



Volunteering as a Career Strategy by Sunitha Narayanan, REA Consultant

Many times the accompanying partners of international assignees will have limited career choices once they relocate due to VISA restrictions in the host country. The US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) recently announced that they will no longer accept cap-subject petitions for the Fiscal Year 2005. How does this announcement change things for accompanying spouses affected by this announcement? And how does it change the way in which relocation consultants manage expectations for clients in this predicament? What are some non-traditional ways to explore career interests for these individuals?

Volunteering has long been considered a proactive way to “get a foot in the door.” Does this strategy work for all clients? For some clients this might appear to be a win-win strategy but others might wonder how sensible it is to “give my time away.” This article takes a look at volunteering as a viable career tool to explore opportunities and new skills.

Lyn’s Career Needs

Lyn moved to the United States when her husband accepted a promotion within his company. As a British citizen, she does not hold a valid work permit for employment in the US. In the initial discussions with the consultant, Lyn explained that she had always worked and would like to get a paid position as quickly as possible so that she could beat the H1B cap deadline. At this point, she was willing to explore any business opportunity so that she could be one of the first getting in line for a work permit. So began the feverish activity of looking for employers who would be willing to sponsor her for the H1B visa.

While continuing a traditional job search and identifying leads for the client, the consultant also suggested that Lyn volunteer at a nearby non-profit organization for arts and gave a contact to follow-up with. This led to a productive conversation and Lyn accepted a volunteer position to work 3 hours a week in the library. The consultant encouraged her to network within this organization and ask for feedback on her resume and portfolio. Eventually, one of the librarians introduced Lyn to the Director of the Marketing Department who said that they did need someone to help with developing promotional materials for their new children’s center. Lyn saw this as an opportunity to sell her skills and communicate her strong interest in the position. She accepted a three month unpaid assignment in the marketing department, while keeping her hours of work in the library.

A win-win situation for Lyn

Even though Lyn would have preferred paid employment, she saw this opportunity as “opening doors” for future career plans. She was very excited at the opportunity of working

with the Executive Director of the organization. As she shared, “think about all the people I will meet while planning fund-raising activities....I will report directly to the Executive Director...” She was also excited about using some of her skills in writing, art and design to promote the children’s center. While talking about this opportunity and revisiting her portfolio, she realized that she would like to seriously pursue her interests in writing and illustration. In conversations with the consultant, Lyn mentioned her cherished dream of writing books. She was becoming excited at the idea of actually having time to seriously pursue her interest in writing, while working for the children’s center. Looking back on Lyn’s experience to embrace volunteering as a career strategy, the consultant reflected on what helped plant this seed and help it “grow” for this client.

- **Open ended questioning** Encouraging a wide range of responses by asking open-ended questions. In conversations, Lyn always mentioned her interest in art, design and writing but always ended conversations by asking for specific job leads, saying, “Well, I’m not sure I have the time to pursue all this right now.” Asking questions about these interests, for example, “What do you like about art and design?” “How could you pursue your interests in writing?” helped Lyn uncover and understand these interests better. It also gave the consultant an opportunity to identify local non-profit art agencies to help Lyn explore these interests and skills. This helped to show the client that she could take small steps to this goal of exploring her interests.
- **Sharing benefits of volunteering** Connecting how volunteering will help the client understand the job search process better. For example, this opportunity would help Lyn expand her language skills, build her resume and references, become comfortable with cultural norms of working in the United States and test out her interests. Given her VISA situation, this would also help her look for leads in the hidden job market through networking, building a work reputation and learning new skills.
- **Imagining career possibilities** Asking questions which encourage the client to envision volunteer opportunities as “real work experiences.” For example, identifying the sources of enjoyment and satisfaction in Lyn’s description of past experiences helped her acknowledge how strongly she felt about writing and she was able to see the “benefits” of not working full-time just yet. The benefits she identified were the time she would get to write and revise her stories, to explore options of being published in a realistic manner, take classes to strengthen her writing skills and join local support groups to share her work with.
- **Readiness to try the volunteer route** Helping the client voice concerns about this strategy helped her see this idea as worth pursuing. Some concerns Lyn listed included demands on her time, poor use of her skills and talents, and tasks not being clearly defined. The consultant helped Lyn generate a list of questions to evaluate this volunteer opportunity and also prepare for her conversation with the Marketing Director. Lyn used this list to ask questions about the marketing internship, to showcase her skills and to participate actively in discussing her involvement in this project as a volunteer.

