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**Insight** The e-magazine for  
management accountants

# Accountants in demand as short term volunteers

## November 2009



Accounting for International Development is a new social enterprise placing experienced accounting professionals as temporary volunteers with NGOs across Africa. Insight spoke to its founder, Neil Jennings.

After 10 years commuting into the City of London, Neil Jennings had what he describes as a moment of clarity - although some of his friends described it at the time as a moment of madness. He left his role as the director for an international accountancy recruitment firm to become an overseas volunteer.

He found a placement as overseas development director for a small Rwandan non-governmental organisation (NGO), set up by orphans and refugees of the 1994 war and genocide

'I'd always wanted to "make a difference" and Africa seemed the ideal place to start,' said Jennings. 'While working closely with the Rwandans it became apparent that, while they'd achieved amazing results with little or no resources, the survival of their activities hung desperately in the balance due to a lack of basic financial planning and management.'

With little or no access to these vital skills and services, however, there was no solution in sight. Rwanda is a country of 9 million, but it had only 60 registered accountants.

A realistic prospect

After returning to the UK many skilled people mentioned to Jennings that they would love to volunteer abroad but couldn't spare the time from their business or family commitments.

This is what inspired him to create Accounting for International Development (AfID) - a new social enterprise placing experienced accounting professionals as temporary volunteers with NGOs across Africa. These assignments typically last from two to 12 weeks and form part of a long term coaching and mentoring programme. They are designed to build financial management and planning capacity within small grass root projects such as street child centres, health clinics, enterprise initiatives and rural cooperatives.

The idea is that this will make volunteering a realistic prospect for tenured professionals, either as part of a staff development programme or simply as part of their annual leave. For AfID's partners in Africa it will provide access to a vast pool of talent.

For short assignments to be effective excellent communication between the volunteers and the many stakeholders is essential, said Jennings. Therefore partners, volunteers and in some case beneficiaries will post blogs, video diaries and photos as their projects develop.

Jennings said: 'For the first time, this will give fair representation of every stakeholder's viewpoint and provide observers with a truly comprehensive and balanced case study of a development programme in action.'

#### Positive response

To further encourage the sharing of scarce resources locally all AfID's partners and their resources will be easily identified through accurate Google mapping of their precise location on AfID's website. The idea is to champion best practice, accountability and encourage cooperation and a commitment to long-term sustainability, said Jennings.

To help volunteers prepare for the challenges and complexities they are likely to encounter they will receive a full day's induction delivered by John Cammack, a specialist trainer in the sector.

How has Jennings coped with setting up a social enterprise in the middle of a global recession? He said: 'Sadly in these financially challenging times funding for even the most worthy causes is in swift decline, therefore travel costs will be the responsibility of the volunteer. But living costs are small and hopefully many will receive support from their employer.'

However, Jennings said that interest from the international development sector has been very positive with over 40 UK charities, supporting more than 250 NGOs, keen to adopt the voluntary programme.

#### What would CIMA members get from short-term volunteering?

'Volunteering for shorter periods using their accounting skills and experience is pretty new but definitely of interest to a surprisingly large number of accountants,' said Jennings. 'It's a great way to develop vital softer management skills. For many of our volunteers it is also the only way to pick up vital experience in the international development and not for profit sectors sector. This is essential as CVs with purely commercial experience are often discarded without proper consideration.'

'But whatever their original motivation for volunteering I guarantee the experience will be something they remember and value for a very long time.'

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