

■ by Diane Stark

Hiring reliable summer staff is an ongoing challenge for camps around the country. To help solve this problem, many camps are looking outside the United States and hiring staff from nations around the world.

This process can be complicated, but here's how five camps are navigating the international (hiring) waters. ►

Photo courtesy of Camp Crosley, YMCA





Victor
(Brazil)

GOING INTERNATIONAL

Filling staffing gaps through international hiring

“Many of our international staff come from urban areas in their home countries, so they haven’t spent a lot of time in nature. It’s neat to see them hike in the woods for the first time.” —Tyler Wagner, Twinlow Camp

Utilizing Personal and Ministry Connections

Eric Small, director of Pineywoods Camp (Woodlake, Texas), uses a staff exchange program with a camp in Ukraine. “We helped to start a camp there in 2008, and for the past three years we have been trading staff with them,” says Small. “We took a team of staff members there to build cabins, and they sent two of theirs to work in our camp this summer.” Small uses international staff for kitchen help and maintenance workers. “Our staff wear a lot of hats,” he says.

Shane Carlson, the director of CRISTA Camps (Poulsbo, Washington), hires his international staff through his camp’s ministry partner, Children of the Nations. “It is our fourth summer using international staff, mostly from Malawi,” he says. “Children of the Nations is an organization that raises children out of poverty and hopelessness so they can become leaders who transform their nations. They not only meet their physical needs, but they teach them to be leaders in their countries. Serving in our camps offers them practical work experience and the chance to use the leadership skills they have learned.” Carlson’s international staff serve in many capacities. “In addition to support staff, they each work as a counselor at some point during the summer.”

Utilizing International Staffing Organizations

Joy Lavens, the program coordinator at Camp Manitouqua (Frankfort, Illinois), started hiring international staff from South Africa in 2013 because she was having trouble finding enough domestic staff. Her camp has been using International Exchange North America (IENA) for the past five years. “Interested staff members can apply to work at our camp through the IENA website,” Joy explains. “They interview them, do the paperwork and help get them here on time.” This organization has worked well for Lavens’ camp, but she has one word of caution. “IENA is not a Christian organization, but they do have a place on their website that asks about the applicant’s faith background and if they would be willing to work at a faith-based camp,” she says. Lavens uses her international staff for the day camp positions. “Our staff rotate through the various age groups,” says Lavens. “That way, they can learn how to interact and share the Gospel with different-aged kids.”

Tyler Wagner, director of Twinlow Camp and Retreat Center (Rathdrum, Idaho), started hiring internationally five years ago, after struggling to find male staff members. He hires three or four international staffers each summer. He uses Camp Staff USA for their international hiring. “They find the kids, ▶



Caitlin
(South Africa)

Photo courtesy of Camp Manitouqua

Gustavo
(Brazil)



Photo courtesy of Camp Crosley YMCA

Jumping into International Staffing

7 ways to get started

1. Comb your connections. Who do you know that might be affiliated with a Christian organization overseas? Does your church have overseas ministry partners? Does your camp? Making connections with ministries in other nations can be a great way to form partnerships and find international staff.
2. Consider using an agency that helps with international staffing. These agencies handle the search, as well as the visa paperwork. But be prepared to pay a fee for these services (usually in the range of \$350 to \$500 per international staff member).
3. Start your search early. Many international staff want to commit to a summer job as early as possible. Waiting until the spring to start looking could leave you with fewer hiring options.
4. Dot your i's and cross your t's. The paperwork to bring in international staff can be arduous. Start early and encourage your prospective staff to be precise in filling out their visa applications.
5. Always have a backup plan. Visas are issued by the State Department, and they can be denied, leaving you unable to bring in that prospective staff member.
6. If necessary, fight for the staff you want. Last year, a boy from Mexico served at Twinlow Camp (Rathdrum, Idaho). He wanted to return to their camp this summer, but his visa was denied. The camp director and others wrote letters to their congressman, informing him of this problem. The boy's visa was granted when he re-submitted it. They are thrilled to have him returning to their camp.
7. Above all, pray. Staffing is one of the most important decisions in running a camp. Ask God to bring you the right people, even if they have to cross an ocean to get to you.

