HR Directions

Hire a Humanitarian

Bringing the Advantages of Global Experience Into Your Workplace

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Hire a Humanitarian

The year was 2014, and it was time to come home. At least for a little while.

In the five years that I had been working with Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières or MSF), I had done some interesting work. I had ferociously negotiated a supply agreement with compound guards who were inordinately – and very seriously – invested in receiving their fair share of tea, milk, and sugar. I had held my ground against a corrupt customs official in the Ivory Coast whose French was far better than mine. I had recovered an Australian expat I misplaced in Palo, whom I accidentally put on a helicopter bound for Guiuan, when she really should have been heading to Cebu to catch her flight home to Sydney.

I had found a home for a "polite chicken," and later, working in cahoots with another kind soul, a pet goat that had been slated to be the main course at a farewell party. I had stared deep into the eyes of a little boy with two broken legs, who had been carried to the hospital on his mother's back. I had run headlong into a rebel fighter inside a lonely stairwell in a hospital far away, with my hijab most definitely not in respectable condition and avoided an international incident. I had learned enough Arabic so as to avoid causing offense in most reasonably predictable situations. I had learned enough French to keep me out of jail, and just enough Swahili to order beer and make taxi drivers laugh.

I had come to the point when it was clearly time to come home for an extended break. Why now? Because of the gunfire. Not because the gunfire was frightening or too much for my nerves. But rather because it had become an annoying intrusion on my paperwork. And I was beginning to resent it. Resenting the sound of gunfire is not a normal reaction to the thing that usually sends crowds running for their lives.

My mother had always told me, "Be careful with what becomes normal to you, Catherine," and gunfire had become my normal. Thankfully, there was still enough normal within me to recognize that gunfire outside the office compound is not, in fact, my normal. So, after a debriefing session at the Paris MSF office, I got on a plane and began my trip to the small town of Lone Pine, California. Here was the plan: I would put my suitcase somewhere where my

mother wouldn't trip over it. And then I would go to sleep. For a full month (you think I'm kidding?). And then, when I woke up, I'd go into the kitchen and see what she had planned for dinner. And then, since I was planning to be stateside and somewhat stable for at least a year, I would see what I could do about finding a job. Probably something in HR.

But here's what I found out. Friends had trouble knowing how to talk to me. And potential employers didn't know what to do with me. Totally understandable. It's hard for everyone – friends, hiring managers, even self – to find that path to reentry into regular life. I suppose it's like talking to an astronaut. I have no clue what I would ask an astronaut if one walked into the room. "How was the ride?" "Is it hot in that suit?" I have zero context or experience with space travel to ask intelligent questions. On my side, I usually get, "How was Africa?" "Wasn't it hot?" "What did you eat?" "Do they really need people like you?" (That last question is actually perfectly reasonable. Think MSF and images of doctors – who look remarkably like Angelina Jolie or Antonio Banderas -

> **"Be careful with what becomes normal to you.**

come to mind. But MSF needs HR and administrative services too. That's where I found a place for myself among humanitarians.)

Before I headed off to Paris in 2009 for a training that would prepare me for my first assignment in Kenya as an HR and finance administrator, I was the HR director for a small Albuquerque-based nonprofit.

I had an SPHR (Senior Professional Human Resources) Certification and everything. I wrote job descriptions. I interviewed candidates. I set up systems that would most efficiently cull out the non-starters and bring only the most qualified people who might or might not be right for the job or the organization's culture. I pushed the buttons, made the phone calls, implemented the policies, worked the networks, relied on exquisitely defined search words, and enjoyed the wonders of online job boards and job fairs.

Then, in 2014, I began trying to find my way back into what was once a familiar world, at least for a little while. But my painstakingly updated resume did not catch an automated applicant tracking system's attention. Key phrases such as "managing the mundane while in complete chaos," "burnout planner," "tea and sugar negotiator," and "livestock relocation specialist" simply don't register.

Look, I get it, there isn't much use for those skills in your average workplace.

Before my own MSF days, never once had it ever occurred to me that an employee who doesn't get rattled when the generator goes out, is willing to take bucket baths, or can oversee surgical procedures without running water might be good qualities to look for in a candidate for a First World organization.

