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GLOBAL: As NGOs cut jobs, "this is no time to lose talent"



Photo: Life

Aid workers unloading supplies in Gaza (file photo)

DAKAR, 30 January 2009 (IRIN) - As the bleak economic climate forces NGOs to scale back staff, human resource experts say managers should focus as much on developing skilled staff for the long term as they have on cutting back.

"The right skills and talent are still in short supply in the aid industry," said Ben Emmens, human resource director at People in Aid, an NGO network focused on management in the aid industry.

"In these difficult times we need fewer people to do more, and better. Humanitarian disasters won't disappear because of a recession - in fact, they're likely to be exacerbated."

He added: "This is no time to lose talent. Managers should use this [period] as an opportunity to better use and nurture the talent they already have."

International humanitarian NGOs have not always been good at this. Turnover rates at aid agencies are higher than the average in other sectors; though there have been no standardised studies and estimates of rates vary figures vary from 20 to 46 percent, depending on how turnover is defined.

With turnover defined as "a premature cessation of a contract", average turnover across all sectors in the UK was 17.5 percent in 2008, according to the [Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development](#) annual report.

In some cases keeping staff in place short-term is healthy – managers do not want staff to stay long-term in a conflict-affected fragile state for instance.

But "a striking majority" of aid agencies consider staff turnover to be a problem, draining agency finances and eroding programme quality, according to 2006 research [Understanding and addressing staff turnover](#) in humanitarian agencies' by [People in Aid](#).

Turnover can lead to a loss of institutional memory; a waste of money spent re-recruiting, re-training re-inducting and re-deploying; low staff morale and increased stress levels for staff who remain, according to People in Aid.

The recruitment process costs on average US\$8,500 for the post of international emergency programme manager, says Save the Children, while the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), puts the cost of its hiring process at \$21,400.

Understanding why people leave – and stay - is the first step to lowering these figures, says Emmens.

Why turnover high

A common perception is that aid workers quit because of environmental reasons – the high stress of the job, huge workloads, potential insecure environments, and difficult living conditions.

"Emergency response is exhausting. It takes a lot out of you. [In an emergency] you can work 18 hours, seven days a week – it's not sustainable," said Jessica Taublib-Kiriati, a 29-year old emergency programme coordinator with the International Rescue Committee.

But NGO World Vision says inter and intra-agency politics, inconsistent management, a lack of team work and unclear organisational objectives are more likely to lead to chronic stress and burnout.

"Aid workers have a pretty shrewd idea of what they are getting into when they enter this career, and dirty clothes, gun shots at night and lack of electricity do not surprise them," World Vision's stress and trauma handbook reads.

Oxfam's emergency programme manager in Chad, Pauline Ballaman, told IRIN it is simple: "Good management is enough to make me stay. And if it is bad – I'll leave."



Photo: People in Aid

Ben Emmens of People in Aid

For Ballaman, the first step is for organisations to standardise their procedures and make them more suitable to emergency environments, to make staff handovers easier. The second is to "get the small things right".

"Giving people 10-minute phone calls with their family once a week, giving them good R and R, and giving them support – these make a huge difference," she said.

Changing the mindset

But there is also a practical reason why turnover is so high year on year in the aid world, says Emmens: short-term contracts.

“... Good management is enough to make me stay. And if it is bad – I’ll leave...”

NGO staff often blame short-term donor funding for having to impose short-term contracts. "It is increasingly difficult for agencies to maintain long-term funding in chronic emergencies," said Save the Children emergency director Gareth Owen.

And aid managers say a shift in donors wanting to fund the UN instead of NGOs directly reduces the money available to NGOs to train and mentor staff.

But Emmens says NGOs also need to shift their mindset. "It is about aversion to risk. If you take someone on and you are not guaranteed funding you may avoid issues around severance and redundancy by not giving them a long-term contract, but this could eventually affect the quality of your work," he said.

Sorcerers and apprentices

To flourish NGOs need skilled, experienced staff who can apply lessons learned from one emergency to another, and who avoid making repeat mistakes, aid workers say.

"Old-timers are essential as they maintain and put into action the value set and culture of the organisation – they are the organisation's conscience and moderate its ethics," Owen pointed out.

"They are also the wise sages who teach the new talent. They are safe havens of reliability and when mixed with new talent, this can be a potent force. Every sorcerer needs an apprentice."

Change

Agencies are starting to take mentoring and staff development more seriously.

Seven of the largest international humanitarian NGOs have formed the [emergency capacity-building project](#) (ECB) to improve organisations' ability to respond to emergencies, including how to retain and develop staff.

Through the project agencies discuss successful mentoring schemes. Catholic Relief Services runs an international development fellowship programme to recruit graduates into country programmes, up to 95 percent of whom go on to take up management posts within the agency.

Save the Children US trains and mentors local staff – who generally stay longer-term – to respond to emergencies by posting them on short-term assignments around the world. Its counterpart Save the Children UK runs a leadership development programme, and training schemes for neglected response areas such as child protection .

"When you grow your own talent you get to mould them in the way you want...they are fearless and ambitious and bring tremendous energy which challenges established norms. This is key to diversifying the institutional DNA," said Owen.

Some donors, among them the UK Department for International Development, Irish Aid and ECHO, are willing to support such schemes, say aid managers.

Meanwhile, several European NGOs are increasingly adopting open-ended contracts with mobility clauses so experts can spread their experience.

The next phase of the ECB project, to be launched in February 2009, will outline in more detail how agencies can identify and nurture their talent, no matter how grim the economic climate.

"It is a tough climate now," Matt Bannerman, project director of the ECB said. "Agencies have to be particularly careful now about how they use resources. But trends in terms of scale and frequency in terms of emergencies make the issue of capacity and working together especially acute."

aj/np

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