The impact of an international volunteering experience on individual career development

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Abstract
Volunteering has recently been perceived by many in the career development industry as a viable strategy for career enhancement, as a means of gaining valuable work experience and developing skills sought by employers. International volunteering is carried out by people driven by a range of motives and values, which often change as a result of the international volunteering experience. These experiences provide individuals with a broad set of opportunities to enhance not just their career development, but a variety of other benefits that cannot always be predicted prior to such experiences. Literature on the topic of international volunteering largely focuses on the improved employability of returned volunteers, the resulting career decisions that emerge, and the changed values and clarity of motives for volunteering. While the relationship between international volunteering and career development is not always predictable or straightforward, it is often transformational for the volunteer, with career development remaining a significant aspect for international volunteers.

Introduction
International voluntary work is growing both numerically and in its importance as a means of contributing to development programmes and humanitarian aid worldwide (Sherraden, Stringham, Sow, McBride, 2006). It serves as a means of allowing people to serve in different capacities for various periods of time, in a wide range of contexts. Globalisation appears to have accelerated the growth of international volunteering, but has corresponded with a slower pace of relevant research (Lough, McBride and Sherraden, 2009).

Often referred to as international voluntary service (IVS), it is purported to allow ordinary people an opportunity to become involved in development work, humanitarian aid, the promotion of peace and understanding across international borders, as well as offering technical assistance and training for
the benefit of others throughout the world (Sherraden, Lough & McBride, 2008). During the process of making such contributions, volunteers themselves often benefit via personal growth, development of self-confidence, intercultural competence, and a greater commitment to civic and global engagement (Sherraden et al., 2008). Enhanced career development is often a further significant outcome, and includes benefits to the volunteer such as improved employability, clarity in relation to future career decisions, and changes in values that contribute to greater self-awareness and understanding of personal motivations.

As a career practitioner with a strong interest in volunteering, the author has previously been an advocate of this approach as a career-enhancing strategy, largely within the university context in New Zealand. The development of a volunteering strategy within one tertiary education context has led to several events that promote volunteering held on university campuses in New Zealand. Volunteering is perceived to be a useful career strategy because of its potential to contribute to student and graduate employability, particularly in an economic downturn when acquiring paid employment is likely to be more difficult. Although this may seem like a less-than-altruistic motivation for anyone to volunteer, it is nevertheless an approach that is understandable and worthy of consideration when bearing in mind options for gaining valuable work experience and thereby furthering the career potential of individuals. The international aspect of this study was partly brought about by personal involvement in short-term volunteer work in Fiji, Thailand and most recently Timor-Leste, which has fuelled the desire to research this topic in more depth.

While positive benefits will often result for volunteers’ career development, these are not automatic, and may incur other less-than-desirable consequences, including outcomes related to the host communities in particular. Potentially negative aspects of international volunteering include conscious or sub-conscious imperialistic attitudes with a resulting reinforcement of inequalities between the developed and developing worlds (Sherraden et al., 2008). One example cited is the preponderance of gap-year programmes for young people (Simpson, 2004). In a somewhat sceptical fashion, these have been portrayed as nothing more than a means to combine tourism, adventure, with supposedly “making a difference”, as well as the unspoken possibility of allaying guilt over the volunteer’s wealth and privilege. The danger is seen as potentially making little meaningful
contribution to the host community, and perpetuating the myth that such programmes create long-lasting improvement to such communities, when this may not actually be the case (Sherraden et al., 2008).

**Employability**

The idea of improving one’s employability by way of engaging in an international volunteering experience seems a desirable, although not automatic, outcome for the volunteer in particular. Employability refers to the knowledge skills and attributes likely to be required of those seeking employment in the future, and is enhanced by a wide range of factors. Generic skills such as communication skills, teamwork skills, problem-solving skills, initiative and enterprise skills, planning and organising skills, self-management skills, and technology skills, have been recognised by projects including the Employability Skills Framework, which was developed in Australia (ACCI & BCA, 2002) and based on research of Australian employers’ views. These and other skills are commonly referred to among career professionals working in tertiary education in Australia and New Zealand.

