

Top 10 Reasons Why Volunteering Internationally Will Help You Get Ahead

Introduction

International volunteering provides a more reciprocal form of travel, in which both volunteers and host communities are able to benefit from the experience. The following report focuses on the benefits that can be gained by volunteers.

The goal of the report is not to undermine the importance of volunteering for altruistic reasons, but rather to highlight the mutually beneficial nature of volunteering and inspire people from all walks of life to step up to the challenge of volunteering abroad. In addition, when volunteers recognize how they can benefit from their experience, a sense of shared power and purpose is created between host communities and volunteers.

The information in this report has been drawn from three key sources:

1. Global Volunteer Network (GVN) Survey

Former volunteers from GVN's volunteer programs were asked to complete an online survey regarding how they had benefited from their program. The survey collected both qualitative and quantitative data and included volunteers of all ages and backgrounds.

2. Research

This report also takes into consideration key academic research and what universities have to say about volunteering internationally.

3. Media

International volunteering is regularly discussed in the media and this report includes relevant quotes and statistics from media in both the UK and USA.

Benefit 1: Enhance your CV/resume and increase your employability

Volunteering overseas is a great way of making your CV/resume stand out. It shows that you are willing to step outside your comfort zone to make a difference to the lives of others. Employers appreciate this and they value the life experience, soft skills and cultural understanding that you will gain through volunteering.

The GVN survey results showed that **94% of university graduates** believed that volunteering through GVN possibly, probably or definitely **had a positive impact on their employability**. In addition, **94% of university graduates** believed that volunteering through GVN possibly, probably or definitely **had a positive impact on their CV/resume**.

Academic research also supports this claim. Simpson (2005a) argues that the gap year "is now part of one's progression to employability, as necessary in the UK as 'A' Levels and as

inevitable as a degree” – (p. 451). Furthermore, research published by the Chartered Management Institute and the international volunteer agency VSO states that **94 % of employers agreed or strongly agreed that volunteering abroad increases skills and 48% believed it increases employability.**” (Cook and Jackson 2006, p.3). Other research has also highlighted the way in which volunteering not only increases employability but also expands your networks, with Raymond (2007) arguing that volunteers “felt that the contacts they had made with local people and organisations during their experience could help them professionally in the future” (p. 128).

The link between international volunteering and employability is also apparent in the media, with USA Today stating that: **“Going to a foreign country for a volunteer experience is a huge boost on a resume.** Employers love to see a person that can think outside the box and work past their comfort zone. The added benefits of teamwork, foreign language knowledge, and plain old hard work also add polish to the volunteer candidate. Since business now happens on a global scale, the volunteer is armed with useful, and potentially actionable, information.” (Starr 2008).

Here is what some GVN volunteers had to say on this topic:

“(volunteering is) a great experience to bring up while looking for a job and they ask you of your life experience” – Karlee Van Norman, Peru program.

“Volunteering on a CV will ALWAYS look good to any prospective employer/university” – David Holtslag, Vietnam program.

“I have had several calls alone just from the program being featured on my CV” – Audra Gravatt, Uganda program.

“Everyone I have had interviews with of late, has commented and wanted to know more about my volunteering” – Lauren Cherry, Kenya and Vietnam programs.

Benefit 2: Gain professional orientation/clarification

International volunteering gives you the opportunity to take time out of your regular routine and think about what it is you really want to do with your life. By volunteering in an area you are interested in pursuing, you will have the opportunity to solidify your goals and career path. Alternatively, you may choose to explore new career possibilities (see for example Rehberg 2005).

Campus Explorer also points out that volunteering is a great opportunity for pre-college/university students who need some direction: “No idea what major you want to pursue? **A gap year can allow you to find your academic focus before you start your degree program.**” - Campus Explorer, 2010.

Here is what some GVN volunteers had to say on this topic:

“After spending time in Uganda **I gained a new perspective on my personal and professional development and what I was meant to pursue in my life.** Since volunteering there and building amazing relationships with some of the most amazing people

I have ever met in my life I have found my "calling" to work with the people of developing countries and helping them improve their quality of life. As a result I have pursued a Certificate in International Development with the University of British Columbia as well as a Master's in Public Health in order to gain knowledge and skills sets that will allow me to have a deeper and lasting impact in countries like Uganda." – Joanna Chan, Uganda program.

