

GIVING BACK

TOM BERRY EXPLAINS HOW TWO CHARITIES ARE ADDRESSING THE NEED FOR FINANCE PROFESSIONALS IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD



It seems we love to give up our time to help others. The Home Office estimates that over 11m people in the UK are actively and regularly engaged in volunteer work ranging from supporting local community groups to overseas charity work.

The most popular types of volunteer work are well known: sports, education and social support. But, as Neil Jennings of Accounting for International Development (AfID) says, there is a growing need for professional skills overseas. 'We're really pleased to see so many accountants giving up their time to work in developing nations. Many of the accountants I work with are surprised that they are in demand – most people think it's only teachers and doctors who work overseas.'

AfID was founded in 2009 by Jennings to bring skilled accountants together with grassroots non-governmental organisations and charities in developing nations. Within a year, AfID has helped place accountants from newly-qualified to finance directors of large organisations such as the Scouting Association and Open University, in pro-bono financial management and consultancy roles in NGOs based in East and West Africa, Cambodia and India.

BUILDING A FINANCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The need for skilled accountants is largely driven by a lack of training at local level, mixed with the added complications of overseas funding. 'When you are a priest or a doctor or any individual trying to run an NGO in a developing nation, it can be very difficult to keep your records up to date and ensure all your overseas donors know what's happening with their money,' Jennings says. 'Most of our placements are generic but rewarding – helping local people build a financial infrastructure for doing good in a sustainable way.'

Mango (Management Accounting for Non-Governmental Organisations) has been established for 10 years and specialises in helping its global

network of 400 accountants find positions in organisations ranging from small charities to large international NGOs. 'Placement can be anything from two weeks for specialist audit work, or 12 months plus for general financial management positions,' says Lucy Markby, Mango's recruitment and HR director. This year, Mango has placed 10 ICAEW members, providing training, networking opportunities and consultancy to help them find positions in Africa, Asia and South America, as well as in UK charities and NGOs.

While Mango placements tend to be paid (albeit at charity rates) and AfID provides pro bono opportunities, the reasons why accountants get involved with both organisations are the same. 'We always ask people why they want to work for NGOs and they almost always say the same thing,' says Markby. 'They want to use their skills to give something back. They see inequality and they want to address it – it is a very British mentality.' Jennings agrees: 'It's about an equal exchange. The NGOs get skilled support; our volunteers get great experience and satisfaction.'

Both Mango and AfID are keen to get new members to sign up for overseas placements. Interested parties should contact the organisations directly (see box).

Of course, interested parties need to exhibit certain skills. A second language helps, as does some experience of working abroad – but attitude and drive are important. 'We're looking for motivation, flexibility and experience that can be applied in a situation where the resources and culture will be very different,' says Markby. 'We spend a long time training our members before they go into the field to prepare them for the challenge.'

Jennings says anyone who wants to get involved should give it a go. 'You just need patience, understanding, [the disposition to] enjoy a challenge and be able to communicate the benefits of good financial management in a clear and simple way,' he says. 'You don't have to be a superman or have special powers.'

ACCOUNTING FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Graeme Heckels in Battambang



Through AfID, ACA Graeme Heckels travelled to Battambang province to work for the Cambodia Vision Development project. CVD is a local NGO that works with the most disadvantaged Cambodian communities across the Samlaut district.

The first thing Graeme Heckels noticed was the warm welcome he received in Cambodia. 'I was welcomed by lots of cheerful faces at CVD, a trait that seems to be widespread throughout the country,' he says. 'It was

clear from the start that the small team was looking forward to getting additional support and expertise.'

Having quickly built up a rapport with the CVD management, Heckels dug deeper into the key issues facing CVD and to find out more about how it operated. Using a pre-prepared AfID questionnaire, he was able to gain insight into everything from long-term strategy to the workings of systems and procedures.

'Over the next couple of weeks it transpired that I would often have to think on my feet to draw from my past work, education and life experience to tackle new and varied challenges every day of my placement,' Heckels says. 'This included building rapport quickly with members of the CVD team, communication with various stakeholders, reviewing systems and procedures, report writing, training, teaching, interviewing, proposal writing and presentation, poster creation, correspondence with foreign embassies and international donors based in Cambodia, attendance at NGO events... and of course finding time to make lots of new friends over tasty Khmer cuisine!'

'The appreciation of everyone at CVD is the best way of knowing that I made a positive impact and that I was able to pass on my skills, experience and personality in the best possible way. In return I've made new friends, learned about the workings of NGOs, tasted a different way of life and, most of all, I will always be able to draw perspective from the positive people of Cambodia,' he says.

MANGO

Leo Skyner gave up his job as a finance director of a successful print and media business to work with NGOs at home and abroad – and he's about to start his dream job.

Leo Skyner studied history at university, and he says he has always had a deep interest in politics, world issues and international development. He also has always had a hankering to travel, so made the decision in February 2009 to register with Mango and leave his job as an FD in the City of London. 'I didn't know what I was going to do or what to expect, but I was very keen to get a general education in the NGO sector and, ultimately, work for a charity abroad,' says Skyner.

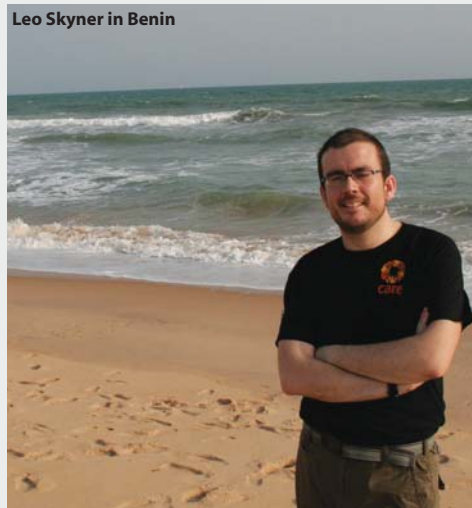
Mango provided him with training and support, culminating in finding him a position at Care International's UK office where he has been instrumental in developing and testing a new microfinance project where individuals can lend small amounts of money to entrepreneurs in developing countries. 'It's been a real education into how the NGO sector works – from finance to projects management to marketing. But what really excited me was getting over to West Africa to see the system working in practice,' he says.

Skyner's next assignment starts this month, when he joins Save the Children in its emergency team. His role will be to travel the world, providing financial,

operational and resource management to enable Save the Children to offer relief efforts to those hit by natural disasters, war and famine.

'I have no fears about the new role. Many people think that NGOs and charities are just filled with do-gooders, but they are actually very professional organisations and offer you loads of support and opportunities,' he says. 'I can't wait to get started. My advice to anyone thinking about volunteering or working overseas is "go for it!"'

Leo Skyner in Benin



For more information, or to register your interest in working with NGOs at home and abroad, you can contact:

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See also www.AfID.org.uk**

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The ICAEW's Narrowing the Gap programme supports chartered accountants considering, or returning from, a career break. For details, visit www.icaew.com/narrowingthegap