

Becoming an International Aid Worker

An Experienced Professional Explains How It's Done *by Matthew Bolton*

I have an incredible job. Initially as a volunteer and later as a consultant to international nonprofit aid agencies, I have worked in ten countries, including Bosnia and Iraq...

I have worked alongside a former Marxist guerrilla, arranged financing for landmine clearance, helped organize relief convoys to conflict zones, talked with some of the poorest people in the world, and watched international diplomats dancing to folk music in a garden surrounded by minefields.

It is a great opportunity for people who don't want to spend their lives pecking at keyboards in cubicle farms. However, be warned: it is not a traditional career path. Being an aid worker requires an ability to adapt to intensely challenging situations and withstand emotional strain.

Aid work is also unlike any other profession in that it is often very difficult to get your foot in the door. Since aid agencies' work is global, they have truly international workforces; one competes for one's job with intelligent, skilled, and well-motivated people from all over the world.

It is highly unlikely that you will get a well-paid position with significant responsibilities straight out of university. However, if you work at shaping yourself into an ideal candidate, you will start getting good job offers two to three years into your career.

Here are the elements I have found most important in getting started in the aid work field:

Know your motivations. It is said that in job interviews for the International Committee of the Red Cross, one of the world's most important humanitarian agencies, sometimes applicants are asked "What are you running away from?" Indeed, one has to have pretty strong (and perhaps strange) motivations to want to leave one's home, family, and friends and go live in war zones and situations of poverty.

In Helen Fielding's great satirical novel about aid workers, *Cause Celeb*, one of her characters wears a T-shirt "set out like a multiple choice questionnaire for relief workers. It reads: (a) Missionary? (b) Mercenary? (c) Misfit? (d) Broken heart?"

The missionary's earnestness can be a sustaining factor but can be damaging when their ideology surfaces. While the mercenary types are often talented and pragmatic, it is morally questionable to exploit human suffering for material gain. Misfits think outside the box but sometimes an inferiority complex or just plain weirdness can get in the way of a successful team. Finally, broken hearts may be willing to take risks and may be less easy to fool, but their "issues" become tiring for others to hear about.

In reality there are good humanitarians with all kinds of motivations. What is important to think carefully about how your motivations might sometimes be a hindrance to your work.

Have something to offer and market it. This may sound obvious, but it is important to have skills, knowledge, or abilities that aid agencies need. Ideals cannot feed people. As the adage says, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."

Engineers, agronomists, environmentalists, logisticians, linguists, and medical professionals are always in high demand because of their highly technical knowledge. Persons with other less obvious niche skills are also regularly hired. Nonprofits have computer networks that need maintaining and so hire IT specialists. They handle enormous amounts of money and thus look for business and accounting professions. As large organizations they require experienced and skilled managers.

That said, social science majors and liberal arts students need not be discouraged. I was a history and religion major, which on the surface seems rather unhelpful. However, the skills that got my foot in the door were writing and research.

The big nonprofits are usually funded by government or UN agencies that require reams of documentation, reports, and proposals. Someone has to write these. Moreover, projects and programs need the support of social research to measure their impact and appropriateness. Such tasks require good social scientists.

Finally, it is important to describe your skills to these agencies. If you never tell them, they will never know. Get your resume out there and begin talking to people "on the inside."

Attributes. Aid workers come in all shapes and sizes and have widely variant personality types. However, there are some attributes that tend to be in common with the best humanitarians.

Integrity and accountability are very important as one handles large amounts of money and commodities. At the same time, an ability to compromise and diplomatically adapt to challenging situations is essential. Plans rarely work out perfectly.

It helps to be tough and adventurous. Being able to roll with the punches and live in poor conditions will take you a long way. Whiners are not appreciated in a field office.

Finally, savviness and quickness to learn enable one to adjust to new cultures and languages rapidly.

Connections. For better or for worse, the old cliché, "It's not what you know; it's who you know," is just as true for aid work as for any other profession. In fact, it is probably even more true. Working in complex and stressful conditions of poverty and conflict, aid agency administrators want a team they can trust—thus there is a tendency to hire people they know well and have seen in action. It is essential to network and build contacts. Go to conferences, use mutual friends to get introductions, and save business cards. Most importantly, bringing us to the next point, get good international experience.