"Every day I think about the way I felt while living there, how alive I felt, how connected to others and willing to help I was, how grateful I was, and how lucky I am to lead the life I lead in the United States. It has made me a better person, and certainly shaping my personal and professional goals. **Right now I am moving and searching for a new job and I don't think I would have had the confidence or push to do so had I not done this volunteer program.**" – Ann Bartkowski, Haiti program.

"When I returned from Nepal I came back to Canada and **quit a prestigious job and decided to return to my clinical roots as a health professional.** I now work with older adults with dementia as it is a form of humanitarian care resonates more with my true character -- as a first generation indo-canadian." – Amarjit Mann, Nepal program.

Benefit 3: Improve college admission chances

Colleges and universities increasingly look for candidates with life experience and international travel experience. They value students who have taken a year out but are increasingly demanding as to how you choose to use your time out. Heath (2004) states that "there are good gap years and bad gap years, with young people expected to justify the manner in which they spend their time" (p.14). Volunteering overseas is perceived by universities as a 'productive' way to spend at least part of a year out due to the opportunities provided to step outside your comfort zone, mature, broaden horizons and consider career options.

For example, Harvard encourages students to defer enrolment for one year to "travel, pursue a special project or activity, work, or spend time in another meaningful way" (Harvard College Office of Admissions 2010). According to Time Magazine, Harvard has long encouraged its incoming first-years to defer matriculation and "has seen a 33% jump in the past decade in the number of students taking gap years" (Gregory 2010).

90% of pre-college/university students believed that volunteering through GVN possibly, probably or definitely **had a positive impact on their admission to college/university.** Here are a couple of comments we received from GVN volunteers on this topic:

"A few years after coming back to New Zealand I decided to apply to study a Bachelor in Speech Language Therapy. Entry is competitive. One of the interviewers asked me about my experience with people with disabilities, and I talked about my volunteering. He said it sounded "fascinating", and **I'm sure it made me stand out**" – Lucy Schumacher, Vietnam program.

"Volunteering helped me to clarify what it was I wanted from my life and from work, which has meant **that I got on courses I applied for, and have been regularly promoted since I started my new career.**" – Anna Warrington, Ecuador program.

Benefit 4: Improve chances of university/college success

By taking time out to volunteer abroad, you will also increase your chances of success at college/university because you will be giving yourself the time to mature and focus your interests. Time Magazine reported that “Robert Clagett, dean of admissions at Middlebury, did some number-crunching a few years ago and found that **a single gap semester was the strongest predictor of academic success at his school.**” (2010).

If you choose to study subjects related to your volunteer program, you will also have an increased level of motivation as you will have experienced the value of what you are studying. For example, one GVN volunteer said: “I study human rights and conflict and also work for human rights institute. The program helped me get into a Master’s program, and reinforced my desire to work in the field.” – Marie Lamensch, Rwanda program.

If you choose to volunteer in a developing country you will have the opportunity to learn to appreciate how fortunate you are to have access to education and this will often result in a greater commitment to your studies. For example, one GVN volunteer said “It helped put things in perspective for me. When I saw the hardships other people had to face in their lives it made me think of how much I take for granted and how I really have nothing to complain about.” – Kara Rickey, Romania program.

Benefit 5: Experience improved self-esteem, self-confidence and life satisfaction

By volunteering abroad you will have the opportunity to experience personal development, which can take the form of improved self-esteem, self-confidence and life satisfaction (see for example Wearing 2001; McGehee 2002). By pushing yourself out of your comfort zone and immersing yourself into a different culture, you are likely to feel a sense of empowerment and also begin to reflect on what you want from life.

Campus Explorer state that “Being on your own in your gap year can not only be fun but will also help you build your self-confidence and maturity level. Look at the gap year as a positive transition from family home to college dorm life.” (2010).

In addition, Harvard University recognize that “Many students speak of their year away as a ‘life-altering’ experience or a ‘turning point’ and most feel that its full value can never be measured and will pay dividends the rest of their lives” (Harvard College of Admissions 2010).

