

How to Snag a Job In International Social Work

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As Director of NGOabroad, I assist people to get into international humanitarian work, either paid or voluntary. My experience and therefore my comments below pertain to humanitarian, not corporate, work in Asia, Africa, Central and South America, the Caribbean, the Pacific, and Eastern Europe. The comments below answer the oft asked question, "How do I get a paid international humanitarian job?"

Let's start with the challenge and then address the steps to deal with that challenge.

The Challenges

1. Paid international humanitarian jobs are highly competitive. There is a huge bottleneck getting into paid international humanitarian work. The majority of the grassroots humanitarian organizations in Asia, Africa, and South America are run on the commitment of their members; they do not have money to host volunteers or pay expatriates. In countries with 20-40% unemployment, the grassroots jobs rightfully belong to the people in those countries. The niche for expatriates is with the international NGOs (non-government organizations). Highly qualified candidates from all over the world—Philippines, Uganda, Tajikistan, India—are applying for these jobs with the international NGOs. If you thought the competition was fierce when you applied for a job in your town, global competition is fiercer, because there are far more people applying for only a few positions. But honestly, don't let that stop you. Just know it takes a lot to get your foot in the door.

2. What does it take to get paid international social work? You need:
 years of domestic social work experience
 international experience
 knowledge of the culture that you will work in
 attitude: humility, resourcefulness (can hit the deck flying)
 determination, tenacity for the search itself
 language is very helpful but often in-country colleagues translate

3. International experience is a must. If you look at most international job announcements, they specify how much international work experience is required. They will say things like "five years experience in the Great Lakes necessary." (Not Lake Michigan or Superior, but Lake Kivu, Tanganyika, Victoria, and Nyasa.) The Great Lakes is the tumultuous region that encompasses Rwanda, Burundi, and Zaire/the Congo. You must have plenty of street smarts there. There are milder places to begin to get your first international experience!

4. Volunteering is a great way to get international experience. International volunteering that gives you pertinent experience is a great way to build your foundation for international work. You usually need 2-3 posts of volunteer work to get the foundation of experience. International experience is not just window dressing; it is essential. International work is complex. You can't just transplant your skills into another culture. You must know that culture. Employers are looking for people who "know the ropes" and understand how international work is different from their work back home. Because most international humanitarian work is funded by projects, you must be able to "hit the ground running."

So get volunteer experience that is pertinent to your long-term goal.

5. Cultural experience helps immensely. People who have cultural roots in the country where they wish to work are at a distinct advantage: they likely know the language, beliefs, and interaction patterns, so they know how to connect and get things done in that culture.

6. Class experience is equally valuable. If you are going to work in a poor country, then experience with poverty, hardship, and despair helps you "get" it. The biggest step that most North Americans and Europeans will make is not onto the airplane but across the class divide. One eighth of the world population consumes seven eighths of the world resources, leaving only one eighth of the resources for the other seven eighths. This is a world of Have-Lots and Have-Nots.

7. Have lots of experience and something valuable to contribute. Get your experience at home. Don't expect to learn professional skills in another country where you will be coping with cultural differences and snafus. By bringing plenty of skills and savvy, you don't drain their organization, but you contribute to it. Most international positions do not require you to carry out a task but require you to teach others to do it. You "download" your skills. In the terms used in international work, you partner as equals to build capacity.

8. Partnering as equals. Many people think that international social work means that you do the same tasks that you do here, simply transplanting them into another culture. Not true. People are very capable all over the world. They can do things for themselves. So they don't want you doing things for them.

Your job is to mentor. This is where it helps to have years of experience, including supervisory experience. You will have to know your subject so well that you can see where the snags are for them, or how to apply a new innovation or approach into a different cultural or religious context. That's where it gets tricky. You need resourcefulness and the ability

to improvise—to hang things together with “duct tape and baling wire.”

