

“All we want you to do is talk....and drink coffee” ***The Global Red Cross Red Crescent experience with Randomised Coffee Trials***

The Red Cross Red Crescent Movement is the world's largest humanitarian organisation, 430,000 staff and 17 million volunteers working in 189 National Societies. The sheer size and scope of this 'Movement' is one of the organisations greatest strengths and presents significant potential for collaboration, learning and innovation. Yet often people are nationally fortress-ed and only a small percentage are able to engage with or connect to others outside of their local area, let alone outside of their country.

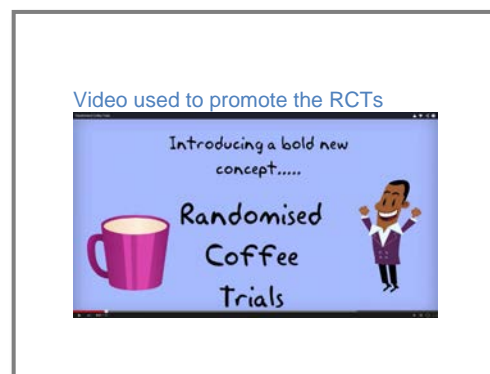
Typically it is quite difficult to access international contacts in the organisation, you must be nominated to regional committees or be engaged in global projects or be appointed to an international role or something similar, what was needed was an approach that could link people directly and without regard to their role or status in the organisation.

The Randomised Coffee Trials (RCTs) were first developed by Nesta UK; people sign up and each month (or fortnight or week) are randomly assigned someone else in the company to have a short coffee break chat with. Then next month you are assigned someone new. The idea is to just give people a space to talk, and then to see what happens, it promotes connection and collaboration. If you want to learn more about Randomised Coffee Trials, [David Gurteen](#) is a passionate advocate of this and other conversational approaches to learning and is well worth reading.

In the Red Cross Red Crescent the RCTs were implemented as a component of a broader Learning and Engagement Plan for Volunteering Development. A core principle underpinning this plan has been to create spaces (both physical and otherwise) where people could come together and talk, learn from each other and collaborate for solutions and innovation. The plan focuses on conversation as an underestimated tool for learning. A number of similar 'conversational approaches to learning' have also been implemented alongside the RCTs in the Learning and Engagement Plan.

As far as I am aware RCTs had never before been tried on the scale that we were intending to implement here, we wanted to open it up to anyone in the Movement who had an interest in volunteering, given the centrality and scope of volunteering in this organisation, this is an astonishingly diverse and large stakeholder group.

We created [a short video](#) and other promotional pieces to help communicate about the initiative and invited anyone to participate. We offered the initiative in four languages, English, Spanish, Arabic and French. There were no boundaries placed on what they should talk about, no meeting summaries, no action points and no agendas. We suggested they could talk about volunteering but it was entirely up to them. The only rule we placed in the matching was that you couldn't be matched with someone from your own country, which meant that instead of meeting for coffee in person, it had to be done over skype. It has been running for about 6 months now and here are four key things that we learned after soliciting feedback from the participants;



1. People love the idea

The idea has resonated, most people immediately like it, there is something intriguing about being able to meet with a volunteer from Syria one month and then a health programs manager in Fiji the next. [The videos we created](#) to promote the initiative have more than 11,000 views and approximately 700 people have signed up already, with around 600 participating each month, which while only a fraction of the total Red Cross Red Crescent population, does represent a good start by most internal comparisons.

However we did find that it has so far been more popular with some regions than others; the initiative did very well amongst both Eastern and Western Europe, North America, Australasia, the Caribbean and parts of Asia, the Spanish version was likewise very popular across Latin America and Spain. The French version however has been less popular including in French speaking Africa (only about 50 participate), and the Arabic version has largely not taken hold, with no more than 10 signing up at any one time.

It is hard to say with authority why these differences exist, whether it is cultural, access to technology or the strategies that were employed to promote the initiative. The project has however attracted people across all strata's of the organisation, there are directors, CEOs, and middle management participating alongside of volunteers and project officers.

2. The biggest problem is people finding time

The single biggest complaint from participants has been that their match doesn't respond to their request to meet up or that the two of them struggle to find a mutually convenient time to talk.

"It happened to me, I left some messages on their skype to no avail...Maybe they thought I was a stalker! ;) LOL."

Sometimes this was about prioritisation, this is not a management driven and endorsed activity (though numbers of leaders do participate), and it can get squeezed out of people's competing time demands. The activity is also perhaps sometimes seen as more of a social activity, rather than a legitimate work priority.