GVN volunteers recognize the personal development associated with volunteering as one of the key benefits of their experience. **78% of all GVN volunteers believed that they had benefited from their experience by having the opportunity to ‘learn more about myself’.** Here are a few examples:

“Pushing myself out of my comfort zone was one of the biggest benefits of my experience in Kenya. **I had big emotional challenges when I first began and knowing that I overcame them 100% is incredibly empowering.**”– Lisette Brewster, Kenya program.

“I am no longer afraid to practice my foreign language skills. **I have a new confidence** in my ability to communicate with people that do not speak my language.” – Erica, Peru program.

“Going to Peru changed my life and **I learned so much about myself and what I am capable of on this trip. THE MOST AMAZING TIME OF MY LIFE.**” – Michael, Peru program.

Benefit 6: Avoid burnout

One of the reasons why universities are so in favour of a year out, is that they recognize the need to avoid burnout. “You’ve spent 12 straight years as a student. You have spent the better part of the last year conducting an exhaustive college search, completing your college application and going through a rigorous admissions process. Before you embark on a major and pursue a degree program, it may be time for a break. Taking a year off before returning to school will afford you the opportunity to approach the next phase of your education with a fresh start and renewed vigor while staving off academic burnout.” (Campus Explorer 2010).

Time Magazine claims that taking a year off is a good investment because “After a year out of the classroom, students will enter college more energized, focused and mature” (2010). In addition, Harvard University states that “**Harvard’s overall graduation rate of 98% is among the highest in the nation, perhaps in part because so many students take time off.**” (Harvard College of Admissions 2010).

Employers are also aware that taking time out to volunteer, re-charge your batteries and re-assess your priorities in life can be incredibly beneficial. Volunteering is therefore becoming increasingly popular amongst professionals seeking a break from their careers. For example, one of our volunteers stated that: “I think **volunteering is especially great for people who have been working for many years** (especially in a developed country). It helps to regain some perspective in life and makes you realise just how big the world is and how privileged one truly is.” – Cleaven, Ethiopia program.

Benefit 7: Gain new knowledge and work experience

Working in another country will provide you with the opportunity to gain knowledge, experience and skills which you may not have been able to acquire at home. The obvious example is learning a foreign language much faster than you could at home by immersing yourself into the language and culture. In addition, by volunteering in your field of interest you will have the opportunity to learn new ways to approach different problems, and you will gain valuable work experience in a new environment.

According to research published by the Chartered Management Institute and the international volunteer agency VSO, **80% of volunteers believed they returned with expertise that they would not have gained in the UK.**” (Cook and Jackson 2006).

GVN volunteers really valued the opportunity to learn new skills and knowledge through their volunteer programs. For example one volunteer said: “Volunteering on two conservation programs in Ecuador enhanced my passion for conservations, and **gave me**

unique perspectives and experiences in on-ground conservation. I was already studying environmental science prior to volunteering, but the volunteer program strengthened my resolve to work in the conservation area, and I have no doubt it assisted in gaining me employment in the industry. Six years on, I still look back on my time volunteering as a pivotal moment in my personal development.” – Katherine Selwood, Ecuador program.

Benefit 8: Learn about the world and different cultures

Volunteering is very different to being a tourist because you will spend a significant amount of time in one place and you will be working on a daily basis with local people. This provides an invaluable opportunity to learn about different cultures, develop an understanding of the issues facing host communities and develop a sense of global citizenship (see for example Jones 2005; Lewis 2005).

90% of all GVN volunteers believed that one of the key benefits of volunteering was the opportunity provided to interact with local people. **91% also valued the opportunity to learn about other cultures on a deeper level than through a regular vacation.** For example:

“I think that volunteering was valuable as it allowed me to **see first hand the issues facing local communities** and children in Nepal - I don't think I would have developed an understanding of this had I just experienced Nepal as a tourist.” – Laila Ragupathy, Nepal program.

“It was a valuable learning experience and **a great opportunity to learn about other cultures with more depth than simply taking a vacation.**” – Katie Caufield, Vietnam program.

“**It established a mental bond with the country and its people.** It also increased my awareness of how much the countries are interlinked. – Anonymous, Costa Rica.

