

This Seattle-based Organization Proves that Skilled Volunteers Make a Real Impact, at Home and Abroad

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MOVINGWORLDS

MovingWorlds.org

Seattle is a funny city. I'm a native to the area and have no trouble admitting our own little quirks. I've also been incredibly fortunate to travel around the world and be immersed in culture vastly different from our own. The energy on the streets of Buenos Aires and the spiritual connectedness in the Nepalese Himalaya couldn't be more different than the passive rainwalkers during Seattle's cold, dark, and rainy winters. But far beyond the "Seattle Freeze," Seattle is also unique in its focus on global issues. For such a small city with a culture of people becoming more socially withdrawn during our dark winters, we also have a vibrant spirit for looking beyond borders to see how our innovations can be used to better the world.

I believe it's this introspective attention that has led to

many of our global innovations. Take my social enterprise, MovingWorlds. In the past five years there has been a firestorm against “voluntourists” as report after report demonstrates that when people pay to volunteer their skills overseas, they often [create more harm than good](#). *The New York Times* even held a [Room for Debate](#) on this very topic after an [Al Jazeera’s People and Power](#) section uncovered child-trafficking as a result of this practice. This is not only true for volunteering, but really, for much of philanthropy. While many backed away from voluntourism to avoid the bad press, our startup social enterprise leaned into this issue, analyzing every stage of the process: How do you find organizations that actually want volunteers? How do you filter organizations that will truly benefit from hosting volunteers? How do you select volunteers with the right know-how and motivations? How do you ensure that matches turn into productive relationships? How do prepare both parties for these cross-cultural experiences? How do you track impact so you can keep improving the way you match, prepare, and support both parties?

Instead of drawing away from these complex issues, we dove into the practices of our own organization, and the industry at large for one simple reason: Data was clear that a lack of access to human capital – more so than financial capital -- was the leading barrier to progress for emerging market startups and local social impact organizations. This data continues to be reinforced, and

was [re-reported in 2018](#) as being the key to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. As the world was becoming more aware of the need to boost human-capital, we noticed another scary trend -- both impact investment capital and philanthropic capital was becoming more risk-averse and moving away from locally-led organizations to support bigger institutions. For us, this cemented the need to find a way to get skills and expertise to grassroots organization that have the best abilities to create local jobs and solve local challenges.

Five years later, we've emerged as an award-winning social enterprise that helps organizations find top talent by connecting them to an incredible pool of professionals that travel and "experteer" their skills for short-term projects. Our best-practices in finding projects, matching them to expertise, and supporting constructive projects that make a sustainable impact have been published in Devex, NextBillion, SSIR, and more. Along the way, we've been approached by, and engaged with, some of the world's top brands, like Microsoft, eBay, Booking.com, EY, Kering, Siemens Stiftung, and more to help them identify how they can mobilize their human capital to support their corporate social impact goals and better develop their employees. As one example, The MySkills4Afrika program which we co-designed and co-manage with Microsoft just earned a HALO award for best skills-based volunteering program.

One of our proudest accomplishments was a report [we](#)

[published in the Stanford Social Innovation Review](#) this past year sharing our best practices in how to ensure skilled volunteers land with impact.

I believe it's our introspective spirit that led to our innovations in skills-based volunteering, but it's also fueled by something else native to us Seattleites. As much as we withdraw, we also strive for connection with people and nature. Once our winter is over, we flock to social events, the forests, and the mountains to make the most of our limited time under the sun. And every season when we do, it's with a renewed sense of self, and our place in the world. The rhythms in our social impact innovations represent this same rhythm -- withdraw in introspection to improve, and then rush out into the world to connect with the things that matter most.