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Business Education

Teamwork beyond the borders

Executive education

A scheme that matches management expertise with humanitarian projects is luring volunteers, says **Rebecca Knight**

As chief executive officer of Executives without Borders, a non-profit group that links experienced business people with targeted humanitarian projects in developing countries, Robert Goodwin wants to make it easier for the business community to give back.

"Maybe someone doesn't have a year [to devote to a project] because of their job or because they have a family," he says.

"We try to give them a Peace Corps type experience based on the time they do have to give, be it a month, a couple of weeks or even just a couple of hours a few times a month."

Mr Goodwin, a former officer in the US Air Force, founded Executives without Borders in 2007 after graduating from Harvard Business School's general management programme. The seven-week programme, which takes place over five months, typically has about 100 students each term.

At the time, Mr Goodwin worked as chief operating officer of International Aid, a healthcare relief and development organisation. He recalls that his fellow students were intrigued by his job and interested in the notion of social entrepreneurship.

Mr Goodwin wanted to harness those good intentions to bring about change



Group co-founder and CEO Robert Goodwin

Scott Robinson

in the developing world. From his experience in the field of humanitarian aid, he knew that schools and hospitals and non-government organisations in developing countries had business requirements. But hiring consultants came at a steep price. Moreover, money spent on those services could otherwise be used to benefit the organisation itself.

His concept: match volunteer business professionals eager to work on humanitarian projects round the world with NGOs in emerging countries most in need of help. The NGO gains a seasoned business leader to help it improve efficiency and effectiveness; the volunteer comes away with personally and professionally satisfying work experience.

The idea is based on Médecins sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders) the international medical

humanitarian organisation. Executives without Borders has a network of hundreds of volunteers worldwide from the corporate and academic arenas; many are also graduates of Harvard's general management programme.

The diversity of the network – students come from 35 countries and represent 50 industries – encourages dynamic ideas, according to Benjamin Esty, a professor at HBS and a casual adviser to Executives without Borders.

"It's that diversity that stirs up thought... lots of ideas get sparked," he says. "You have a pretty powerful global network the day you set foot in the programme."

Prof Esty says that Mr Goodwin's organisation has "elevated the importance of social contribution".

"The mission of this school is to educate leaders to make a difference in the

world. Bob was able to infectious attract senior leaders to think about how they can contribute to solving big, complex problems," he says.

Executives without Borders matches the skills and expertise of an executive with the projects he or she could most benefit. The volunteers first work remotely with the organisation, getting to know its needs and challenges, and then work on site.

The group targets projects aligned with the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals, which include halving extreme poverty and combating HIV, malaria and other diseases. It also targets projects that will provide sustainable benefits to a community for generations.

Executives without Borders has three ongoing projects: one in conjunction with an Indian NGO to increase enrolment and graduation rates for young girls, a second at a hospital in a poor community in Honduras and a third at an inner-city school in Rwanda run by a new Harvard MBA graduate. Each project has a staff of 15-20 people.

The bleak economic climate is having an impact on the organisation's ability to attract donors, says Mr Goodwin, who oversees an annual budget of about \$500,000 (£377,000, £450,000). However, the downturn has boosted the ranks of his professional volunteers. "Now there's a lot of people who've been laid off who want to do something significant," he says.

Mr Goodwin hopes to expand the scope and number of projects, implementing immunisation programmes and water sanitation schemes in emerging countries.

"What's exciting for me is that we can make such a big impact because we're not starting our own projects," says Mr Goodwin. "We're making existing projects work better."

An alternative career

Many students are now pursuing careers in social entrepreneurship.

In response, business schools are creating courses that focus on this topic, writes **Rebecca Knight**.

For example, The Global Entrepreneurship Laboratory at MIT's Sloan School of Business is an international internship that gives students experience working with start-ups in emerging markets.

And in 2008, NYU Stern of Business launched its Social Impact Internship Fund for first-year MBA students who work in the area of social enterprise.

In its inaugural year, Stern supported a student who interned with the Clinton Foundation HIV/Aids Initiative in Africa.

At Syracuse University's Whitman School of Management, many students are opting for internships with non-profits.