

Mick James talks to two accountants who've used their professional skills to help change the world.

accounting all over the world

■ Many people feel a desire to give something back to the community which is not satisfied merely by dropping money in a tin. Yet the days when personally volunteering for work overseas required little more than a rucksack and a willing attitude are long gone. However, there are opportunities to translate the skills developed in professional life in the UK into overseas work for charities and NGOs.

Mango is a charity set up to provide training and support to NGOs in the area of financial management, an area that's growing in importance in the relief and development sector, as donors become more and more concerned with issues of transparency and accountability.

Much of Mango's work involves providing support, training and resources to charities around the globe. They also maintain a register of finance professionals who are willing to go out and transfer their skills in the field. "We look for well-qualified accountants who are experienced in financial management and also have the right personal skills," says Mango's Lucy Markby. "We have about 250 accountants on the register – of those we interview probably only a third make it on to the register."

Some of the accountants on the register take sabbaticals to work on projects, while others leave their jobs to take on six to twelve month placements. "It's often difficult, especially with accountants' annual cycle being quite fixed, to find short term work that coincides with the slow time in the cycle," says Markby. However, many employees rely on the generosity of their employers, while others are prepared to make the sacrifice. "They want to make a difference and once they've tried it they just love it," she says. "There's an enormous opportunity to make a significant impact by improving financial management."

Adam Vickers – from London to Nairobi

One ACCA accountant who got bitten by the bug is Adam Vickers, who acquired a taste for development work at school, travelling to Gambia to help build a vegetable garden. After

school he was inspired to return to the same area to teach geography, and later did a masters in development.

"Unfortunately I didn't get a job," he says. "They said the academic qualification was nice but what we really want is practical skills." Instead he joined an insurance company and ended up training as an accountant which he finds ironic: "I was a good social scientist but had struggled with maths," he says. "Now I'm not a bad accountant at all."

Adam used his accountancy skills to work with medical charity Merlin as a finance officer, but found it hard to live in London on the salary. "I said to the financial director, I can't stay here much longer," says Vickers. "He suggested I transfer to Nairobi and become East African financial controller."

As part of his new role Vickers had to set up the financial organisation for Merlin's medical programme in Ethiopia virtually from scratch. "I've never worked so hard in my life but I got an enormous amount out of it," he says. "I was well outside my comfort zone – not just dealing with finance but HR and admin and the local authorities in Ethiopia, where things are much harder than in the UK. And I learned a lot – I would never have had the same opportunity in the UK."

However, people might find some of their expectations pleasantly confounded: "You can be sitting by a lake in the Congo in the middle of a war zone with four mobile networks competing for your business," he says. "It's not like it was even 10 to 15 years ago. From a business point of view things are often slower, you have local officialdom to contend with which is often frustrating when you've got London on the phone being extremely impatient."

One area people should not be overly concerned with is security. "The NGOs look after their staff very efficiently, especially in conflict situations," he says. "They're very hot on security and even in the Congo I didn't feel unsafe – I knew I'd have been evacuated if there was the slightest chance of a problem."

After this project, and a well earned holiday pony-trekking in the mountains, Vickers agreed with his partner that it was now

time to concentrate on her career for a while. While she searched for the right project, he found another, shorter term contract with Mango to do financial training in Uganda, working with child-focused charity EveryChild to aid its local partner, the Lodoi Development Fund. "We had to put in a finance system and train the finance officer to run it," says Vickers. "It took seven weeks, although ideally we'd have taken longer."

return to the UK

Now he's back in the UK, and looking for a new role – one problem will be finding a role which gives him the same level of responsibility as his African experience.

Vickers says he found the experience "intensely fulfilling" and wouldn't hesitate to recommend it to others, particularly those with ACCA qualifications. "It's not just accountancy and finance, you get drawn into a whole range of activities such as budgeting and planning and HR. The ACCA qualification is quite broad and does take you into that area – it's not just bean counting, there are a lot of business aspects to it."

take a sabbatical?

