

Preparation for an International Development Assignment: How to Be Successful

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Preparation for an International Development Assignment: How to Be Successful

Abstract

International development work, and the associated travel, can be very exciting. For some of us, learning about different cultures is among the best of life's experiences.

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Background

Picture yourself in some far-off land where the climate is warm and life is low-tech (often very enjoyable compared to the pressures of Western culture). The indigenous people are friendly, yet their customs are mysterious and interesting.

International development work, and the associated travel, can be very exciting. For some of us, learning about different cultures is among the best of life's experiences. We increasingly see that success relies heavily on our understanding of that culture.

As compared to being a tourist, when you're working on an international assignment you're immediately plugged into a network of good people within that country. As a tourist you tend to be more isolated from the people and the essence of their culture.

It's a genuine privilege to assist people with very limited resources and positively impact their lives. They readily express a sincere gratitude for your effort that tends to be overlooked here in the States. And often, international development assignments provide more encouragement to focus on doing quality work, with less emphasis on quantity. That's rewarding!

But how do you become an international development consultant (IDC), and how can you be successful in this role? No matter how bright you are, there's no substitute for thorough preparation, including your subject expertise, development work in general, and knowing how to make your way in a variety of international settings. The better you are at it, the more successful you become and the more fun it is.

Attitudes and Philosophies

You can improve your chances of being a successful IDC by using a tried and true approach. As an IDC, your challenge is to share your specialized knowledge in such a manner that people discover ways to improve their local situation. This takes time and patience. You cultivate local ownership by having the people become full participants in the development process of determining needs, planning for action, implementing, and evaluating. People support what they help create.

As a trusting relationship is gradually established, the local people become more involved in a team approach that focuses on solving the problems they want addressed. Solutions are more sustainable when they're included, rather than bringing in a "fix" from outside.

The local people are the experts on the local situation. It's largely through their valuable help that important problems are identified, courses of action are planned, and solutions are selected, adapted, and implemented. A good development philosophy is to assign a high value to improving the quality of life of the poorer people, usually accomplished in both economic and human terms.

Successful IDCs have a sensitivity and curiosity about other cultures and see the differences between our's and their's. They recognize that their own developmental shortcomings aren't subject matter or technical as much as cultural. You can increase your effectiveness by attempting to understand how people think, what motivates them, how they obtain information, and why they do what they do.

In my experience, successful IDCs develop an underlying philosophy that recognizes and appreciates other people's worth and potential. When indigenous talents and resources are used, a project stands a better chance of enduring in the long run. It's a philosophy of "helping people help themselves."

Development and Cultural Preparation

If you're a "wanna-be" and haven't served on the international scene before, begin by preparing at home. Since you can't acquire in-depth knowledge about a lot of places, try to focus on one country or a region. Develop local contacts and networks with people and organizations that have an international focus. Most institutions of higher education have a number of opportunities for you to learn about other cultures. Examples are included in the following list of ways to prepare:

- Seek out and spend time with people from other countries. You may find them in your community as neighbors, business people, employees, teachers, or students. Once you develop a mutual comfort level, take them to lunch, or invite them to your home and learn

about them as individuals, as well as their customs and beliefs. Talk, listen, ask questions. Look for ways to assist them; it should be a give-and-take relationship. You'll soon be introduced to friends of theirs from other countries.

