

# FieldNotes

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## Recruiting and Screening Program Participants

Imagine that you work at the front desk of a computer repair shop and an irate customer comes in to complain about the service he has received. How would you react? How far would you go to appease the customer? When would you engage your supervisor?

Such real-life scenarios are part of a role-playing exercise that applicants to the *Conéctate* program in Venezuela, a youth employment training initiative, undergo to be selected. Launched in 2005, *Conéctate* provides disadvantaged young people, ages 18 to 29, with job and life skills training, internships, and assistance with job placement.

Finding young people who are the right 'match' for a youth development initiative can be challenging. What steps can youth-serving programs take to successfully promote their services to the young people they seek to reach? How can programs effectively screen applicants without spending inordinate time and resources?

Those programs supported through a global youth development initiative of Nokia and the International Youth Foundation (IYF) have learned a great deal about how to publicize their programs and effectively screen participants. When it comes to recruitment, some have developed pro-bono relationships with the media. Others rely on nonprofit networks and alumni to spread the word. Most have finely tuned their screening processes, yet when it comes to making tough decisions about who to accept, often it comes down to the level of passion a young person exhibits and his or her desire to learn and grow through the program.

Featured here are the experiences of three IYF partner organizations in Nigeria, Poland, and Venezuela in recruiting and screening program participants. Each of the programs focuses on developing life skills among youth — from employability skills in Venezuela to the skills needed to be effective leaders in Nigeria.

## TIPS FOR DEVELOPING PROGRAM APPLICATIONS

Most of the Nokia-IYF programs use an application form to gather initial information about a potential participant. In addition to obtaining standard information such as name, address, gender, date of birth, and educational/employment background, IYF partners recommend the following:

- Ask applicants to describe their past experiences related to your program offerings (e.g., involvement in service projects).
- Assess their current skill level with respect to the life and other skills your program seeks to develop.
- Inquire why they are uniquely suited to participate in the program.
- Ask how they hope to use the training/experience they receive in the future.
- If possible, make application forms available online through your website, giving applicants the choice of either filling in an electronic form or, for those who don't have ready access to the Internet, downloading the application and mailing it in.
- Request that applicants include the name and contact details for at least one independent reference.
- Ask applicants how they found out about the program so you can gauge the success of your marketing efforts.

### Developing a Participant Profile

While many of those programs supported through the Nokia-IYF initiative have established criteria for the types of youth they seek to reach, others target their audiences more broadly, reaching out, for example, to low-income youth who live at the very margins of their societies. How you go about promoting your program depends on your goals and whom you seek to reach.

Some groups have established program selection criteria which include: educational background/attainment level, socio-economic status, geographic location, and past experience related to the program's offerings (e.g., basic IT skills). Less concrete, but just as important, factors that program managers emphasize are a young person's overall level of enthusiasm for the program and commitment to actively participating.

In Nigeria, for example, participants in LEAP Africa's Youth Leadership Programme are required to be 18 to 30 years of age,

high school graduates, fluent in English, and residents of one of the program's six target areas within the country. Even if they haven't exercised significant leadership in the past, they need to possess strong motivation and have a clear vision for how they want to contribute to their community.

In Venezuela, the *Conéctate* program targets disadvantaged high school graduates, ages 18 to 29, in three cities. The youth should have a demonstrated interest in information technology and business. Special attention is focused on identifying those who have family members dependent upon them for income. Candidates must be currently unemployed and have no employment or further educational prospects.

In Poland, the Make a Connection – *Przylacz Sie* program promotes youth volunteerism and civic engagement, while enabling young people to develop concrete skills and experience that will improve their future education and employment prospects. The program targets youth, ages 16 to 22, who live throughout the country and who have a clear vision for a volunteer project they seek to launch.

### Getting the Word Out: Publicizing Your Program

IYF partners pursue a variety of strategies for promoting their programs to prospective participants and ensuring that those youth who could benefit most are aware of the program. Strategies range from TV and radio broadcasts to school postings to alumni presentations at popular youth venues.