International and Cross-Cultural Experience. It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of experience in getting a good position in humanitarian organizations. As noted above, employers want to hire people with a track record, someone they can trust. Experience in a wide range of cultures and contexts shows that you are able to adjust and perform in difficult circumstances. It also means you are more likely to have the chance to learn new languages.

Of course, this brings up the paradox that you can't get a job without experience and you can't get experience without a job. With humanitarian work, one usually has to start from the very bottom as an intern or a volunteer. This means you have to be willing to work for little or nothing when you start out.

Programs like the Peace Corps are the best starting places because they provide good training, language classes, support, and are well known. In addition, they provide a post-assignment network of contacts—returned Peace Corps volunteers tend to look out for each other.

My start was a little unorthodox. A friend of mine helped me arrange a stipendiary volunteer assignment with a nonprofit working in Bosnia. This way was a bit more difficult than a structured volunteer program, but it taught me to be a self-starter.

If you have difficulty getting into aid work programs for medical or other reasons, study abroad or even local cross-cultural experience (for instance working with immigrant communities or teaching in a school whose students are of a different culture than your own) can be a good start.

SELECTED ALPHABETICAL LISTING OF TOP INTERNATIONAL NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

Academy for Educational Development
Accion International (AITEC)
ACORN- Reform
The Africa Fund
African Medical & Research Foundation
African Wildlife Foundation
The African-American Institute
Africare, Inc.
Aga Kahn Foundation
Agricultural Cooperative Development International
AIESEC U.S., Inc.
Alan Guttmacher Institute
America's Development Foundation
AMIDEAST
American Council for Nationalities Services
American Enterprise Institute For Public Research
American Friends Service Committee, Inc.
American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee
American Near East Refugee Aid (ANERA)
American ORT Federation (Education for Life)
American Red Cross International Services
American Refugee Committee (ARC)
American-Scandinavian Foundation (ASF)
Americas Society
Amnesty International U.S.A.
ANERA
Appropriate Technology International (ATI)
Arms Control Association (ACA)
The Asia Foundation
The Asia Society
ATA (Aid to Artisans)
The Atlantic Council of the United States
Baptist World Alliance
Overseas Development Network (ODN)
Bikes Not Bombs
Bread for the World
Brethren Volunteer Service
Church of the Brethren General Board
The Brookings Institution
Brother's Brother Foundation
CARE, Inc.
Caribbean Conservation Corp.
Catholic Medical Mission Board, Inc.
Catholic Relief Services (CRS)
Center for Defense Information
Center for International Development & Environment
Center For Strategic & International Studies (CSIS)
Center for Third World Organizing
Centre for Development and Population Activities
Children's Survival Fund, Inc. Relief
China Institute In America
Christian Children's Fund
Christian Foundation for Children- Poverty
Christian Reformed World Relief Committee
Church World Service
Citizens Democracy Corps (CDC)
Commission On Security And Cooperation In Europe
Compassion International
Concern America
Cooperative Housing Foundation
Council For a Liveable World
Council For Inter-American Security (CIS)
The Council On Foreign Relations
Delphi International
Dental Health International
Direct Relief International (DRI)
Dooley Foundation/INTERMED-USA, Inc.
East-West Center (EWC)
Ecumenical Development Cooperative Society
Environmental Defense Fund
Episcopal Church of the U.S.A.
The Episcopal Migration Ministries
Episcopal Church Volunteers For Mission
Family Health International
Farmer to Farmer
Farmworker Health Services Inc.
Father Wasson's Orphans
Fellowship of Reconciliation- Fellowship for Freedom
Food for the Hungry, Inc.
Food for the Poor
Foreign Policy Association (FPA)
Foster Parents Plan International
Foundation for International Community Assistance
Foundation for the People of the South Pacific
Fourth World Movement
Freedom From Hunger Foundation
Freedom House
Frontiers Foundation Inc./Operation Beaver
Goodwill Industries of America
Habitat for Humanity International
