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International Experience Reflection

My international experience took me to Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where I served as project manager for the Ubuntu Blox factory. The Ubuntu Blox project is an innovative approach to converting Styrofoam waste into earthquake resistant construction blocks. Using a local labor force, the Ubuntu factory produces these blocks from collected Styrofoam waste. The goal of this ongoing project was to ultimately expand the use of these blocks in the market by growing it from the developmental stages to more practical use and to make production more efficient to meet growing demands. These new building blocks have potential to greatly decrease the amount of Styrofoam waste in the streets, serve as a way to create jobs for local people, and provide a new, culturally accepted building material for constructing houses and other infrastructure. As the recipient of the McKinley ’74 Family Grant, I was awarded funds to pursue this project.

Prior to embarking on the trip, I had three goals I wanted to accomplish during my time as factory manager:

1. Establish a market price for the Ubuntu Blox
2. Create an efficient method for collecting Styrofoam from the streets
3. Create a training program to transfer skills needed to create the Ubuntu Blox to provide future employment opportunities for people in the community

Upon arrival, I realized that some of these goals had already been accomplished from past managers, so my focus then shifted from the goals listed above to improving the efficiency of the overall factory and increasing daily block production, creating an efficient system of Styrofoam collection, and ultimately finding the price it costs to produce each block. The
The project received $10,000 in funding to make any improvements to existing machinery, improve or invent new hardware, and pay the wages of the local workers to run a full 15-day trial in order to determine the costs associated with the production of each block. I was in charge of managing the budget, making factory and Styrofoam collection improvements and recommendations, and insuring the factory was in top running condition before ultimately running the trial to collect information on the costs.

With my time managing the factory, I suggested a number of layout and machinery improvements that helped decrease the time it takes to make each block. I also streamlined the collection of Styrofoam, so there was no lack of inputs to stop production early during the day. Originally, Styrofoam was collected on a needs basis, meaning when the supply of Styrofoam at the factory finished, the workers would leave their posts and scour the streets for more. This was inefficient for many reasons. Collection was limited to areas within walking distance of the factory, meaning after a few months, local collection had diminishing returns. Additionally, production of actual blocks halted during collection times. To address these problems, a community member was found who collected Styrofoam and was paid a per-pound rate. Because he had access to a car, he was able to reach areas that were unreachable before. Since he was not a factory employee, collection was not stopped during Styrofoam searches. This change showed dramatic increases in Styrofoam stock and improved Styrofoam yields by 155%. Coupled with the layout and machinery improvements, daily block production jumped from 37 blocks per day to averaging 53 blocks per day.

The first important lesson I learned from this was related to goals. The goals I believed I needed to accomplish prior to arrival were drastically different from the ones
that needed attention once I arrived on the ground. Being flexible is crucial when working in any sort of dynamic environment, as is the realization that it is difficult to understand the needs of any sort of initiative from afar. This became exceedingly clear to me as the internship went on. A team based in Canada runs the Ubuntu Blox project. Although they make multiple trips to Haiti each year to check up on the progress of the project, there is no dedicated team member running the project from Haiti at all times. I was essentially filling that void for the two months I was doing the internship. This made me realize the inefficiencies of constantly having new project managers and lack of a constant presence. Upon arrival, I was left to determine the state of the project myself, with limited knowledge of what the prior manager had experimented with. The only guidance came through my weekly calls with the Canadian project coordinators. Additionally, communication is exceedingly difficult and unreliable using Haitian Internet services. As a result, I learned a significant amount about how to approach a problem independently. With little guidance, I learned how to work in a new environment and find ways to improve factory problems.

Unfortunately, I was not able to run the 15-day trial myself, as preparing the factory and workers took significantly longer than expected. This was another valuable experience. I began to realize the flexibility it takes to work in different places. What would be a simple, one-stop pick up at a construction store in the United States turned into a multi-day trek all over Port-au-Prince to various markets for factory supplies. Although I did expect delays, experiencing firsthand the difficulty in locating specific parts and getting through general logistics taught me a lot about what people and organizations in other countries experience when trying to accomplish a goal.

My experience managing a factory of local workers taught me many things beyond
independence. I learned how difficult it can be to manage a project across cultures, and even began questioning the value of that relationship to begin with. Is it right for local workers to be managed by an outside source? In relation to this, I ended up hiring a local manager to both keep the project continuous and facilitate interaction between workers and foreigners. This also helped to smooth transitions between foreign managers, aimed to minimize losses during on-site leadership changes, and minimized cross culture differences that can make working less efficient.

In the end, this internship taught me so much about development, the roles NGOs should play versus what role they actually play in a country like Haiti, and applying leadership skills in a foreign working environment. Things did not go smoothly the majority of the time- a difficult aspect to deal with when you have specific goals. However, it is a central part to working in a foreign environment, and an extremely worthwhile lesson to learn. I found the whole experience to be invaluable for both my career and personal development.