

Filling the gap: How to build your resume while unemployed

By [Ingrid Ahlgren](#) 20 May 2014

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What's the best activities to include on your resume that gets you the job you want? Photo by: Devex

You've just graduated from college with an international relations degree or finished your master's degree, and are yearning to land your dream job in global development. Or perhaps you're a seasoned professional in between jobs after funding dried up at the nongovernmental organization where you were employed.

What are the best way to fill your time — and the best activities to include on your resume — while you look for that perfect position?

The possibilities for how you can spend your time might appear endless, although your options depend to a certain degree on your financial situation. Choices include volunteering, taking classes, temping in an office or working in a service role, such as waitressing or retail.

What looks best to a recruiter? Experts says the ideal practice is to think about what kind of development job you eventually want to have, then examine your resume to see if a familiarity with something is missing. For example, you might have the right skillset for a job, but you haven't yet worked for a development organization.

One idea is to design a pro bono consulting opportunity for yourself that provides some of the experience you need.

“Find out what a development organization needs at the moment that your skills are aligned with,” said Shana Montesol Johnson, a career and leadership coach who works with development professionals. “Then pitch that you’ll do a project in that area on a pro bono basis. It is unpaid, but it lets you get more work experience that you’ll need.”

A recent graduate who might be tech- and social media-savvy, for example, could pitch a pro bono social media strategy project to an NGO that needs support in that area.

“This provides value to the recent graduate, but it also brings a lot to the organization,” Johnson explained.

Many international development jobs are office positions, so experience working in an office environment could be a plus. In addition, writing skills are often called upon in global development positions, even for those who might not consider it their strength, so honing your writing skills will always be valuable later. If you’re aiming for a job that will involve a lot of writing, consider proposing to help an organization write reports.

Offering to help as a pro bono consultant can also help more established professionals move into global development work, Johnson said.

“They can capitalize on what they already have, and it gives them more exposure, credibility and contacts,” she said.

Debra Wheatman, a certified professional resume writer and certified professional career coach, as well as the owner of Careers Done Write, a New York-based company that offers job counseling services, thinks volunteering is also a great choice.

“You build your network,” she said. “Also you get the energy from working on a good cause.”

But volunteering comes with its own set of challenges, Wheatman added.

“It’s really hard because you can be working with an unbelievable amount of new people,” she explained. “Also, people may report to you, but they don’t really report to you. They don’t have to do something if they don’t want to. And that’s challenging.”

If the title of “intern” is more attractive to you than volunteer, that’s an option too, according to Anne Steen, director of the Graduate Career Development Center at the Georgetown School of Foreign Service.

Steen feels the right thing to do while looking for employment depends on the individual’s situation, “but there are some things that don’t hurt you and that can usually help,” she said.

“If you want to be in a certain part of the world, sometimes the best way to get a job is to get over there,” Steen said. “Go to that part of the world and then start networking as an intern.”

Creating your own internship opportunity is another approach, Steen added.

“Approach an organization and say you’ve finished a program and you’d like to volunteer 30 or 40 hours a week,” she said. “Ask if they could use your help in a particular area or with a specific project.”

If you have an entrepreneurial aspiration, you might want to be your own boss and become a consultant.

“You could take on unpaid work, but also paid consulting work,” Steen explained. “You can pick up projects while you’re working on finding a full-time job. That’s also a nice thing to do, and it teaches you business skills.”

Finally, career experts confirm that you don’t need to do just one thing. You could be working at a restaurant part-time while you’re engaged with a pro bono consulting project for an NGO. And you don’t need to put everything that you’re doing on your resume.

“If it is a part time thing, you don’t have to put it on your resume,” Wheatman said. “Maybe you’re also volunteering and you’d rather highlight that experience.”

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