The Hansard Society For Parliamentary Government
Heifer Project International
Helen Keller International
The Heritage Foundation
HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society)
High/Scope Educational Research Foundation
Hudson Institute
Human Rights Watch
The Hunger Project
International Association of Exchange Students for Technical Experience (IAESTE)
Institute for East-West Studies
Institute For Food and Development Policy/Food First
Institute for International Cooperation and Development
Institute for International Development, Inc.
Institute For International Economics
Institute for Policy Studies
Institute of Cultural Affairs
Institute of European & Asian Studies
Institute of International Education
Interaction
Interchurch Medical Assistance, Inc.
International Agricultural Exchange
International Aid, Inc.
International Catholic Migration Commission
International Center for Research on Women
International Christian Youth Exchange
International Development Enterprises
International Executive Service Corps (IESC)
International Eye Foundation
International Foundation For Electoral Systems
International Institute of Rural Reconstruction
International Medical Corps
International Planned Parenthood Federation
Western Hemisphere Region, Inc.
International Reading Association
International Rescue Committee
International Voluntary Services
Interns For Peace
Japan Information Center
Jesuit Volunteer Corps
Joint Baltic American National Committee (JBANC)
Language for Eastern European Development (LEED)
Laubach Literacy International- literacy
Los Ninos- adoption international
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service
Lutheran Volunteer Corps
Lutheran World Ministries
Lutheran World Relief
MADRE
MAP International
Marin Interfaith Task Force on Central America
Maryknoll Lay Missioners
Mennonite Central Committee
Mennonite Economic Development Associates, Inc
Mennonite Voluntary Service
Mercy Corps International
Meridian International Center
Middle East Institute
National Audubon Society
National Cooperative Business Association (NCBA)
National Council of Negro Women
National Council On International Health
The National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations
National Wildlife Federation
Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC)
The Nature Conservancy
Near East Foundation- Poverty in Africa and Middle East
Operation Crossroads Africa, Inc.
Operation USA-
Opportunity International
Overseas Development Council (ODC)
Overseas Education Fund
Oxfam America
Pan American Development Foundation
Partners of The Americas
Pathfinder International
Peace Brigades International-North America Project
Peacework
The Pearl S. Buck Foundation
People to People Health Foundation, Inc (Project HOPE)
Health Sciences Education Center
Phelps-Stokes Fund
Planned Parenthood Federation Of America
Plenty US
Population Action International
Population Connection
Population Council
The Population Institute
Director of Future Leaders Program
Population Reference Bureau, Inc. (PRB)
Program for Appropriate Technology in Health
Project Concern International
Proyecto Libertad
Salvation Army World Service Office
Save the Children Federation, Inc.
Service Civil International
Innisfree Village
Sister Cities International
Technoserve, Inc.
The Lisle Fellowship, Inc.
The Seva Foundation-
The Training Exchange
Thomas A. Dooley Foundation/Intermed-USA
Tolstoy Foundation, Inc.
The Trickle Up Program
U.S. Committee For Refugees
U.S. Committee For UNICEF
U.S. Feed Grains Council
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee
United Farm Workers
United Methodist Committee on Relief
United Nations Headquarters Internship Program
United Nations Volunteers
Urban Institute
Ursuline Companions in Mission
Visions in Action
Voices on the Border
Volunteers For Peace (VIP)
Volunteers in Overseas Cooperative Assistance
Volunteers in Technical Assistance, Inc. (VITA)
Volunteer Workcamp Association of Ghana
Washington Office On Africa (WOA)
Washington Office On Latin America (WOLA)
Witness for Peace
Women's International League For Peace and Freedom
World Association of Girl Scouts
World Concern
World Council of Credit Unions
World Education
World Learning, Inc.
World Neighbors, Inc.
World Policy Institute
World Rehabilitation Fund, Inc.
World Relief Corporation-
World Resources Institute
World Vision International
World Vision Relief and Development, Inc
World Wildlife Fund
WorldTeach, Inc.
Worldwatch Institute
YMCA International Program Services
Youth For Understanding (YFU)