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- **DOING GOOD CAREER ADVICE: INNOVATION**

Behind the buzzword: Development jobs in 'innovation'

By [Ingrid Ahlgren](#) 06 May 2014

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Designers, social workers, academics, entrepreneurs and other professionals working together during a workshop that centers on innovation for social issues. Photo by: [Kennisland](#) / CC BY-SA

There is no clear path to securing the title of “innovator” beside one’s name, but the need for new and improved development ideas isn’t going anywhere, and neither are the positions to facilitate them.

In fact, the increasing number of innovation positions in global development require candidates from a vast range of disciplines with a knack for understanding the development agenda and the ability to build — or help colleagues build — forward-thinking solutions to complex challenges.

In the fall of 2010, President Obama called for investments in “game-changing innovation to accelerate progress toward development goals in health, food security, climate change, energy and environmental sustainability and broad-based economic growth.” And, in June 2013, Prime Minister David Cameron announced that the U.K. would help technology pioneers find groundbreaking solutions to poverty through investing £50 million in a new platform called Global Development Innovation Ventures.

“Innovation has really come on full steam in the past couple years,” said Mac Glovinsky, who leads the Innovation in Humanitarian Action Unit at [UNICEF](#)’s New York headquarters. “It is a big buzzword right now.”

One of the biggest drivers for embedding innovation into existing functions is increased funding.

“Donors want something new and are essentially looking for novelty,” said Otto Farkas, a senior advisor for the Global Office of Strategy, Collaboration & Innovation at [World Vision International](#). “There was a global awakening that resulted in donors and NGOs wanting to see innovation as an essential function...”

And as interest in innovation has grown in the international development field, so have career opportunities.

Over the past 10 years, innovation positions in the international development field have evolved from scientific and technological roles — scientists, engineers and others holding doctorates — to more diverse roles where it is essential to understand customers' needs and propose fresh solutions, according to Josue Fumero, director of innovation and competitiveness for Costa Rica's Ministry of Science, Technology and Telecommunications.

Common innovation roles in international development

Individuals working in innovation jobs might decipher ways to use drones for humanitarian efforts, develop new tools to help register children who have been separated from their parents in the wake of a natural disaster in Asia, or use social media to increase political engagement among youth in Africa.

In addition to developing new products, innovators in global development might also work on new methods of performing common tasks.

"People tend to talk about product and technology innovation, but that's only half the story," said Dr. Jonathan Quick, president and CEO of [Management Sciences for Health](#). "Our point is, yes, you need technology innovations, but you also need health systems innovations in order to get things up to scale," he said.

Although innovation jobs are often at organizations that specialize in fields like technology and health, World Vision, [Mercy Corps](#) and the [United Nations](#) also employ innovation experts and advisors, as do government agencies. Titles to look for might include "director of innovation," "chief innovation officer" or "social enterprise business advisor."

The qualifications and experience required for these positions depends on the position and the type of organization. For example, a senior director of innovation at a global health organization such as MSH would need graduate training in medicine or health, such as an MD or MPH, and in business, such as an MBA, as well as extensive experience in global health and a demonstrated interest in innovation.

A successful candidate for this type of position would be able to show their qualifications by demonstrating innovative thinking, according to Quick.

"We're not looking for entry-level people, but people who've done it," said Quick, who heads up MSH's innovation efforts. He added that a successful candidate would need to be able to offer examples of problems in health care delivery, and how they've changed those systems and gotten results.

It's also important to be able to demonstrate familiarity with innovation concepts. Farkas said.

"Talk about creativity and experimentation," he said. "Make sure that you understand what you mean by innovation. What is your definition? Did something you worked on take root and become a standard? Also, be familiar with basic concepts of how innovation gets diffused."

Innovation opportunities are everywhere

Jobs with “innovation” in the title, such as “director of innovation,” aren’t easy to land and are often reserved for senior-level professionals.

The U.N. has several senior-level positions in innovation, according to Glovinsky, but he added that the organization is hiring younger junior officer level candidates for innovation positions internationally.

“Of course, U.N. positions for young people require advanced degrees,” he said. “A lot of it is in the field.”

However, experts in innovation and other organizational leaders point out that a job working in innovation doesn’t always have the word “innovation” in the title.

“Most of the ‘innovation’ positions aren’t written that way,” Quick said. “There are people who are running a program and asked to solve problems and find better way of doing things. It is firstly a way of thinking and bringing different skills sets into solving the problem.”

