



10th

Emerging World,
provider of
international
development
experiences, inclusive
business strategies and
corporate volunteering
programmes,
celebrated its 10th
anniversary in 2014

Matthew Farmer sheds new insights on how skills-based volunteering overseas can help build tomorrow's global leaders

Building leaders through international development

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Tell me and I will forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I will learn

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

Benjamin Franklin's words have never resonated more truthfully.

The growth of experiential learning and frameworks such as 70:20:10 are formalising the way that learning and development (L&D) departments think about how employees learn and how to structure their learning interventions and processes. However, when it comes to global leadership development, what kinds of experiences are most relevant?

In the past, rotational assignments were used but many companies are phasing these out due to their expense and high risk of failure. So what kinds of experiences are relevant to build the capabilities of employees to tackle the global volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity of tomorrow? Enter Corporate International Service Learning (CISL).

CISL involves initiatives in which employees of corporations travel internationally to use their business skills in the service of third-party organisations, usually addressing a social need in some form or another, and learn as an outcome.

It was coined to encapsulate two kinds of experiences offered by companies – those driven by CSR/Corporate Citizenship as a structured form of corporate volunteering and those offered by L&D functions as a way of stretching and challenging leaders.

Over time, more companies have embraced these kinds of programmes. Early movers in the late 1990s included Zurich Financial Services, Accenture and PwC, sometimes supported by a facilitating NGO such as VSO.

Case studies of these programmes and the companies that initiated them highlight the quality of interventions and their innovative nature. After all, they were a good story to tell – executives out in developing countries helping people, lots of interesting pictures, the potential of doing good/saving lives – it all looks fantastic.

However, as more companies have got on board such as IBM with its Corporate Service Corps programme, which sends hundreds of people each year on CISL assignments, or Microsoft's Front Lines programme in which experienced senior leaders in the organisation work with strategic partners using action learning, the stakes have increased.

It has become more important to understand in greater detail what impact the programmes have on participants. What empirical data is there? And while the inspiration and immediate impact of these programmes seems intuitive, what about the long-term impact?

These are questions that we have been asking for some time at our company Emerging World, which operates in this field, and we decided to use the celebration of our 10th anniversary in 2014 to look for the answers. The findings were compelling.

The impact of CISL programmes is multi-dimensional. They have an impact on the projects, people and organisations operating in the developing/emerging world as well as an impact on the participants in the programmes and the organisations that employ them.

Within our research, we were initially most interested in the impact on participants, as companies need to show the ROI of these programmes if they are to continue to invest in them.

We were mindful that there is little existing data on the longer-term impact of these experiences and almost none from a cross-company perspective. Most of the published research has tended to take a case study approach.

Therefore, we undertook an empirical study into the impact of programmes on participants over the longer term. It provides fascinating insights into the power of these experiences and their value to corporations.

One of the challenges of undertaking cross-company empirical research in this area is the need to ask participants of programmes from different companies the same questions with regard to their impact. Companies tend to assess the impact of their programmes using sets of questions tailored to their own outcomes.

However, having worked with many different companies on these kinds of programmes previously, we were in a unique position to be able to launch a cross-company study. We had also kept in touch with a range of participants enabling us to reach alumni who had changed employers since taking part in programmes. In our first phase, we were able to collect data from 65 participants in eight different CISL programmes offered by six separate organisations.

The results can be summarised into three different areas; all of which are key outcome areas that companies look for in these programmes:

- the impact on participants' leadership capabilities
- the impact on career mobility
- the impact on employee engagement

In terms of leadership skills, the research shows how strong the learning is and how relevant to the future are the competences and behaviours that these experiences develop.

Respondents had completed a CISL experience (ranging from one to 12 weeks) at least 12 months prior to participating in the research (and in some cases up to eight years previously). Therefore, unlike other studies, we were able to understand what participants have been able to apply to their work and lives on return.

We used Kirkpatrick's levels of learning framework to consider the results, as this was the most popular framework among companies. Ninety-eight per cent of respondents had recommended their programme to at least one other person, which is a very powerful indicator of a positive reaction (Level 1 on Kirkpatrick's scale). But our questioning also revealed that 92% of respondents felt that their experience had made a positive difference to their leadership skills and competencies (Level 2).

