

Volunteering Overseas:

A Career Episode

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Abstract

This article focuses on the effect of a voluntary overseas aid assignment on career development, and compares such a career step or episode with other overseas career experiences such as the company expatriate assignment and the New Zealand “big OE” (overseas experience). In particular, the article reports on the findings of a recently completed longitudinal study of 48 such volunteers who were recruited by New Zealand Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA). The article considers careers within the “New Careers” paradigm of career development theory, and in particular the effects of individual self-direction in career, across international boundaries. Analysis of data from the recent study suggests VSA volunteers are individuals who are knowledge workers, making cross-cultural experience and learning a key focus of their careers, combined with an altruistic desire to aid those less fortunate than themselves.

Introduction

As globalisation proceeds, careers internationalise, taking place across national as well as international boundaries. Simultaneously, boundaries between paid work and other segments of individuals’ lives (family relationships, leisure, volunteer work) become more blurred. Career development may come from any segment, and the definition of career itself is changing. The definition used for the purpose of this article is Seligman’s:

A sequence of roles or positions, including work, leisure, volunteer, and educational pursuits. (Seligman, 1994, p. 25.)

Volunteering – particularly to work in another culture very different to one’s own – appears to provide considerable skills and personal self-awareness as yet undocumented. Volunteers also appear to self-manage or self-direct their careers; they are not tied to any one employer and they use the VSA experience as a contracted career experience or episode. This is a model in which international experience is obtained and used to support the development of career.

Background of VSA

Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA) is an international development agency based in New Zealand which recruits skilled New Zealanders to work with local communities and organisations in developing countries throughout Africa, Asia and the Pacific. On average 60–80 volunteers are in the field at any one time, with an age range of between 24 and 65 years. The type of assignment has changed over time; in the earlier years teaching was the predominant role, whereas today volunteers represent the whole spectrum of occupations. Recent volunteers have included an aviation expert, ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) trainers, an environmental consultant, health specialists (a doctor, nurse tutor, midwife and physiotherapist), a plumber, a bee-keeper, a carpenter, an engineer, a small-business advisor, an HR (Human Resources) manager, a government economist, a lawyer and an IT (Information Technology) specialist.

Volunteers are recruited for their professional experience, their qualifications and their ability to share skills, knowledge and energy with the communities into which they are placed. They usually work in the field for two years, and their employers may be non-governmental, community-based, local or national government organisations.

Self-directed careers

In their career behaviour, overseas volunteers appear to combine the common 21st-century trends of career mobility, project careers, self-direction of career, boundary-crossing and intercultural experience in a unique and informative way. How far does this unique combination of features enable the expatriate volunteer experience to illuminate the understanding of careers, and how far does the experience enhance the careers of those who undertake it?

There is considerable literature (Birdseye & Hill, 1995; Oddou & Mendenhall, 1998; Porter & Tansky, 1999) regarding the expatriate/company experience working for organisations overseas (the “expatriate assignment” (EA)). However, this literature tends to be framed in organisational psychology or Human Resource Management (HRM) terms rather than in individual psychology or individual career development terms, and ignores “self-direction” and “volunteer” aspects. In this literature the expatriate career experience is assumed to be subordinated to the goals of the multinational corporate sponsor and their employee. The expatriate employee takes up the overseas assignment as part of their in-company career development path. Overseas volunteers, however, appear to “self-manage” or “self-direct” their careers rather than be driven by HRM impositions.

There has also been research exploring the impact of the New Zealand “OE” (overseas experience) on career, and contrasting it with the company expatriate experience (Inkson et al., 1997). The comparison showed some similarities and many differences. Inkson et al. (1997) proposed the key characteristics of OE to be:

1. Cultural experience as important as work.
2. Geographical mobility.
3. Curiosity driven.
4. Personal learning agendas.
5. Individual is self-supporting.
6. Weak company attachments.

Individuals do not usually embark on OE as an exercise in work-career development. Cultural experience and geographical exploration are also sought, and individuals may take non-career-related employment as a way to enjoy further valued non-work experiences. The traveller is motivated by broad curiosity rather than specific goals and the learning agenda is improvised. The individual is largely self-supporting financially, although many social networks may be made, and although as an employee he or she may give good service the attachments formed are temporary and weak (Inkson et al., 1997).

The key differences from the characteristics of the expatriate company employee relate to the first of those listed above, and the last three. The OE experience is driven by the individual, who supports themselves rather than being supported by a company (as in the case of an expatriate employee), who chooses to go for a variety of reasons, the least of which is career driven, and who is mobile.

This article suggests that the VSA experience provides a slightly different model of career development, with some similarities to and many differences from these other overseas career experiences.

The case material below comes from a recent longitudinal study of VSA volunteers which included: exploration of the careers of a cohort of volunteers, their motivation and the perceived effect of the VSA experience on their career competencies and future career direction (Hudson, 2004).

