devex
Do Good. Do It Well.



DEVEX CAREER ADVICE AND INSIGHTS

POST-USAID PIVOTS: HOW THE AGENCY'S EX-WORKFORCE IS MOVING FORWARD

MARCH 2026

INTRODUCTION

INSIDE THE POST-USAID PIVOT

Over the past year, many who lost jobs as a result of the USAID crisis have bounced back — from practical pivots to bold reinventions. These are their stories.

It's been over one year since the U.S. foreign aid freeze was first enacted. The quick demise of the U.S. Agency for International Development that followed sent shock waves through the global development workforce, and the job market for sector professionals remains extremely challenging.

While many who lost jobs are still figuring out their next chapters, several others have moved forward in a variety of ways. From pivoting to the private sector to establishing a new company, or somewhere in between, there are several avenues for former USAID staffers and others looking to get back on their career paths.

This is why we've created this guide, featuring firsthand accounts from those who have transitioned to new roles, both inside and outside the development and social impact spaces. Coupled with expert guidance from career coaches and recruiters, our aim is to inspire and inform those looking to position their previous experience and skills for new roles.



TABLE OF

CONTENT

This guide contains nine sections over 13 pages, featuring firsthand accounts from development professionals and expert advice from career coaches and other sector experts.

Post-USAID pivots: They became development consultants 04

How to pivot: Turning layoffs into consulting careers 06

Post-USAID pivots: They became development entrepreneurs 07

How to pivot: Applying USAID experience to a new role 09

Post-USAID pivots: They moved into a new sector entirely 11

How to pivot: Reposition your CV for something new 13

How to pivot: Conveying your transferrable skills 14

Post-USAID pivots: How other pros have navigated the crisis 15

How to pivot: The benefits of volunteering 16



POST-USAID PIVOTS

THEY BECAME DEVELOPMENT CONSULTANTS

Many have considered shifting to consulting work in order to keep working in the sector. Learn how two new consultants successfully pivoted to project- and client-based work.

Staying in the sector and offering skills on a consultancy basis has been one way of earning during this period of uncertainty. "Probably anyone who works in this space has the skills to add value as a consultant," Sarah Steller, director of Keylime, a marketplace that matches international development organizations with consultants, said.

Like thousands of development professionals, Grace Tran, founder of Athena Insight Consulting LLC, and Taylor Williamson, director of Cadence Advisory, lost their jobs last year following USAID's dismantling.

For Tran, the pivot to consulting was not something she had given much consideration to previously. After being laid off, her gut reaction was to frantically apply to "anything and everything." But in a saturated job market, where people with decades of experience were applying for relatively junior roles, she struggled to see where she would fit.

"Consulting was kind of something that I was essentially forced into," said Tran. "It became really clear that I was not going to find a full-time job."

Consulting wasn't an immediate path for Williamson either, but as he figured out his next steps and spoke with others in the sector, he was increasingly drawn to the idea of working with a range of clients across a range of issues. He also applied for jobs — something he now sees as market research that helped him understand what roles were being hired for and how he could offer the services that organizations were seeking.



> *Probably anyone who works in this space has the skills to add value as a consultant.*
>
> **— Sarah Steller, director of Keylime**

One of the biggest challenges for both Tran and Williamson in starting out was securing their first clients. While cold applications and requests for proposals – or RFPs – can yield occasional leads, global health specialist and consultant Candela Iglesias Chiesa said that most consulting opportunities come from the people who already know your work. The goal, she added, is to get to the point where your services are requested, and this comes from effective networking.

Tran did an "extraordinary amount of networking." She targeted organizations with diversified funding sources — many of which had also been affected by layoffs and couldn't hire someone full-time, but still required support to provide services. Talking with a wide range of people helped land contracts for part-time or hourly work, said Tran, though her anchor client came from a conversation with a rowing teammate who works for a conservation organization that was hiring but hadn't yet advertised the position.

The best advice Williamson got was to "tell everyone that you know that you're consulting." You never know where the next connection will come from, and the weak ties are often the ones that land you the most work, he said.

