

WORKING DRAFT

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**THE IMPACT OF IT ON A VOLUNTEER PROGRAM
ACTIVE IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: A VIEW FROM A
PRACTITIONER'S STANDPOINT**

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The Impact of IT on a Volunteer Program Active in Developing Countries: A View from a Practitioner's Standpoint

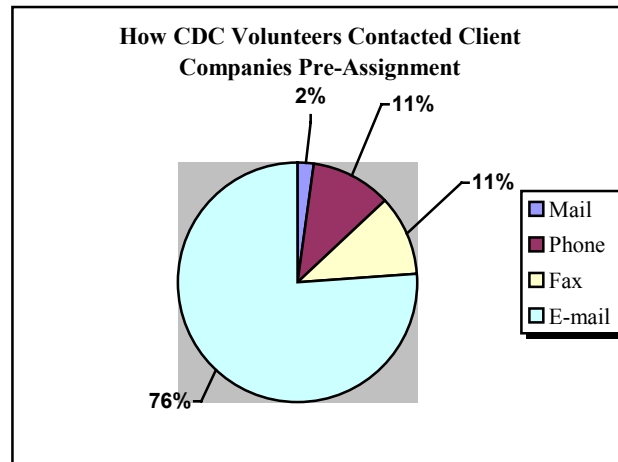
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Citizens Democracy Corps has placed volunteers from the business, non-profit, and government sectors to help small and medium size businesses, business support institutions, and local governments in developing countries since 1992. The origins of CDC date back to former President George Bush's call to mobilize the voluntary spirit of the U.S. private sector to lend their expertise and assistance to the countries of Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Since then, CDC has expanded its operations to other parts of the developing world, including the former Soviet Union, Asia, and Latin America. Since 1992, CDC has fielded approximately 2,000 volunteers in over 3,000 assignments in 17 countries. Currently, CDC maintains a database of 5,500 professionals from a wide variety of fields.

Because most CDC volunteers are still active in their business or organization, many can only spend 3-6 weeks on site with a client in a developing country. The Internet has played a key role in preparing the volunteer and client prior to the assignment; in assisting the volunteer during the assignment; and especially in the follow-up after the assignment so that CDC assistance is not a one-time hit, but often leads to ongoing consultations and even mentoring relationships that last for years. **In fact, the Internet has made it possible for many active businessmen and women to undertake volunteer work** and make the short-term assignments more productive.

Preparation

CDC encourages volunteers and clients to communicate in advance of the assignment to better prepare both parties. The Internet and Email has made this much easier and, as a result, communication exchanges occur much more frequently. According to a recent survey of CDC volunteers conducted for the purposes of this paper¹, over 75 percent of CDC volunteers contacted their client company by Email (an average of 5 email exchanges) prior to an assignment, while 11% contacted the client by telephone. Language can pose a barrier, but Internet translation tools, the use of translators and other outside help are usually able to bridge the gap.



Prior to an assignment, clients share business plans, marketing plans, financial information and technical data with the volunteers. Volunteers review a Request for Assistance (RFA) developed by CDC staff and/or a local partner and the client, which defines their scope of work for the assignment. After examining the RFA, volunteers use email with CDC local staff, the local partner or the client to clarify just what needs to be done and what they will be able to do. In addition, volunteers use the Internet to look at the client's web site², research the client's specific industry, find technical information, including specifications for equipment in which the client is interested or the volunteer might recommend. Volunteers also do Internet research on

¹ The survey was sent to 300 CDC volunteers that have completed assignments in the past year. Sixty-five responses were received.

² At present, one-third of CDC SME clients in developing countries have web sites. Volunteers often help clients put up web sites as a value-added activity to their assignments. Only about 15% of client websites are also in English.

industry standards, certification procedures as well as their country of destination to better prepare for the assignment.