To partner as equals, you need a tremendous amount of humility. To be honest, Americans flunk this test. All over the world, we have a reputation for our arrogance. Most Americans come in thinking that they are hot stuff. Capacity building is recognizing and building the skills of your team rather than show-boating. Canadians come in much more gently and accomplish far more. What can each of us do to change that attitude and way of presenting?

9. Study the cultures and countries that interest you. Ascertain their needs. This will help not only when you are in-country but when you approach people about paid or voluntary work. Remember Richard Bolles' job strategy in *What Color Is Your Parachute?* Determine the unmet needs in the organization. If you can meet the unmet needs, you are more likely to be hired. Help solve what vexes, baffles, bewilders, and plagues them. Don't just focus on an organization, but consider the culture at large. For example, in countries that have no budget for health and education, then there are few social services to meet human needs. Therefore, there are few jobs but lots of needs to fulfill—thus, lots of room to start programs.

10. Find burgeoning grassroots organizations. Social work has a role to play at all levels of a nation's social service infrastructure. Paid jobs in well established organizations are available to those with the necessary qualifications. But those may not be the real plums. I believe the most exciting jobs are those on the cutting edge: assisting with the growth of the grassroots citizens organizations (often in a volunteer role).

In poor countries, there is very little money that can be devoted to social services, but social services are growing nonetheless. In the last 10 years, there has been an explosion of organizations started by citizens, not by the government. The growth of infrastructure is from the ground up, not the top down.

11. What skills are needed? In the new grassroots organizations, community organization skills are incredibly valuable in helping with organizational and program development. Grant writing and fundraising skills are more in demand—although I believe that we must look at how monies are allocated. In very poor countries, how do you decide who gets the funding? Someone proposed that the village itself makes that decision.

In paid positions, managerial skills are often required, as you may wear the hats of both director and service provider. The clinical skills that you may have acquired in North America may or may not be applicable. Psychotherapy is a very foreign notion in most of the world; counseling is a luxury.

Your people skills, broadly speaking, are what are treasured everywhere. Social work is one of the most important professions in international work because of our emphasis on poverty.

Getting Your Foot in the Door

1. Identify prospective organizations and contact people. This is where much of the preparatory work is. You could spend years researching possibilities.

2. Write a culturally-sensitive, compelling cover letter and résumé. In the industrial world, you want to impress people with your qualifications. When writing to South America, Africa, Asia, Central Asia, or the Balkans, it is offensive to receive a letter from “me-big-kahuna” in corporate America. A boasting tone that prevails in North America will backfire. “Who needs a Big Kahuna? Big Kahunas give me a headache. We need someone who can help.” Be more humble.

3. Outline how your skills will help meet their needs. For voluntary work, rather than say that you are a Big Kahuna, explain that you can help them set up their domestic violence program or a livelihoods program in a refugee camp. You can help teach how a media campaign changes attitudes toward “gender based violence” or you will work with the slum dwellers on advocacy programs.

4. Steer clear of the crowd. If the problem is this global bottleneck, then target organizations that no one else has heard of.

5. Hang tough. Keep at it. Go into an international job search knowing it is a marathon. Take breaks along the way. Pace yourself. Persist. In the course of searching, you learn an immense amount about how international work is “wired,” which is invaluable on the job.

6. It is worth it! International humanitarian work is amazing! It is likely to be one of the highlights of your life. The field of international NGOs is quickly changing as NGOs fill a niche that many governments neglected. The world needs people contributing their skills to address humanity's problems.

The needs are clearly there. It is just a matter of finding your niche. Your niche may be voluntary rather than paid work. Keep at it, because we need you and your skills.

Ann McLaughlin MSW, a social worker by trade with a passion for world cultures and international affairs, founded and directs NGOabroad. NGOabroad is a service that matches your skills to international needs. Ann assists with the international job search through career consulting to identify goals and strategies, polishing résumés and cover letters, and providing lists of opportunities for paid or voluntary work to shave years off of your search. See <http://www.ngoabroad.com/> for more information.