

Blog by Ana Leal on her internship experiences at IRC

Three lessons from the new (virtual) reality to develop your career

2020 - what a time for finishing a Master's degree!

Four years ago, while developing spatial planning for river basins in the local government in my hometown in Mexico, I started dreaming about doing a master studies overseas, to continue learning and expand my horizons, to further develop my career at the international level. I would never have imagined that a microscopic virus would change the world, in every sense, and most likely forever.

Because, Covid-19 has transformed the way we study, interact with each other, and even celebrate (virtually) together. It has also changed the way of developing our professional careers.

I had the opportunity to study [Water Management and Governance in the Netherlands](#). When I graduated, my student chapter finished (virtually) and I decided to gain more hands-on experience by putting my knowledge and skills into practice at an organisation working with water topics.

At other times, it would have been easier to attend networking events, or directly go to the organisations you are interested in, to have an idea of their culture and the kind of job you would do. You might think that now with lockdown restrictions, everyone working from home and no networking events, this can be a challenge. And yes, it is! I applied to many (many) different organisations. And I am going to be honest, at some point I thought that building my career at the international level at this precise moment (the so- called COVID-times) was not the greatest idea.

Fortunately, in October 2020 I found a (virtual) open door at IRC. I said yes to the vibrant energy of my manager and the idea of developing business strategies for scaling up a capacity building platform, and a (virtual) internship. I had some knowledge of business models, a clearer notion of what WASH meant, and a background on systems thinking related to capacity building. So, this represented a great opportunity.

Initially a virtual internship might not sound good. I have never had the chance to meet anyone from the organisation in person, never had a lunch break or cup of coffee in the hall, and I don't even know the offices! The whole idea was basically, me, my laptop and conversations with a couple of people at virtual meetings. I know, it doesn't sound appealing, even less so when you want to build your professional career.

Nevertheless, I want to share with you how this "new normal" internship experience has helped with increasing my hands-on experience, building skills and knowledge in other areas, and the possibility to network with several professionals in the sector. And for sure, increasing my chances of building my career at the international level.

1. Increasing hands-on experience

IRC has a lot of projects in which capacity building is an important element. I collaborated in their online capacity building platform, the WASH Systems Academy, which looks at strengthening water, sanitation and hygiene systems by offering online learning, which can also be used in face-to-face trainings.

What do you need to do to understand if the e-learning platform is working or not? Data! Large datasets! So, I learned how to use Moodle tools to know how many people have used the Academy (more than 2000, FYI). Also, I kept developing my investigative skills by using Google Analytics, and understanding for example where the users are based. Therefore, the

virtual environment was excellent to develop a hands-on experience, which will contribute to the improvement of the capacity building strategy.

2. Building knowledge in completely other areas

Remember that I studied Water Management and Governance? I certainly never attended a business lecture. When I started at IRC I had a vague notion of business models. But for my internship I had to look into a suitable business model for the WASH Systems Academy. So I immersed myself in literature about business models and looked at real cases in the e-learning arena. Also, I started to understand the world of Massive Open Online Courses (which is huge!) from the inside. For example, how does edX get revenue if the courses offered are free? No, the answer is not just charging for certificates. They actually have quite an interesting business model.

3. Networking with several professionals in the sector

The perspectives regarding e-learning for professionals working in the water and sanitation sector are fundamental. In the end they are the ones that use this knowledge in the real world, in the systems that make (or not yet) adequate access to water and sanitation possible.

Market research was carried out. What does that mean? Well, I had the opportunity to interview 15 staff members of IRC, 9 country directors and representatives (India, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Honduras, Uganda, Nicaragua and Peru) and 19 professionals from non-profits, universities, and networks.

So, a broader understanding of what is needed in the sector, as well as the main needs were shared. This information is quite useful for me in order to direct my career towards the topics that are urgently needed.

Also, this opened doors to have *informal (virtual) coffees* with professionals in the sector who gave me advice on how to build my career at the international level.

Indeed, these are strange times for a recently graduated professional. Nevertheless, there are opportunities, and even if they are offered not under the most fantastic conditions, the (virtual) open doors will enhance your professional career for sure. So, if you are wondering if you can develop your career during the virtual “new normal”, I will say yes, for sure, and you know what? Some of the lessons I have learned demonstrate that this would even not have been possible if people had not been working in a virtual environment right now.

Please also check out my personal website:

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