Skill development as a result of international volunteering certainly contributes to individual employability, and the abovementioned skills, together with cross-cultural communication, are recognised in a quantitative study produced jointly by Australian Volunteers International (AVI) and Monash University (Brook, Missingham, Hocking and Fifer, 2007). These skills “are both highly valued by employers and well-developed in volunteers” (p.1). Although this report was likely to have been produced for the purposes of promoting AVI volunteers to Australian employers, it declared that 87% of returned international volunteers had acquired or improved one or more skill, with 57% improving on three or more skills. Repatriated volunteers are “well prepared to deal with the globalised workplace” (p.2). Career development of international volunteers is therefore positively impacted by their experiences, and employers also benefit from this. Despite some reservation on the part of employers toward the skills and experience accrued by volunteers, many volunteers also developed the attitudes of responsibility, communication, creativity and commitment, all of which the majority of employers are likely to respect. The study further asserted that “International volunteering programs are transformative experiences that
develop and foster generic tough skills in volunteers” (p.23).

An organised period of IVS will usually include positive outcomes for the volunteer such as skill development, personal development, intercultural competence, language skills, international knowledge, and subsequently a greater involvement in civic and global affairs, according to Sherraden et al. (2008). IVS potentially increases the capacity of the volunteers’ in leadership, language, communication, problem-solving, team-building, and interpersonal relations, which all contribute to employability. Although some employers may not always give appropriate recognition to the overseas experience, many still recognise the personal development and attitudes of returned volunteers in areas such as self-confidence, self-awareness, maturity and independence. Sherraden suggests “The potential is high, therefore, for IVS to be a transformative experience in the lives of volunteers” (p.409).

The experiences of managers as both volunteers and the employers of volunteers can provide an interesting perspective on employability and professional development issues. In 2006, the Chartered Management Institute in the UK (Cook & Jackson, 2006) produced a research report that focussed primarily on managers, although it certainly has applicability to volunteers in non-management roles as well. The expressed purpose of the research was “to evaluate the professional development benefits of volunteering” (p.1), with a call to employers to recognise the skills developed by volunteers as well as exhorting individuals to consider the career development advantages that volunteering could provide.

A large proportion (94%) of Cook and Jackson’s (2006) participants ”agree or strongly agree that long-term overseas voluntary activities broaden skills and experiences, and 48% claim that it increases employability” (p.3). “Long term” is defined here as a minimum of two years. Eighty percent of repatriated volunteers referred to increased confidence and skills as a result of their placement. The authors also alluded to the difficulty of minimal recognition by employers of the benefits to their organisations of an employee with overseas voluntary experience. However, those who did employ returned volunteers were largely positive.

A higher education perspective on employability and skill development as a result of international volunteer experience is provided by Richardson and Mallon’s (2005) study of 30 British expatriate academics, who had crossed
national borders in search of, among other things, enhanced career opportunities. Although not discussing volunteering specifically, this is still a useful perspective on the experiences of one type of occupation. Their conclusions lacked the primarily positive outcomes of working overseas, mostly because of two significant stipulations offered by some of the younger participants in the study. The first was that long-term career benefit was partly influenced by the country the expatriate travelled to: regions including New Zealand, Australia, Western Europe, USA, and some parts of East Asia were looked upon as more beneficial, whereas Africa, Eastern Europe and the Middle East were perceived as less attractive. Two-thirds of respondents also stipulated that career benefit was relevant to the content of the work itself. They highlighted “that for overseas experience to be recognised and rewarded it must involve identifiable competencies and knowledge as determined by their institutional criteria for tenure and promotion” (p.415). This seems an interesting proviso for a group that also highlighted adventure and life change as two of their primary motivations. It would seem that separating themselves from the “institutional criteria” was not necessarily part of the adventure!

Many employers are increasingly seeking candidates who have some understanding of cultural diversity. (e.g., Brook at al., Cook & Jackson). Crossman and Clarke (2010), who also represent the higher education perspective, carried out a study of 45 employers, academics and students, with the aim of discovering links between international experience and graduate employability. They present a worthwhile case for international volunteering as a means to develop experiential learning, personal networks, and language skills. The additional attributes of intercultural adaptability and global competency allude to qualities such as open-mindedness, initiative, flexibility, empathy and co-operation, which all contribute to the employability of the individual, and in some measure stem from international experience. These authors draw upon a significant amount of prior research, and conclude with the assertion that international experience, in the form of volunteering, internships or paid work, makes a solid contribution to the preparation of graduates for employment.

Superior employability and an increased desire for studying social sciences among returned volunteers, represented significant outcomes of research on youth volunteering in Europe provided by Powell and Bratovic (2007). They concluded that, as a result of international volunteering experiences, that:
“Employability, the potential to be able to find employment, is a much more common outcome than employment.” (p.30) Despite this conclusion, the authors acknowledge that volunteers’ personal growth resulting from their experience is a more dominant outcome. Increases in maturity, independence, confidence, and self-esteem commonly occur for young Europeans, with career development a secondary result.

