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Reaching Out to International Visitors

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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In several recent workshops I've conducted, a similar idea surfaced that merits sharing more widely. It's the availability of foreign nationals (without American work permits) to fill volunteer positions. There are a number of ways such people come to the United States (and this is probably applicable in any country):

1. They are here as full-time students and are not permitted to hold full-time jobs while studying.
2. They are the spouses of people employed by a multi-national company and are on assignment here for six months or longer. The employed spouse is on a work visa, but most often the unemployed spouse is not permitted to work for pay. Older children may also be living here while their parent works.
3. They are *au pairs*--generally young women who provide live-in child care for room, board, and a small stipend and must be enrolled in at least part-time higher education courses. Regulations require them to have time off each week, but they are restricted from other paid employment. Some sponsoring organizations encourage them to do volunteer work as an added cultural exchange opportunity.

In general, these foreign nationals are quite well-educated, with a wide range of skills. The spouses of corporate employees may or may not be fluent in English, though more are than not they are. Such long-term visitors are often lonely and bored, but do not know enough about American culture to seek volunteer work.

These potential volunteers are especially helpful if you serve a client population with possible English-language difficulties. This can include not only your primary clients, but their extended families. For example, could a school or youth program include grandparents in more activities if interpreters were available? Do you work with Alzheimer's patients who have reverted back to their mother tongues (my mom, for example, now speaks almost completely in her native German and--except for me--almost no one in her facility can communicate with her well)? There are undoubtedly many such opportunities to help your community.

Other ways to utilize foreign nationals include inviting them to speak about their country (show slides, play music, etc.) to groups of students, seniors, or whatever clients you have. Or how about becoming one-to-one friends with peers and later continuing with a pen-pal relationship (or, these days, an e-mail relationship)?

The best ways to find this talent pool are:

1. Assess which corporations in your community have foreign branches and may rotate in foreign workers and their families. Contact their personnel/human resources departments and enlist their help in spreading the word.
2. Talk with the Admissions Office of local colleges and universities and find out which organizations on campus reach out to foreign students and which staff offer counseling or other guidance.
3. Identify any local programs for immigrants, as well as organizations promoting "hyphenated" affiliations: the German-American Club, the Japanese-American Association, etc. These groups often sponsor recreational programs for visitors of their cultural heritage.
4. Contact any local foreign language newspapers or newsletters and see if they would be interested in running a story about your volunteer opportunities.
5. Collaborate with any foreign exchange programs, either for students or for diplomatic visitors. Before spreading a recruitment message, take the time to develop volunteer assignments most likely to use these foreign nationals' skills and to pique their interest. Some possible persuaders are:
 - Make new friends and learn first-hand about new areas of American culture.
 - Keep your skills active/alive so that when you return home you'll still be in practice.
 - Learn new skills that will help you get a good job when you return home (and get some references for your resume).
 - Improve your English through practical use.
 - Help others with what you know best: your own language.

For some cultures, it might work best to recruit spouses or students in small groups. This minimizes the risk for the volunteer and provides built-in support and friendship.

By the way, when I was at the Volonteuropa conference last year, I met an American woman who was concerned with this exact issue in reverse. She was trying to get American spouses of employees working overseas to do volunteering in their host country, since they also could not work for pay abroad.

What have been your experiences with any volunteers in these categories? Any tips you'd like to share with others?

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Submitted by Sue Sommerville, Coordinator of Volunteers, Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology, Alberta, Canada

I welcome international volunteers, however there are some procedural issues that must be met. The volunteer from another country must apply for an employment authorization from their country and receive validation from an immigration officer. If the person is to be employed without remuneration authorization and validation must be obtained prior to volunteering in Canada. It is important that organizations are aware of the immigration issues in their country prior to accepting volunteers. As well, screening procedures become challenging when you are dealing with international volunteers. Has anyone else faced these challenges and if so how have you met them?

Submitted by Jan McKenzie, Volunteer Manager, Northwest Medical Teams International, Oregon USA

Our organization sends out volunteer medical, humanitarian, and disaster teams as well as humanitarian aid. We have volunteer opportunities in our warehouse for sorting supplies and equipment. We also have volunteers helping with general support services and on our local Mobile Healthcare Units.

International volunteers, with spouses either in school or on long-term temporary assignments have been valuable additions for us. Some of these volunteers are medically trained nurses in their home country but are not able to practice here. They help us with sorting and identifying medicines and equipment. One nurse even began working on one of our mobile units as a dental assistant and has gone on one of our teams. This experience benefits them as they stay connected to the medical field (and in some cases getting required hours for their certification) until they get back home.

Submitted by John D. Bergeron, Volunteer Program Manager, Glaucoma Research Foundation, California

We have had great luck with people visiting the US without work visas. One volunteer found a listing at the local Volunteer Center, which interested her because she wanted to gain more experience in media relations while her partner was working in the US--her skill level and dedication are great! Another international volunteer was with us full-time for three months building skills in US office environment before returning to Japan. So far, our recruitment has been pure luck--our listings intrigued these volunteers. I'd like to become more deliberate in my recruitment of these volunteers and appreciate Susan's tips. Thanks!

Submitted by Joan Brown, Civic Center Volunteers, San Rafael, Ca

We've had outstanding foreign visiting volunteers (often spouses) in various areas, including a MD who volunteered 20 hours a week for us for 6 months. My experience has been that this is a very sharp pool of volunteers because the spouses are in our areas for high tech jobs. They tend to be well educated and active.

With being on the internet, I have had inquiries from England and other countries from students who expect to be here for the summer and are looking for meaningful volunteer work. Good for you, Susan, for making this a hot topic!

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