Volunteering does help in staying productive and exploring different career paths. It is a good way to boost self-esteem when searching for full-time employment and career enhancement alternatives. In fact, working in a volunteer position where the rewards are primarily intangible might demonstrate strong work ethic. “Employers like employees who are passionate about their work...it also tells employers that for you working is about enjoying what you do, not merely a paycheck” (Horowitz, Jason, CareerJournal.com, 2004). For Lyn, volunteering opened up a door to staying active in the working environment, exploring career ideas that had not been focused on before, and using her time productively as she waits for her VISA issues to be resolved and looks for paid employment.

Does volunteering always work out positively for clients? Probably not. In another example, volunteering as a career strategy did not work as well for Melissa as it did for Lyn. As with Lyn, there were VISA restrictions, narrowing employment opportunities for Melissa. As the consultant and Melissa worked together, the following reasons were discussed as contributing to Melissa’s unhappiness with this strategy.

- ***Being very specific about volunteer tasks in her field*** A State license was required for Melissa to practice in her field. While waiting to get these credentials, Melissa was hesitant to take on volunteer positions which involved tasks that normally her assistant would do. Her belief was that she could wait to look for paid positions once she took the licensing exam. She was aware that she still might have difficulty finding a job because of VISA restrictions but was at this point unwilling to consider some of the benefits of volunteering in her field. The consultant respected this “block” and helped Melissa define immediately attainable tasks such as preparing for the exam, places to contact for complete information and identifying people to talk to who had taken this exam.
- ***Lack of immediate outcomes in terms of open positions*** Networking through contacts and volunteer opportunities, by its very nature is time consuming and this strategy may or may not lead to concrete leads. This seeming “lack of progress” towards the final goal of accepting an offer was hard for Melissa to accept. In addition, as a parent of young children, she would not be able to commit to volunteering in the hope that “something might click.” To address this concern Melissa and the consultant identified specific structured goals that would help Melissa feel she was “progressing” towards her main goal of finding employment. Creating a support group by introducing her to Lyn who lived in the same city, encouraging her to conduct an informational interview with a personal contact and develop a strategy for completing defined tasks helped Melissa look at her job search more positively.

One career strategy, two different outcomes for these two clients. Recognizing that clients proceed at their own pace and bring different perceptions and expectations into the client-consultant relationship, it is important to reflect on the reasons to try volunteering as a career strategy. Some people might volunteer to meet specific needs such as expanding professional contacts, building friendships or learning customs in a new culture. For some, it might be a specific means to an end, one of gaining experience to get a job. In cases

where the client is unable to work, volunteering may offer opportunities to apply current and develop new skills they can use when they return to their home country. Galen Tinder, Sr. Consultant & Manager at Ricklin-Echikson Associates (REA) comments, “the ultimate value in this (volunteering), apart from giving clients something fulfilling to do at that time, is to put them into a good position for professional reintegration upon repatriation.” Other factors such as willingness to try something different, other personality traits, short and long term career goals, and individual life situations influence how open clients will be to giving volunteering a committed chance.

Sunitha Narayanan, M.S. is a Career Consultant for Ricklin-Echikson Associates (REA) and lives in Ohio.

Ricklin-Echikson Associates (REA) is an internationally recognized leader in providing global transition assistance and career management services to corporations and individuals. REA's services, which are customized for both our client companies and our individual customers, include Spouse/Partner Career Relocation Assistance, Family Acclimation and Settling In Assistance, Outplacement Services, and Career Transition Coaching. REA's unique business model (localized delivery with centralized support) allows us to deliver quality service worldwide, price competitively, and expand on demand to meet your needs. REA's greatest strength is our highly educated and committed team of professional career consultants located throughout the world, familiar with local markets and industries, employer networks, and professional and community organizations. To learn more about REA and these services, please email us at jcowan@reacareers.com.