**Career Decisions**

Career decisions are prompted by a myriad of circumstances and experiences, and international volunteering is no exception. In addition to the evidence that supports improved employability among repatriated volunteers, research into the topic has revealed the impact of the experience on future approaches and decisions regarding career, including the commitment to undergo formal education where necessary.

Lough et al. (2009) investigated 291 international volunteer alumni who had been expatriated overseas via two US-based organisations WorldTeach and Cross Cultural Solutions [CCS], subsequently presenting self-reported volunteer outcomes. They discovered that returned volunteers from both organisations believed the overseas volunteering experience was “transformational – or life changing” (p.4) with respect to further career direction, with many of these later pursuing educational opportunities in a range of disciplines. It was noted that “Many respondents concluded that volunteering internationally changed the course of their lives and increased their commitment to international or social and economic development” (p.5). The report also suggested that “international volunteering helps to define volunteers’ educational and career objectives” (p.30). Resulting study options as a determination of this career change included international education, international law, non-profit management, language studies, public health and international development. After returning home, many volunteers also began to work “closely with immigrants, refugees, or other internationals” (p.30).

Similarly, repatriated Australian volunteers also attributed their overseas experience as significant to a subsequent change in career direction. Brook et al. (2007) reported that 61% who made a significant career change, by either remaining in the same industry with a new job (32%), starting work in a new industry (22%), or remaining overseas in another capacity (7%). Overall, 53% of returned volunteers reported their experience as useful in seeking
employment or advancing their career.

Powell and Bratovic (2007) suggest that, along with personal growth and enhanced employability, international volunteering engendered positive consequences on previous career indecision. They report that voluntary service is also found to be a useful means testing out career ideas, thereby contributing to the career decision-making process. Interestingly though, these authors seem to be in the minority by suggesting that long-term follow-up of volunteers as the most accurate method of measuring career, skills and employment outcomes.

Career intentions is also one aspect of a research study of 145 international volunteers carried out by McBride, Lough and Sherraden (2011) that speaks to future career change as a potential result of international volunteering. They assert that “International service provides exposure and immersion to develop these… intentions” (p.969) and that even short-term volunteer experiences overseas “can begin to prepare participants for longer term engagement and future international service” (p.970). Unlike other similar research, this study used a comparison group of non-international-volunteers over the same period. Measuring career intentions quantitatively involved examining the degree to which respondents intended pursuing a career “related to in international or social and economic development issues” (p.972). They discovered that prior to the survey there were minimal differences between volunteers and non-volunteers in this regard, but following the overseas experience of the volunteers there was an appreciably higher intention to pursue a development-focused career path. This suggests the nature of the experience of international volunteering, what was seen, felt, done and reflected upon, was the crucial difference in subsequent career intention.

A review of the Canadian Volunteer Cooperation Programme headed by Universalia (2005) evaluated in detail a wide range of results that focussed on returning volunteers. One of their more significant findings related to the level of influence the experience had on the direction of their subsequent choice of career and/or education. Specifically, 46% of the respondents reported their experience as affecting subsequent career decisions “to a great extent”, with a further 40% affected “somewhat” (p.50). Re-focussing of personal study also resulted in many cases, even among volunteers who had not yet completed a qualification. Additionally, a number of returning graduates subsequently
pursued additional qualification in areas relevant to their experience, including development and education.

Although dating back almost 20 years, a brief but relevant study of 37 Australian volunteers (Bell, 1994) sought to draw out information relevant to returned volunteers including their resulting changes to study choices and career. Of the volunteers in this survey, 62% changed careers as a result of their overseas experiences, with the corollary that “the likelihood of volunteers changing careers is directly related to the period of time spent overseas” (p.35). Among those with longer assignments (up to 5 years), 74% made a career change, while those having shorter assignments (at least 2 years), 50% made a career change. Bell concludes with the observation that “it appears that many returned volunteers experienced substantial career development throughout their AVA terms and beyond” (p.36).

Linking career theories to volunteering (Michalos 2010) is an interesting topic for career practitioners, providing some evidence that volunteering will have a positive effect on the prospective careers of those who participate. Future career decisions are linked to Person-Environment Fit (Holland, 1973), Life-Span Development (Super, 1953) and Social Cognitive Career Theories (SCCT) (Lent, Brown and Hackett, 1987). Analysis of the PEF relationship to volunteering proposes a range of occupations typical of volunteers and their correlation with Holland’s hexagonal model. Despite the somewhat linear relationship between personality and occupational suitability that is characteristic of PEF, this is a useful indicator of success and career fit for volunteers.

