

Careers in development: an interview with Amanda Jupp on private contractors, AYAD and MSF

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In this interview, the second in a series exploring careers in development from the perspective of various development professionals, I sit down with Amanda Jupp, a project manager at [Coffey International Development](#), who for the past five years has worked with the [Enterprise Challenge Fund](#) (ECF), an AusAID funded project.

Jonathan: *What is Coffey?*

Amanda: Coffey International Development is a private contractor that manages aid programs on behalf of donors. We are part of Coffey International Limited.

We bid for projects that major donors, such as AusAID, put to tender. If we are awarded the contract we manage everything in the implementation. We need to recruit the right people for each role to ensure successful project delivery and also put the right monitoring and evaluation measures in place.

We manage the project and add value to it through the resources and management systems we have.

Jonathan: *Could you run-through your background and why you joined Coffey?*

Amanda: My background is actually in IT and accountancy, so it's a completely non-traditional development field.

After university I worked for KPMG in Canberra with government clients. I wanted a bit of a change so I worked in Kenya for three months on a volunteer program through [World Youth International](#), and I enjoyed it a lot. It was really grassroots, teaching in schools and working with street kids. I was there in 2003 when there were still a lot of under-developed areas in western Kenya. I did that really just to make sure that I could actually work and live overseas.

After that I applied for a placement with the [Australian Youth Ambassador's for Development program](#) (AYAD) and spent 12 months in Vanuatu working in a micro-finance institute that was in the process of commercialising. So my background, in terms of accounting and IT, was really useful as they were updating their systems.

While I was in Vanuatu I was also studying international development through the University of Melbourne Private, which has now closed down. The course was good because I could do it online but I found that often there weren't a lot of answers, and it seemed hard to find a way forward in development.

Jonathan: *On the AYAD program, it's such a huge advantage for people in Australia trying to get into development. What advice would you give to others who are thinking of applying?*

Amanda: The best advice given to me was to treat it like an assignment. Ask yourself how you would actually do it and write that in the application. It will give the employer the sense that you have thought it through. It's not about putting yourself forward as a nice person that wants to come and help, it's about explaining exactly what you would do in that role and how you would add value to the organisation.

You also need to know that when you get there that you are going to enjoy it, and that you can adapt to the context. Having prior experience in a developing country is really important. Something with World Youth International or [Youth Challenge](#) can be really good.

Jonathan: *And when you got back from your AYAD?*

Amanda: I decided to continue looking for work and took a position with [Médecins sans Frontières](#) because they were an organisation that was talked about in my international development degree as having a clear impact and a clear mandate, so I knew I would be contributing to something.

Jonathan: *Could you elaborate on what you can do as a non-health professional in that type of organisation?*

Amanda: In every mission there are those with non-medical skills, and almost all missions are structured in the same way. You have a head of mission, a medical director, an administrator and a logistics coordinator that support the medical programs.

So there's not as many non-medical as there are medical positions, but they are really critical roles. The logistics coordinator is a role many people are interested in because it draws on a broad skillset. They manage everything from transport and security, housing and maintenance, to the guard central, depot maintenance, depot registration, movements, radios and communications. Managing teams and being able to technically run a mission is important to that role.

There are a lot of logistics courses you can do, particularly in Europe. There are some really well known courses in dealing with logistics on the ground during humanitarian emergencies. In Australia, the equivalent would be the [RedR](#) courses.

In terms of administrative roles, it is administration finance and administration HR. Importantly, organisations aren't always looking for people with the most highly technical skills, rather those that can cope in tough situations. Being able to prove that is really important.

Jonathan: *And are the application rounds done through MSF or through a central website?*

Amanda: Through MSF, and they have a really good HR team. MSF Australia will do all their recruitment here. Most often people are put on a standby list that can send them to any number of missions around the world. Because MSF is so reactionary, a position might come up straight away or it might take months.

So it's a bit trickier than a normal posting because you're not given a lot of notice. I was given four days'. It was lucky I had finished my AYAD and was at home when MSF said "we need someone for 12 months in Malawi, can you do it?" You have to be ready to say yes at any time.

Jonathan: *And what was your role in MSF?*

Amanda: Administration. I managed all the paperwork for the mission—everything from HR contracts to the finances, paying staff, contracts with houses, supplies.

Jonathan: *And where was that based?*

Amanda: MSF has five operation centers. The one I work with is based in Paris. They also have a Sydney office, which does recruiting, fundraising, advocacy and communications in Australia, and they have a medical team of paediatricians, obstetricians/gynaecologists and midwives which provide support to field teams managing women's health and paediatrics. But in terms of the management of operations, they are all overseas.

Jonathan: *It seems you have benefited a lot from your undergraduate accounting and IT skills, would you recommend potential development careerists to pursue vocational skills?*

Amanda: It is really hard to say. When you get out into the field, there has to be something that you're there for—to add value to a program or to a position, whether it's as a volunteer, in an NGO or private company.

My background in business, administration and management goes across all those sectors. So it's a really good foundation to move around with.

I guess more broadly it's a bit harder when you talk about going and working on the ground. Even if you have the technical skills, you can struggle with the soft skills needed to manage very diverse situations, especially if you go with an approach that's strictly by the book and of a developed world standard.

Jonathan: *The approach won't match up with the realities on the ground.*

Amanda: Exactly. When you get into the field, members of the local staff in the mission or in the organisation have usually been there for 10 years or so. If you're coming in saying, "I just studied this and this is the latest accounting technique", it's not really going to help. It's about getting there, understanding the situation and then bringing in your experience to match it.

Jonathan: *What type of people do you find working at Coffey?*

Amanda: We have a really diverse team. There are a number of entry level positions, and paths into development roles. This would be similar to any of the other managing contractors.

Entry level positions generally support project managers who manage the contracts. They would be exposed to all the administrative skills and financial management contracting, human resource recruitment of people, etc. So that's really the base level training. These people can then progress to project manager roles that take those skills and apply them to projects and start managing them more independently.

There's also a team of people who primarily work with tenders so they do a lot of background research into what business opportunities are coming up, such as identifying upcoming tenders from AusAID, multilaterals or the World Bank where we have core experience. And then when the tender is released, they support the whole bidding process by deciding who the right people are for the roles, what experience we can demonstrate, what resources we need. They manage the whole process right up until the tender and the interview with the donor. This is another entry point for people.

We also employ people in operational areas such as finance, administration or even design and through osmosis they start understanding the industry more broadly and may move to more development-focused roles.

Jonathan: *From your career to date, what are some of the major lessons you've learnt?*

Amanda: Certainly having that technical background or having something to bring into an organisation or a

volunteer position is important. You can't just treat volunteering as a holiday.

You should also take every opportunity to learn what you can from the people that you work with.

Another thing is making sure that you spend time in developing countries to really understand what you are getting yourself into. I think that's one of the biggest dilemmas people that face: whether they can cope in a developing country. There are all these aspects of the experience that you're confronted with: security, hygiene, access to familiar foods. In the three months I was in Kenya, we worked with 18 people, 17 girls and one boy. By the end there were only six of us left!

Knowing how you'll cope in situations is incredibly important. A lot of people come to Coffey wanting to get out into development, which is great, it's a good aspiration, but if you haven't tested yourself against those simple things then it's not the role for you yet. You need to get out there and take up an opportunity in the developing world. Having a protracted experience overseas is really key.

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

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