

Volunteering: A Unique Way to Enhance Your Skills

Ismael Cordero

Medical technology professionals have many avenues to learn new skills, from manufacturer training to continuing education to attending conferences and keeping up on literature in the industry. But what about a way to build your own skills and benefit your employer, all for the cost of a few weeks of leave time and, as an added bonus, helping out others in need?

There are many volunteer opportunities available that can help you grow professionally as well as personally. This article takes a look at the benefits of short-term volunteer assignments of one to two weeks and offers

Looking for a Volunteer Opportunity?

The following organizations are just a few that sponsor volunteer opportunities for medical technology professionals.

- ORBIS International: www.orbis.org
- American College of Clinical Engineering www.accenet.org
- Project Hope: www.projecthope.org
- Engineering World Health, Duke University: www.ewh.org
- Global Assistance for Medical Equipment: www.global-medical-equipment.org
- Operation Smile: www.operationsmile.org
- International Aid: www.internationalaid.org
- Mercy Ships: www.mercyships.org
- Assist International: www.assistinternational.org
- CardioStart International: www.cardiostart.org
- Samaritan's Purse: www.samaritanspurse.org
- Operation Renewed Hope: www.operationrenewedhope.org

suggestions on how to prepare and get the most out of such opportunities. It doesn't take a lifetime or career-changing commitment to use your skills to help others, but it does take more planning than enrolling in a course or attending a meeting might.

For example, a biomedical equipment technician (BMET) working in a large or mid-sized hospital with a team of colleagues may not have the chance to test his or her skills on a variety of equipment. If you're not a laboratory equipment specialist, you might never repair a centrifuge. But on even a short-term volunteer assignment at a free clinic in the United States or a hospital in Indonesia hard-hit by the tsunami a few years back, you will likely encounter equipment and challenges you'd never face at home—repairing a piece of equipment whose manual was lost 20 years ago; dealing with a faulty device that is needed tomorrow, but parts won't reach the area for six weeks and there's no back-up device available; etc. These skills, no matter how obscure they seem, will make you a better employee back home.

Why Volunteer?

Medical technology professionals volunteer for many different reasons and for a variety of projects, ranging from basic primary care to specialty surgery (Operation Smile, for example, needs volunteer equipment technicians to support clinicians treating children with facial deformities). Most often, they just want to do something significant while helping those in need. Some travel overseas because they find that their work at home has become routine and is not as exciting any more, and a short break revitalizes them. The appeal of an adventure in a distant land drives some, while others are guided by their religious or philosophical convictions to help while putting their values into practice. On the whole, volunteering is a good life experience and provides a chance to demonstrate commitment to and interest in the underserved.

Whatever the motivation, you can benefit immensely from volunteering, and ultimately so can your employers

and customers. Some of the benefits are:

- Exposure to challenging new problems.
- Exposure to new lands, cultures, and customs.
- A chance to learn new skills.
- A chance to learn from others.
- A chance to see things from a different perspective.
- A chance to teach.

From an employer's point of view, volunteer experience on your resume shows that you are driven by incentives other than financial gain. It also demonstrates that you are flexible, compassionate, a team player, and that you enjoy new and challenging situations. Those enrolled in or just finishing school, without any work experience in the field, may want to consider volunteering to gain some experience. There are a few organizations that provide volunteer opportunities for students. For those who have retired, volunteering is a way to keep active, maintain and even build on your skills, and remain involved in the profession.

Getting Involved

Volunteers may choose from a variety of groups sponsoring medical volunteer work. They can range from small informal associations to huge international organizations with multi-million dollar budgets. Many have a religious affiliation. Institutions of higher education, national governments, non-governmental organizations, and global organizations such as the World Health Organization support volunteer activities both directly and indirectly through training, research, and supplies. The impact of volunteer work varies widely from country to country. In Haiti, for instance, volunteer organizations deliver a significant proportion of the healthcare services provided to the poor.

One of the biggest needs for volunteers in developing countries is the repair of medical equipment. The list of available volunteer activities reads almost like a BMET's to-do list:

- Testing and installing donated equipment.
- Teaching engineers and technicians to repair equipment.
- Teaching users to set up and operate equipment.
- Setting up and supporting equipment for volunteer surgical teams.
- Providing advice on setting up a clinical engineering department.
- Providing advice on improving systems, policies, and procedures related to managing healthcare

If You Can't Travel

Many medical technology professionals may want to volunteer but for many reasons may be unable to travel. You can still help by providing essential supportive tasks at home such as:

- Donating supplies, manuals, tools, and equipment
- Donating money or raising funds
- Logistical support.
- Moral support
- Communications.
- Special projects
- Mentoring

technology.

- Assessing the technology needs of hospitals.
- Evaluating new equipment for purchase.

In the day-to-day work at home, these skills are developed over time through a combination of on-the-job training and educational opportunities. A volunteer activity can offer a crash course—trial by fire, as it were. OR-BIS volunteer Robert Dondelinger, for example, traveled to Vietnam and was challenged to repair equipment with a tool set not designed for the task and a single piece of test equipment (for more on Dondelinger's experience, see the January/February 2007 *BI&T*).

Your chances of succeeding as a volunteer, too, mirror what makes a good employee at home. Beyond technical skills, patience and flexibility are at the top of the list—if you can roll with the punches on the job, you probably can in a volunteer assignment as well. Communication skills are important, as is the ability to be self-reliant and improvise to find a solution to a problem.

Finding the Time

Not many of us have enough time to take off from work to volunteer overseas, and earned vacation is usually reserved for time with family. One way to gain time for these expeditions is to negotiate a leave for volunteering before accepting a new job. You could tell your new employer that in addition to your earned vacation time, you will need a week per year for volunteer assignments. Sell your project not only on its humanitarian aid, but on what skills you will bring back to your employer. Some employers may accept this leave as your condition of employment, but it will most likely be offered as an unpaid leave. The bottom line, though, is you won't know until you ask.

Preparing for a Volunteer Assignment

The preparation required for an assignment will depend greatly on the sponsoring organization. Some pay for and organize most of the travel details, while others expect the volunteers to arrange and pay for their own airfare and accommodations. A few essential items to include in your pre-trip checklist:

- Passports and visas
- Physicals, prescriptions, and vaccinations
- Insurance
- Airfare
- Money
- Packing (clothing, small gifts for hosts, tools and test equipment to use or donate)

Expect the Unexpected

Obviously volunteering in a developing country won't bring all the comforts of a two-week training course at home. You should prepare yourself to be tolerant of uncomfortable situations and foods you don't recognize—one organization cautions potential volunteers on an upcoming mission, "there will be absolutely no creature

comforts. Bathroom arrangements will be very primitive. Because of this you must be in very good shape so that the total discomfort will not render you incapable." You might encounter people with different concepts about time and personal space. Be ready to learn about and observe differences without being judgmental. Before going abroad, try to learn as much as you can about the local customs, beliefs, and language. Talk to others who have been to your destination and seek opportunities to see movies and read up on the country and culture. People you meet while abroad will often be very curious about life in your home country. You may find it helpful to educate your friends and family about where you'll be going and what it is you'll be doing, so that they can be advocates for your work abroad. Having a strong support system will help you get through the challenges of working in an unfamiliar environment far from home. ■

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