

Find Your Aces: Turn Your Handicaps into Opportunities

Deck stacked against you? Shuffle your cards to find unexpected riches.

By Karen Eber Davis

Our location is terrible. . . . The competition has all the benefits. . . . We don't have enough money. . . . Our employees won't be able to compete. . . . How often do you hear arguments like these about why you can't increase your organization's income? And because of such perceived disadvantages, do you pass up opportunities to earn money?

Unfortunately, too many leaders look at their deck of cards and see only a two of spades, a three of clubs, and a four of diamonds. Everyone else it seems has kings.

Yet many nonprofits with competitive challenges discover ways to create more mission and more income. How? By embracing three critical mindsets:

- 1. They accept all the cards** they've been dealt.
- 2. They recognize that even cards with low value** can be played as trumps.
- 3. They remember that cards come in decks** full of both high and low cards. They seek out their aces.

Hunt for Market Advantages

Opportunity Village in Las Vegas is one nonprofit that turned problems into gold. The Village faced major challenges finding jobs for the developmentally delayed adults it serves:

The prospective employees are low skilled.

Most have never had jobs.

Until their personal experience proves otherwise, many employers will be concerned about the work quality of these employees.

The deuce of spades? Nevada is plagued with one of the nation's highest unemployment rates.

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Opportunity Village hunted for places where they would have market advantages. After brainstorming a number of possibilities, they came up with the perfect ace: They found hyper-secure locations such as military bases where Opportunity Village's special-needs workers could provide cleaning services.

In top-secret spots, what competitive advantages do Opportunity Village employees offer? They easily pass security clearances. Once hired they rarely leave. These two issues plague other cleaning services.

The work is top notch because of Opportunity Village's approach to cleaning. Teams support each other by working together and each team member performs just one task, such as vacuuming the floor or emptying the trash.

Opportunity Village also has three high value cards to play:

Cleaning jobs that bore most workers remain valuable, interesting, and stimulating to these pure-hearted employees.

The setup is nearly impossible to infiltrate for espionage purposes. The companies can be sure that their secrets are safe.

Employers who hire Opportunity Village employees will be seen as models of corporate responsibility. They provide employment for local citizens with special needs.

By finding places where their disadvantages can be reduced or augmented by advantages, Opportunity Village fulfills its mission. It generates employment opportunities for 1,500 people at \$9 an hour in secure, long-term jobs that can never be off-shored. In turn, the contract revenue the employment service produces is 50% of Opportunity Village's \$25 million annual budget.

Find Your Trump Card

Likewise, Bok Tower Gardens in Lake Wales, Florida turned two of its handicaps into a benefit. For years, staff and board members at the Gardens mulled over what to do about a 1929 mansion located adjacent to the Gardens. They were pouring buckets of paint and money into the old building to keep it up. Unfortunately, few people could be enticed to pay money to tour it.

The Gardens' second disadvantage, from some perspectives, is its location. It's 37 mostly rural miles from Disney World and the other Orlando tourist destinations. Before enjoying the Gardens, visitors must take a bit of a rambling drive.


The trump card the Gardens found came by linking the drive and the opportunity to view the mansion. Staff decided to sell mansion tickets at the front entrance of the Gardens (at the end of the visitors' drive to the Gardens) instead of at the Visitors' Center (before the drive). Now, right after making the trip, when they have their credit cards out, visitors are asked, "Would you like a combo ticket today? It includes tours of both the gardens and the mansion." In essence, the Gardens transformed the fast food question, "Would you like fries with that?" into a query that created extra income for them. This tiny shift made a huge difference: In the months after the Gardens started the new policy, 300% more visitors paid extra for a combo ticket.

Don't Let Lack of Money Deter You

Another common nonprofit disadvantage is a lack of money. Instead of letting this be a barrier to more money, this roadblock motivated the Houston Arts Alliance. The Alliance is well on its way to meeting its goal to raise \$250,000 annually by selling online calendars. The University of Houston and others are customers. The Alliance's high value card? Their expertise at creating great calendars for the local arts community. The Alliance didn't need to make a large investment to begin since staff had already attained the skills. While the service doesn't directly create more mission – art in the community – the income it earns does.

Find Your Own Starting Place

As a nonprofit, do you have competitive disadvantages when it comes to earning income? Yes, without a doubt. Are you letting those hurdles stop you from earning more

income? That's up to you. Take a second look, and a third, and fourth, as necessary. Find your advantages. Discover places where your disadvantages can be played as trumps. Shuffle and sift through your deck till you find your kings, queens, and aces. Mix cards together to create wins. Believe opportunities exist. Go find them. 



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Shuffle the deck for new opportunities

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