On Assignment

A number of CDC volunteers make use of the Internet while they are on assignment. Questions invariably arise that require the volunteer to research a topic, show the client web sites of U.S.-based companies or email colleagues or friends for advice and contacts. A number of volunteers are able to show clients the web sites of similar businesses, products, competitors, as well as potential buyers, and to help them become better informed about the global market. More and more CDC volunteers are helping clients to create a web presence, showing them how to use the Internet for market research and advising them on the use of the Internet for marketing products, parts, design, and even e-commerce. Volunteers also stay in touch with their family, offices, or businesses to ensure everything is going smoothly while they are out of the country.

Virtual Assignments?

The Internet also provides the opportunity to do “virtual assignments.” Several volunteers believe that they can help companies with certain tasks, such as putting together better financial statements, without an on-site visit. Other volunteers believe that “virtual teams” of experts will be able to work with clients at minimal cost for longer periods of time, using Internet meeting tools. CDC and other volunteer organizations are experimenting with these types of assignments but with an acute awareness of their limitations.

Most volunteers agree that e-mail cannot replace the personal face-to-face contacts that an assignment provides. In the words of one long-time CDC volunteer, the personal interaction helps the volunteers “convince client companies of the advantages of the recommended concepts, ideas and techniques that are, at times, in conflict with the way things were done in the past. The volunteer gains so much insight into a client’s operations and workforce by visiting a plant and office site. The rapport the volunteer develops with the client company’s managers is key to the successful completion of an assignment.” Given that volunteers often deliver the message that the clients’ work is not up to the standards of Western companies, having a personal relationship helps.

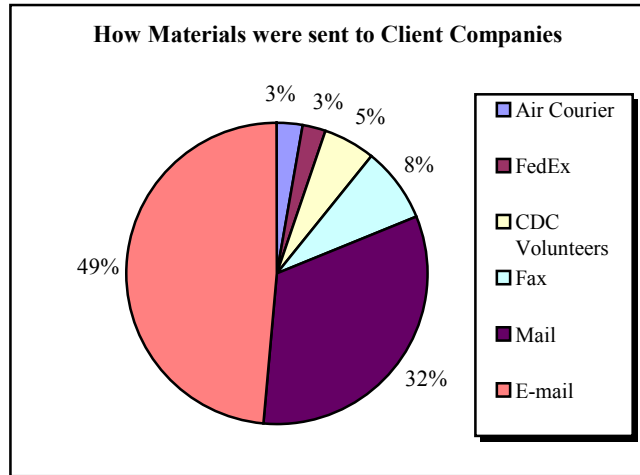
Many volunteers find that the client, even with the help of a local consultant or CDC staff, often do not define their real problems in the RFA for an assignment. It may be that the client themselves do not realize the source of the problem. It could also be that only an industry expert active in the same business can recognize the problem. Once the volunteer is on site and has a number of discussions with management, the true nature of the problem or challenge becomes clear.

Post-Assignment

All volunteers agree that after a positive rapport has been developed with a client, continued contact by email becomes very important and is often critical in achieving results. According to survey results, 57% of CDC volunteers that have access to Email continue to maintain contact with their overseas clients after having completed an assignment.

On average, volunteers will send about 20 emails in post-assignment follow-up, while receiving approximately 10 in return from their client. A number of CDC volunteers have sent dozens, even hundreds, of emails to former clients helping them with challenges and opportunities that come up years after the

on-site visit. CDC volunteers often supplement these email exchanges with document attachments as well as faxes and phone calls. CDC estimates that at least 25% of CDC volunteers send books, directories, samples, catalogs, brochures, or



other bulky items by mail, courier services, or another outgoing CDC volunteer. Many times this ongoing communication has led to a CDC volunteer sponsoring a visit from the client to the United States or having the client or volunteer arrange and pay for follow-up visits without CDC's involvement.

Limitations

Not surprisingly, email communication is not without its limitations. CDC program managers have much better success recruiting for an assignment by phone. The nature of volunteerism is such that one often needs to ask someone to volunteer. The "ask" is much more powerful by telephone than by email. By telephone, the CDC program manager can also answer questions, gauge the interest and enthusiasm of the volunteer, and quell any doubts about the assignment, country or region where the assignment is located. Most CDC program managers have traveled extensively in the former Soviet Union as well as in other parts of the world and

are able to offer practical advice and answer questions on the basis of their own personal experience. This works better in a telephone conversation than in an email exchange. On the other hand, program managers often communicate with long-time CDC volunteers by email, saving time and avoiding the usual telephone tag that happens when trying to contact busy people.

