

Careers in development: an interview with Jo Spratt on careers in the NZ development sector, public health, nursing and consulting



by Jo Spratt and Jonathan Pryke

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Jonathan: *Could you please just run us through what you're currently doing and a bit about your background?*

Jo: I volunteer for New Zealand Aid and Development Dialogues, which takes up a lot of my time writing and researching New Zealand aid. I also work as a nurse part-time and then I do bits and pieces of consultancy work, mostly in the Pacific. I'm also about to start a PhD, looking at NZ aid policy.

I began my working life as a nurse, working in that sector for about ten years, and at the same time doing the usual Kiwi overseas experience. I lived in England for a while and travelled quite a lot through South America, the Middle East and Africa. Travel gave me an appreciation of development issues and of the inequalities that exist across the world.

Then I got back to New Zealand and was just a bit bored with nursing and decided to go back and study at Victoria University of Wellington, and ended up doing a degree in Political Science. After studying some public health papers at the Otago School of Medicine I sort of fell into a Masters of Development Studies back at Victoria Uni, which really got me to where I am now. After my Masters someone at [Family Planning International](#) was going on maternity leave so I got a six month job there and it all just went from there.

After spending almost two years working managing the Pacific programme the

Director of that unit left, and I applied and got the job and I was in that role for about five years I think.

It was an amazing job because it was a very small unit – it had four or five staff at its maximum – but it was a wonderful mix of projects and advocacy, which was awesome. So I got to go to the United Nations and work on negotiating documents there, and then at the other end of the spectrum I also got to go and scope projects in small Pacific Island Countries like Kiribati. So I got to experience aid and development work across the broad spectrum of international and regional advocacy, to project management, to shaping the direction of the unit. I was very lucky.

Jonathan: *Did you find your nursing background was helpful when you got into these development careers?*

Jo: Definitely. I think having that kind of technical background can be helpful. It certainly helps in other people's eyes, particularly potential employer's eyes, by making them think *oh gosh, she's a nurse. She's got a technical health background.* My public health stuff really helped as well, giving me the ability to analyse problems through a public health lens, which complements my development lens nicely.

Jonathan: *What are the options available to those with health skills, like being a nurse or doctor?*

Jo: I've never really pursued working in a health professional role overseas, but they sometimes require a particular set of skills, and ones which I've never had, such as in quite specialist areas, such as intensive care, theatres or emergency, , sexual and reproductive health, or public health nursing – immunisations, nutrition and the likes. But if you were a nurse, doctor or health professional wanting to work overseas then my advice would be to think about what sort of area you'd like to work in, and then develop skills in that area. For example, you could specialise in midwifery, primary healthcare or the more intensivist end of the skill spectrum. These days, with the global burden of health shifting, experience in diabetes, disability, cancer and mental health is becoming increasingly useful. So there are more opportunities for physios and occupational therapists. Overall, I'd advise perseverance and getting involved with organisations as a volunteer, if possible. All sorts of opportunities crop-up if you're willing to find them and take them.

If you don't have any Development Studies or community development background then these days, I think you will find it more difficult to break into a career in development with your technical skills alone, unless you work as a health professional for MSF or the likes. When I've recruited for staff, I short-list people

with both experience and a development qualification over others, and there is no shortage of them.

Jonathan: *New Zealand is a very different story from Australia. It's a much smaller industry with a much smaller pool. Is it as difficult to get into development in NZ as it is in Australia?*

Jo: It's really difficult. A lot of people who come through the Masters struggle to find jobs in development. Quite a few do, but after several years and several goes at trying different avenues. I think of the people we studied with, maybe half of them, have gone back to domestic jobs and the other half have gone on to get jobs in development. Perseverance and trying different avenues is essential.

Jonathan: *What are the best avenues for a New Zealander trying to break into a career in development?*

Jo: The best way would be volunteering at an agency because there is such a small formal employment market. Also everybody seems to do their Masters these days and I guess there really aren't that many people who get into the sector without doing Masters or substantial work experience overseas.

So volunteering locally for an agency I'd put number one. Number two would be if you went offshore and volunteered somewhere and then came back. And then possibly supplement this with further study.

Jonathan: *Do agencies in NZ advertise these volunteering opportunities or do you have to cold call and really pursue it?*

Jo: Definitely cold call. Some of them advertise for interns, but not many. As Director of Family Planning International I probably had at least one or two interns a year just from people calling and asking me. We always needed people. I would always try and make it a sort of a win, win so we would all get something out of it.

Jonathan: *I imagine you don't need to put out there that you need interns because you get so many people looking.*

Jo: That's right. And people need to be willing to try anything too. You can't think *No, I can only do this* since, particularly in small agencies, you need to do a range of different things. At Family Planning my job ranged from research to events to advocacy and fundraising. So there is a whole spectrum of stuff you are expected to do, and need to be willing to do, including the photocopying.

Jonathan: *You're now also engaged in some consultancy work, which is a big part of the development sector. How does one become a consultant in development?*

Jo: For me that's been quite easy because sexual and reproductive health in the Pacific is only a small group of people that have experience or knowledge in that area. So it's been easy for me because I'm known through my previous work with Family Planning, and also my work for the [International Planned Parenthood Federation](#), meaning I've never really had to go asking for work or looking for work. It kind of comes to you and people seem to stop and say *this might interest you* or people recommend you to other people.

Getting to know the network of the area you want to work in would be the best approach and if you were coming in cold it's important to just let people know that you're available and willing to work. It's important to find more experienced people that are prepared to support you if you're just entering the field.

But for me it has been easy, and since I am not looking for full-time consultancy work the pressure to find a job hasn't been that great. But if I had to give one piece of advice, networking is crucial.

Jonathan: *In New Zealand where do you go to network?*

Jo: What kind of avenues? Actually in New Zealand the umbrella organisation CID ([Council for International Development](#)) would be a good place to start. They are the same as [ACFID](#) here. And they've just opened-up to let 'supporters' join – before they only let NGOs be members. If you're an individual it's kind of difficult to tap into the network, but again I would recommend door knocking. And if you can just volunteer for an organisation and that organisation belongs to CID then you get entry to all those different kinds of activities and opportunities. The other way would be to hook into the universities, like attending talks and the likes, or doing a paper.

But cold calling shows initiative, it shows that you're committed and also that you're getting out there and are ready to learn about a whole bunch of different organisations. And by researching those various organisations you learn more about the industry, which is beneficial for you too.

Also, every two years there is a [DevNet Conference](#), which is definitely something you should go to if you're trying to get into the scene.

Jonathan: *Do you have any final bits of advice you'd like to give to wrap up?*

Jo: I think we've hit on the main ones. Perseverance, door knocking, networking. Showing a mixture of being proactive and engaged. Also, don't ever turn up somewhere and don't know anything about the organisation. That's not a good look from a prospective employer's perspective.

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This is a part of our blog series 'Careers in Development'. The rest of the series can be found [here](#).

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Link:

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