

2003 HIPNET IT Conference

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Geekcorps History

- ❖ Founded in 2000 as a PVO focused on technology transfer to developing nations using expert volunteers
- ❖ Founders were tech experts with a lot to learn about international development. Initial funding was from private donors, mostly dot.com
- ❖ Joined forces with IESC in 2001, in part to leverage experience in working with USAID. Operate as an independent division, leveraging HQ for accounting, compliance, but doing our own program design, recruitment
- ❖ Major sponsor is USAID, continued strong support from private sector.



What do the geeks do?

3-6 month projects, working as part of a company in a developing nation to help them complete a project. In the process, train counterparts in cutting-edge IT and business techniques.

Dan DiNicolo – IDN: Unix expert, deployed to IDN, wireless ISP in Ghana. Original assignment: help staff learn Cisco routers, get certifications. Ultimately helped IDN design and build their own wireless router/firewall/email gateway which they build and sell locally.

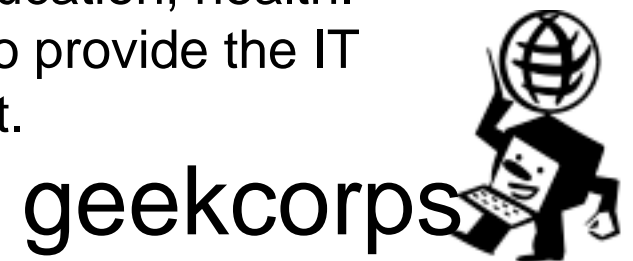
David Smith – Alphasoft: DBA, assisted Alphasoft to design the database used to manage the GACACA genocide mediation process in Rwanda. Kigali-based firm designed, built and will maintain the system that will allow the Rwandan Department of Justice to settle over 100,000 outstanding criminal cases resulting from the Hutu/Tutsi genocide.



New directions for Geekcorps

Increasingly asked to advise governments on IT policy – ISP licensing, telecoms privatization, VOIP. **Andrew McLaughlin** – former chief policy officer for ICANN – in Mongolia, advising deputy minister of Information. Dialogues between government and private sector partners. Shorter volunteer terms, need for volunteers with deep policy experience.

Increased focus on partnership – Early work in International Digital Divide assumed that problems were pure IT problems – connectivity, skills gaps, etc. Increasing realization that the interesting IT problems are within other development fields: government, education, health. Consequent need to partner with innovative NGOs to provide the IT component of a project, rather than the entire project.



Our philosophy

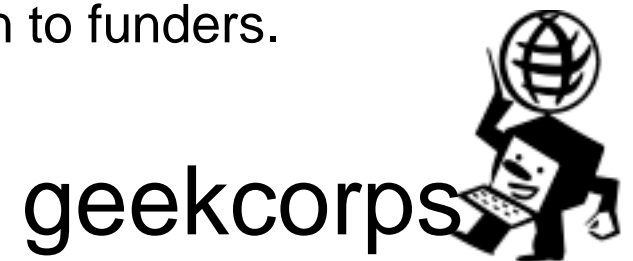
Skills-based volunteering – Assignments are designed to use the full skillset of the volunteer. No projects solely to train basic skills.

Exclusivity – Extremely selective and competitive. No “right” to volunteer, turn away many potential volunteers.

More than project completion – Obviously, we want to complete projects, but we consider skills transfer more important.

No poison pills – Every project involves a local entity capable of maintaining and extending any project we work on.

Consultants in disguise – We look like a consulting firm to client, a Peace Corps alternative to volunteers, and a bargain to funders.



Digital Independence

Our goal: *Every nation should be capable of fulfilling its own digital needs.*

Why?

- Prevents creation of software that can't be locally maintained, forcing dependence on outside contractors.
- Allows nations to conserve critical hard currency resources
- Raises the local skillbase, allowing new avenues for economic development, potential for original, indigenous products
- Creates better-designed, more culturally appropriate software

How?

- Support local IT businesses, encourage them to increase quality
- Focus on creation of "ecosystems" of specialist businesses that can cooperate on complex projects
- View every project as having a dual bottom line

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opportunity for learning as well as for completing a project

What's been easy...

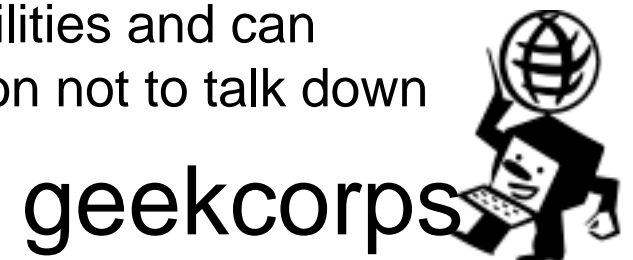
Recruitment

- ❖ 1700+ volunteers in the database
- ❖ Wide skills range: soft skills (project management, sales and marketing) through hard skills (networking, packet radio, telephony, software dev)
- ❖ Wide language range – importance of recruiting internationally

How?