The Polish Children and Youth Foundation (PCYF) begins to publicize the *Przylacz Sie* program in March each year in order to announce those selected by June. Through its pro bono relationship with Viva, a TV channel, and *Radio Stacja*, PCYF broadcasts brief announcements of the program and encourages young people to apply. Information is also posted on NGO websites and 10,000 leaflets are distributed in over 90 schools. Program alumni play an important role in outreach activities by hosting presentations throughout the country.

Such a multi-pronged approach has proven successful. Of the 655 applications PCYF received in 2006, 79 young people were selected — an acceptance rate of 1:8. While PCYF has excelled in generating significant interest in the program, it prefers an acceptance rate of 1:5 so that fewer youth are rejected. "Developing an effective recruitment process takes time," says Bartosz Sulek, PCYF Program Manager, adding that while the program exceeded its applicant target, it managed to achieve a related goal: educating more youth about the importance of youth volunteerism and civic engagement.

“I can often tell from their writing their level of commitment for what they want to do. You have to decipher that they're not just saying what they think you want to hear.”

— Ngozi Obigwe, General Manager, LEAP Africa

In Venezuela, the *Conéctate* program tailors its outreach to the three cities where the program operates: Caracas, Carabobo, and Anzoátegui. While the program is managed at the national level by Fundación para La Infancia y la Juventud – *Oportunidades*, it is delivered by grassroots NGOs in each city. These local partners conduct targeted outreach — meeting with youth groups, advertising on local radio stations or in newspapers, and tapping program alumni to refer youth.

Similarly in Nigeria, LEAP Africa relies on local partner organizations to promote its Youth Leadership Programme within the six locations in the country where it operates. Outreach formally begins two months prior to the date applications are due. Individuals (e.g., peers, faculty members, school administrators, and representatives of religious or community organizations) nominate candidates using an online form, or youth may apply on their own. In addition to promoting the program on its website, LEAP distributes flyers at high schools, universities, and youth development organizations, and networks with national service-oriented organizations such as Rotary to help promote the program. In 2006, LEAP received 120 applications, from which 70 youth were selected.

## Screening Participants

IYF partners use a combination of methods to screen participants, generally starting with a written application form, followed by individual or group meetings, as feasible, to further assess candidate qualifications.

In screening applicants — on paper and in person — partners emphasize the importance of an individual's commitment to the mission of the program. Says LEAP's General Manager Ngozi Obigwe, "They (applicants) need to make a strong case for wanting to make a difference in the community." Innovation is also



*A youth volunteer in Poland demonstrates to children the art of making pottery. Since 2001, the Make a Connection – Przylacz Sie program has equipped nearly 10,000 Polish youth with the skills and resources to launch volunteer projects in their communities.*

important. To verify that applications are truthful, LEAP asks for a character reference that is not a family member.

In Poland, applications can be downloaded from the program's webpage, or requested from PCYF, and need to be submitted by mail. Applicants must demonstrate that they are solely responsible for planning and executing their proposed project, and that there will be a lasting benefit to their local communities. Applicants must also describe the innovativeness of their approach and plans for long-term sustainability.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

As you develop and refine your program, below are points to consider in recruiting and screening participants:

- **Have you produced materials — print and/or online — that describe your program, the selection criteria, application deadline, and process for submission (e.g., by post, via email, or through a web-based form)?** Consider adding quotes/testimonials from past participants demonstrating how the program helped them achieve their goals.
- **Have you carefully defined the qualities that you are looking for in a program participant?** Such qualities might include age range, socio-economic status, educational background, and past experience.
- **Have you considered what networks, if any, might be helpful in spreading the word?** For example, do you have relationships with youth groups, youth-serving NGOs, universities, and other organizations, who could assist with outreach?
- **Have you developed a screening and approval process?** In doing so, consider how many stages will be necessary and how you will inform applicants of their status.
- **Do you have connections with youth media outlets that might advertise your program for free or at a reduced rate?** Mainstream media are also helpful as many youth find out about the Nokia/IYF programs through their parents and other adults.
- **Have you explored ways of including donor representatives in the recruitment and selection process?** Nokia was instrumental in helping PCYF develop pro bono relationships with media outlets in Poland. Through engaging a Nokia representative on the program's screening committee, PCYF benefited from a corporate perspective and strengthened ties with the company's local office.



