

Working with International Organizations: A *Primer*

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International consulting is big business. Billions of Dollars, Euros, Yen and Shekels are spent every year on private and public sector projects. My experience with private sector projects allowed for some interesting observations that could be of interest to the employee or consultant who is considering "work abroad".

The benefits that come to the adventurous are real. The remuneration can be lucrative and the variety of experiences is numerous. One can easily imagine the varieties of people, professionals, places, geographies, foods, customs, weathers, challenges that combine into acute life experiences to exponentially spur one's growth.

I refer to the private sector as that part of the international business dedicated to improving the lot of impoverished third world countries, and countries similarly affected by war or natural disaster. Within this sector are the non-profit and for profit organizations with the former measuring their productivity by service rendered, at the cost of dedicated personnel who make personal sacrifices, while the latter measures their productivity with profit margins and employee who are there for financial rewards that make their displacement worthwhile. My experience in Africa is with the latter.

This business is funded by aid organizations in Canada, the U.S., Europe and the orient. While they are there to help the general populations of the host countries, they are also advancing the political /economic interests of their home governments. This duality can be served, but it appears the one purpose of helping the host countries is dependent upon the other purpose of self interest. For example, experience indicates that for local residents of impoverished countries where there is no guarantee of security or survival for one or one's children, there is a common practice of demanding or accepting bribes for cooperation. A front line customs official who wants the equivalent of twenty to fifty dollars USD to accept your passport is an irritating cost of doing business. On the other hand, the bribes can involve high ranking government or military officials, who skims off thousands or millions regularly from project funds and that undermines the country's recuperation to perpetuate the suffering of its people. Regrettably, the practice is rampant at all levels of officialdom.

Personally, I cannot judge the bureaucrat who is badly and intermittently paid and who is struggling to keep his family alive. Bear in mind, when we speak of hungry people here,

we are not talking about occasional hunger pangs or cravings for a favourite snack. These are the thousands of people who, after suffering consistent hunger, die on a daily basis, with the truly destitute frequently leaving their dead bodies by the roadside. On the other hand, condemnation is due for those with the avarice to pocket the millions of dollars at the expense of suffering citizens.

At first glance one would think an aid organization would deliver an ultimatum to the host government to cease this practice or suffer the complete withdrawal of all aid – end of story. However, to abandon an aid mission would sever political ties and terminate revenue generation for the participating firms of the home country. At the very least, this would remove the home country from the geopolitics being played by all first world, G-8 countries. The game is to possess the resources of the host country before the others do. If, for example, the U.S. severed its USAID ties with the Congo it would leave the field open to China to obtain all the rights to the oil deposits in that country. And this they cannot do.

So the high level bribery continues. I've been told the standard loss of operating dollars to bribery after a project receives funding approval from an international aid organization, can be about 15%. So, if company A gets approved for \$1 million, \$150, 000 could go to "motivation". This means the company has lost 15% of its capacity to render service to the population. But the siphoning continues because the parent company may claim up to 30% of the overall budget to cover its hidden overhead costs and contribute to its profit margin. Then the project could be left with 55% of its operating dollars to provide 100% of the originally intended service. While this is unfortunate for the recipient citizen, it creates added pressure for the project personnel because somebody has to make up the difference. The project was awarded X number of dollars to produce Y and the personnel must produce 100% of Y with 55% of X.

One should also be wary of the parent company that may be the intended employer. A colleague has been doing humanitarian work for a corporation that projected an outward façade with medicine while it was still producing the napalm first used in Vietnam. Sometime you have to dance with the devil, but at what point do you cash in your soul?

Given the setting one may parachute into, other personal concerns precede departure time - the job interview and contract negotiations. Telephone interviews are the most common and for the person really, really wanting an assignment, one can effectively put one's best face, or voice forward. But of equal concern, aside from the remuneration, is to discover what the new workplace will offer. I was lied to on various counts about the work I would be doing because I did not ask the right questions. Nor did I

ensure my understanding of the work conditions and responsibilities were crystallised in the legal agreement or made the wrong assumptions. For example I bought into an assignment as an expert consultant with no personnel responsibilities for the 4 experts working in-country with the project. Shortly after arriving I was told I had full responsibility for a piece of the project and no authority to address personnel shortfalls while my team of four really consisted of a half person in each of the four distant locations. Oh la la, buyer beware. As I opened the poke to take a good look at the pig inside I discovered other ugly piggies squirming around in the darkness.

Preparing for the telephone interviews and the contract negotiations requires identifying what you absolutely require, what needs you are prepared to modify and what you can give up. This self assessment is onerous and complex. Give it the time and reflection it needs. Talk to others who know you as you develop your inventory.

When negotiating the contract, leave nothing to chance or good will. I accepted terms stating such and such was left open to unpredictable amendments by the funding organization or parent company and since suffered from, "We're sorry, but we don't do X, Y or Z anymore". If there is allusion to a benefit or a compensation or a working condition, be sure to nail it down clearly, in real time with flexibility left only to enhance what you will receive. Being protective of what you will receive will help buffer the hidden costs that could include any of hidden taxes from home or abroad, living costs, unanticipated trips home or elsewhere, etc.

With the above elements behind you and after the goodbye parties and admiration you will receive from friends and family for the exotic choices you made you will find yourself , somewhere over a large body of water Atlantic at 30,000 feet, cruising at 750 knots, in the dark of the night and awake as those around you snore away. And then you may ask yourself, "what have I done? I actually laughed this off because I felt well prepared for the unpredictable of any adventure. But somewhere between that point in the sky and being driven from the N'Djili airport in Kinshasa, I hit the shop floor. I realized that those around me weren't in admiration of my adventure because the folks on the ground expected me to work and get things done. Adventure? Gone. Work? Lots of it and precious little time to do it.

After getting over my panic from an inability to recognise foreign features and learning to do so, after tuning my French Canadian ears and tongue to Congolese, France and Belgian French I started adapting to my present circumstances – as I will until I leave. The rewards are as described above while the stressors are many. With the military regime of a war afflicted country, expats live with concerns for security against rebel actions, street violence or unhindered crime. The subtle cultural differences are profound and complex. Ambivalent management practices and work ethics, distance from home and social isolation are complemented by the undrinkable water, microbes and

diseases that await our irrelevant immunities. And these are experienced against a backdrop of third world misery, sluggish bureaucracies, double and triple standards and expensive knock offs that are produced by phantom companies to deliver cheap goods that will break down as soon as you get them home.

And all of this is the unpredictable and uncontrollable essence of adventure. Fortunately, there are many common elements of people being people, no matter where one goes. We all wish to be respected and we all like to laugh.

What a trip so far. Any regrets? Not a one. I would sign up again in a heartbeat – but with a better contract.

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