Questions designed to elicit data at Level 3 confirmed that 79% of participants had made positive changes to the way they worked as a result of the experience while 62% said that these changes had been observed (and reported on) by others.

Unlike studies that capture more immediate responses where the enthusiasm of the experience is still fresh, this data shows what participants have actually been able to achieve and apply over time.



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Other data shows how the experiences affect 12 different global competencies and behaviours required by leaders to be effective in a global context.

These range from important qualities such as self-awareness, self-confidence and the ability to deal with ambiguity through to behaviours such as working with culturally diverse groups and teams and initiating new ways of doing things. These competencies have been identified by leading researchers in this area as important global competencies required to succeed in the future.

An interesting nuance is how the level of stretch (or the degree to which you are out of your comfort zone) affects learning – something that has intrigued us for many years. We were able to start to see patterns that indicated that more stretching assignments were stronger at building self-confidence and self-awareness and at developing competencies such as the ability to deal with complexity.

We could also see the differences between shorter and longer experiences and between group and individual assignments.

Companies interested in offering these programmes are often curious about how the experiences impact career mobility and retention. Our intuition was that these frequently visceral experiences, which bring colliding perspectives into play create significant disruption in individuals' usual thought patterns, which drives changes and can cause them to seek new challenges and experiences.

The data showed that 65% of respondents indicated that their CISL experience had been a factor in changing roles after their assignments but there was very little evidence to support that these experiences led to increased overall attrition. Indeed, the effects on employee engagement were very positive – although, interestingly, stronger for shorter (less than four weeks in the field) than longer experiences.

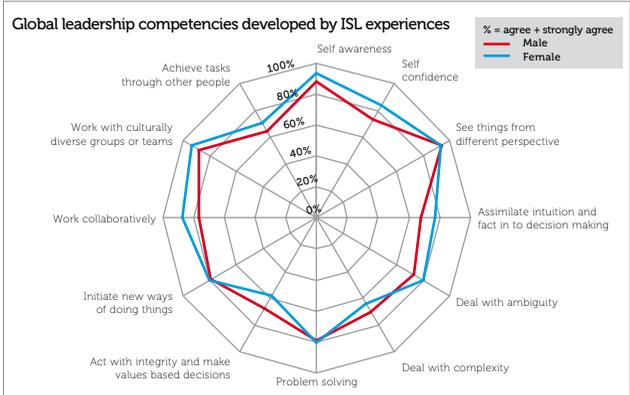
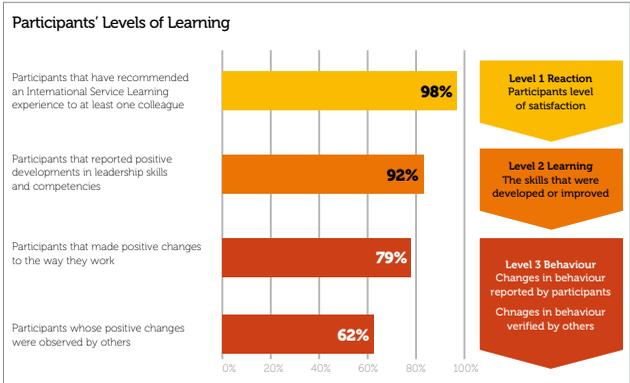
These data-driven insights have led to us to undertaking a wider study in which we have had over 300 responses from CISL programme alumni from five companies – BD, Credit Suisse EY, GSK and Microsoft.



PHOTOGRAPH ABOVE & BELOW COURTESY: Jeff Kay, Microsoft ©



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The study, launched in October 2015, provides additional weight of responses and creates a benchmark that will not only enable other companies to measure the impact they are having with their programmes in this growing field but also a framework for how they can improve them.

The study also identifies the variables that have most impact on participants' learning and engagement. You can find out more about the findings during a special webinar scheduled for November 12th at 16.30 (CET).

Many practitioners will recognise that international development for executives needs to be relevant, viscerally impactful, immediate and preferably actively endorsed by the CEO in order to get serious attention and achieve business results.

In this globally integrated and uncertain world, leaders also need externally focused experiences that help them to understand different cultures and operate effectively within them.

CISL programmes tick all of these boxes and CEOs should enjoy championing such inspirational work - and now we have the data to demonstrate their business impact.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew Farmer is founder and managing director of Emerging World, a provider of international development experiences, inclusive business strategies and corporate volunteering programmes.