Farkas added that, although agencies have innovation units or focal points, increasingly innovation is part of an expectation for various jobs.

In December 2012, [Abt Associates](#) held its first Innovation Expos — one at Abt’s Cambridge office, the other one in Bethesda, Maryland — that was attended by approximately 400 employees. The event featured 10 Abt-created innovations at various stages of development, from project-based tools to company-wide capabilities.

Mark McEuen, vice president and deputy division manager for international health at Abt, said the organization is focusing on and investing in innovation.

“Donors are looking for ways to do things more quickly, more efficiently,” McEuen said.

He added that although someone might not have a position such as “innovation director,” within a job in global health, they would still be encouraged to look for ways to innovate.

This is a sentiment echoed by many in the industry.

Ideally, innovation efforts should be dispersed throughout an organization, said Wayan Vota, a technology expert focused on using IT and communications technology to accelerate social and economic advancement of the developing world who is currently senior mobile advisor at [FHI 360](#)’s TechLab.

“We should all be looking at ways to do our job better and work more efficiently,” Vota said.

Breaking into an innovation career

The path to a job in innovation isn’t always a straight one. Fumero began his career at a large multinational technology corporation, then moved into a semi-private institution, where he helped local firms and helped local firms work with multinational companies in Costa Rica. After that, he began his own start-up company.

“I guess that this interesting professional mix is what finally brought me to my current position,” he said.

Fumero noted that innovation is still a developing discipline.

“There are very few opportunities out there,” he explained. “Sometimes you’ll just have to create them. Do not search for an ‘innovation position.’ Take a look at the description of the job and identify if what they’re in need of is an innovator. They might not have even noticed... but you do.”

Other development professionals agree that it can help one’s career if you are perceived as an innovator. Vota said his own experience began in the 1990s, when the company he was working for at the time didn’t have a webpage, so he launched one.

“The view at the company was that I was willing to try new things,” he said. “That is the key to rising in a career. Accept the crazy things people throw at you and try them out.”

If you want to stand out in the crowd, look for ways to either create new ideas or be seen as someone who embraces new ideas quickly, suggested Vota. For instance, you could volunteer to help with social media at your organization. Vota added that people tend to see technology as innovation, so having experience working in technology or for a tech company can help.

But the best way to start out in innovation might be to head to the field, according to Glovinsky, “where the fun and meaningful work happens.”

“Try to work for UNICEF or an NGO overseas,” he said. “Apply your skills. Then people will recognize you. There’s always a need for help in emergencies. Get involved in humanitarian work. Go to where the problems are.”

The “Stories of Innovation” blog for UNICEF’s innovation unit lists [principles for innovation in technology in development](#). These include designing solutions with the user, building for sustainability and being collaborative. Other best practices mentioned on the list include designing for scale and being data driven.

“Doing innovation in a principled, smart, pragmatic manner is different than what a lot of people have been doing,” Glovinsky said. “Things need to be coordinated. You sometimes see things that are a solution without a problem.”

Michelle Risinger, Pact innovations officer for foundations fundraising, explains how she assists stakeholders at Pact to progress their innovative ideas.

Rising into the top ranks of innovators

What does it take to move into the top ranks of innovators? Passion and creativity are essential, but so is discipline.

Contrary to what most people think, innovation has little to do with spontaneity, Fumero said, and individuals often mix up creativity and innovation.

“The first is indeed the creation of new ideas, a lot of ideas, spontaneously; the second one is the creation of new ideas, accurate ideas, value-generating ideas, all the time, the same way. To become a top-level innovator, you must master discipline.”

Linda Raftree, senior advisor for innovation, transparency and strategic change at

Plan International, added that sometimes innovation and invention are confused as well.

“It’s not just creating something, but taking it through to success,” she said. “Humility is really important. Don’t forget all the nuts and bolts required to get the work done.”

Other innovation experts say that a willingness to try different things and be open to failure is equally important. Leaders in innovation need to be able to experiment without jeopardizing or compromising the core business, Farkas said.

“You need to be willing to fail, but you also have to provide leadership so that others can experiment, even the most junior of your staff,” Farkas explained. “You need to have the ability to deal with failure...having failed a number of times. You should have experience that demonstrates you can make things happen but also live up to the failure and learn fast.”

The top innovators in international development are very open to failure but also extremely forward-thinking.

“They have a real gift for eyeing the future and a clear knowledge of what the present is,” Glovinsky said. “Rather than creating solutions for the problems we have today, they are addressing a possible problem in the future.”

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