Know where to fish – Near zero recruitment budget. Only money we've spent has been on attending trade shows. Emphasis on PR, especially in technical magazines, journals. Postings on message boards. Leveraging LUGS and other user groups

Talk the talk – Our recruitment director is a former technical journalist – good understanding of technical needs and capabilities and can communicate with geeks on their own terms. Decision not to talk down to geeks throughout our PR and marketing.



Still pretty easy...

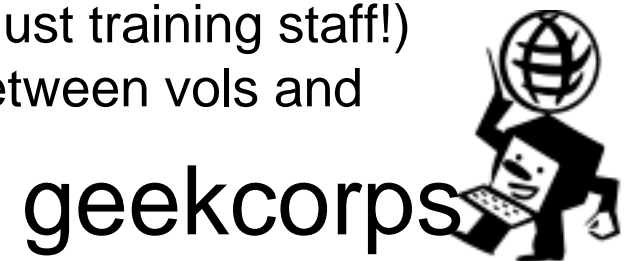
Training

- ❖ Geeks in Mongolia, Ghana participate in week-long, structured training focused on intercultural communication, business customs, “survival skills”. Language training in Mongolia extends throughout the tour.
- ❖ Solo geeks are trained by overlapping geeks in the field, virtually by staff and by third-party trainers in the field.

What we've learned:

Don't reinvent the wheel – We've found a wealth of training resources in every country we've worked in. Peace Corps has been an invaluable resource and, when we can, we ruthlessly repurpose their materials.

Involve staff in training – We often send staff (not just training staff!) into the field to run training. It builds strong bonds between vols and staff and is a great incentive for staff.



Less easy...

Field Support – Three models

- ❖ **Geekcorps country office** – In Ghana and Mongolia, we have a dedicated CD and staff. Great for vols, tough hire and tougher job.
- ❖ **IESC field office** – In Armenia, Jordan and Rwanda, we use an IESC field office and designate a team member the Geekcorps lead. Communications and expectation issues.
- ❖ **No field office** – Requires a certain type of geek and lots of virtual assistance, as well as advance knowledge of the country.

What we've learned:

Good ground staff is key – Pretty obvious, but worth mentioning. Very, very hard to find someone who knows vols, tech and local culture – you'll end up compromising on one or more fronts. We compromise on tech.

Ruthlessly leverage partners – Use beneficiaries to find/provide housing. Other ground partners are your best lead for offices, translators, etc.



It's easier to send an expensive vol than a cheap vol.

Decidedly not easy...

Project identification and scopes of work

A bad scope of work = a bad project

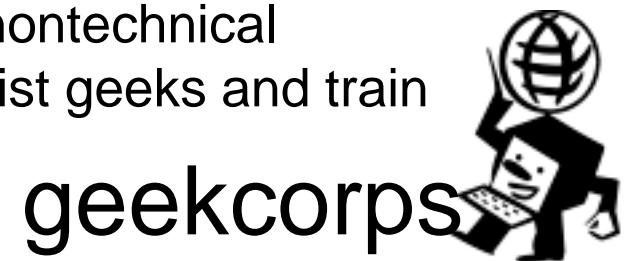
No scope of work = no project

Writing good scopes of work has been the hardest thing for us to learn.

- ❖ Must be achievable
- ❖ Must have buy in from volunteer and partner
- ❖ Must be revisited throughout the process
- ❖ Must be written by a technically knowledgeable person

Übergeek model – Use experienced geeks to define projects for the next generation of geeks to execute.

Overlap model – Send a generalist geek to help a nontechnical organization define needs. Create SOWs for specialist geeks and train them once they're deployed.



Downright hard...

Matching geeks to Scopes of Work

We've built a reputation on deploying the right geek to the right project – that means finding a French-speaking DBA with experience porting from mSQL on WinNT to Oracle on BSD if necessary... which means you need to know what all those tech words mean if you're going to match vols!

Recruiter needs tech expertise, persuasion, skill at judging character. Importance of identifying vol independence – helps no one to get a volunteer in over their heads... Need to be able to push back on scopes of work and renegotiate.

Growing concern – how do we match geeks to projects that require both IT experience and sectoral experience – i.e., health experience?



The need for cool projects

“Cool” = well-defined, achievable, philosophically consistent efforts to create innovative, new products with more than one application.

“Cool” " successful. Lots of projects are successful without being cool.

Maximizing cool

Geekcorps as part of an implementing team, not sole implementer: beneficiaries, NGOs, local software developers need to work with Geekcorps for a project to be successful.

Dual impact – creation of new technologies for development, strengthening of local tech firms who can build, expand and support these systems.

Need partners who can identify projects – What are the key information problems within development problems? **We don't know what the cool applications are. Neither do you. Together, we can find them.**





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Ethan Zuckerman

www.geekcorps.org

ethan@geekcorps.org