financial services industry was clearly hierarchical. One decision is made and you go do it, period.” he said.

“At the foundation, people have a strong desire and expectation to be much more involved in the decisionmaking process, and it’s important to



## PERSONAL NOTE

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engage everyone. I wanted to introduce more effective business processes, but the senior team had to get everyone involved and get buy-in or it wouldn't have flown."

Cook has a different perspective. "I'm not sure that every nonprofit is more consensus driven. As far as I'm concerned, nonprofits can vary as much as for-profits. Some organizations are well run; some aren't. One difference is that in the corporate sector, if your business is not well run,

you are more likely to be kicked out sooner," she said.

The other difference Cook sees is resource constraints. "Clearly, nonprofits have more challenges in this area," she said. Cook feels that nonprofits have an obligation to balance their mission to the community with their own financial sustainability. Most corporate enterprises don't have that constraint.

Having survived complex career journeys to end up in nonprofit leadership, Martha Cook and Hank Schmelzer will likely be an inspiration for many executives. They each took a big risk after age 50, realized they cared more about people than about corporate profit, and—perhaps most importantly—had the guts to try to make a difference. ■

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