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GIVE YOUR TIME

Accountants play a vital role in ensuring aid money reaches those in the world who need it most, while volunteers gain an unforgettable experience

Going solely on the familiar television images of international volunteers drilling wells or building schools, it may not be immediately clear what unique skills a chartered accountant has to offer on the front line.

However, accountants all over the world are giving their time to charitable work which is rarely seen by the public, but is vital in ensuring that the generosity of donors has the maximum possible impact.

Kate Baker, an accountant in the London office of Wingrave Yeats and former chair of CAPELLA, has just returned from three months travelling across South East Asia, including four weeks working with children's education charity MySmallHelp in Nepal.

Kate's placement was organised by Neil Jennings of [Accounting for International Development \(AFID\)](#), who Kate originally met with a view to selling the idea to other accounting students.

"Lots of big UK charities tend to send large sums of money to smaller charities overseas, which often don't keep any proper records of money they're receiving," she explains. "And you often get to a point where the bigger charity begins to question whether the money is being used properly and asks for more and more detail. And if they don't get the information they want, they might just stop that source of income.

"So a bit of basic accounting can make a big difference. Just auditing their records, making sure they're keeping proper records and retaining bank paperwork - that sort of thing."

Kate's own placement with MySmallHelp was an opportunity not only to put the organisation's Nepalese office's records on a more organised footing, but also introduce a system of pro-forma documents to ensure trustees back in the UK could get a clear view of what was happening on the ground.

"I was working six days a week, based in the office," she recalls. "To start with, I think there was a sense that I was there as an accountant to check up on them. But we ended up getting on really well.

"Just going through the bank reports uncovered lots of things which they were then able to deal with. Simple things like sponsorships which they didn't realise had lapsed and so hadn't chased up." On returning to the UK, Kate was quickly back in touch with MySmallHelp and intends to continue supporting them with her time and expertise in ongoing projects.

For some though, volunteering can have a more lasting impact on career direction. Vicky Portnell, for example, stepped back from a promising career in audit with Ernst & Young after her experience.

Volunteering overseas had always been at the back of Vicky's mind. Before qualifying, she read and kept a 2006 article from CA Magazine, looking at the work of Mango (www.mango.org.uk), a charity specialising in placing professionals with other charities in need of their specific skills.

Several years later, she retrieved this article and made contact with Mango, which put her in touch with the charity Restless Development (formerly Student Partnership Worldwide). Her application was successful and, in June 2009, Vicky began three months of unpaid leave which would see her travel across Africa with the charity.

“Restless Development is relatively small, so they were looking for someone to come in and coordinate their internal audit programme for that financial year,” she recalls. “It was only the second year they’d done any sort of internal audit, so I was also to formalise that programme and come up with a toolkit they could use going forward.”

As well as overseeing the entire process, Vicky personally audited the South Africa, Tanzania and Sierra Leone offices, each of which she visited for two weeks.

After the project was over, Vicky’s thoughts immediately turned to volunteering again during 2010’s quiet summer season. As time passed though, it became increasingly clear that she really wanted to move into the third sector, working with charities and NGOs, on a more permanent basis.

Once again through Mango, Vicky found and won her current six month contract in internal audit with Christian Aid. This role has so far taken her to Mali, Burkina Faso, Malawi, Zambia, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Her next stop is Brazil.

But would she not rather be on the front line, volunteering at an orphanage, or building a hospital?

“There was a time when I wondered whether I’d made a really big career mistake going into finance and accounting,” she admits, “because I realised I wanted to work with charities and you immediately assume [accounting] isn’t something that’s important or needed. Your immediate thought is that you should be handing out food parcels,” she laughs.

“As soon as I started looking into it and talking to Mango, I realised the skills accountants have are a really important thing for charities and NGOs to have.

“A really obvious one is that when you’re procuring really large things like food aid, you need to go through a whole quotation process and get the best deal. And, because the role I’ve got means I am not just based in the UK, we can see how what we’re doing is really serving that larger purpose, which is great.”

When her six month contract with Christian Aid comes to an end, Vicky has every intention of staying in the sector and, ultimately, would like a permanent post overseas.

“I’d like to go and live in-country for a year or two years. Probably in Africa, preferably moving out of audit area and more into being part of the in-country finance team. I’ve been looking at one in Sierra Leone, one in Zambia. All exciting decisions.”

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