- Whether on business or holiday, you often notice foreign nationals taking photos, looking at maps, or showing some confusion (as you will when you're overseas). Ask them if you can help. You may get a chance to talk to them a bit, get their reaction to our country, learn about them.
- Participate in organizations that have an international element. Take an active part in them and develop mutually-beneficial relationships. Attend internationally-focused programs and listen with an open mind. Yes, people from other countries are often difficult to understand, and some of what they say will be "different" from your experience.
- Read about international travel, other cultures, and development work. Your library has textbooks and periodicals, and so do your local bookstores. Study maps until you "know your way around" geographically. If you're planning a trip or developing an international "focus," you'll find travel and cultural information that will provide many insights about the place to which you're heading. Read your newspaper's world events section on a regular basis. The Sunday edition of the *New York Times* always has special in-depth international articles that are very well done. The *National Geographic* is a terrific source of information, particularly the super photographs. "A picture's worth a thousand words," as the saying goes.
- There's an increasing amount of electronic information becoming available. Some of it's available on discs or CDs, such as electronic encyclopedias or volume-types of information. And the computer networks have growing sources over the Internet, TurboGopher, and World Wide Web.
- Look in your university's telephone directory for offices that offer international information or contacts. Check for the obvious under an "international" listing in both your telephone book and faculty directory. Ask if they have information on current or upcoming projects, or if

they know someone from your country of interest. Call the language department, because there's usually someone specializing in the language spoken by people in your target area. That person would know about that part of the world and possibly people from there that may be visiting here.

- Try to get appointments with experienced IDCs. They can provide a special insight into how you might fit into the international development picture and how you might proceed with preparation. Maybe they'll share copies of project proposals, project plans, or consultant reports, and explain how the project development process works. You'll find some new language and a bunch of acronyms, but look for structure and content.
- Talk at length with people who have visited other countries as tourists. Much of what they've experienced is more than merely "seeing the sights," but relates to cultural beliefs and conventions.
- Visit travel agencies for information on travel and tourist attractions in your country of interest. Most information will offer an address of a tourist promotion bureau where you can obtain further information.
- Travel as much as you can afford. For those of us on the U.S. mainland, Puerto Rico and Mexico aren't far away, and you can see and learn about tropical cultures. Look for special air fare rates to stretch your travel dollars; it may be cheaper to fly to Europe than California. Check the Sunday papers and travel agents for travel bargains, but these often require that you plan months ahead.
- There are French-speaking areas in Canada that can provide some experience of being in a foreign culture. For that matter, most of our larger cities have distinct foreign segments that can furnish good learning experiences.

Sponsors and Landing an Overseas Assignment

Develop a resumé slanted toward international development work. Try to get some internationally-oriented experiences to show your aspirations and sincerity. Maybe you can take an international course or two, or learn a foreign language. Read as much as you can about your subject specialty and make a special effort to seek information beyond the "Western" publications.

Many international development-related agencies and organizations produce publications written by authors from throughout the world. Two of my best sources are: the World Bank, 1818 H Street, NW, Washington, DC 20433, and FAO (Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations), Via Delle Terme di Caracalla, 00100 Rome, Italy. FAO also has a publications outlet stateside at UNIPUB, PO Box 1222, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.

Apply to many development organizations, because their needs for a particular specialty will vary considerably, depending on their current projects. Zero in on volunteer development organizations at first; your chances of gaining an assignment will be greater. The more experience and successes you have, the greater your chances of being selected (it's sort of a which-came-first-the-chicken-or-the-egg thing). Most prospective employers would like you to send them an updated resumé each year. It's good to have new activities on there to show your commitment.

There are many other overseas employment opportunities, particularly in teaching and in the craft skills areas. For those with advanced degrees, there are many positions at foreign universities listed in "The Chronicle of Higher Education." Some placement offices have overseas job listings, and some periodicals advertise these as well.

One of the largest international sources of jobs is the tabloid "International Development Opportunities." You can subscribe by writing to Rt. 2, Box 305, Stanardsville, VA 22973. Their phone number is 804-985-6444. A recent issue advertised jobs ranging from construction work in Saudi Arabia, to medical assistant in Zaire, to USAID chief-of-party in Nigeria. There were many jobs with locations here in the USA, also. Some were for directors of international institutes at universities.

Learn about potential employers or sponsors. Study their information and find out what they do, what they need and want. One experienced consultant suggests: "...thorough preparation is only possible through extensive liaison with the actual hiring agency. That both technical and cultural preparation has to be seen as country specific...."

Talk to other employees or consultants. Learn as much as you can about their projects and try to see how you might

prepare yourself to contribute to such projects. Fill in your weakness gaps. Keep learning.