So I certainly don't expect would-be employers to keep track of my growing list of qualities while I'm out in the world doing things that can't be captured in the SHRM list of competencies. But here is the thing. I'm not alone. There are thousands of humanitarian workers out there in the world who eventually circulate back to their home country. They marvel at how difficult it is to fall back into pace with the society that used to be their native ecosystem. Not that they come back weirdly changed – although there may be some of that, I grant you – but their resumes don't jive with what recruiters are told to look for. The words on the resume just don't compute.

When you read "adaptable" on a humanitarian's resume, what we really mean is "able to work in complete chaos with minimal complaint." "Problem solver" refers to our ability to "out-MacGyver MacGyver," and "multi-cultural experience" is code for the fact that we regularly spend our days with at least four different nationalities using multiple languages and hand gestures to communicate. "Goal oriented" translates to successfully getting things done in multicultural teams that, in less in extremis circumstances, would be filled with cultural nd hair-trigger political, interpersonal responses. The multiple contract dates and locale changes on our resumes are frequently misinterpreted as "jumping around" or "unable to commit." What those details really indicate is that we are "flexible," "go where we are needed," and "able to quickly assimilate into an existing team in a complex environment." But try explaining all that to a computer.

There is no arguing the fact that we are some of the most dedicated, resourceful, creative, mission driven talent that you could ask for. The problem is, you don't know how to ask for us, and ATS systems overlook us. And we don't know how to step forward, raise our hands, and announce, "I'm right here!"

> **Adaptable: able to work in complete chaos with minimal complaint**

Fast forward two years, and I can say I did pretty okay for myself. I opted for the non-traditional path of writing and speaking. And now, with some significant amount of sleep and reflection in my system, I'm ready to head back out into the world again.

As I depart, I know that many of my humanitarian colleagues will be returning. We are like the tides. Rolling in and out, passing each other but pausing long enough to say hello and give the highlights on where we have been to ease the other's transition to where they are going. So as I roll out, I'd like to take this opportunity to introduce you to those rolling in.

Not one by one, but by the qualities you, as employers, have been crying for. (As you struggle with the challenges of Millennials coming into the workforce, wondering how you are going to keep up with their ever-increasing demands and expectations, keep in mind that as far as most of us in the humanitarian world are concerned, we're grateful to sit in a comfortable chair. Working Internet and a continuous electricity source are divine. Days without blood, gunfire, or children in pain are also much appreciated. And reliably running water, well, that's nice too.)

Humanitarians Make it Happen

This is what typically happens when the headquarters of a humanitarian organization determines that there is a population in need, security is manageable, and resources are available:

A team of four or five arrives from all over the world to the designated location – invariably remote and extremely devastated. They then stand united, contemplating either an expanse of nothingness or a catastrophe before them. "You see that out there?" the project coordinator says. Heads nod, cigarettes light up, and they shield their eyes from the sun for a better view of what is out there – or what's not out there because mayhem came along and transformed what existed into absolute wreckage. Other than this small group smoking cigarettes, there is not a single human in sight. A collective "Yup" in various mother tongues is heard in response to the question.

"We need a 20-bed hospital, access to water, a secure compound, an office, housing for the expats arriving next week, and qualified local staff members to support the activities," says the project coordinator. In their silence, the team members are already in their various roles getting the work started in their heads. The logistician is accounting for what the project coordinator did not mention: A space for vehicle maintenance, supply stores, and a BBQ pit for the weekends so expats can have some semblance of a social life. The administrator is calculating budgets, creating the organization chart, converting expenses to local currency, and fighting off concerns about slow Internet speeds. The medical coordinator is envisioning patient flow, assessing medical equipment needs, preparing the pharmaceutical order, and handing out malaria pills.

The project coordinator respects the silence, understanding that the team is already making it happen in their heads. This person takes the time to consider security concerns, upcoming negotiations with local officials, and how best to manage team morale in such a remote setting. More cigarettes are smoked, clarifying questions are asked, and ideas are shared. Soon, the team is nodding in the affirmative, "No problem," they agree, committed to the outcome. The administrator begins handing out local currency to team members so they can purchase needed supplies. The last instruction is a universal one: "Get receipts."

