



# The Skills and Competencies that NGOs Employees should Display in the Near Future and how to Acquire or Strengthen them

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**Abstract:** *The global context has changed with new upcoming challenges. As a result, we interrogate ourselves on what are the most suitable models for social impact between intergovernmental, non-governmental, and others. In general, there is more and more multilateral work where United Nations System (UN) organizations collaborate with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and other stakeholders as an example of the overall reflection that there is no one unique model that functions over the others but rather and inter-section of models which operate and co-exist together efficiently and harmoniously.*

*In terms of concrete, tangible results the NGOs have the opportunity to make a difference that can be measured at the level of short and mid-term impact. At the same time, the role of the NGOs has evolved and changed in terms of being more active and independent in the accomplishment of their mandate. As a result, new emerging skills and competencies are required to comply and succeed in this new role. How? How has the role changed? What are the relevant skills and competencies? How can the NGOs workforce acquire and/or strengthen them? Recent studies have shown that the relevant skills are around the ability to manage projects and programs, raise funds, and measure results. The relevant competencies are around the capacity to innovate, create, problem-solve and collaborate through horizontal leadership with teams and individuals across the organization. These skills and competencies have been identified through global skills and competencies gap mapping processes. According to recent pedagogical studies, the most effective methodology to strengthen and/or acquire these skills are experiential learning techniques, particularly for the behavioral competencies and tutorials – easy, short, and rewarded ones particularly for the technical skills.*

**Keywords:** *Education, NGOs, intergovernmental model, skills, competencies, pedagogy, humanitarian.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The global context presents new upcoming challenges. The United Nations System (UN) Journal issue of 15 September 2021 indicates that the global economy is expected to bounce back with a growth of 5.3 percent, the fastest in nearly five (5) decades, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD, 2021).

The UN Agenda has been revised to become the 2030 Agenda and the Millennium Development Goals have become Sustainable Development Goals with new and more sustainable accomplishments defined by specific targets and key performance indicators. This has made the work of the UN and in general of all national and international humanitarian organizations including NGOs more pragmatic and dynamic, requiring project and program management skills along with a result-based methodology. The disruptive digitalization which has characterized these last two years particularly during COVID has exponentially accelerated the way we learn and has transformed not only the way we work but the way we behave, relate to others, the way we live our lives holistically. What are the most suitable models for social impact? In this new context, social scientists and experts have raised fundamental questions around the existing societal and organizational models and how we can ensure the required impact, which brings and adds value.

In a world of increasing multilateralism, the inter-governmental model has started to show its weaknesses. With the UN's foundation in 1945, this model was meant to respond to the urgent need to

address global emergencies, such as wars, etc. through inter-governmental decisions and interventions. While this model became predominant in dealing with these global issues such as climate change, human rights, hunger, etc. (SDGs) multilateralism grew leading to a high level of overlapping among UN organizational mandates as well as the mandates of other stakeholders. This resulted in funding cuts for the UN which along with the latest events such as COVID, the fall of national systems such as Afghanistan, made the entire system more challenging. Other sectors, such as the non-governmental sector grew in strategies and dimensions. And now it is time to reflect on what are the models which appear to be most effective in leading the global context for intervention and support.

As a result, the non-governmental organizations, which have had until recently a supporting and complementary role to the inter-governmental model have now a stronger and more tangible opportunity to make a difference. How concretely? How has the role changed? What are the relevant skills and competencies that the workforce requires to make such a difference? More precisely, what are the skills and competencies for the NGOs workforce of the near future? How to acquire and/or strengthen them?

Recent research (WEF, 2015) shows how new skills need to be strengthened and/or acquired in international organizations, especially humanitarian. Some examples are skills related to data visualization and data management. In a world of progressive and exponentially increasing technology, digital skills are becoming critical for a more effective and sound decision-making process as well as an evidence-based model. Other skills such as research-based job skills and Artificial Intelligence (AI) new trends and applications are now crucial to support the automation of repetitive and routinely easy job functions while also regulating the relationship between humans and machines (Manyika & Sneader, 2021).

Finally, project and programme management skills as well as results-based management skills: are due to the increased matrix structure in these organizations supporting the delivery of large-scale projects with clear key performance indicators and orientation to result in a more transversal and collaborative manner. What is particularly critical for the NGOs workforce in terms of behavioral competencies? According to studies (Potoker, 2010), a combination of leadership and advisory role along with coaching skills to manage teams often dispersed and in particular virtual management, virtual decision making, ethical decision-making have resulted in essential skills-sets for NGOs talent acquisition and retention. In terms of learning and performance, the most critical methodologies relate to experiential learning as an effective means to strengthen the behavioral competencies, combined with short and rewarded time (ex. learning certificate) spent in acquiring technical skills through easy and accessible online tools (Chiu, 2019).

## **2. ROLE OF NGOS AND RELEVANT CAPACITY**

***Characteristic: direct impact, speed of delivery (less bureaucracy), engaging mandate to attract talent***

NGOs, non-profit groups that function independently of any government, have been increasingly impacting in the areas of welfares and humanitarian aid. In the last 5 years in particular their role has changed towards becoming more of a force for deep-rooted social transformation.