Sometimes people connecting with each other was complicated by significant time zone differences, busy periods of work or significant travel schedules, particularly to remote locations. This has proved very frustrating for participants;

"I have to admit that though there have been 4 rounds, I was only able to connect with the first person I was matched with while the last 3 have never gotten back to my initial email/meeting request. This is unfortunate because I really would like to have the opportunity to learn more about what others are engaged in within their own programs and Societies and also discussing ways in which they engage their volunteers."

There is a need to make sure that those that sign up are actually participating, as such we have begun temporarily removing people from the initiative if they don't return requests for contact from their 'match'. They are placed back on the roster if they write to us and request to be included again. This has however, added to the management time of the initiative.

We have also found that a small percentage of participants (approximately 5-10%) withdraw after 3-4 rounds of matches and that the most common reason they cite is that they no longer have the time to schedule their skype catch ups. The second most common reason for withdrawing is when they leave the organisation. It is possible however that for some, three or four rounds is enough to satisfy their curiosity of the initiative.

3. Managing it technically can be a challenge

The project was relatively easy in the first month, just under 100 people signed up, we used a simple group generator in excel that did random matching and then we mailed out manually to participants to inform them of their match (we tried an excel mailing sheet first but it kept failing or only partially succeeding, furthermore it was still time consuming to enter all of the email address and matches, so it didn't save much time).

By the second month we had 250 people playing and couldn't manage it anymore with existing tools, fortunately the people at [Spark Collaboration](#) came to the rescue with a platform that allows people to register and then automatically manages the matching and mailing each month. This was a god send, we found that you could source free software that handles the random matching relatively easily and you could separately source mailing programs, but a system that manages both for you automatically, saves a huge amount of time. It also works in three languages (English, French and Spanish) and the registrations are managed by the 'users' who create profiles, significantly reducing management time of the initiative. After a few teething issues it has now taken the whole fuss out of the project. If you are considering a similar project with large numbers I would definitely recommend this tool.

4. There were a lot of great work related outcomes, some unexpected.

People enjoy the experience and it contributes to feelings of motivation and being inspired

Those who were able to connect with their match almost unanimously reported extremely positive experiences and many found their engagement a source of inspiration;

"I wanted you to know that I just did the first coffee meeting at 6am this morning before work and it was such a lovely way

to start the day! Great idea to link up volunteers and staff from different National Societies. As well as a good chat, we both learnt a fair bit and hope to maintain the connection."

"I see value in retention. Sometimes I am just over our own politics, culture and systems and this "afar friend" brings a bit of normalcy back to my thinking and refocuses me on what's really important after all"

"I have a coffee partner from Trinidad and Tobago. She is so passionate about her work! I was very inspired and we will have our next meeting next month"

This is an important outcome in an organisation where volunteers and many of the staff are driven by an emotional connection to the cause and the drive to make a difference in the world, inspiration is important fuel amidst these dynamics and motivations.

It can build a sense of connectedness

One of the most frequently reported outcomes was that the initiative helped to build a sense of connectedness to the global organisation and a sense of unity and common purpose. To some, particularly volunteers, feeling a part of a *global* Movement is cited as a motivating factor for engagement and retention, feeling part of something big in the world that is making a difference. The RCTs gives them a simple way to experience this first hand and to be inspired by the work going on in other places;

"Globally I felt a sense of connection to mission- just Skype someone around the world and have an immediate understanding - very powerful.... I was all smiles, loved to see an equally full of smiles person and the excitement in our voices was pretty neat."

"Thank you for providing the opportunity to share and forge links with other volunteers worldwide. I had my first virtual coffee trial today and it was an awesome experience. Discussing our work and sharing our experiences just added the right flavor to what we do regardless of the distance. We are not alone . We have a voice."

"I find it absolutely amazing that you organize something like this. It really opens my view on the RC/RC movement."

On two occasions people have arranged to have their RCT skype meeting during a broader youth meeting so that everyone could meet their 'match' and they could discuss common issues together. This idea was extremely well received by both the 'match' and the youth groups.

It can strengthen networks and lead to longer and perhaps deeper engagement

One of the more impressive outcomes is that the initiative can help to strengthen professional networks, which can be of benefit to both individuals and National Societies, widening the reservoir from which people can gather ideas, support and learning. One third of respondents reported that they had follow up contact with one of their matches either through subsequent skype conversations, emails or Facebook.

"YEAH!!! (Redacted) and I connected today! VERY FUN! We are going to chat again next week."

The first round went remarkably well, as I was paired up with a brilliant woman from Australia who provided me with a good picture of the Australian Red Cross and general Australian civil services; amazingly, our different countries have very similar strategies in our communities! We're also planning on keeping in contact with one another for fun / for cultural education (including Red Cross information)

"With both of my contacts we couldn't arrange a skype, but we connected on Facebook and have been communicating there now"

"What I'm talking with them about is my Red Cross organisation and learning about theirs, what we do there and some other things about Red Cross/Red Crescent. Also we talk about our hobbies.... So I mean we learn to know each other and with some I build a good friendship and we have a second Skype call again ;). That's amazing."