In a remarkably short time, the team achieves the objective. They have created a functional hospital, living compound, and office, all in a secure environment and all out of nothing. Running water may be in the form of staff running buckets back and forth. Roofs might leak, expats might sleep on mattresses on the floor, and Internet might be slow. Electricity might be limited to twelve hours a day, and receipts might be scrawled on the backs of empty cigarette packs. None of this matters because the BBQ pit works beautifully, and, most importantly, patients are receiving treatment.

Translating a vision into the tangible and working in and around limited resources, are inherent characteristics among humanitarians. They can't help it. Further, they are motivated by the challenge.

Whether opening a project in a remote location, digging water wells in high-tension zones, delivering food to starving populations, or the thousands of other needs they serve, humanitarians make it happen.

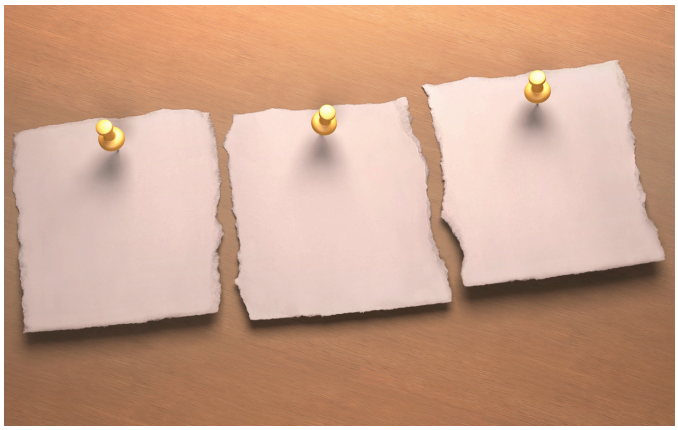
Humanitarians Roll With It

While working in a small village in the Middle East, medical data started coming in from the refugee camp indicating a potential measles outbreak. No one was surprised. After years of conflict, the country's previously functioning health system was in shambles, and children were no longer receiving routine vaccinations.

A vaccination campaign was planned, and we needed to quickly hire over fifty people for both medical and non-medical support positions. It would be a delicate recruitment to balance getting the skills we needed with having a politically sensitive, diverse representation from the key families in the

village. We wanted the new hires focusing on the vaccination campaign and not on comparing the number of positions one family received over another.

We posted job announcements in multiple languages, and within hours we were flooded with "applications." The applications arrived on pieces of paper that had been torn into halves and quarters. Written in Arabic, potential candidates provided only a name and phone number. Maybe a statement of their desire to work and rarely the title of the position they were applying for.



We rolled with it. This is a country torn apart by civil war. A country where electricity and fuel are non-existent, let alone access to a computer and printer. Even basic supplies like pen and paper are at a premium. In this recruitment drive, those who did have paper were tearing it into pieces to share with family and friends, so they too could submit applications.

It would be impossible to select an initial pool of candidates based solely on the applications we received. So, we invited every single person who submitted a piece of paper to a preliminary group interview. Since phones were also limited, it turned out to be quite easy contacting all those that had applied. Call one person in the family and leave a message for the rest. (How's that for an applicant tracking system?)

After the group interviews, we stepped back into our normal recruitment process. Ranking applicants against job requirements, then holding technical interviews with the hiring managers. Within two weeks, we had sorted through all the pieces of paper, each one holding the hopes and dreams of an individual, and filled the positions in what was a transparent and culturally appropriate process.

Humanitarians work with what is in front of them, adapting processes and expectations to match the constraints of the environment.

Humanitarians are Instant High-Performing Teams

It was November 2013 and we were in Cebu City in the Philippines. Typhoon Yolanda had just destroyed cities and villages on the next island. Here it was, days later, and the world still could not get there to help. Airports were destroyed, shipping lanes blocked, and tons of humanitarian supplies were stacked at the Mactan-Cebu International Airport, waiting to be transported. It was nearly midnight, and I was in the office facing more hours of work before I could respond to the pleas of my bed calling out for me.