***Challenges: Resources, overall organizational budget, and subsequent compensation package and entitlements for employees.***

However, recently, many NGOs are facing problems of increasing bureaucracy and tendency to self-promotion, and distance from the people they're supposed to serve (Edwards, 2020). As described in the article "What's to be done with Oxfam?" (Edwards, 2016) NGOs are often "too small to influence economics, too bureaucratic to be social movements, banned from politics and removed from the societies they're trying to change, where do NGOs go next?".

## **3. RELEVANT SKILLS AND BEHAVIORAL MODEL TO ENHANCE AND BUILD CAPACITY IN THE WORKFORCE**

***NGOs are dedicated to reaching the goals of the organizations and finding new ways to meet the needs of the developing world. This is defined as the new leadership framework.***

Based on the Edwards (2020) definition, NGOs exist in resource environments that encourage competition for government contacts, foreign aid, and voluntary donations within structures characterized by unequal access to funding opportunities. However, especially in the present times, NGOs are faced with the growing competition and shrinking budgets. They have to demonstrate that they make good use of the resources, while being obliged to learn from their actions and experiences and try new methods and practices, in order to be competitive and effective (Vathis, 2016). Consequently, NGOs must understand that in terms of organizational change and re-skilling and up-skilling which must be thoroughly prepared and managed (Edwards, 2020).

***What are the relevant skills?***

Employees in NGOs are involved more and more in managing multiple projects, therefore, a certain skill-set and attributes are particularly useful for professionals to have in order to be able to succeed in NGOs, such as project management, time orientation, fundraising skills, etc.

**3.1. Project Management**

For many NGOs, projects are run by teams of different dimensions depending on the size of the NGOs themselves. The project team must be able to manage a project through effective planning, execution, and closure of projects with the existing resources and available time. Particularly, due to the fact that compared with international organizations, some NGOs have little money to support their projects and organizational transformation. As a result, NGOs, dedicated to humanitarian aid professionals, need to be able to see the bigger picture when defining the project scope, creating a strategy and schedule to deliver it as well as identifying project risks and developing responses to mitigate them, which ensures that the maximum value is achieved within the available budget and resources in a timely and effective manner (Global Peace Careers, 2019).

**3.2. Time Orientation**

As described in the characteristics above, the NGO workplace is often intervened with a high level of unpredictability, namely, funding, social supports, etc. NGO employees start their work-day with plans to complete certain tasks but often new priorities emerge. For instance, employees need to prioritize team agenda according to the urgent deadlines or project plans; and act in accordance with a final group schedule, which may even conflict with their own decisions and plans.

**3.3. Fundraising**

Funding is a constant obstacle for NGOs. Most NGOs rely on being funded by grants and donors in order to be able to carry out their activities. Lack of funding often results in closing particular projects and services as well as redundancy of staff (Global Peace Careers, 2019). To obtain the maximum support for the upcoming projects, the fundraising officers, other than fundraising skills, in the NGOs need to manage to acquire a capacity building, guidance, and oversight at regional or global level, to foster regional opportunities, to maximize the donor values. For example, a fundraising officer, based on the local acknowledgments and awareness, to identify opportunities and fundraising activities with relevant stakeholders across areas and channels.

**3.4. Monitoring and Evaluation**

Another key important skill for nowadays NGOs is project monitoring and evaluation. In order to maintain a strong partnership with different donors, a comprehensive monitoring system with timely and accurate measurements and feedback of each project is essential. All the information regarding project processes, reflections, and, outcomes are available through the system to the relevant donors and stakeholders, as well as the public, which not only enables to strengthen the partnerships and public trusts, but also to further facilitate evidence-based decision-making processes for the future projects.

**3.5. Communication**

Communication skills are also critical for nowadays NGOs' employees. For example, again using the case of fundraising officers, they need to speak clearly and effectively to the donors, while listening and correctly interpreting their requests and requirements, later on, answering appropriately or asking corresponding questions to exhibit NGOs' principles and interests. Moreover, field NGOs' officers,

especially responding to the humanitarian aids, are further required to tailor their communication styles for the locals, while demonstrating a sense of openness.

Especially, the Hong Kong Council of Social Service (n.d.) illustrates a list of personal competencies for the ideal CEOs in their NGO CEO Competency Model:

### **3.6. Vision and Foresight**

First, under the current changing society, the heads of NGOs are anticipated to recognize social patterns quickly from a higher perspective, to predict what is needed in the future, and to explain and discuss the situations to employees in a simple and effective way(The Hong Kong Council of Social Service, n.d.).

### **3.7. Strategic Planning with Entrepreneurship**

Additionally, after identifying current complexities, the heads of NGOs are ready to translate the visions and decisions into courses of action and a strategic plan in pursuit of possible solutions and social changes responding to the expectations of various stakeholders on NGOs (The Hong Kong Council of Social Service, n.d.).