In letting your network know about your career pivot, Williamson stressed the importance of a clear value proposition that makes it easy for someone to introduce you or summarize your expertise in a single sentence. "A lot of times, client acquisition happens when you're not in the room," he explained, so it comes down to someone else describing your work to a potential client, and they need to have a clear sense of what you're offering.

MORE ON DEVEX

- How to get started as a global development consultant
- Development consultancy trends for 2026

PRO TIP: CLAIM YOUR NICHE



"What do people already come to you for [or] what issue or approach do you want to be associated with? Because if you're known for everything, somebody's probably not going to come to you for the thing they need."

— Kelsi Kriitmaa, social impact coach

HOW TO PIVOT

TURNING LAYOFFS INTO CONSULTING CAREERS



> *Consulting was kind of something that I was essentially forced into. It became really clear that I was not going to find a full-time job.*
>
> **— Grace Tran, Athena Insight Consulting LLC**

Grace Tran, founder of Athena Insight Consulting LLC, and Taylor Williamson, director of Cadence Advisory, reflect on their first year as consultants.

INVEST IN NETWORKING

The best advice Williamson got was to "tell everyone that you know that you're consulting." You never know where the next connection will come from, and the weak ties are often the ones that land you the most work.

STICK TO YOUR NICHE

The question shouldn't be if you can do something, but whether the job fits your niche, Williamson said. Taking an assignment not aligned with your strengths could prevent you from delivering the desired results.

FIRM YET FLEXIBLE RATES

For Tran, it was important to establish a minimum hourly rate, along with varying rates for different client types. "You need to have a range of rates that you're willing to work with," depending on the clientele.

WATCH: TURNING LAYOFFS INTO THRIVING CONSULTING CAREERS

Two consultants share tips for successfully pivoting to project- and client-based work. **WATCH THE EVENT RECORDING**.



POST-USAID PIVOTS

THEY BECAME DEVELOPMENT ENTREPRENEURS

For some, losing their USAID-funded role meant finding new ways to continue the same work. Learn how they transitioned their expertise and networks to create new ventures.

The issues USAID was created to tackle still exist and therefore require solutions. "The needs, regardless of the issue you care about, still exist, but the actors, the places that are going to be mobilized and fill these gaps, are not really emerging clearly," said Kyle Dietrich, founder of Grounded Idealist, explaining that this is an opportunity for people to rebuild the future of the sector. We've talked to several former USAID pros who have done just that.

When Monica Bansal and Hadas Kushnir saw they were losing their climate-related positions at USAID, the two friends, who were neighbors in Washington, D.C., couldn't find anything they wanted in their sudden, forced job search. "We just wanted our jobs," said Kushnir.

Instead, they started their own environmental limited liability company. While Kushnir has since moved to Seattle, the friends are collaborating remotely with a grant from the Navigation Fund for fired federal workers doing climate projects. They both officially lost their jobs in July.

They've conducted surveys, along with group and individual interviews, that examine how the sudden end of U.S. foreign assistance affected environmental programs, and how those programs might continue. They've focused on seven countries: Bangladesh, Colombia, Kenya, Mozambique, Peru, the Philippines, and Vietnam. With this project, the Momentum for the Environment Initiative, partners in countries where USAID once funded programs can also be connected to funding that continues their work.

The friends said through their 150 interviews, people have been thankful there's a space to share their expertise.



> *We felt like there was so much knowledge, there was so much depth, there was so much that was at risk of being lost, that's the mode we went into.*
>
> **— Monica Bansal, environmental development entrepreneur**

Kevin Melton took a similar approach. In early March, the peace and security strategist received notice that his division at USAID was going to be cut — and with it, his job.

That weekend, during his kids' nap time, Melton drafted the business plan for what would become Pax Strategies, the risk analysis consulting firm he later launched. He had two decades of lessons learned on engaging with the military in development work. "We used to have USAID people sit next to four-star commanders. … That's gone now [and] pretty much why Pax exists."