At the same time, right outside my office, was a group of experienced humanitarians who had nothing to do until we found them a way to the devastation. I heard laughter and the unmistakable clink of glass bottles. I did what one does in these situations, I turned the music up on my headphones so I

could focus and get to bed all the sooner. It didn't work. I got up to go see what was going on. It was a reunion.

I watched as members of this joyful group caught up with one another.

"Delphine! How are you? Last time I saw you was Haiti. What have you been doing?"

"Oh, Adrien, good, I tell you, good. You know, the usual, working back home to make a living. What about you? I heard you were in Syria. How was that?"

"Great. Horrible, but great. Hey, stand still, let me show you a little something the Free Syrian Army taught me."

On and on this group of aid workers went. Laughing, retelling stories, clinking beers, and gearing up for what would be intense work once we got them out of Cebu City and onto Leyte Island.

"Remember when the tent fell on Khalid?"

"And what about the time Matt went out for a six-day trip and ended up staying for six weeks?"

"Yes! He returned and found out we were using his bedroom as storage. Ha ha ha. And oh, oh … what about that bridge we built? Can you believe the villagers still use it?"

"Oh! Is that the bridge Nico worked on in Mzimba? I worked with him in Nigeria and heard all about it. We worked on a malnutrition project together. I'm Natalie. Heard all about you guys from Nico."

People reunited from France, Japan, Australia, the United States, Belgium, Germany, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and more. All coming together again to face another emergency. Medical, logistics, and administrative personnel, all specialists in their fields, instantly forming into a high-performing team. All needing very little direct supervision, except, of course, an occasional reminder about the receipts.

I watched as the scene played out before me, smiling for the first time in hours as they reconnected with one another, remembering the experiences they had shared all over the world and falling in love again with the work that calls to them. And I wondered, "Who is going to hire them when they get home? What are they going to do until the next emergency hits? What company will ever see what I see: Trustworthy, dedicated, spirited, intelligent, and inclusive individuals who bring back receipts …most of the time. What company will hold a place for them and their passion? What employer will let them leave on a moment's notice for a week or two so they can serve others, then return with a full heart and stories to share about what is happening in the world?"

As I turned to head back to my work, I stopped for a moment and thought about it. Why was I worried about them? They seemed to be doing just fine. What I really needed to worry about was what I was going to do after this assignment ended.

Humanitarians Never Stop Communicating

The project for the day was to swap out the old generator. We were in Syria, and the new generator from our coordination office in Turkey had arrived. The only hitch was that we would have to shut down the electricity for a few hours. As the administrator, my job was to not complain with the other expats about the short battery lives on the phones and computers, or wonder how we would live without the Internet. Grumbling and muttering sufficiently accomplished by the rest of the staff, the hospital and office went dark.

A few hours later, Sami and Mohammad, two Syrian employees, walked into the communal office and stood in front of their supervisor's desk. Prior to the war, Sami (who spoke Arabic and English) had been a university student in Damascus studying English literature. Mohammad (who spoke Arabic) had a successful thirty-plus-year career as a car mechanic in his home village. On this day, Sami was working as a logistics assistant, and Mohammad was our maintenance man. Together, the twenty-year-old and the fifty-year-old stood before their supervisor, Thomas, an expat from France (who spoke French and English), to give an update on the generator swap.

Sami: "Not working."

Mohammad: Standing slightly behind Sami, nodding in the affirmative, but not understanding a word.

Thomas: "What's wrong?"

Sami turned to Mohammad and for the next few minutes, those in the communal office watched as they held a discussion in Arabic and our battery lives slowly dripped away. It was a full-on conversation complete with questions, responses, tonal variations, nodding heads, and eyebrows that raised and lowered.

After this extended discussion, Sami, turning to face Thomas, pronounced: "Don't know."

In the office was Aya, also Syrian and also a former English literature student from Damascus University (she spoke Arabic and English), who was now our administrative assistant. Anne, a Canadian doctor (who spoke French and English) was our project's medical director. And I, the American administrator, could speak only English and grammatically incorrect French. The three of us put our computers on sleep mode and sat back to see what would happen next.