CDC program managers must communicate regularly and frequently with CDC field staff as well as local partners in the country where the assignments take place. Emails have made a huge positive difference when working with a number of overseas offices, especially where there is a significant time difference. However, we have found emails must be supplemented with regular telephone calls given the importance in establishing relationships with the field staff and the many possibilities there are for miscommunication by email. Email communication shows its weaknesses most often in situations where the details of an assignment must be communicated exactly and with tact. A common problem is that CDC local partners or staff with good, but non-native, English skills may misunderstand a critical sentence or phrase. Also, tone, intent and context often don't translate well in email messages and emails are too brusque for sensitive subjects.

Improvements in CDC Internal Operations

CDC operations have become much more efficient with the incorporation of information technology tools into our daily operations. Keeping our overhead at an acceptable rate means that each program manager must be able to recruit about 100 volunteers per year. Getting in contact with volunteers is much easier by email than by telephone. For first-time volunteers,

however, we have a policy of contacting them by telephone because it is easier to get to know the volunteers and their personalities by telephone and the first contact also serves as an interview.

CDC maintains a website where we not only have basic information on our organizations but where we post information about open assignments.³ Volunteers can check the site regularly and do—especially when they know they have some annual leave time coming up or a slow time when they can get away and do an assignment. This is a much more efficient means of communicating than trading telephone messages. Volunteers also forward information on open assignments to friends and colleagues that they know would be qualified for an assignment.

Internet Marketing of Volunteer Services in Russia

CDC has developed a web site for its Western Russia program (funded by USAID), which focuses on success stories of volunteer assignments. CDC operates through local partners and each local partner is able to advertise its consulting, training or other services for SMEs on the web site. Since volunteerism is not completely understood in Russia, local partners often use the web site to show skeptical clients the results that other companies have achieved by having a volunteer advisor. The web site can be found at <http://www.ebs.ru>

CDC has made significant investments in IT. In the last few years, we have purchased 3 new servers and pay the expense for a shared T1 line to provide fast access to the Internet. CDC has also developed an Intranet, which is used as a repository for official corporate documents and as a way for all employees, including field staff, to access these documents. The Intranet also makes it possible for CDC staff to remotely access CDC's email system when on travel. CDC used to employ two people in-house to handle IT needs, but now saves on overhead by

³ See <http://www.cdc.org>

outsourcing this function. Outsourcing also allows us to stay current on the latest technological developments.

A recent improvement that takes advantage of the Internet is an agreement with our travel agency to provide itineraries of volunteers online (instead of by fax) so that the itineraries can be shared easily with CDC field staff and partners in the field. This has made the program officer's jobs more efficient since sending an email link is much faster and easier than sending a fax, especially to countries where the telephone lines are not good.

CDC will continue to use the Internet and IT to make its operations more efficient and broaden its recruitment of volunteers. CDC is developing a system that would allow volunteers to update and upload their resumes. With over 5,500 volunteers in the CDC database, keeping resumes current is a challenge. This new system will also allow volunteers to classify their areas of expertise themselves. This will make database searches more accurate than the current system of having program managers interpret skills based on the resume. The new system will also allow CDC to easily capture the types and number of assignments for various reports required by donors, for our own performance measurement systems, and for marketing purposes.

Summary

In a day and age where one might think that the fast-paced world made possible by electronic communication makes it difficult to leave one's position or take the time to volunteer, we are finding just the opposite. The Internet has made it possible for more and more full-time, active business people to use their skills and expertise to help their counterparts in developing

countries update their skills and learn how to survive in a market-based and intensely competitive global economy. Volunteers are able to prepare for an assignment using email and Internet research to optimize their time in country and then continue to follow up after the assignment for months, if not years later. This is because communication by email is easier, cheaper and more efficient. As translation tools become better and more widely available and language barriers become less of an issue, we expect to see overseas volunteerism and the effectiveness of overseas volunteer assignments to continue to increase.