The following Monday, Melton got a call from Rick Morgan, a former USAID conflict analytics lead who had also been laid off. Morgan added some ideas to the business proposal, then they brought on board Ami Morgan, a former director at the Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization, and Angela Greenwald, a retired U.S. Army civil affairs officer and former USAID senior adviser.

What they created is best described as a network — or bullpen, as Melton calls it — of experts on stand by to provide strategic advisory services to governments, commodity companies, private-sector clients, and international organizations in peacebuilding, conflict management, and investment more broadly.

He believes their unique network of contacts in difficult-to-reach and conflict-affected areas, including foreign service nationals on the ground, makes Pax's services attractive to public- and private-sector partners alike.

MORE ON DEVEX

- How a former USAID staffer created a network of security experts
- For those affected by USAID job loss, how to move forward in 2026
- How a former USAID staffer returned to entrepreneurship

WISE WORDS: SAME MISSION, NEW SYSTEM



"What if [Washington] D.C. moves away from being a government hub and becomes the next social-entrepreneurship hub of the world? Maybe this is how we build the future we want to see."

— Radhika Bhatt, climate and social impact career coach

HOW TO PIVOT

APPLYING USAID EXPERIENCE TO A NEW ROLE

Alder Bartlett, a former USAID staffer, on how she found meaningful and purpose-driven work outside of the global development sector.

Bartlett: It's a lot to pivot. It's hard to begin again. And a big part of me is incredibly appreciative to have landed in a mission-driven organization, doing work I really believe in and supporting an organization I can stand behind.

At the same time, I deeply loved the work we did at USAID. I really believed in what we were doing, and we had this incredible global community of extraordinarily talented development professionals. Losing that — the grieving and the sense of loss — is really hard to hold in parallel with the excitement of a new role and a new beginning. For those of us who had to make that transition very quickly, holding those feelings at the same time has been really difficult.

That's real. I try to stay connected to that part of myself through coaching and by staying in touch with former colleagues.

In terms of the new role, what has helped me a lot is reflecting on the systems and processes that worked well in my previous work. Nothing is perfect, of course, but there were many things that worked well. One lesson from USAID is that we essentially started over every four years with a new mission. In some ways, things stayed the same — the regulations, for example — but in practice, every country context was different.

So in a way, that experience was a gift. It reminded me that I've actually had to start over many times before.

Whenever I entered a new USAID mission, my approach was always to learn first — to listen deeply and authentically. That has translated directly into how I approach this new role. I try not to come in and immediately change things. Instead, I focus on understanding why something works the way it does, where it works well, and where it might not. I want to hear from staff about their pain points.

That's the mindset I brought into this role: I'm not here to make sweeping changes right away. I want to support people in the places where



"You can find [purpose] in more places than you think … that mission-driven piece is in a lot of organizations, and it might surprise you."

— Alder Bartlett
COO, Oregon Housing & Community Services



things don't feel like they're working for the greatest number of people. Let's talk about that together and figure out where I can help.

My experience at USAID has been valuable in concrete ways because you're exposed to many different approaches across countries. You build a mental library of examples. I've been able to draw on some of those — thinking, "This worked well in that context; maybe something similar could apply here." But I'm also careful not to constantly say, "At USAID, we did it this way," because that's not always helpful.

Instead, I try to learn from the sector I'm now working in. For example, with monitoring and evaluation, I've spent time researching how it's done in the affordable housing context. I've looked at which U.S. states are doing particularly strong work on affordable housing strategy and evaluation, and I've spent time studying their approaches. That helps me bring in examples that resonate more with the people I'm working with now.

I've also had to remind myself that it's okay to be in learning mode, even as a senior leader. Sometimes that's hard. I'll be in a room with eight or ten members of the executive team, and I'm not the expert on affordable housing. They knew that when they hired me — it's no surprise — but it can still feel uncomfortable when everyone else has deep subject expertise that I don't yet have.

But I try to remind myself that it's okay. I bring a unique set of experiences, and I try to contribute that where it makes sense. At the same time, I lean into the expertise already in the room.