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and we interview them,” Wagner says. “This enables us to dig into their faith background and make sure they will be a good fit for our camp.” Also, Wagner prefers to hire from Spanish-speaking countries. “Most of our international staff speak English well, but if they don’t, we have domestic staff who speak Spanish, so there’s less of a language barrier.”

Wagner’s summer staff rotates through the various jobs throughout the summer. “Many of our international staff come from urban areas in their home countries, so they haven’t spent a lot of time in nature,” says Wagner. “It’s neat to see them hike in the woods for the first time. The only downside to this is that many of them cannot swim, so obviously, they don’t serve as lifeguards, but every other position is open to them.”

Every summer for the past 36 years, Richard Armstrong, the director of Camp Crosley YMCA (North Webster, Indiana), hires 25 international staff members through Camp America. Most of their staff comes from the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. “Our camp has an account through Camp America, and we can search the available personnel based on our needs,” says Armstrong. “We can watch videos on their website where the applicants tell about themselves. We also have a placement coordinator who can help us find staff based on our needs.”

Armstrong hires international staff for foodservice and especially for his water sports program. “We love hiring staff from Australia and New Zealand to teach sailing and other water sports. They are much more qualified for that than most domestic staff.”

Benefits of International Staffing

At Pineywoods Camp, Eric Small has seen many benefits of international staffing. “Bringing in staff from other countries exposes my domestic staff to the importance of missions work,” he says. “It plants the desire to share the Gospel and creates a real spark for missions.”

He’s also seen his international staff benefit from working at his camp. “Many times, they are timid at first and they have anxiety about being so far from home, but before long, they come out of their shells and fully embrace the experience. It’s great for everyone when that happens. We learn from each other.”

The campers at Twinlow Camp love the international staff members. “Idaho is a very homogeneous place, so

many of our campers have never met someone from another country,” Wagner says. “They love learning about new places and different cultures.”

Wagner has seen benefits for the international staff as well. “Many of them are not as comfortable sharing their faith with the campers, but they have such loving, humble hearts,” he says. “We train them how to share the Gospel and lead a Bible study, and they are able to take that home with them, along with a wide variety of new experiences.”

Carlson says that international hiring at CRISTA Camps is a win for everyone involved. “The campers and parents love the diversity here. The international staff have a great learning experience. Our domestic staff benefits from seeing the authentic faith of our international staff. Many of them come from places where following Jesus is difficult, and it’s encouraging to hear their stories and see God using them. International staffing allows our camp to take part in what God is doing globally.”

Armstrong has never seen a downside to international hiring. “It makes people more globally aware,” he says. “We want to emphasize the similarities, rather than the differences among people. The international students get to experience America, but we also get to experience their culture through them. We bring the world to camp and everyone benefits by learning about one another’s culture and making deep, lasting connections.”

Lavens has seen benefits for her campers at Camp Manitoqua. “Spending time with the international staff helps the kids to see that our God is so much bigger than they thought,” says Lavens. “They see that people in other countries love Jesus and they are working to serve Him, too. God is using people all over the world. It’s a great reminder that each of us can make a difference for His kingdom.”

She also notes the benefits to her domestic staff. “It really opens up their perspective and helps them see that the faith community is so big,” she says. “It’s encouraging for all of us.”

Lavens recommends international staffing to other camps. “It’s a longer process, but it’s so worth it,” she says. “It can be scary because you have to trust God to get them here on time, but once they’re here, it’s amazing to watch God use their unique talents.” ■



Photo courtesy of Camp Mantiagua

Megan
(South Africa)

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Diane Stark lives in Indiana with her husband and their five children. Her writing has been published in Guideposts, Outreach, War Cry, and about 40 Chicken Soup for the Soul books. She loves to write about the important things in life: her family and her faith.