Super’s Life-Span Theory affirms career exploration and enhancement of self-concept as achievable through volunteering. Super’s theory also incorporates the value of non-work roles as equally significant for career development, and although not specifically referring to international experiences, verifies volunteering as a valuable strategy for career development. SCCT components that relate to volunteering include self-efficacy, outcome expectations and personal goals, which link to activities and their outcomes applicable to volunteering. A question such as “Can I volunteer and do it successfully?” is an example of this approach. Michalos (2010) reminds us that volunteering can be an opportunity to explore career options at any stage of life, providing that curiosity is allowed to thrive as a fuel for exploration and a pathway to a resulting career decision.
Motivations and Values

Volunteering in general and international volunteering in particular have received a reasonable amount of consideration in relation to the personal values and motivations of volunteers. Values are inherent in the individual, and are determined by a wide range of factors throughout a person’s lifetime, and form the basis of motivations that in turn prompt action towards becoming a volunteer. It is widely recognised in the career development industry that personal values will often have a significant impact on career choice, and will likely change throughout a person’s life. Congruence between values and career will create personal meaning and engender individual commitment and motivation to the fulfilment of that career. Any change in values will therefore potentially affect both motivations and career as a result.

Volunteer overseas development work was the focus of Hudson and Inkson’s (2006) research, one aspect of which examined motivations of volunteers. In many cases there were multiple motives for volunteering, including a combination of altruism, search for meaning, challenge, adventure, long-held desire, the opportunity to experience a different culture, and for career-enhancing purposes. Altruism included the concepts of helping others less fortunate, giving back, and the sharing of skills. These authors discovered evidence of “discontinuity and pro-active change” (p.310) and high levels of openness as significant career characteristics of many volunteers, hence the presence of a “readiness” factor regardless of career implications (p.310). The authors classify these people as those seeking a Protean career – one where there is minimal ties to a particular organisation, and characterised by being highly motivated by their own values, and who are generally adaptable and self-directed. However, only a minority of participants in this study seemed to consistently perceive the experience through the lens of their own career development.

Strength of motivations for returned international volunteers was surveyed by Lough et al. (2009) with the resulting data indicating that the desire to gain skills for a job was not in the top six motivations of participants. Meaningful experiences, making a difference by helping others, gaining cross-cultural understanding, and acquiring language skills were all ahead of the career development imperative. However, they did report that volunteering “for career preparation” was regularly mentioned, particularly among those in the teaching profession. The opportunity to either prepare for or advance their
careers was seemingly still part of the overall motivation, even if not the most significant one.

Espoused motivations by returned Australian volunteers (Brook et al., 2007) were dominated by the desire “to help other people or do something useful” (55%) followed by “adventure or travel” (24%), “a need to try something new” (10%) and “personal change” (5%) (p.13). Career or professional development was reported by 14% of volunteers as a significant motivation. Similar to Hudson and Inkson’s (2006) conclusions, multiple motivations often occurred.

Amongst managers who volunteered, Cook and Jackson (2006) reported that 79% expressed the desire to “give something back” and “to improve things and help people” as major reasons for volunteering (p.3). This altruism seemed to be mixed with the concurrent, although secondary, desire to maximise career and professional development, with only 10% reporting this as the primary motivator. Among this group there was the desire to increase skills related to management functions such as strategic understanding, coaching and mentoring skills, networking, and negotiation skills.

Motives for expatriating among academics (Richardson & Mallon, 2005) included adventure, travel, life change, family reasons and to enhance her career opportunities, although only one participant said she had made the choice specifically to improve her career. In spite of this, career concerns were reported to be a dominant consideration when assessing the overall value of the overseas work experience. “They expected it to provide an ‘edge’ in the academic labour market primarily because of the perceived internationalization of higher education.” (p.415)

The motives of Irish volunteers involved in social care work were considered as one aspect of MacNeela’s (2008) research, distinguishing between self-oriented and other-oriented motives. The likes of “giving something back” is obviously from the latter category, with the potentially more self-serving career development motive as belonging to the former category. In some volunteer organisations the career motive was not always well received. However, the notion of “volunteering as an exchange” (p.130) seemed to provide a middle ground between the two categories. Bell (1994) also reports a mixture of motives among volunteers, suggesting there were “generally a mixture of self-interest (i.e., personal development) and altruism” (p.34).
Inkson and Myers (2003) highlight the experiences of New Zealanders self-initiated “OE” (overseas experience) examining the effects on career development as a result. Although not specifically focussing on volunteering, similarities exist with their perception of the career benefits of OE, such as the sometimes improvisational nature of life in another culture that in itself has the potential to develop personal skills and characteristics that contribute to the career potential of the individual. Exploration is a further common theme among the OE demographic, as are a range of other motivations including “autonomy, independence, adaptability, transience, self-directed learning and multi-culturalism, (all of which) are increasingly requirements of careers.” (p.172)