As a leader, it's important to elevate the experience and knowledge of your team. I have an incredible group of staff who are deeply knowledgeable. I don't need to have all the answers. What I need to do is listen, help elevate the right ideas, and sometimes synthesize those ideas for leadership.

So for me, it's been about finding that balance as I join a new organization — especially one that doesn't have the international focus my previous work had. That's a big transition.

But at this moment in history, being able to help strengthen local government and local systems feels incredibly meaningful. We're supporting communities that are deeply affected by the economic realities and volatility happening at the federal level right now. Being part of strengthening local systems at a time like this feels powerful and important.

WATCH: HOW TO LAND YOUR NEXT MISSION-DRIVEN ROLE

Drawing on her own job-search experience and insights as an executive leadership coach, Bartlett shares advice for professionals affected by layoffs on how to stand out to hiring managers. **WATCH THE EVENT RECORDING.**



POST-USAID PIVOTS

THEY MOVED INTO A NEW SECTOR ENTIRELY

The former USAID workforce has in-demand skills that can apply to a wide range of sectors. Here's how some applied their transferrable skills to new career paths.

There are many fields in which the skills of former USAID staff have been transferred. Some have been related to development, including philanthropy, think tanks, or nonprofits focused on local issues. Others might be entirely new territory, such as the private sector or technology, or exploring unrelated passion projects.

In 2019, Brian Pedersen, who worked in social and behavior change full time with USAID-funded projects at international organizations, and his husband took a one-day workshop on buying bed-and-breakfasts, thinking they might start one down the road. But when Pedersen saw in early 2025 that his global health career of over 20 years was in jeopardy, their plan moved up.

In February 2025, they contacted a broker. In April, Pederson lost his position at USAID. By September, they bought the already-up-and-running Miss Murphy's Bed and Breakfast.

While it's a shift from global health, Pedersen said he sees ties to his previous career when he's looking after guests. "I'm hoping that they feel cared for, which is the same thing we try to do in global health," he said. "That's how I'm sort of bridging the gap between what I used to do and what I'm doing now."

Other bold pivots include a small and growing group of people who built careers inside USAID's orbit who have decided to run for political office, including Allison Eriksen, who worked in USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance for eight years.

After losing her job with USAID in March 2025, Eriksen was among those who went to Capitol Hill weekly seeking answers. She said the



> *"When I talk about why I am, I believe, far and away the most qualified candidate for working at the State House, I draw on every single job and title that I held at the agency, because it trained me for this in so many ways."*
>
> **— Brit Steiner, candidate for Ohio State House of Representatives**

message they got was to wait for the 2026 midterm elections in November, when Democrats have a chance to retake control of Congress.

"I felt like that level of government is just not meeting the moment," she said. "After several months, I finally realized I'm not under the Hatch Act anymore, and I could do something about it," she said, referring to the U.S. law that prohibits federal employees from engaging in political activity.

By the end of the summer, she had decided to run for a local office in Maryland, where she lives. She is seeking a Montgomery County Council seat representing District 3, which is home to a large number of current and former federal employees.

Meanwhile, others have gone on to do similar work outside the traditional development sector, such as Laura Wigglesworth, who began 2025 as a senior talent acquisition consultant at PATH and had worked in the sector for 25 years. For her and many others who lost their jobs as a result of the USAID cuts, the loss cut far deeper than a terminated contract.

"I'm realizing that I've not just lost my job, I've lost my industry," she said. Wigglesworth spent the following weeks and months applying to jobs and reaching out to her community, including organizing local career summits to help connect and support others in a similar predicament. But none of her efforts led to a new role in the oversaturated market.

After doing pro bono work for an artificial intelligence job-seeking platform, she landed a contract role with Callings.ai, an HR technology startup that uses AI to assist job seekers through the recruitment process.

MORE ON DEVEX

- **Trump dismantled USAID. Now these aid workers are running for office** (Pro)

WISE WORDS: FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE



"There's a balance between being able to have a title that really translates to an external audience and being true to what your role was in the organization."

