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## MBA ENTERPRISE CORPS

## Expats with macaroni in a suitcase

The 'business peace corps' is a unique opportunity for those adventurous enough, says **Lisa Wood**

Nearly 10 years ago John Lynch gave up his well-paid job as a TV management consultant in New York and set off for Poland with his wife, Anne Kalin, to work for about \$300 (£183) a month in a small privately owned consultancy.

Friends thought they were crazy. "Anne was just out of business school with good job prospects in the US. I was giving up a six-figure salary. But we were setting off on an adventure and so there was a mixture of bewilderment and envy among our peers."

The couple were among the first recruits of the MBA Enterprise Corps, a US-based programme established in 1990, which places recent MBA graduates in jobs in private companies in emerging and transforming economies for one year. It is believed to be the only programme of its kind.

Characterised as a "business peace corps", the corps members act as internal consultants to local businesses, bringing their skills as MBA graduates. The programme so far has 500 volunteers who have taken part in the programme so far return to the US - where according to the corps they encounter few problems re-entering the mainstream business world. Indeed, the corps claims, the experience generally deepens the volunteers' management skills.

But for a substantial minority, the corps is a springboard into opportunities they did not envisage at business school.

Mr Lynch and Ms Kalin, for example have not returned to the US. Today they own and run Lynks, the market leader in Poland in promotional products such as customised T-shirts, pens and watches.

"The year that I spent with the MBA Enterprise Corps was one of the most important periods of my life," says Mr Lynch, 37.

The idea for the MBA Enterprise Corps was sown in 1989 when the then presidential candidate, Ross Perot and former White House adviser David Gergen shared the platform at a business conference at the University of North Carolina. MBA graduates could probably do more good in Warsaw than on Wall Street, Mr Gergen said during his speech.

Staff at the University of North Carolina contacted other business schools in the US. Sixteen were positive about the idea and the consortium was born in 1990.

Since then, 507 volunteers have signed up for the programme which now operates in Thailand, Ukraine, Croatia, Bulgaria and central Asia. Some countries no longer participate, including Russia, where, after the economic downturn, host companies decided they could no longer afford it.

Applicants must be second-year

### There is no hint of Enterprise Corps volunteers imposing their management systems or values

or recently graduated MBAs from participating business schools, which include those at Columbia University, Berkeley, Chicago, Pennsylvania Cornell and Yale.

An applicant must have three or more years work experience and be a US citizen. International students may apply only for post-positions with US affiliates and may be placed only in countries other than their native country.

The corps, with the assistance of the US Agency of International Development, pays for training, expenses including air fares and a re-entry stipend of up to \$4,000.



The host company provides wages at local level and a furnished home.

Leigh Shamblin, an executive director of the programme, says potential recruits have an average age of 29 and want to add an international dimension to their careers. There is an element of altruism, she says.

"The corps is certainly not for everyone," she says. "The job market for MBAs in the US is fantastic right now; MBAs are being offered high salaries and signing on bonuses which are very hard to turn down in the face of high students loans."

"We are looking for those MBAs who realise that spending 15 months in the corps, gaining early international work experience, learning a new language, and helping businesses in emerging and transforming economies will reap personal and professional rewards well beyond the short-term lure of today's offers," says Mrs Shamblin.

"While corps' members work primarily in one country during their tenure, the skills they gain - flexibility, the ability to work and plan in uncertain and fast-changing environments without being daunted, the ability to manage in an environment where market and other important business information is lacking - will make them better managers... anywhere in the world."

Mrs Shamblin, who was herself a volunteer in Slovakia, rejects

the notion of volunteers spearheading a form of management imperialism. "There is no suggestion in the programme of volunteers imposing their management systems or values," she says.

Mr Lynch and his wife, graduates of the Wharton Business School at the University of Pennsylvania, wanted an international dimension to their careers. "The desire for adventure was greater than any sense of altruism," he says.

His desire for overseas work, he adds, was whetted by study at universities in Britain and Spain prior to working at Procter and Gamble, the consumer products group, and Marakon, the Connecticut management consultancy. His wife, Anne, who had worked at Control Data Corporation before studying for an MBA, shared his desire. Poland, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, was attractive.

With a case half-full of macaroni - they had been told there were food shortages - the couple went to work for Krakow Business Services, a small privately owned consultancy. It worked with western clients interested in investing in Poland, as well as local ones.

"We naively thought we would be bestowing our wisdom on the consultancy. What we found was a mutual learning process. The Poles are good business people but they were faced by a multitude of problems, ranging from

cash-flow to the distribution infrastructure," he says. Ms Kalin adds: "We learnt to think laterally and more creatively."

Before the year's end, the couple wanted to set up a business. Living in a working class suburb and working in a local business, Mr Lynch says he gained greater insight than if he had worked in a US-based company in Poland. "We quickly learnt Polish and we got to know local people - all of which has helped us understand our workforce better. I believe one year of relative poverty - with no car and no telephone at home - was a small price for what we learnt."

Many of his friends in the US, he says, are investment bankers and highly paid consultants. But "we have had the great satisfaction of starting our own business working with a young and highly creative team."

Ms Kalin is sure that had she and her husband not joined the MBA Enterprise Corps they would have successfully started a business in the US. "But we were given the fantastic opportunity of doing something very different for one year, a year in which we learnt a tremendous amount.

Then by staying here we avoided the rat-race encountered by many of our peers in the US and the distractions that big salaries can provide. We could concentrate on building a business - which we have successfully done."