

Volunteering overseas: the pros and cons

There's no shortage of evidence to suggest that time spent volunteering overseas will help your job prospects back at home. Much of this information is provided by volunteer organisations themselves. But what do employers really think about volunteer experience? And how can you ensure that your own time abroad will be worthwhile?

Don't be naive

Frances Meegan, a Careers Advisor at the University of Cambridge's Careers Service, says that 'unworldliness' is a complaint she hears regularly from recruiters across a range of sectors. Employers, she says, are often 'shocked by the naivety' of applicants, and a successful period of overseas volunteering can be a good way of showing you're not someone who needs to be nannied.

Hands-on volunteering experience can also help you to establish your interests and career goals more clearly. Frances reports seeing many students who simply want to 'help'. Time spent in the field will enable you to determine more exactly how you could contribute.

Be specific about your motivations

Simon Lloyd, director of non-profit recruitment specialists, agrees that employers aren't impressed by a vague desire to 'change the world'. You need to be able to state your motivation much more precisely. He points out that talking to other volunteers whilst abroad can be a valuable way of learning the specific motivations of people already working in the sector.

Emotional intelligence and 'soft skills'

Vitality, time spent volunteering is also a way of demonstrating that you have emotional intelligence (EI) as well as transferable skills. Simon Lloyd says that a lack of EI in candidates is often a big concern for charities when it comes to recruitment.

This is confirmed by Emily Lomax, Volunteer Support Team Manager at VSO. As a manager herself, she says she looks for overseas volunteering experience in applicants. It demonstrates that people possess the crucial 'softer skills' required in development work: patience, determination, the ability to think quickly and communicate effectively in the most challenging circumstances.

Choosing the right volunteer project for your career

So, you've decided to take the plunge, but which of the many volunteer opportunities on offer carry the most weight with employers?

Simon Lloyd says that, rightly or wrongly, there is a perception among employers that the larger and better-known organisations offer better-managed, more meaningful volunteer experiences. He also observes that these organisations tend to have more rigorous screening and selection processes. In the eyes of employers, all of these things are impressive and will earn you points. However, Simon reiterates that, ultimately, what matters most is being able to articulate what you did while you were abroad, and what you got out of the experience.

Own your own professional development

Careers advisor Frances Meegan says that volunteers must initiate their own professional development whilst abroad: “Take responsibility for what you need to know.”

In addition, she says that putting yourself forward can sometimes open up unexpected and spontaneous employment opportunities. However, she emphasises that it’s the capacity for actively seeking out answers, information and knowledge in the field that employers will see as marking 'serious players' out from 'do-gooders'.

Look for qualifications

Neil Finnie, partners manager at volunteering charity Global Vision International (GVI), recommends researching overseas placements to find those that will give you a qualification or quantifiable skill. He instances GVI’s own programmes, which include opportunities to gain a recognised Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) qualification in Thailand or (if it’s conservation work that interests you), a Level 3 BTEC Advanced Certificate in Biological Survey Techniques whilst working off the coast of Mexico.

It doesn't have to cost you anything

What about the widely held idea that volunteering overseas is just for students and the middle classes? A myth, according to Emily Lomax of VSO. While VSO is for skilled and experienced professionals, a degree isn’t a necessary requirement. Moreover, VSO do not require their volunteers to pay: “You won’t make money, but it won’t cost you anything.”

Do your research and be realistic

In terms of financing time spent overseas, Rachel advises searching dedicated career break websites, adding that she found a wealth of helpful information this way when planning her own time out. Above all, though, do be realistic. As Tracey George, Managing Director at non profit recruiters TPP says, volunteering overseas “can be an expensive commitment”, and it’s vital to weigh potential career benefits against probable hardships and, if applicable, lost earnings.

How long should I volunteer overseas for?

The length of overseas volunteer placements varies hugely - for example, VSO’s standard volunteer roles last between one and two years. As Neil Finnie of GVI points out, it’s obvious that the longer you spend abroad, the more both you and your chosen project will benefit. While GVI offer a number of shorter schemes, Neil recommends committing to a minimum of four weeks if your aim is to develop skills that will be of subsequent professional benefit.

Rachel Collinson of Raleigh goes further. She suggests that volunteers who want to develop their careers (as opposed to simply increasing their cultural awareness, or developing personally) should sign up for a minimum of three months overseas.

Thinking long-term

It’s easy to get caught up in the excitement of arranging an overseas placement, but time abroad may have unanticipated implications for your career. Careers Advisor

Frances Meegan points out that the diplomatic and security services often require employees to have had continuous UK residency of some duration. So if you're not certain of your career path, it's really worth doing your homework with regard to all the areas you're interested in.

The Directgov website similarly advises volunteers to find out in advance how time abroad could impact their current career. "This includes your work contract, health cover, pension and National Insurance contributions, as well as your continued service."

Overseas volunteering and your career: top tips

- **Think first what you want out of your time abroad**, to gain a qualification? To demonstrate that you possess those all-important soft skills? To identify which areas of development and charity work interest you?
- **Research everything**, from the charity you'll work with to the country you'll be in and what your dream employer wants from its staff – again and again, charities and recruiters stress that you can never do enough research
- **Be flexible and patient**, as Rachel Collinson of Raleigh says, if you're the kind of person who expects things to happen on cue, you may not be cut out to spend time abroad - overseas volunteering is no careers fast track.
- **Be proactive**, take responsibility for your own professional development - as Emily Lomax of VSO says, always aim to learn the local language, even if it isn't a requirement of your placement, it will help you in the field, and show future employers you've got the right attitude
- **Be specific and precise**, when it comes to applications, CVs and interviews, ensure you can articulate both your reasons for volunteering and what skills you gained in the process - if you can't be specific, employers will find it much harder to take you seriously

<https://knowhownonprofit.org/people/your-development/future/volunteering-overseas>