

The Importance of Philanthropy

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Ask most senior businessmen or women what was the most rewarding experience of their working life and you are likely to hear about a charity or other not-for-profit organization that they have worked with.

Justin King (University of Bath MBA) told the Daily Telegraph about his experiences with Comic Relief in the UK:

King is heavily involved in Comic Relief: a personal interest that appears to have been sparked by a visit to Africa.

"One of the clever things they do - and they do it a lot with their celebrity sponsors - is to take you out and show you two things: the poverty they are dealing with, but then also the things they are doing," explains King who accompanied Olympic gold medal winner Sir Steve Redgrave and actress Sue Johnston on a visit to southern Africa.

"We saw everything: from a women's refuge in a South African township dealing with the ever-present problem of rape, through to the issues of Aids-related poverty and orphan children in Zambia," adds King.

On his return to the UK, King spoke at length to almost 200 senior executives about what he had seen in Africa.

"I came back feeling compelled to share with people the experience, more convinced than ever that we were doing the right thing in supporting Comic Relief," he added.

Why is philanthropy so important in rounding out the MBA career? And why do employers value people who have given their time (and possibly money) to further the well-being of others?

It is often too easy to be caught up in the fast-paced world that dominate the MBA career landscape. Reasons frequently cited for taking time out to do charitable work include:

- Humility – to see poverty at the coal face reminds us of our own good fortune and how to share our lessons with those less fortunate
- Balance – when thinking how to spend the latest bonus – new car? new boat? – the opportunity to see how the poor manage with so little resource can provide a reality check on how we spend our time and money
- Inspiration – having time to think about different issues than day-to-day corporate pressures provides a unique opportunity to reflect

One charity that receives corporate support worldwide, and therefore provides interesting opportunities for MBAs wanting to support local communities is Habitat for Humanity (www.habitat.org). During FY2006, Habitat for Humanity built or rehabilitated 26,196 homes. "On a Habitat build, united in the goal of helping people, employees at every level get to see each other at their best. It's an opportunity to grow, to bond and to experience good feelings

that get carried back to the workplace,” says Willo Brock, Director of Resource Development in Europe and Central Asia.

Michael Kirkwood, CMG, MD and Country Corporate Officer, Citigroup, said, “You get far more return on this investment than any other team building event. This is real—real problems, real solutions with real differences made.”

For some the need to take a longer step out of work, perhaps before a major job move, can be provided by the Voluntary Service Organisation (www.vso.org.uk).

VSO was voted top international development charity in the International Aid and Development category at the Charity Awards 2004 for its work in promoting innovative approaches to globalising volunteering.

Their approach to volunteering has changed dramatically over the years. Today the average age of a volunteer is 38, the majority coming from skilled, professional backgrounds. Most placements are for two years, but can also be as short as 2 weeks. They have almost 1,500 skilled professionals currently working in 34 countries, responding to requests from governments and community organisations throughout Asia and Africa.

The volunteers aim to pass on their expertise to local people so that when they return home their skills remain. Volunteers can be aged between 18 and 75 years old and must have a formal qualification and some work experience. Regular postings are for two years and volunteers are provided with accommodation and a local level allowance as well as air fares and insurance. But many volunteers, with the financial wherewithal to pay their own way, donate the cost of their expenses as well.

There are a wide variety of opportunities to contribute your time and experience to society. Additional ways to do this include:

- Joining the board of a charity or not-for-profit
- Becoming involved through your company in mentoring/coaching schemes for heads of schools and other organizations. Business in the Community in the UK (www.bitc.org.uk) has a variety of programs.
- Identifying faith-based organizations who work locally to you. In the US take a look at www.charitywire.com for a comprehensive list of charities. In the UK the Church Urban Fund (www.cuf.org.uk) has a wide remit to tackle poverty.

Whatever your interests there will be an organization that works with a relevant community. The experience is almost guaranteed to enhance your career and your life. Christine Hodgson, CFO of Capgemini said of BITC’s ‘Seeing is Believing’ program, “the most important common message was that a small amount of effort can make a huge difference”.