

New Grads Can Make Community Service Jobs the First Step in Their Career

By John Rossheim, Monster Senior Contributing Writer

Community-service programs skewed toward recent-grad volunteers are certainly gaining in popularity. For example, online applications to AmeriCorps more than tripled for the period November 2008 to June 2009 compared to a year earlier, according to the federal government program.

But for college grads facing the most brutal job market in decades, is devoting a year or two to the greater good -- and putting off any serious earning -- a wise career move?

It can be, if the volunteer is willing to assert self-interest when choosing a program and performing the service, and then effectively presents the experience to prospective employers once the service is done. About 80 percent of service alumni report the experience helped them learn about new career options, according to a 2008 study by AmeriCorps.

Opportunities for a term of pro bono or low-paying service are diverse, from the PeaceCorps and AmeriCorps to organizations devoted to aiding Katrina victims or making microloans to small businesses in third-world countries. How can volunteer service in one of these programs help launch a career? Let's lay the groundwork.

Choose a Service Program That Will Serve Your Career, Too

First, you need to think about what you want your community-service stint to do for you.

Branching out through community service can help you decide what you want to do in your career. "Service can help people define their goals," says Siobhan Dugan, a spokeswoman for AmeriCorps.

Working in a nonprofit environment can also give you experience in specific business disciplines, like financial management. "Typically you do budgeting and have to account for every penny you spend, and it's not a lot of money," says Dugan.

You can also launch a career by acquiring subject matter skills and first applying them in a charitable setting. "LEED accreditation can position you to work with Habitat for Humanity on sustainability, for example," says Avi Yashchin, CEO of CleanEdison, a green building consultancy and education provider.

For some business disciplines, you may be better off going large. "If you want to do marketing, for example, it's probably easier to do that in one of the larger nonprofit organizations," says Rick Smith, author of *The Leap: How 3 Simple Changes Can Propel Your Career From Good to Great*.

On the other hand, "you can be more demanding at nonprofits than in heavily formatted programs like AmeriCorps," says Smith.

Still, others say you'll get maximum benefit from your year or two of service if you really stretch yourself. "The secret when you pick a program is going against your instinct," says Seth Godin, a marketing guru, former Monster contributor and author who markets himself as a contrarian. "Your instinct will be to work for the biggest organization, where they'll tell you what to do. But to get real experience, look for the most shoestring organization you can find, and change everything."

While Serving, Consider How Your Accomplishments Will Transfer

As soon as you hit the ground in your community service role, start thinking about which activities will further your career.

In many nonprofit situations, there are a wealth of opportunities relevant to your future. “As an AmeriCorps member, you’re always working in organizations that are short-staffed or small,” says Dugan. “So you get a wide variety of experiences and opportunities to develop management and leadership skills.”

Remember to build your professional portfolio as you perform service. “If you wait to market yourself until you’ve finished the program, it’s too late,” says Godin. “Start by blogging your experience every day, so people from the outside can see what you’re doing.”

Market Yourself After Your Service

Some college grads worry that doing community service for a time may raise questions about their interest in corporate careers to prospective employers.

However, more than two-thirds of AmeriCorps alumni said that prospective employers considered their service a plus. “People who do community service come out of the experience confident and aware of the skills that they have,” says Dugan.

Be bold about describing how your stint in service has endowed you with experience that few candidates can claim within two years of graduation. “When you come out of your community service, talk about how you worked with teams, dealt with stress and so on,” says Smith.