The study showed that the individual gained new skills, expertise and knowledge – both tacit and explicit – of self, culture and work. They were also aware of changes in values, which might affect motivation for future career choices.

Comparison of overseas experiences

The material in the following reports responds in turn to perceived differences of the VSA career experience when compared with an EA assignment or the New Zealand OE experience, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Contrasting qualities of EA, VSA assignment and OE

Compared areas	EA	VSA	OE
Initiation	Company	Individual/partner org.	Individual
Goals	Company projects	Partner org. projects	Individual
Funding	Company	Personal savings/ allowance	Personal savings
Career type	Organisational career	Boundaryless career	Boundaryless career
Cross- cultural experience	Significant	Significant	Very significant
Research literature	Large	Little	Little

Initiation

These are different between the EA and the other two career experiences. As noted previously, the EA is taken up in response to a company’s direction and there is an expectation that the employee will continue to work for the company on their return (Birdseye & Hill, 1995; Oddou, 1991). In contrast, both the OE and the VSA experiences are self-initiated, and in turn re-entry to New Zealand or another overseas post involves further “enacting” of the individual’s career (Weick, 1996).

Goals

The goals for the individual on an EA are usually set out as part of the company’s business plan and the individual may have very little input into them. The goals for the OE individual and the VSA volunteer have some similarity, but the altruistic goal of volunteering one’s knowledge and expertise is unique to the VSA volunteer. Once the volunteer is working for the partner organisation they may be tied to the goals of that organisation, and may then be more like the EA individual.

Those starting out on their OE are motivated to “explore and learn” (Inkson et al., 1997). In the VSA cohort, studied motivations included:

1. The **right time**, described as:

And all these things just slotted into place and suddenly I thought, Yeah I can go. Just the timing of the whole thing and I’ve basically got a two-year time slot now which I’m using up, before other commitments start hitting me.

An educational administrator going to Cambodia.

2. **Altruism**, suggested as:

I always ... well even when I was at school I had some kind of altruistic desire to do something. And you look back at it now and think how naïve and simple, but I think there was something in there because ... and I somehow knew this was a good thing and a right thing and it also seemed like a really interesting, fascinating thing to get into.

An IT consultant going to Vanuatu.

3. A search for **meaning in life/career**:

At the moment I am working for clients, to make them more money and there is nothing that really draws me. I don't really get a huge amount of enjoyment out of it, yeah, it is hard to explain.

A tax consultant going to Bhutan.

4. **Challenge and adventure** for the volunteers was expressed as a physical, psychological, or career challenge, in comments such as:

Could be I am doing this for me...em...because I need to re-affirm, I need to push myself a little bit over the edge and see what happens.

A desktop publisher going to Laos.

5. **An alternative cultural experience** was a motivation that appeared to meet a cultural challenge:

The chance to experience this sort of immersion in a society that is so different from our own.

A business advisor going to South Africa.

6. **A lifetime dream.** For some older volunteers it was something they had wanted to do for a long time:

I had this dream of going for nearly 30 years, not explicitly working for VSA but either VSA or World Vision or something like that. It has been a long-time dream.

A business advisor going to the Solomons.

7. **A deliberate career stepping stone.** For some younger and mid-life volunteers the assignment was seen as a deliberate career move.

And I think it is a really good stepping stone to lots of places I'd quite like to work in, and they need the experience of working in a developing country.

A lawyer going to the Solomons.

In choosing to work overseas in a challenging environment for a period of two years, volunteers appear to fit well with career theories which suggest that they are “enacting” their careers and have a “protean” career orientation (Briscoe & Hall, 2002). They are

not tied to an organisational career path; they appear to have values, which put service and/or challenge and adventure before financial gain for at least two years. VSA acts as a “broker” between the volunteer and the employing agency, government or non-government aid organisation. It is very much up to the volunteer to build the relationship and to negotiate how the work will be done.

Funding

While the expatriate assignment (EA) is frequently well paid, with extra overseas allowances, the OE careerist usually does any type of job to fund their travel, while the VSA volunteer has their travel to and from the country of their assignment and is paid a living allowance comparable to that of their local co-workers. This is a major difference between the EA and the other two models; the rewards for the individual going on their OE or on a VSA assignment are not monetary.

Career type

Expatriate assignments are within organisations, and the employee may see the EA as a career step within their organisation. Those on their OE and the VSA volunteers appear to fit some of the emphases that Arthur (1994) describes in his definition of the “boundaryless career”: their careers may “draw validation and marketability from outside their present employer”; some may be “sustained by extra-organisational career boundaries”; there may be “no hierarchical reporting”, and there is no advancement. Indeed, many volunteers reject other career opportunities for personal reasons, and many want “independence from organisational career principles”. With the phenomenon of downsizing of companies and outsourcing or contracting of work, individuals who are comfortable in such a “boundaryless” career world may be at an advantage.