Technical Preparation

New international consultants often arrive at their destination in high spirits, taking great enjoyment in seeing a country and people very different from back home. They're warmly greeted, and are soon beginning their work with great enthusiasm. Then, after a period of time, there is disappointment in how slowly people move on new ideas. Some of the initial enchantment with the new place of residence begins to wear off and enthusiasm falls. Seasoned consultants understand this and prepare for it both professionally and personally.

Review the possible contributions you can make to the upcoming project. Don't limit this to what's listed in the scope of work, but try to anticipate possible requests for assistance in related areas. You can only carry so much, so prepare an organized assortment of concise materials that represent your expertise. It's a good idea to carry both hard copies as well as electronic files of your needed information.

Some of your information will probably end up being reproduced for handout materials to be used during training, or otherwise distributed to target audiences. So, they're best if prepared with that in mind. Sometimes it's possible to send materials ahead of time so they can be translated, if necessary, and reproduced before you get there.

Developing countries usually have severely limited resources, so study ways of accomplishing your recommended improvements with reduced resources, particularly using locally available materials.

Be sure to prepare visual aids and other training materials, because they help overcome language and cultural barriers. They also increase student interest, learning, and cause an audience to see you as more of an authority. You'll be more persuasive. These materials might also be quite helpful if used by your counterpart after you leave the country.

Take along photos and/or slides of your community, your home, your work, your hobbies, and your family, for they are of particular interest to those of another culture. If they like you, they'll be anxious to learn about your culture as well.

Computers

Many of today's successful IDCs take their own laptop computers with them. Some development agencies even expect you to have one as part of your professional preparedness. If you travel a lot, portability will be an important consideration.

Try to get a good fix on what reports are expected of you; often your sponsor has a specific format that's required. Enter the report format into your computer before you go, and build on it as you go along. It's a nice feeling to find a place to print out your final report and hand it in before heading home, instead of trying to piece it together later. Employers love it, too.

Computer compatibility may be a problem, i.e. Macintosh versus MS DOS or DOS Windows. I've installed the AppleFile Exchange application on my Macintosh PowerBook so I can save a document onto a DOS-formatted disk as a DOS or Windows file (usually in MicroSoft Word or WordPerfect). Then I just pop the disk into a local DOS computer and print. It's one way I get around the compatibility problem. Oh yes, there are increasingly affordable lightweight portable printers.

Much of the electrical current found overseas is 220 volts, so check your computer. If it says 110 to 220 volts, you're probably OK. If not, you'll need a transformer. Electronic, lightweight transformers are often short-lived, and the durable ones are extremely heavy.

My PowerBook 170 has a small wall-outlet transformer that works equally well on current from 110 to 230 volts, and on 50 or 60 cycle current. It's been to many places and never fails me.

You'll need a set of electrical adapters to adapt the two-prong USA plug to foreign wall outlets. Kits can be purchased at an electronics store or in some department stores.

Let me also mention the value of a computer as recreation. A couple of times I've been in an area of a country that had little entertainment to offer and, on certain evenings, provided little opportunity to do my usual socializing with the local people. A tiny, rural community with nothing much to do. No place to go, no radio (in a language that I could understand), no television, no restaurants, no bars. After the early dinner

provided by the hotel, it was back to the room. When the day's report was finished, I'd spend some creative time on writing (about my day's adventures) and/or graphics production. I also read quite a lot in the evenings, but sometimes I find it valuable to entertain myself on the computer - even with mindless computer games.

Another trivial (maybe not) note - it's better to buy a 220 volt hair dryer than to try to use a transformer, because their heavy current requirement is tough on lightweight, electronic transformers. I recall a three-week assignment in Eastern Europe where my room was often less than 40 degrees, Fahrenheit, and the bathwater about the same. Imagine a wet head at that temperature! I'd have caught pneumonia without my hair dryer.

