3 July 2009

Within the few weeks I’ve spent at the American Refugee Committee, I’ve come to realize that the inner workings of an International Non-Governmental Organization are much more detailed than I ever imagined. As thankful as I am to have received this internship, I am oftentimes the person relegated to doing much of the tedious—yet crucial—work that just simply needs to be done. Whether it is data entry, research on a country and its current issues, or typing up an hour-long phone interview for a press release—all of these things are necessary for the organization to run smoothly and effectively.

Throughout the next eight weeks, I will be researching the many aspects of what goes into the actual creation of an INGO, as well as analyzing common mistakes others have made in the process of forming their own organizations. In order to keep the research attainable, I will focus mainly on networking (both here and abroad), fund raising, administration, and marketing of an INGO. I will be using a variety of different sources for my research including interviewing employees at the American Refugee Committee Headquarters as well as other professionals who are knowledgeable about the INGO field (i.e., World Vision, the CARE Foundation, and Development consultants), attending networking events for the Association of Fundraising Professionals and the Midwest International NGO Network (MINN), as well as reading books and articles about fundraising and the development of NGOs.
For the fund raising aspect of starting up an INGO, my research will primarily consist of meeting with Susan Fink, our Major Gifts Advisor weekly. Susan is extremely knowledgeable about the field of fundraising and networking. She keeps in close contact with all of our major donors and is active on almost a daily basis in pursuing possible new donors by attending various events here in the Twin Cities. I will also be interviewing our Director of Development and Public Affairs, Sara Hartman, and will hopefully gain some important insight on the overall picture of how a fundraising department gets started, how it operates and learn of problems that the American Refugee Committee faces in their fundraising pursuits. I am also planning on investigating Professional Fundraising Agencies like Mal Warwick, an organization based out of California that is actually hired by the American Refugee Committee to do some of its fundraising. I also plan to read some literature about fundraising and the different creative ways to go about it. In addition, I hope to be able to investigate how fundraising has had to assimilate in our suffering economy and what effective mechanisms have proven to be successful during this time.

I am excited to learn the skill of networking as well. In the short time I’ve been at the American Refugee Committee I have come to realize that networking is a lot more important than I had originally thought—in fact, even if I don’t ever end up working here, I can count this internship a success just because of the networking possibilities I’m offered here on a daily basis. Even just today I had a man from a different department come over to my cubical and tell me that he knows a few people I can be contacting about possibly getting some experience in clinical psychology work overseas—and that was just because I mentioned to him earlier in the day that I am an International Affairs
and Psychology double major. I plan to learn more about networking by simply attending as many events as I can and by putting myself out there. Last night I attended a meeting for Midwest International NGO Network (MINN) and got a few business cards of some people I’d like to interview for my research this summer. It wasn’t as scary as I thought it was going to be! I will also be talking with our Marketing Director, Chris Kindler, and ask him what he knows about Twitter and other online networking devices (i.e., Facebook and MySpace). I think my most valuable learning experiences in this field, however, will be with my own attempts at networking while researching for this project.

For the administration part of my research, I will be interviewing Beth Schmeig, the American Refugee Committee’s main gift advisor. Beth handles the many invisible details of this organization that most probably have no idea go on. She completes the IRS 990 forms and other official governmental documentation; she is also the expert with our “Raiser’s Edge” software database that records all donations that come in as well as all of the communication we make with our donors. Although this kind of work is extremely tedious in my opinion, it is all vital for the functioning of this organization. Identifying and fully understanding the reality of all these details makes the idea of starting an NGO much less daunting. I will also be studying the SmartGivers.org website that is part of the Charities Review Council. This website offers a kind of “checklist” called the Accountability Wizard for a nonprofit organization to go through to ensure it is in-check legally, essentially so that the public and the state is assured the organization isn’t taking donations and using them for the wrong reasons and that the decision-making process of the Board of Directors is democratic and just. This site is helpful because it describes
each of the official documents an organization like the American Refugee Committee has
to have.

I have already set up three different interviews that will take place next week and
I have my tape recorder ready to go! I am very excited about learning even more about
this organization -- and in the process learn about how an organization like this gets
started. I have listened to some interviews that our journalist has had with our founder
and with one of the first volunteers for the American Refugee Committee. From these
interviews, I can see that the task at creating a vessel through which change can be made
isn’t as daunting and intense as most would assume. Neal Ball, the founder of the
American Refugee Committee, said in his interview that he simply “saw a need and
responded to it.” In my travels to Central America and Sub-Saharan Africa, I too saw
many needs but had no skills or resources with which to address them appropriately. It
gives me great comfort to know that starting an organization like this one isn’t
impossible, and with following the correct, efficient steps and getting connected with the
right people and resources, I too could possibly follow in the footsteps of Neal Ball and
contribute to making some change in this world. My goal is not to be idealistic or overly-
optimistic, but to be the opposite: realistic and lucid, and to better understand all the
different steps that go into the formation of such an effective INGO like the American
Refugee Committee.
Working Bibliography


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