Cross-cultural experience

Although there appear to be similarities in the quality of the overseas experience (Table 1), the depth of cross-cultural experience varies considerably. The EA experience does not usually involve close living arrangements within another culture, although it may involve language learning and cultural awareness in business practices and protocol. Those on their OE tend to find employment in English-speaking countries where the cultural differences may not be quite so profound, whereas VSA volunteers who find themselves in isolated communities living immersed in the local culture can be significantly challenged and from this experience change their attitudes and values, and learn many new skills. Osland (1995) describes this process of cultural integration as a process of “letting go” and “taking on”.

Three cases from the cohort study data illustrate the “letting go”:

I wrote down my first impressions and it sounds like I was a naive twit. Yes I was shocked at cultural differences and the power that the medical people and allied health people have over the patients. Physiotherapist, Vietnam.

Yes, everything belongs to everyone but they don't share knowledge with each other and this was one of the difficulties we found, they won't share it. It is sort of a power game. It took a while to get our heads round that. It was so totally different to our culture. All the possessions are shared but not knowledge. Agricultural educator, Vanuatu.

It is about losing face ... and I know I had to learn to not show it. They would say, “She is hot hearted,” like grumpy, so I think I learned it does no good. Desktop publisher, Laos.

And three cases illustrate the “taking on”:

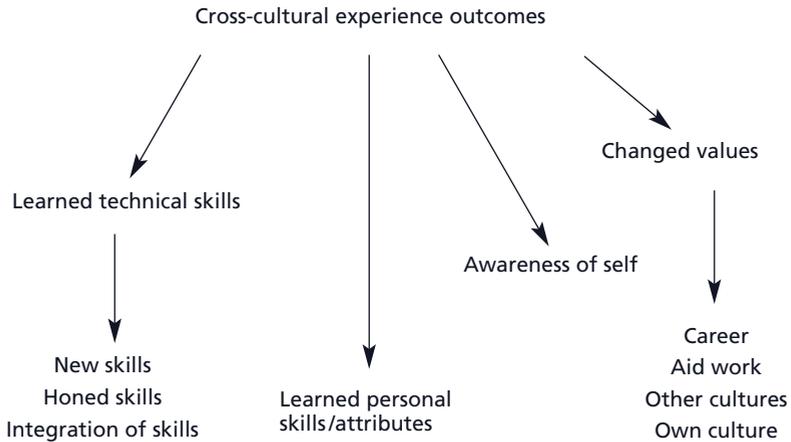
I was accepted into the community completely, literally, when I rented a house; my landlord lived behind me and I became part of his family and that is how they treated me. Educational administrator, Cambodia.

People were just so friendly. We got involved in the community straight away. And the local people were great. We couldn't get to town easily so we didn't have much social life with the other volunteers that were there. We learned heaps about the culture and the way of life, it was very special. Specialist educator, PNG.

I built a good trusting relationship with Mrs K and got a better handle on the country and the way things worked and what wasn't OK. Journalist, PNG.

The study also provided considerable data in relation to the skills and changes the VSA assignment facilitated in such a cross-cultural environment (Figure 1). Such breadth and depth of reported changes or outcomes could be termed “significant”, and is described in depth elsewhere (Hudson, 2004).

Figure 1: Cross-cultural experience outcomes



Conclusion

Inkson et al. (1997) suggested that the OE experience is an important means of “knowledge acquisition, individual enrichment and national human resource development”. This article has suggested that volunteering overseas as an aid worker is equally important for such aspects of career development.

VSA volunteers choose to go for a variety of reasons, and on the whole their expectations and desired outcomes are fulfilled. For some, particularly those who are under 40, the VSA experience is a career step or episode that helps them decide on a future career in development or aid work. For others, mostly those over 50, it is the realisation of a dream, and for a third group it is a time of adventure in another culture. All of the participants want some kind of challenge.

The fact that VSA volunteers take part in an international career episode, which they deem successful, suggests they appear to be well-positioned to cope with the changing world of employment and be comfortable participants within the paradigm of the “New Career”. Gender appears to have no impact on this group’s ability to choose career direction.

This article suggests that individuals who choose to volunteer for VSA may expect

to be challenged physically, emotionally, ethically and morally. This may involve changes in their attitudes to life, to their career and to other people, in both their own culture and in other cultures. They will frequently need to improvise, and they will be likely to learn new technical and personal skills. They may come back as “different” people. Any individual who was not open to any of these possibilities would be unlikely to enjoy the VSA experience, but for someone who fitted these characteristics it would be a worthwhile and interesting career episode.

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