

Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of International Volunteer Assignments: A 10-Year Analysis

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Above > Staff at New Ireland Tourism Authority with Australian volunteer Tourism Project Coordinator (second from left), Papua New Guinea. Photo > Harjono Djoyobisono / AVI

BACKGROUND

This research brief summarises the key findings of a study that sought to understand the factors that contribute significantly to the effectiveness of a volunteer assignment, and the implications of these factors for Australian Volunteers International (AVI). The research was based on an analysis of monitoring and evaluation survey data collected by AVI from partner organisations, volunteers and AVI Country Managers from 2002 to 2011. The study was conducted by researchers from the University of Technology Sydney and the University of Sydney, and is summarised here by AVI's Program Partnerships and Development Effectiveness unit.

This brief also provides recommendations on how AVI can best use the results to continue supporting successful and effective volunteer assignments.

KEY FINDINGS

The key findings of the study were:

- > Volunteer assignments are successful, appreciated and productive experiences.
- > AVI manages volunteer assignments effectively.
- > The support that volunteers receive from the partner organisation (their host organisation) is the strongest contributor to assignment success.
- > The support that AVI provides to the partner organisation is an important enabler, and makes a statistically significant contribution to assignment success.
- > The contributions that volunteers make to 'interpersonal capacity building' (such as improved attitudes, skills and knowledge of organisational staff and counterparts) are highly valued by partner organisations and may be underestimated by volunteer agencies and volunteers.

"AVI has been a constant source of support. [Staff members] are proactive in maintaining communication and providing information and monitoring of the project. It's been great to know they are available at all times."

– Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID) volunteer in China



Above > Australian volunteer EFL Curriculum & Teacher Trainer (fourth from right) with teacher and students at Yezin Agricultural University (Naypyidaw, Burma) during an early morning field practical class. Photo > Harjono Djoyobisono / AVI

METHODOLOGY

Available AVI monitoring and evaluation data from partner organisations, volunteers and AVI staff were analysed for 1773 volunteer assignments over a 10-year period. These assignments contributed to nearly 26,000 months (2166 years) of service to organisations in 42 host countries.

Both quantitative and qualitative data were analysed for this study, including data from partner organisation end-of-assignment evaluation surveys, volunteer end-of-assignment surveys and the AVI Personnel Information Management System (PIMS) database (see *Table 1*). The quantitative data were analysed using a range of statistical methods.¹

Table 1: Summary of the data available for analysis

Data Tool	Quantitative	Qualitative	Completed by
Partner organisation end-of-assignment evaluation survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AVI support rating • Assignment outcomes • Achievement of stated objectives² (performance rating) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AVI support rating • Assignment outcomes • Assignment outputs • Achievement of objectives • Sustainability of outcomes • Challenges • Assessment of further capacity development needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partner organisation at end of assignment
Volunteer end-of-assignment evaluation survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer wellbeing and AVI support • Partnerships • Capacity building • Achievement of stated objectives (performance rating) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer wellbeing and AVI support • Assignment outcomes • Assignment outputs • Achievement of objectives • Sustainability of outcomes • Challenges • Partnerships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer at end of assignment
AVI database (PIMS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achievement of stated objectives (performance rating) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AVI Country Manager at end of assignment

In addition, qualitative data from a sub-sample of 216 volunteer-partner organisation pairings (2004–2010) were also analysed to understand the volunteer experience from the perspective of both parties. These qualitative data came from the same forms described in *Table 1* and related to three main issues:

- > outcomes achieved
- > perceived support
- > factors that enable or inhibit the achievement of assignment objectives.

In total, almost 3500 qualitative responses were distilled, coded and categorised. The categorisation of qualitative data allowed within-group and between-group patterns of responses to be compared using statistical methods.³

DATA LIMITATIONS

Despite the strong and statistically significant findings identified by this research, there were some data limitations that should be considered when reading these findings:

- > Qualitative data responses for both volunteers and partner organisations were more likely to be absent in assignments that were less successful.
- > Qualitative responses from partner organisations were typically briefer and more generic than responses from volunteers. Proficiency in written English could be a factor leading to this response bias.

¹ These included *multiple* and *logistic regression analyses* and *t-tests*.

² A one to five scale is used to measure success in reaching stated objectives, with one being the lowest rating (very limited; 1–24%) and five being the highest (100%).

³ *Pearson's chi-square test* and *independent t-tests*.

FINDINGS

The main findings of this research suggest that AVI could most directly influence assignment success by implementing initiatives that strengthen the partner organisation's capacity to effectively support and manage volunteers.

The main findings of this research are:

1. The level of **support that volunteers receive from the partner organisation** is the primary contributor to assignment success.
2. The **'capacity development' outcome most valued by partner organisations is 'interpersonal skills'**, including improved attitudes, skills and knowledge of organisational staff. This outcome, commonly achieved through interpersonal role modelling, is often not a specified purpose of the assignment. Three out of the four assignment outcomes that partner organisations most frequently identified were classified in this category: specifically, improving attitudes (for example, motivation and work ethic), developing skills, and increasing knowledge. Collectively, these made up 43% of all capacity development outcomes reported by partner organisations.
3. Partner organisation and volunteer responses indicate that **AVI manages volunteer assignments effectively**. AVI is especially good at managing the 'relational' contract with partner organisations and volunteers. Feedback about the support AVI provides during an assignment is overwhelmingly positive.

Volunteers and partner organisations saw AVI staff, both in-country and Australia-based, as friendly, professional, approachable and responsive. Both were significantly more likely to provide positive responses about AVI than they were about each other.

