

A Peace Corps for Retired Executives

An Interview with Thomas J. Miller,
President and Chief Executive Officer, International Executive Service Corps (IESC)

EDITORS' NOTE In 2011, Thomas Miller was appointed by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to be the Chair of the Board of the International Commission on Missing Persons. In 2009, he was President and CEO of the United Nations Association of the U.S. From 2005 to 2008, he served as CEO of Plan International. From 2001 to 2004, he served as U.S. Ambassador to Greece and, earlier, he was the U.S. Ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Special Coordinator for the Cyprus negotiations (rank of ambassador). He was also posted to Thailand, Greece two other times, and the State Department in Washington, where he focused on North Africa, the Middle East, and counterterrorism issues. He serves on the boards of D.A.R.E., Partnership for a Secure America, and Lamspa. He was also selected two years ago to serve on AARP's National Policy Council. Ambassador Miller has five degrees from the University of Michigan: a Ph.D. in Political Science, Masters in both Political Science and Asian Studies, and a B.A. in Political Science. In addition, in 2003, he received an Honorary Doctor of Laws degree when he was also the commencement speaker.



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ORGANIZATION BRIEF Washington, D.C.-based International Executive Service Corps (iesc.org), is a nonprofit that furnishes expertise to the developing world to train in best business practices. They support and catalyze the development of private enterprises, business support organizations, financial institutions, and public institutions. Over the years, they have implemented more than 25,000 short-term projects and 200 programs in 130 countries.

What is the history of the International Executive Service Corps and how has its mission evolved?

It was set up a few years after the Peace Corps by David Rockefeller and a number of well-known Fortune 500 executives. They thought that we could use the tremendous reservoir of talent that was reaching retirement age around the world – and especially in the developing world – to develop something similar to a Peace Corps for retired business executives.

Is there strong awareness of the organization?

Top-level senior executives always have things to do after they retire that will keep them productively occupied, but at the levels beneath that, the awareness of other opportunities is not out there. There are 76 million baby boomers and we're starting to retire, and baby boomers are living 20 years longer than their grandparents.

We live in a society where you're largely defined by your job, so there is a psychological dimension to this that is extremely important. There is even a U.S. budgetary dimension to this,

because there are all kinds of studies that say people who are productively engaged are happier and healthier.

The single largest drain on the U.S. budget today is entitlements – Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security. If we could get a better handle on finding opportunities for the baby boomers – of which we're a small part – we could make a dent in those entitlements.

How does the process work?

Once someone contacts us, we drive him to our Web site and he registers with us. When we find opportunities, we go through the skills bank and set up matches.

Companies hear "volunteers" and assume it's free – it's not free. We're a nonprofit, so you need someone to cover the costs of travel, lodging, and meals as well as the overhead.

However, it's a lot cheaper and better to get someone with 35 to 40 years of experience rather than a newly minted M.B.A. who has never worked in the sector.

How did the organization's involvement in China come about?

The Chinese have told me that, about a decade ago, they realized they needed help with a lot of their state enterprises at the sub-provincial level on the managerial and entrepreneurial side. At this level, a lot of the officials who were running these state companies were brought up under the communist system, so they didn't have a background in market economics.

A number of years ago, the Chinese began going to France, Germany, and the U.S. to get help. They decided they weren't going to go approach governments because this was private sector based.

In the U.S., they went to the largest organization that was not political or religious,

which is the 37 million-member AARP. At the time, AARP said they weren't implementers and could not help.

The Chinese went back to AARP a year ago to try again, and they said they could still not do it but knew an organization they could partner with, and that was us.

We signed a partnership agreement with AARP and the Chinese, so we're now starting a program with China that could ultimately involve thousands of volunteers.

As a nonprofit, where does the funding come from?

For the first 30 years, we were fantastically successful – we ran 25,000 individual volunteer missions and created over one million jobs.

We got core funding from the governmental organization USAID to pay the expenses, and we got companies to cover some other things. In the mid-'90s, USAID wanted to move on, so we had to change our business model.

The demand for volunteers was still strong, but the funding wasn't there. So over the past 15 or so years, we've been operating largely through U.S. government contracts.

Our two biggest projects today are in Afghanistan, but you can't send volunteers there. We still send volunteers to a number of projects in Africa and the Middle East, but the number of volunteers we have been sending out is way down from what it was before.

What kind of impact has this organization made?

These volunteers are fantastic ambassadors for the U.S. as human beings who just want to do good things. This is helpful in particular areas of the world where the reputation of our country is not so positive.

For the volunteers, it gives them a sense of worth. Many of these volunteers stay in touch with the families they have assisted and continue to help – it often goes beyond the initial mission.

Is the U.S. losing its competitive edge?

I don't think so – we just need to refocus. Where we still have the competitive edge is with managerial and entrepreneurial talent. This is in our DNA.

I don't care how much money you put into it; you have to develop it over time. It has taken us a couple hundred years to develop. I think that's why people still look to America and want volunteers from here more than anywhere else. ●