### **3.8. Continuous Renewal and Innovation**

Moreover, the heads of NGOs are also expected to lead long-term change management, which embraces an attitude towards change and adapt to the changing dynamics in internal and external environments for the sustainability of an organization, including continuous improvements and innovations on mechanisms, and systems, and organizational culture, as well as external relations with stakeholders (The Hong Kong Council of Social Service, n.d.).

## **4. HOW TO FOSTER THE ACQUISITION OR STRENGTHENING OF THESE NEW SKILLS?**

The best way to introduce these new skills within the agencies is through employee learning. To be a learning NGO requires organizations to simultaneously balance the need to take a strategic approach to organizational learning (at the highest level of organizational planning and management) with the recognition that learning is also an intensely personal process that goes on in the minds of individuals (Britton, 2005).

For example, NGOs can start with a learning campaign with several learning policies or reward policies that are led by the HR department and open to all the employees. Based on organizational and individual needs, HR learning officers cooperate with internal and external experts to develop specific courses or workshops, such as fundraising, communication, evaluation skills, etc. In order to contribute to organizational learning, NGO staff need more than a motive for learning, they also need the means to do it. The 'means' for organizational learning include: 1) ensuring conceptual clarity; 2) supporting the necessary competencies to learn; 3) providing a range of methods and tools that can be used; 4) providing specialist support; and 5) investing adequate financial resources (Britton, 2005). Through the continuous learning system, employees will embrace the opportunities to improve themselves, understand organization visions, and further increase their motivation and commitments. Therefore, investing in organizational learning for NGOs can not only increase the organizations' effectiveness and performances, but also improve employees' motivations and commitments.

## **5. METHODS**

### **5.1. Learning Workshops**

The Learning workshops, depending on the formats and styles, can be highly engaging. For example, at the beginning of the learning campaign, employees can be divided into a small-group discussion in terms of their needs, opinions, and expectation for the agencies, which can better assist employees to know each other and express their opinions. Similarly, during the learning selections, learning workshops can boost the efficiency of communications and learning experiences.

### **5.2. Mentorship**

Mentorship is the guidance provided by an experienced person. In an organizational setting, a mentor influences the personal and professional growth of a mentee. However, mentors do not necessarily have to be more senior than the people they mentor. What matters is that mentors have experience that

others can learn from (Bidwell, n.d.). Mentorship is a comparably efficient learning method for NGOs given the limiting budgets. For instance, a senior fundraising officer can offer case study learning to the junior project officers. In addition, employees can certain areas can provide a culture and language lesson to the rest of the teams.

### **5.3. Action Learning**

Action Learning is a process that involves a small group working on real problems, taking action, and learning as individuals, as a team, and as an organization. It helps organizations develop creative, flexible and successful strategies to pressing problems (The World Institute for Action Learning, n.d.). For example, during the action learning, a coach will illustrate a real problem that the organization is currently confronted with, encourage team members to speak out about actions and solutions and facilitate learning commitment.

### **5.4. Advice Networks**

Every organization has informal networks that are not visible on organizational organograms and yet are very influential in the way the organization works. Understanding these networks working with them can be a powerful way of giving recognition to individual expertise, solving problems, and improving effectiveness (Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993).

### **5.5. Learning Questionnaire**

NGOs can also develop questionnaires to assess their employees' learning capacities and requests. Over years of review of the literature and organizational case studies, Professor Marsick and Watkins (2003) have developed a learning questionnaire model that comprises statements describing key characteristics of learning organizations. Ever since, the Questionnaire has been adapted and used by many organizations in the fields of humanitarian aids, environmental issues, and international development.

### **5.6. Learning Maps**

Learning maps enable organizations to visually represent the internal creation and flow of knowledge and learning. The learning map model illustrates the connections among the knowledge, skills, and understandings necessary to meet academic content standards, which helps to guide participants to brainstorm and work on by showing them where a project is now, what the project has been done, and what the next process is (Dynamic Learning Maps, n.d.).

### **5.7. Organizational Performance Indicators**

The knowledge and skill of employees are one of those factors and it requires proactive management attention. Conceptually, this is achieved through Knowledge Management, a term that has existed in the mainstream of business lexicon for quite some time (Turner & Minonne, 2010). Tearfund, for example, uses a system of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) – some of which are explicitly concerned with organizational learning and knowledge management – to monitor and hold managers to account for progress on achieving their strategic goals (Britton, 2005).

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

Even if most of the NGOs face challenges with funding, it is of paramount importance that they continue investing in mapping and defining the successful competencies and competencies required by the workforce to succeed as well as in learning pathways that facilitate the acquisition and or strengthening of these competencies and skills. This has been proved to be an essential component of the HR management strategy which determines the mid-and long-term success of the organization. In order to ensure the NGOs are equipped with the required skills and behavioral model which will help them to succeed a variety of methodologies can be considered. These span from experiential learning methods to technology. It is equally important to measure the impact of the learning against the final results to accomplish the mandate. This can be done through the definition of specific key performance indicators to be embedded in the overall HR Management strategy of the organizations.

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