

Volunteering Abroad to Climb at I.B.M.

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In July, a team of 8 to 10 I.B.M. employees will travel to Ghana to help tiny businesses make their operations more professional. Another team will help entrepreneurs seek microloans in Turkey, while yet another will create training programs on information technology in Vietnam.



Citizens Development Corporation

Local entrepreneurs in Kumasi, Ghana, will receive training from I.B.M. employees in its Corporate Service Corps program. I.B.M. said it would have 600 participants over the next three years.

The projects, which were devised by I.B.M.'s citizenship group and are being coordinated through nonprofit organizations, have all the trappings of corporate philanthropy. But that is not why they were created, or how they are being used.

"This is a management development exercise for high-potential people at I.B.M.," said Randy MacDonald, senior vice president for human resources.

Many multinational companies insist that promising executives do stints in their overseas offices. And many will free employees to do pro bono work at community organizations. But I.B.M.'s program, which it calls the Corporate Service Corps, stands out on several counts. It uses the volunteer ethos to bring together employees who might otherwise never meet, even as it gives I.B.M. a high profile in countries where it does not yet have a significant presence.

"I.B.M. doesn't have a big footprint in a lot of these places," said Kevin B. Thompson, the senior program manager in corporate citizenship who is running the Service Corps project. "And their experiences will be a lot more useful than research that says, say, that the Internet has a 12.7 percent penetration rate."

Management experts say I.B.M. is onto something.

"As a development tool, this is a four-for-one," said Allan R. Cohen, dean of the Olin Graduate School at Babson College, near Boston. "It's stretching to work in another culture, to work in a nonprofit where the measurement of accomplishment isn't clear, to take a sabbatical from your everyday routine and to learn to accomplish things when you can't just bark orders."

Indeed, Paul Ingram, a management professor at the Columbia Business School, is planning a similar program for this fall, in which executives attending the school's Senior Executive Program will work with nonprofit groups in New York. Because 80 percent of the students are not from the United States, the New York location is outside their comfort zone.

"The fact that you are an excellent programmer or salesman, or can lead a project in your own area and culture, doesn't mean you can be a great leader outside of your technical or cultural expertise," he said.

That is I.B.M.'s logic as well. The company views the Service Corps as a way to learn how well employees work with strangers, in strange lands, on unfamiliar projects. And it plans to use that knowledge to customize further development programs for the participants.

Clearly, the Service Corps concept sits well with the I.B.M. employees. More than 5,500 of them, from more than 50 countries, applied for the program. I.B.M. narrowed the pool to those who had been designated as fast-trackers, who had familiarity with volunteerism and who submitted the best short essays on how participation would help them develop as leaders. The applications of those that passed that first cut were sent to the heads of I.B.M.'s eight geographic regions, who chose which of their employees to send.

The final list comprises 100 people from 33 countries, who will form 12 teams that will be deployed to projects in Romania, Turkey, Vietnam, the Philippines, Ghana and Tanzania. I.B.M. said it would select another 100 before the end of the year and have a total of 600 participants over the next three years.

The first projects will not begin until July, but the team members are expected to immediately begin studying the countries they will visit and their cultures.

They will also begin interacting with one another, possibly through a virtual venue, similar to Second Life, that I.B.M. will set up. Each team will have electronic "facilitators," executives who are well versed in the countries they will visit and the types of businesses they will be advising.

After their four-week trips, the participants will go through two months of intensive debriefing to discuss what they learned about leadership — and about the countries they visited.

"It feels good to help in a developing country, even as you enhance your career," said Julie T. Lockwood, 31, a supply chain manager at I.B.M. in Boulder, Colo., who will be on the Ghana team. "This will help my internal résumé more than an assignment in a developed country."

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