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Good Intentions: IT volunteers gain new skills and experience but rarely score a new job.

By Melissa Solomon

When Catherine Bohill and her fiancé, Jason Long, volunteered to work in Cuba for a year, they weren't shooting for typical IT work -- and they didn't get it. What they got to do, including buying computers for Cuban orphanages and managing sonar on a ship scouring the Caribbean for buried Spanish colonial era treasure was a far cry from the IT jobs they left at Nortel Networks Ltd. and DaimlerChrysler AG in Germany. "What's the point of slaving away day after day when you have another wish in the back of your mind?" asks Bohill.

For most IT workers who share that sentiment, the idea of taking a hiatus from office life to go off and do something like build a database for a homeless shelter would be just a far-off dream. But as more of those workers find themselves jobless in an unrelenting market, some are living out such dreams to keep active and, possibly, to boost resumes or score some contacts that could lead to jobs.

Those who have ventured to and from the nonprofit world say the experience is worthwhile in terms of personal growth as well as IT skills development. But it's not necessarily the way to go about securing a new corporate IT job, especially in a tough market. "I was looking to do good, but I was also looking to do good for myself," says Mark Santino, 48, who was laid off from the New York office of London-based smart-card firm Mondex International Ltd. He updated his resume to include his volunteer work building a large-scale technology plan at New York Cares Inc., which provides temporary volunteers for nonprofit projects throughout the city. But, he says, "I've not really gotten anything out of it in terms of a job or a new client."

After their year in Cuba, Bohill, 29, and Long, 33, were fortunate enough to land jobs within a few weeks after arriving at their latest destination: Spain. Both are working at wireless firms in Madrid. Bohill says that likely had more to do with their overall corporate IT work experience than their philanthropic work in Cuba.

Linda Hodges, executive vice president at Hersher Associates Ltd., an IT recruiting firm in Northbrook, Ill., says she wouldn't recommend volunteer work to job-seekers because it can distract them from the very complex process of finding work, especially in this market. "Finding a job is a full-time job," she says. "Go for it 100%, rather than diluting your efforts on other pursuits."

Volunteer work might not produce returns as tangible as a new job. But it can help strengthen one's long-term IT career by building technical and project-management skills, as well as by recharging workers who have grown disillusioned with the climate and pace of corporate life.

As a consultant at Accenture Ltd.'s New York office, **Dayna Graham** worked on teams to help IT departments in finance companies with business-process design plans. Last year, Accenture offered workers partially paid, temporary sabbaticals to try to avoid company wide layoffs and suggested the option of volunteering at NPower NY, a nonprofit organization that provides technology assistance to other nonprofit groups in the city. Graham jumped at the chance. While at Accenture, Graham says she worked on projects run by people with more experience. During her year-long stint at NPower, which ends in August, Graham has been able to lead entire projects. She's now running NPower's training department for employees of nonprofit groups. Graham arranges the logistics of the program develops curricula and teaches courses on everything from Microsoft Office to Web site design. "I've increased my technology skills tenfold," she says. There's also less pressure to meet tight deadlines and achieve perfection because projects aren't as complex and expectations aren't as demanding as they are with multimillion-dollar corporate projects, adds **Farhana Ahmed**, another Accenture consultant who did a four-month stint at NPower, where she learned Web development while creating an online database of Sept. 11 corporate donors.

Santino says just making new acquaintances at New York Cares has helped him come out of his shell. "Being a technician, I just wanted to do what I wanted to do and be left alone," he says. "It's been nice to turn that around." Volunteer work also teaches creative problem-solving because workers must make do with limited resources, says Grace Kong, who manages New York Cares' technology programs.

For Bohill, being in Cuba was an experience of a lifetime, but she says she's happy to be back in the corporate world. "I very much enjoy my work now and appreciate having a mobile phone again and a laptop," she says.