“We look for passion. If we can see from the application that they really want to do this, it’s very important for us.”

– Bartosz Sulek, Program Manager, Polish Children and Youth Foundation

The screening of *Przylacz Sie* applications is managed by program alumni, under the supervision of the program’s manager. Of the 655 applications received in 2006, an Alumni Committee, composed of 15 young people, selected 204 to be presented to the formal Competition Committee. Members include a Nokia representative, a program trainer, a PCYF board member, an evaluation expert, and an NGO representative. From the 204 proposals it reviewed, the Committee invited 84 youth to participate in a three-day training — the last stage of the selection process. During the training, participants received feedback on their project proposals and were asked to submit a final proposal. Of the 84 who attended the training, 79 were formally accepted to the program and received small grants.

In Venezuela, the *Conéctate* program selects youth with varying levels of experience to participate in its three different training levels: basic ICT training, intermediate training, and advanced training. Far more youth apply for the basic training, with *Conéctate* able to accept only half. The application process for all three levels begins with filling out a questionnaire, followed by group meetings in which instructors describe the program and answer questions.

Only fifty youth will be selected over time for *Conéctate*’s highest level of training. Selection must be done carefully to ensure that participants have the requisite competencies and aptitudes to excel in the training and meet employer needs afterward. Following an initial application process, qualifying youth are invited to participate in focus groups. Program staff guide the youth through a series of role playing exercises to see how they react in certain situations and their level of life skills development in such areas as decision-making and conflict resolution.

## Lessons Learned

IYF partners emphasize that excelling at recruiting and screening program participants often takes time and involves a degree of trial and error. When it comes to publicizing your program, having an established program brand and track record helps, as does having committed alumni who are willing to assist in recruitment efforts. Other lessons include:

- **To the extent possible, meet qualified applicants prior to selection.** In Nigeria, LEAP Africa reports that there have been cases when applications are misleading or when an application has been filled out by someone other than the applicant. To address this problem, LEAP asks for references to be included and tries to meet applicants face-to-face.
- **Aim to capture in the application process whether, and how much, experience a young person has had related to**

**your program goals.** PCYF, for example, selects groups that have had experience and those that have not to foster peer-to-peer learning within each “class.”

- **Too many applicants are better than not enough.** Striking the proper balance between adequately promoting and over promoting your program can be difficult. While the latter can force you to “reject” more applicants than you might like, the publicity you generate can fulfill other program goals.
- **Don’t expect that you will have the same number of participants at the end of the program that you did at the beginning.** In Poland, for example, those volunteer groups supported through Make a Connection – *Przylacz Sie* often increase in size as young people learn about local activities and want to get involved. On the other hand, in Nigeria, the Youth Leadership Programme tends to lose participants as a result of young people’s conflicting demands at school and work. To adjust for this, the program accepts slightly more young people than it expects to finish.
- **Always be open to continually improving your approach.** Says PCYF’s Sulek, “The program is always changing. We’re always trying to add something new. We always ask what’s working well and what’s not.”

## Additional Resources

LEAP Africa, Youth Leadership Programme Nomination and Application Guidelines, ([www.leapafrika.org/youthprogrammes.asp](http://www.leapafrika.org/youthprogrammes.asp))

“Participation in Youth Programs: Enrollment, Attendance and Engagement,” *New Directions for Youth Development*, Volume 2005, Issue 105, Wiley Periodicals

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