Medical Preparation

All overseas employers require a medical exam, and a doctor's statement that you're "fit to travel." When you get your exam, your doctor can look up in a publication what shots are recommended for your country of destination. Don't let me scare you, but sometimes there's quite a few that are necessary for your first venture into a tropical climate. I don't take unnecessary chances - I welcome all suggested shots.

You'll likely be asked to get anti-malarial tablets if you're going to a tropical or sub-tropical climate. Most of those are to be taken once each week, beginning before you leave.

When I get to my new country, if I plan to stay more than a few weeks, I ask around and get an appointment with a reliable local doctor. They always know stuff that your back-home doctor doesn't know, because they deal with different medical situations. They usually suggest that you continue to get the gamma globulin shots every three to four months to enhance your immune system. And they'll know the best anti-malarial tablets for the kind of malaria they have locally.

What to Take

While you're allowed two large check-in luggage pieces and two carry-ons on overseas flights, many experienced travelers get by with only one large piece and two carry-ons. You can hang a backpack on a shoulder and have your hands free for

your large piece of luggage and your combination briefcase/laptop bag. With that, you can get around much better. And the backpack will hold your camera, film, a change of clothes if your big suitcase gets lost, and other materials you might want with you daily.

Most novice travelers take many things they don't need, often returning with clothing and other items that were never used. One of the best ways to reduce your luggage weight is to plan on doing your laundry often so you don't need as many shirts, undies, socks, etc. Take some powdered laundry detergent (in zip-lock bags) and a few metal coat hangers and wash out a few things each night. Use the coat hangers to hang 'em up to dry.

Casual clothes are mostly acceptable, except for a few times when you might meet a minister-of-something or other heavyweight. Then you'll need business attire.

Make a list of people back here you expect to write to, and prepare sets of mailing labels. This will save precious time while you're in another country, and maybe avoid overlooking some who expect cards and letters. If you don't have a way to make peel-off labels, simply print the names and addresses out on a sheet and cut and tape them (clear tape) onto the envelope.

You'll find some wonderful people overseas who'll go out of their way to help you, both professionally and personally. Be sure to take some gifts to show your appreciation. They like items that are labeled with your university, city, country, or other names and logos they recognize, like professional sports teams. Hats, pins, ball point pens, key chains, coffee cups, and t-shirts are fairly easily carried.

A valid passport is required, and some countries have visa requirements. Your sponsor will inform you of these things.

Traveler's checks are safer than carrying cash, but the ease of cashing them varies between countries. Usually, only banks and hotels cash them. U.S. money is valued around the world, so it's good to have a few large bills (\$50s or \$100s) tucked away. A money belt under your clothing is safest. It's also a safe place for your passport and air tickets.

Part of being an informed international traveler is keeping an eye on currency exchange rates. Mostly, you'll find these rates

to be favorable to people exchanging U.S. currency. Remember to exchange some currency at the airport bank to get you by until you can get to a larger bank, which often has better exchange rates.

As soon as you enter a new country - **THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT** - buy some bottled water as soon as you can find it. Carry a bottle with you, and avoid drinking unboiled water until you're absolutely certain it's OK.

Here's an abbreviated checklist for international travel:

- Required medicines, anti-malarial tabs;
- Passport; maybe visas, medical records, copy of birth certificate, international drivers license;
- Traveler's checks, credit cards, and money;
- Resources to support your expertise;
- Portable computer and electrical adapters;
- Clothing for climate, comfortable shoes;
- Backpack, money belt, fannypack;
- Flashlight, umbrella;
- Recreational reading material;
- Laundry detergent, coat hangers, snacks;
- Stationary, envelopes, addresses (or mailing labels);
- Phone and FAX numbers of personal and professional contacts;
- Small gifts from the USA.

Summary

Intelligent preparation can go a long way toward making your international development assignment successful and satisfying, both professionally and personally. This includes a proper attitude and philosophy, and doing your homework on the culture and how your expertise might apply. It's also knowing what to take and what to leave at home. The best substitute for experience is to read and talk to people and learn as much as you can.