**Negative Impacts**

In contrast, Devereux (2008) and Simpson (2004) warn that short-term volunteering, especially some gap-year programmes or organisations promoting volunteer tourism, can do more harm than good, and are likely to be unhelpful for the host community. Devereux primarily focused on capacity development and sustainability, providing a perspective on international volunteering that cautions against the paternalistic or imperialist approaches that only satisfy “a self-serving quest for career and personal development on the part of well-off Westerners” (p.358). Such programmes may provide short-term career enhancement for the volunteer, but likewise may “become a new form of colonialism, reinforcing an attitude of ‘it’s all about us’ by their emphasis on short-term ’helping’ over learning” (p.360).

Devereux is not afraid to address the potentially negative effects of IVS, but responds to his own questions by stating that any benefits gained by the volunteer tend to be reciprocal rather than automatically paternalistic, for the simple reason that the act of volunteering is most often “an exchange of skills (for) personal learning” (p.362).

Sherraden et al. (2008) also highlight the downside of volunteering, but from the perspective of who is able to volunteer in the first place. Is the choice of being able to volunteer internationally only limited to people of means from wealthier nations? While the experience may offer these volunteers an understanding of international affairs and a step up for their career, it has the potential to minimise the positive impact on both host communities and
volunteers of lesser means. “Those who volunteer will continue to reap the benefits… using host organizations and host communities as a rung on the ladder of personal advancement, without making lasting contributions and providing avenues for advancement to those who are ‘served’ ” (p.414).

**Conclusions**

Across a range of occupational areas (management, teaching, social service, education, etc.) and via research conducted in various parts of the world (Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Ireland, UK, USA, Europe), career development has been seen to be positively impacted by an international voluntary experience. These effects include enhanced employability, readiness to embark upon a different career direction, and an understanding of one’s motives and changed values as a result. In many cases these themes overlap within individual research reports.

Ascertaining new skills or improving existing skills as an international volunteer contributes to employability in many instances, and is commonly reported by many returned volunteers. This includes a wide range of skills that many employers usually value among their staff, providing they are able to appreciate the personal and career benefits accrued from working overseas. Typically, communication, self-confidence, intercultural understanding, leadership skills, problem-solving, language skills, and maturity are enhanced to some degree due to the international experience.

International volunteering experiences have been reported widely as life-changing and transformational for many repatriated volunteers, both personally and vocationally. Career indecision can be reduced, clarity of career direction improved, and commitment to further education relevant to overseas work developed. Career changes, while far from universal, were certainly a feature of many returned volunteers who had gained different perspectives of life and of the world.

Volunteers’ motives were examined, although rarely in the context of both before and after the IVS experience. Career development was one among several reasons to engage in IVS, however more often primary motivations were cited as travel, giving something back, and experiencing a different culture. Overall, motivations appeared as both self-serving (e.g., travel, career, experiencing another culture) and altruistic (e.g., giving something, being useful, helping others).
A change in personal values is reported by many volunteers (Brook et al., 2007; Hudson & Inkson, 2006; Universalia, 2005) as one of the more significant aspects of their experience. Although motives prior to and IVS experience appear not to have been researched widely, personal values were often reported as changing or enhancing, and therefore potentially having an impact on career as a result.

Success for all parties is also partly contingent on the attributes and capacity of the volunteers themselves prior to their assignment, although little research has been done on this aspect. Factors including the volunteers’ prior skills and knowledge, motivations, previous international experience, and life stage are all potential determinants of positive outcomes, even before the international volunteering assignment begins. The Canadian study (Universalia, 2005) in particular affirmed the likelihood of a “deepening or reaffirmation of …values and beliefs” (p.48) among those who had previous overseas experience.

Richardson and Mallon (2005) simply and accurately state that “the relationship between international experience and career development is complex and multi-dimensional” (p.417). This offers a telling summary and useful stimulus for further research into IVS and its impacts on individual career development.

Overall it appears the international volunteering experience is largely positive, and can usually be considered as “a process of two-way learning” (Brook et al., 2007, p.2). It also has ‘the potential to positively affect volunteers and host organisations’ (Lough, 2009, p.5) and can be offered as a strategy that results in helpful and tangible outcomes for both the volunteer and the host community.

References


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