Qualified Men for Technical Assistance

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The success of foreign technical assistance programs depends to a very great degree on the ability, initiative and personality of the people sent out as advisers. It is a job worthy of our better technicians.

The U. S. technician in a foreign land is becoming more and more commonplace as we seek to help the “underdeveloped countries” of the world. Those of us who have spent time overseas on technical assignments have usually found the assignment to be an eye-opening experience. A great many other technicians have no doubt considered whether they want to seek such an assignment or to accept one that has been offered. Others who have no interest in going overseas are asking whether the technical assistance programs are effective. Let us take a look at the situation as it appear from overseas.

We Americans are accustomed to houses with central heating, to heated cars, supermarkets, canned goods, the corner drug store, ready-made clothes and a great many conveniences. Overseas the expert and his family have to give up some of these luxuries. This is not to imply that we must expect to live in a hovel and eat only local food. To move into a far-away country does, however, require certain adjustments in ways of living. On one hand we may find ourselves with a full-time maid for the first time in our lives and on the other hand in the coldest house we have ever lived in.

Experts who go for an assignment of one year or more are usually encouraged to take their families along. This usually proves to be the best arrangement. This means, however, that the entire family must be prepared to make the necessary adjustments, including that of learning to speak in a new language in most cases.

Technically we are in for a certain amount of adjustment as well. Those few who go out with the idea that they can just transplant U. S. techniques to an unenlightened area are due for a rude shock. Those who go as helpers, who have had a certain experience that may help local technicians to solve local problems, are much more likely to succeed.

The “underdeveloped country” is likely to have some very intelligent and well read technicians. Some of the better local technicians may have studied in the U. S. on their particular specialty. The U. S. technician may find that the local man has read the latest issues of the technical journals and that he has the latest texts available for reference. The reverse may also be true and there may be no local man in the field of work.

The good local technicians are likely to be woefully underpaid, without adequate transportation, and mixed with more than the usual number of lazy or incompetent government workers. Quite often the better local technicians have some good ideas as to what needs to be done. They may need help to find the key points that are delaying progress. The local man may also need the help and the prestige of the “Foreign Expert” to get an effective program in motion.

The U. S. technician who goes in prepared to learn will find that the flow of information is in both directions. He will learn as well as teach. The intelligent and well-trained local specialist of the country will be able to show him many useful things. The thing that may come as a surprise to some, however, is that the uneducated people may also be a valuable source of information. A tent-dwelling desert Bedouin who has never learned to write his own name can call an amazingly large number of native plants by their common names and give information as to their grazing

Figure 1. Range improvement through brush burning and seeding of perennial grass is explained to a group of Soil Conservation trainees from Cyprus by I. Lanir, Farm Planner, Israel Soil Conservation Service. Oryzopsis miliacea and Phalaris tuberosa furnish valuable grazing on former brush areas.
value and distribution. Range technicians from the U. S. may well ask themselves if they have as detailed information on their own minor species as these uneducated Arabs have accumulated through years of close observation.

Not all the problems are technical problems in the usually accepted sense. Local laws and customs are often serious barriers to progress. Lack of foreign exchange, customs regulations, import licenses and other barriers quite often make the import of the latest type of machine or the best adapted seeds practically impossible. This may make necessary the choice of alternative methods and locally available types of machines or even hand methods. The local technician may be a rich man’s son who feels that getting his hands dirty is below him. The man may not be actually lazy. In certain cultural groups educated men do not work with their hands.

The U. S. technician must learn as much as possible about the local situation and try to find acceptable solutions to the key problems. This requires a broad knowledge of the technical field, plus adaptability and common sense. Adaptability is a particularly necessary trait. The ability to “make do” with the facilities available usually spells success.

There is usually a great deal to be done and very limited facilities for doing the job. By study, consultation and careful evaluation, the work must be directed toward those activities and projects that promise the best results. Care is necessary to insure that projects are within the capabilities of the farmers and the country to carry out.

The technician who has a great deal of experience in actually carrying out the details of the job will find a ready use for these talents. Actual farm experience is particularly useful for those who work in various fields of agriculture. A range management specialist may, for example, find himself trying to adjust a faulty electric fence charger being used on a grazing trial or helping to adjust a machine for cutting grass seed. It may even be that the particular job will fail if the expert cannot provide just this type of assistance.

The success of an expert depends as much upon his ability to win friends and influence people as upon his technical knowledge of his field. Both local experts and local farmers and ranchers must be sold on new techniques. This requires enthusiasm and salesmanship. It also requires that the expert be friendly, tactful and tolerant.

A sincere desire to help the people of the particular country to improve their farming methods and their standard of living is essential to the success of a technical assistance assignment. Local people are quick to sense the fact if an expert is more interested in being a tourist than in being a friendly helper. Those who take a foreign assignment principally for the trip are very likely to be discouraged and not too happy with their work.

The ability to meet discouragement without giving up is also necessary. Seeds ordered by air mail for rush delivery may lie in customs for five months while the season for seeding slips away. Inexcusable? Sure it is inexcusable, but it happens. One must learn to postpone the trial for which this particular packet of seed was ordered and go ahead with other projects in the meantime. The man who would let such a thing spoil a year’s work has little business trying technical assistance work.

If you as a technician have not been discouraged by this list of requirements, then by all means try to see if there is a job for you in this type of work. There are certainly plenty of countries needing help to bring up their agricultural production in order to provide higher living standards.

Such jobs are usually well paid and provide the opportunity of travel to places we hardly dreamed of seeing, of making many fine friends and of broadening our perspective. We learn as much as we teach. There is also a great deal of pleasure in seeing ideas translated into action which you know will benefit the country. One may justifiably feel that he is helping to shape the future program of agricultural development in his particular field.