Anyone tempted by overseas work should investigate the possibility of getting a sabbatical from their employer. Mango say this is not always easy, although immediately after the tsunami hit Asia they were, unusually, inundated with offers from employers volunteering their employees' time.

Colin Bailey – from Inland Revenue to South African schools

Colin Bailey, a finance director at the Inland Revenue, did however manage to get time off to work with Link Community Development helping schools in the Eastern Cape area of South Africa develop their financial management.

Bailey had originally intended to take unpaid leave and fund his five-week stay himself, but his employers decided to fund it under the Interchange Programme, which supports the exchange of staff between the public, private and voluntary sectors.

“The difficult bit was persuading my manager that my team could do without me for two months, but they saw that it would be beneficial for the business and for me personally and were very supportive.”

Bailey was working on the Phakama project, designed to make schools in the East Cape financially self-sufficient after years of central control and being starved of resources under apartheid. “Seven of us went out, two of whom were involved at a district level and provincial while five worked at the ‘coalface’ in the schools.”

Because of his management experience Bailey was asked to help at the regional level, but also insisted on doing direct work with schools, staying with local families in remote parts of the province. The rest of the team varied in age and experience from early 20s to late 50s.

“Some were recently qualified while some had been around for a while,” he says. “We were all asked to do a baseline assessment of our competences before going out and six months later as well. That showed how far you’d come in terms of what you’d got out of it which is useful to justify it to your employer.”

Bailey says that he was “way outside” his comfort zone. There was very little infrastructure, not just in terms of things like running water and electricity, but also less obvious things like visual aids and photocopiers. “Once when I was making a presentation I needed to use an example, but there were no flip charts or anything so I had to write it out by hand 20 times,” he says.

The team would get together every week away from their schools for a debrief and some down time. “It’s very important to realise that during the week you’re in someone else’s home, you’re under constant scrutiny and disrupting their social routines,” says Bailey. “They’re incredibly hospitable, they can drown you in hospitality, but they’ve got their own farmsteads to run. It was a huge cultural shock for both sides certainly, but there was no evidence of any resentment to us, far from it.”

One thing Bailey hadn’t expected was how much he’d be the centre of attention in the schools, in an area of South Africa largely shunned by whites. On the first day of term I turned up and there were 500 kids waiting to meet “Mr Mango” he says. “There were literally goats slaughtered and welcome speeches.”

Dealing with the kids’ curiosity was a major task: “I wasn’t there to teach but they

asked all sorts of questions, they wanted to know everything: does it rain all the time in the UK, how do your children go to school, but also more challenging questions about HIV/Aids and sexual relationships which are way outside the territory you’re expecting.”

One of the more harrowing aspects was seeing the impact of HIV/Aids on the region. “It’s had a huge impact on society in that part of the world,” he says. “There’s a whole generation that’s missing – it’s largely grandparents and grandchildren there.”

carrying on the work in the UK

Bailey says that all the accountants on the project came back feeling empowered, and one has gone on to work for a charity in Malawi.

With two children of his own, Bailey is not about to relocate to Africa but has continued to work with Link, making presentations to sponsors and government departments. He has also created links between his local school and one of his schools from the project, and has taken his family out to visit his hosts.

“My advice to people considering this is to do it – it’s not for everyone, but do it after you’ve properly reflected on what it would

mean for you and your family,” he says. “It’s a challenge, you’re likely to be outside your comfort zone, but you’ll come out of it feeling much more positive and enhanced.”

However, Bailey does admit to a certain sense of deflation immediately on returning. “What browned me off when I got back was people complaining, ‘my printer isn’t working’ or ‘I’ve lost my Z: drive,’” he says. “It all sounds really petty when you realise the kids out there have to get up at five to go to school and walk for 90 minutes in the snow. There are no books, no electricity, and barely running water – one school had no roof.”

Bailey says he values the perspective he gained from the experience, and hopes one day to return to the project, work permitting. This may not be for some time, however. In a clear demonstration of the value of the sabbatical to his employer, he was able to use his enhanced competences to apply for a new role, and is now FD in charge of major change programmes in the Inland Revenue. ■

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