Thomas (while peeking at his watch, cognizant of the battery situation) asked again: “What's wrong?”

Sami explained, periodically turning to Mohammad for technical clarification, then to Aya for translation assistance. It went something like this:

Sami and Mohammad (in Arabic): “Blah, blah, blah.” They stopped and looked at Aya.

Aya: “Engine.”

Sami and Thomas (in English): “Blah, blah, blah.” Then a technical question.

Sami and Mohammad (in Arabic): “Blah, blah, blah.” They stopped and looked to Aya,

Aya: “Voltage. I think.”

The conversation continued, and before long, Thomas turned to Anne to ask for her help in translating some of the English to French.

In time, someone asked, in some language, the question that is eventually asked when something does not work: “Has anyone read the manual?”

Sami, Mohammad, and Thomas went downstairs to look for the manual. Aya, Anne, and I chuckled and went back to work.

Before we had the time to fall back into focus on our work, the office door crashed open. All three marched back in, with Thomas in the lead waving in his hands what could only be the manual.

> “Has anyone read the manual?

Thomas (in French and quite loudly): “Merde! Blah! Blah! Blah! Turk!”

Anne (in English and through snorts of laughter): “The manual is in Turkish!”

Sitting down and taking a breath, Thomas picked up the phone to speak with Faruk, the logistics assistant in the coordination office. Faruk (who spoke Turkish and English) happened to have a copy of the generator manual on his desk. Now with six individuals and four languages involved, the team continued to communicate and problem solve. They never stopped. Not even after the new generator was up and running.

Now. Stop and think for a moment about the hundreds of different cultures and subcultures crashing and banging against each other in that small room. The vast differences in customs, religions, genders, generations, languages, beliefs, professions, and educational backgrounds, colliding against one another like atoms gone wild. Each difference, a plausible barrier to the restarting of a generator.

But electricity in a hospital setting is not optional, and the team was not focused on cultural differences but rather the imperative need to get out of the dark.

Humanitarians Focus on What's Important

A friend told me that one of the questions Facebook recruiters use is: "How many golf balls can fit into a limousine?" Give me a break. Who cares? And who wants to spend precious time discussing parameters, such as make and model of the limo or the exact size of the golf balls the recruiter has in mind? Let me tell you some of the questions humanitarians ask when looking for the skills and characteristics that really matter to their teams.

"Can you be trusted with cash?" Security is the first consideration. Not just with cash, but with all things. And how you treat cash is an indicator of your approach to safety in general. Do you treat cash like you would a stick of dynamite; as a tool that can be used either to your advantage or to your detriment? Do you understand the protocols are in place not to protect the cash or annoy you, but to reduce risk and protect people? If candidates can show they can be trusted with cash, then they can be trusted with all things of value.

"Do you treat others with respect?" Another security-related question, this one aimed at how a person treats other individuals. The concern is not so much how they treat people from their own culture, but how they treat people from different cultures and with different beliefs. When we are working out there, what protects us the most is the support of the communities we work in. And, as we all know, at least intellectually, in order to get respect you must give respect. And respect translates to far safer working, and, in the humanitarians' case, living environments.

"Do you sleep on the job?" Again, another security-related question. In this world, a team's safety depends on their colleagues being awake when they're supposed to be. And not just awake, but acutely aware of the ever-shifting environment around them. Humanitarians operate in chaotic environments and, if not in an obviously violent part of the world, in places where the smallest spark could set off events that might impact generations. Vigilance and attention are key. And to clarify, this question is not reserved for those who work at night. It is appropriate for everyone.

"Can you evacuate with five minutes' notice?" What we are looking for here is how quickly theycan organize themselves in times of crisis. When it is time to go, it is time to go. Any discussions about evacuation should have occurred long before the need to evacuate. Responsibilities accepted, "go bags" prepared, and multiple lines of communication defined and frequently tested. The answer to this question is also an indicator of an individual's capacity to quickly identify what matters most.