However, there were some criticisms of AVI relating to 'transactional' aspects of its program management, including unclear assignment objectives, program management delays and challenges with in-country accommodation.

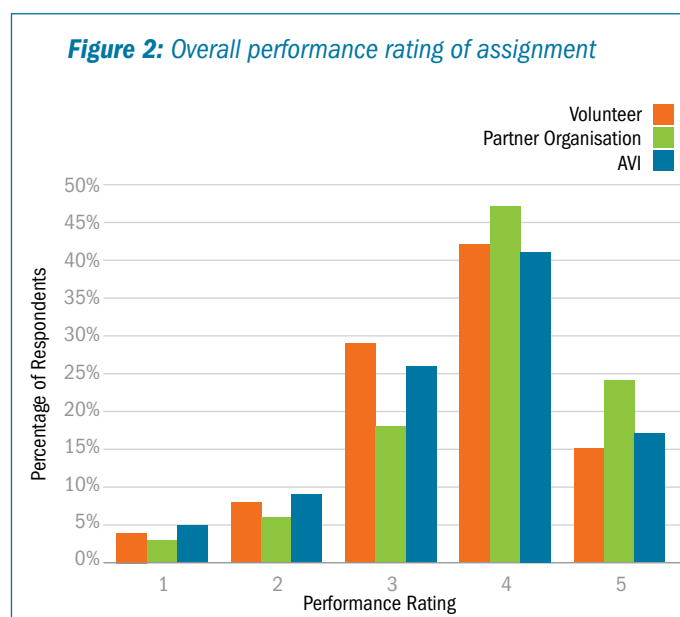
4. Overall, the research indicates that **volunteer assignments are generally successful, appreciated, and productive experiences**. For example, across the 10-year period, more than 70% of assignments were classified by partner organisations as 'high performing', with ratings of four (achieved 80-99% of assignment objectives), or five (fully achieved or exceeded 100% of objectives).

Figure 2 presents the rating of assignment success based on monitoring and evaluation surveys from partner organisations, AVI staff and volunteers.

5. A **supportive, competent, communicative and friendly environment in the partner organisation** is conducive to achieving assignment objectives. Based on volunteer and partner organisation responses, these are clear factors that enable or inhibit assignment performance.

6. According to partner organisations, **continuity and culture are the major influences on assignment success**. Specifically, partner organisations believe that the factors with the strongest influence of assignment success are:
 - > assignment duration
 - > role 'handover'
 - > degree of cultural awareness, and cultural adjustment, of volunteers.
7. While each assignment is unique, the duration of the assignment appears to have a major influence on performance. **Performance increases in step with the length of the assignment** up to 14 months, after which improvement levels off.
8. The **three-way relationship** between AVI, the partner organisation and the volunteer makes managing expectations, responsibilities and performance more challenging and arguably more important.
9. On balance, the data suggests that AVI would contribute most strongly to improving assignment success by **directing resources to developing stronger links between the partner organisation and the volunteer**, including helping both parties to better understand and engage in interpersonal capacity development and role modelling.

Figure 2: Overall performance rating of assignment



RECOMMENDATIONS

As the research findings suggest, the best way for AVI to contribute to assignment success is **through initiatives that strengthen the relationship between partner organisations and their volunteers**. AVI can do this in two specific ways:

1. Continue supporting the development of the partner organisation's capacity to effectively manage volunteers

Volunteers are more likely to perceive higher levels of organisational support when they:

- > are treated with respect and concern
- > feel valued
- > receive recognition
- > have access to information
- > are consulted on decisions that affect them
- > engage in quality interpersonal interactions
- > have opportunities for training and development
- > receive support for non-work issues such as personal security or cultural adjustment.

Based on these conditions, AVI should continue its work with partner organisations to assist them to:

- > understand how these supportive conditions could manifest themselves within that organisation
- > provide this support to volunteers
- > monitor the impact of any changes (*Findings 1 and 9*).

Opportunities for training and development, for example, are a marker of organisational support. Partner organisations may be well positioned to offer volunteers some form of structured or informal opportunities for development throughout their assignment. One example of this may be culture-specific knowledge and skills, which partner organisations identified as a barrier to assignment success (*Finding 6*). By playing an active role in mediating this, AVI could simultaneously strengthen volunteers' perceptions of partner organisation support and contribute to ongoing strategic relationships with its partners.

Prior research⁴ suggests that volunteer sending agencies' direct support for volunteers is also critically important. Therefore efforts to improve AVI's 'transactional' support mechanisms (such as clarifying assignment objectives, avoiding program management delays and challenges with accommodation, *Finding 3*) are likely to be beneficial.

2. Support interpersonal capacity development

The study highlights the importance of informal interpersonal capacity development between volunteers and local colleagues in contributing to the success of volunteer assignments (*Finding 2*). It also reveals partner organisations' concerns about assignment brevity and continuity (*Findings 6 and 7*).

Scoping assignments with less ambitious objectives (and managing related expectations) may be one way to create more time and 'space' for interpersonal capacity development to occur.

A clearer understanding of the nature of interpersonal capacity development (such as improved attitudes, skills and knowledge of organisational staff and counterparts), and the barriers to it, is likely to help AVI in supporting volunteers and partner organisations to improve the exchange. Importantly, it may also help all parties to better recognise and articulate the positive impact of a volunteer assignment.



Above > Australian volunteer Community Counsellor and Trainer (right) with colleague at the Open Door Crisis Centre in Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa.
Photo > Matthew Willman / AVI

⁴ Liu, Y & Ipe, M 2010, 'The impact of organizational and leader - member support on expatriate commitment', *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, vol. 21, no. 7, pp. 1035-48