Benefit 9: Meet like-minded people

One of the most long-lasting benefits of volunteering is the friendships you will make. You will meet people from all backgrounds and all walks of life but the challenges you will overcome together will often create life-long bonds (see for example McGehee and Santos 2005). This is best explained by volunteers themselves:

“**The people I met during my time with GVN changed my life forever.** Living with an international group of like-minded individuals was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. The best part was making friends from other cultures and learning things I probably would never have learned. The whole experience opened my eyes to the world and really made me feel like an international citizen.” – Nick Johnson, New Zealand program.

“While working in Nepal in January - March 2006, **I was lucky enough to meet my husband,** who was traveling through Nepal at the time. Although not everyone gets such a chance, volunteering in a foreign country affords you the opportunity to meet people from

all over the world who share the same interests and values.” – Kathleen McGarvey, Nepal program.

“Some of the most meaningful and impactful relationships and experiences of my life happened while I spent time in Uganda. **The friends I have made have inspired me for life.**” – Joanna Chan, Uganda program.

“It is **fun, interesting, sometimes devastating and just a wonderful experience to interact with all these different people** you meet through volunteering. One of my most precious memories up until now...” – Mirjam Ryter, Kenya program.

Benefit 10: Have an incredibly rewarding experience

Perhaps most importantly of all, volunteering overseas gives you the chance to give back and this can result in an incredible sense of fulfilment. Volunteering also gives purpose to travel and this has been highly documented in a variety of literature (see for example Wearing 2001, 2004).

This benefit was identified as the most important by GVN volunteers with **92% of all volunteers highlighting the opportunity to do something meaningful as a key benefit from their experience.**

“**Volunteering abroad is one of the most rewarding experiences** I could suggest to anyone. The challenges I encountered during my volunteer placement were huge, but the success of completing a hard day of work is amazing almost beyond description. I can't recommend volunteering abroad enough.” – Nick Johnson, New Zealand program.

“**When you think you are "giving"... you are actually getting much much more in return...** and it's something that money cannot buy.” – Margarita L. Austria, Vietnam program.

“In my opinion it is one of the the most rewarding experiences one can have. You can learn things about yourself that you can never imagine, it teaches you to be humble, respectful, accepting and caring person. **It makes you a better you.**” - Kirsti Kosonen, Tanzania program.

About the Author

Eliza Raymond has a Masters focused on international volunteer programs from the University of Otago, New Zealand. She has published work about international volunteering in Journeys of Discovery in Volunteer Tourism, the Journal of Sustainable Tourism, the VolunTourist Newsletter, Tourism Recreation Research, and the Journal of Geography Teachers. She has also presented her work at the ATLAS Conference: Tourism After Oil. Eliza has volunteered all over the world and has worked for the Global Volunteer Network for the last 3 years.

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Why GVN?

There are hundreds of different organizations offering volunteer programs around the world. So why choose GVN? Let's look at what the media, Bill Gates and our volunteers have to say:

CNN:

CNN has made a list of the groups that can help you to make a positive impact on the world around you, and they recommend GVN:

<http://edition.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/africa/11/13/btc.ngos/index.html>

Bill Gates:

"I'd love to see more young people taking action to help the poor and disadvantaged. Two places to get started are Network for Good and **Global Volunteer Network.**" - Newsweek Web.

Our volunteers:

"This was a tremendous experience and I appreciate **the wonderful and responsive support provided by the GVN staff** before my trip, while I was there, and still, afterwards with follow-up inquiries via email! Many thanks!!" – Stephanie Vitrano, Haiti program.

"I have researched many volunteer organisations and GVN was my third volunteer project. **I rate GVN higher in value for money, transparency and breadth of placement than any other I have seen.** Keep doing what you are doing - so many programmes are extortionately expensive and GVN makes volunteering affordable to most thus encouraging more people into the experience benefitting both volunteer and the placement organization" – Lisa Knott, India program.

"I have had the opportunity to volunteer through several different organizations *and I would only strongly recommend GVN to others.* They're honest, organized and supportive. I felt useful at the projects and felt a lot of freedom to explore on my own." – Jan Reid, Thailand program.

"Stop thinking...just do it!!!" – Anonymous, Ecuador program.