"I enjoyed the opportunity to share with her how the American Red Cross is organized, and the volunteers and disaster cycle services that I serve alongside of every day. She told me about the work she does in Armenia educating youth and serving refugees. We are now friends on Facebook, and I look forward to staying in touch"

An illustration of the RCTs completed at a youth meeting in the UK (credit @amberamberson)



It can sometimes strengthen work practice

One of the key propositions we wanted to test was whether or not people felt that the initiative was useful for their work. Most (almost 90%) felt that it was useful in some way, in particular as highlighted above in helping them to feel inspired and a greater sense of unity and connectedness to the organisation. Some were able to identify specific outcomes, one person recounted that they worked in IT in a small National Society and found themselves connected with a senior IT professional, they had subsequent conversations and the person was able to learn from the experience and apply it in their work. Another came up with an idea for programs in disaster preparedness;

“I came to know that in Austria students are teaching the way of building disaster shelters as well as awareness in hygiene promotion and disaster where in my country it’s such a technical session we have not introduced in schools. But I realized this is a very good practice and of course I will introduce it here in Bangladesh also.”

Other benefits cited by participants included a sense of relief that others were dealing with the same challenges and the comfort that comes from receiving peer support. A small number of respondents however felt that it wasn’t useful from a work perspective at all;

“We had a nice chat and exchanged information about our involvement with Red Cross Societies, but I admit it didn’t help with my work and we didn’t have any subsequent conversations.”

“it is/was nice talking to other colleagues and listening to what they do in their National Society but no, there was little/no intention of continuing this contact and no, there was no real “learning” for me from these conversations.”

It is possible that given the sheer diversity of participants that sometimes it is too random to bring more targeted business outcomes. It has been suggested that we could add a filter in the matching process whereby participants indicate what their interest is and then are matched with others that had the same interest. There may be some merit to this suggestion; it is true that those that reported practical work related outcomes often struck a partner that was engaged in similar work;

“Yes, it was a great experience and I think we definitely will connect again! We also exchanged email IDs to keep each other posted on new youth developments specifically (since we’re both involved in youth work).”

It is also true of course, that no matter the initiative, there will always be some for whom it doesn’t work as well as others.

Final Reflections

The program has been successful over all, most participants who successfully participate find that it is worthwhile, ranging from just interesting through to inspiring, informative and/or a means to broaden their networks. Some find practical work outcomes from it.

The global nature of the game makes the experience exotic for many and helps people to feel a part of the larger organisation, this is a valuable outcome, the great majority of people in the organisation will never get a tangible sense of the scale, experience, passion and power of the Global Red Cross Red Crescent, there is value in this alone. It can help inspire people and in particular to motivate volunteers.

It is clear however that the initiative would similarly yield benefits on a smaller geographic scale, perhaps at a regional or National level. A Headquarters in a National Society for instance may find that a random coffee once a month between teams may lead to increased inter departmental collaboration. (one participant in our trial found that their match was a person working three offices away from them (in the same corridor) and they had never spoken before).

It is also likely that the initiative would work very well for technical teams at any scale, who may be disconnected by geography and/or organisational culture. Participants in these teams would no doubt be more likely to engage in technical discussions which could lead to better collaboration, program strengthening and innovation as well as a greater awareness of the realities of work for others in the team.

The fact that the initiative has attracted participants from all levels of the organisation is encouraging and demonstrates the breadth of its currency. It also provides leaders, staff, managers, and volunteers an insight into a different level of the organisation that they may not normally be afforded.

This has been a relatively simple initiative to run, there was some energy involved in establishing it, but now that we are utilising the tool from *Spark Collaboration*, the program largely runs itself, we merely promote it,

occasionally rectify technical issues and follow up on people who have signed up but are not engaging. This represents a small effort each month, but seemingly delivers disproportionate outcomes.

The RCTs by Skype has also delivered an inexpensive solution to connecting people without constantly relying on costly face to face meetings. There is of course no substitute for being in the same room as someone, but this initiative makes a decent complement to other efforts. For instance, we did also use the RCT in advance of a major global meeting on volunteerism. All registrants for the meeting had to participate in RCTs with others that were attending the Forum, this had the effect of building connections and breaking down barriers so that when people finally met in person they were much more ready to be open to share their learning.

Our primary goal overall was to help people build connections (in the knowledge that other outcomes would flow from this) and there can be no doubt this initiative has helped to achieve that and for next to nothing in terms of resources.

This article was written by Shaun Hazeldine at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent, based in Geneva. If you would like further information on any of the subjects raised here you can write to him at volunteering@ifrc.org