"Do you balk at doing work not included in your job description?" I've seen administrators assist with medical emergencies and nurses manage fuel deliveries. It is incredible the things humanitarians find themselves doing out there, most of it not written down. You want people who do not limit themselves to doing what someone else wrote on a piece of paper. Humanitarians see a situation for what it is, identify how they can pitch in to help, and then do so.

"How do you feel about sleeping under a mosquito net?" If you think sleeping under a mosquito net is exotic or romantic, then you've never done it. It is hot under those things and incredibly noisy with mosquitos buzzing around trying to squeeze through the tiny holes to get to your blood. Best of luck should one actually get inside your net. Any hopes of sleeping are gone for good. Instead of tossing and turning under the unbreathable mesh in the heat of Africa, your night is spent trying to locate and kill the little blood sucker without waking up your roommates. The correct answer to the question, by the way, is: "I don't like it but I do it." Humanitarians know the importance of taking care of themselves. They are no good to anyone if they have malaria.

But the question recruiters should really be asking is: *"You go into a room and see a refrigerator in what you believe to be an illogical place...what do you do?"*

The answer you want to hear is: "I leave it alone until I understand why it is there." If your candidate gives this answer, hire him or her immediately.

Here is the deal. When joining a team, new members are tempted to start marking territory andproving to everyone that they were the right hire. Perhaps they change the font on contracts or highlight the header row in blue rather than the customarily accepted 70 percent gray shade. They attempt to update policies without understanding the history, call for meetings to reformulate project strategy, or worse, move the refrigerator from the south wall to the north wall. Their intention is to make an immediate and obvious contribution to the team, but in doing so, they fail to understand why the refrigerator is on the south wall to begin with.

Humanitarians have learned the hard way to leave the refrigerator alone. They understand there is a reason why it stands against the south wall, and their job is to find out why. It might be because the south wall has the only working three-prong electrical outlet in the room. It might be the only spot in the room where exterior doors don't bang against it as people go in and out all day long. Perhaps it is there because that particular section of floor doesn't slope or perhaps, because it does slope. Maybe the floor slopes toward the wall just enough so vaccines don't come tumbling out when someone opens the refrigerator door.

Truly, hire the person who waits before changing things. You want people on your team who willleave the refrigerator alone until they understand why it is there to begin with. Not to mention that such behavior indicates the individual recognizes that there are more important things to do.

Humanitarians Offer Perspective

Now I know what you are thinking. "If I hire a humanitarian, they are just going to go back out again, and my company loses out on the huge investments we made with onboarding and training costs." You can focus on the real costs, I suppose, but what if you focus on the intangible benefits? Look at it as the opportunity to hire someone who could inject new perspectives into your environment.

It doesn't take a humanitarian forever to make a lasting difference. They do odd things like ask lots of questions, quickly identify who is really in charge, and show gratitude for the simple things like coffee and climate-controlled environments. That kind of behavior is bound to rub off onto others.

I know the average workplace is stressful, I used to work in one. Having said that, fresh coffee,sleeping in your own bed, big screen TVs, and safe access to outdoor environments can do a lot to reduce stress. Our First World problem is that we forget to recognize these things as being readily available and fail to take advantage of them in stressful times.

Humanitarians are natural storytellers, and they bring the world to your organization. This is good news for anyone with a corporate social responsibility or community engagement program. Put humanitarians into these positions and watch them find simple and sustainable ways for your company to engage with the world.

Humanitarians are humble and don't take themselves too seriously. They might laugh at inappropriate times but it is usually to blow off steam and put things back in perspective. Besides, especially in the midst of chaos, laughter is important. As are camaraderie, compassion, and finding space to dance with the context.

Chances are your humanitarians will eventually leave to answer a call from somewhere in the world. And when they leave, know that it is not a loss of an investment because for as long as you were able to engage them, you held lightning in your hands. While you gave them time to reconnect to their native ecosystem, they brought you the world and new perspectives. They brought you their passion and commitment, and they gave you their heart-driven best.

So let them go, and I bet, if you invite them to, they just might come back. With their hearts full,some new tricks the rebels taught them, and more stories that make your other employees say, "I never heard of such a thing!" And who knows what great places employees with new ideas might take your company.