— Alder Bartlett, COO, Oregon Housing & Community Services

HOW TO PIVOT

REPOSITION YOUR CV FOR SOMETHING NEW



> *"The past got you here today, but it need not define you moving forward."*
>
> **— Kathryn Harper, development writing expert**

CV writing expert Kathryn Harper shares practical tips for making a pivot, including the importance of reframing skills as adaptable and quantifying achievements.

FOCUS ON ADAPTABLE SKILLS

Harper encouraged professionals to rethink the common phrase "transferable skills." By framing skills as adaptable, job seekers show resilience and creativity, which employers increasingly value.

REFRAME TRANSITIONS WITH CONFIDENCE

Career pivots often involve explaining gaps, short-term roles, or shifts within a sector. Harper urged job seekers not to shy away from these transitions, but to clearly and concisely contextualize them.

QUANTIFY YOUR PREVIOUS IMPACT

A CV that only lists responsibilities risks blending into the crowd. Harper recommends focusing on outcomes — and quantifying them whenever possible to "provide unquestionable context and clarity," she said.

WATCH: WRITING A CV THAT SUPPORTS YOUR NEXT CAREER MOVE

Development writing expert Kathryn Harper shared practical tips for job seekers looking to pivot with confidence. **WATCH THE EVENT RECORDING**.

HOW TO PIVOT

CONVEYING YOUR TRANSFERRABLE SKILLS

Zaid A. Zaid, head of U.S. public policy at Cloudflare and a former senior attorney adviser to the general counsel at USAID, on how to apply your previous wins to a new role or sector.

Zaid: When thinking about your skills and how they're transferable, that's something that can be really hard. It was hard for me after the Obama administration ended, and I was looking for a job. I had to really think about what my skills were, what I had to offer.

I had to think, if I had to give somebody an elevator pitch, what would I say? I mean, essentially, my job was to get shit done, but that's not something you can put on a résumé. So, you have to figure out how to put that down on paper so that people understand that you are someone who, when thrown into a situation, can figure out how to make it work.

You also have to think very broadly and comprehensively about your skills and how they might be transferable, and think outside the box. Think about how or where you can take what you've learned over the course of your career to someplace different, someplace you maybe have never thought about working before.

Consider creating a briefing book for yourself. What are your wins? What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses? What are some of the things you've done over the course of your career that are hard to remember that you worked on?



"Thinking about all the different things you've done over your career is a good place to start. Write them down and do a draft Q&A so that you're ready to answer questions."

— Zaid A. Zaid
Head of U.S. public policy, Cloudflare

MORE ON DEVEX

- Career emergency: What to do if you've lost your USAID job
- Watch: How to navigate the Trump effect on the development career path

WISE WORDS: PIVOTING WITH PURPOSE



"You will have many transferable skills, but what do you actually want to do? This is a chance to step back and think about your purpose, what you want to achieve."

— Louise James, managing director and global colead, Accenture Development Partnerships

POST-USAID PIVOTS

HOW OTHER PROS HAVE NAVIGATED THE CRISIS



> *"Other industries may see your previous title and it doesn't compute. The key is to find ways to sell yourself to an industry that doesn't understand the one that you were in."*
>
> **— Samantha Hicks, former global talent acquisition manager, Abt Global**

PRIVATE SECTOR

Samantha Hicks was a senior member of Abt Global's HR team when she was furloughed in February 2025. After trying and failing to land another development role, and with mounting financial stress, she eventually **landed a senior HR role in the private sector**.

COACHING

As a team lead and adviser at USAID, **Corinne Hart** completed leadership coaching training and started using it in her work. After losing her job last July, she moved out of Washington, D.C. and set up her new business: **Hart & Co. Coaching**.

DEVELOPMENT ORGS

Five months after his USAID-funded position in Accra, Ghana, ended in April, **Munkaila Mohammed landed full-time work with Medtronic LABS.** His experience writing abstracts for USAID projects has positioned him well for his new role, he said.

VOLUNTEERING

Jamie worked at USAID supporting projects in Latin America. Since losing her job in September, she's yet to secure full-time employment and, in the meantime, is **volunteering with an education startup** that helps youth find career paths.

WATCH: HOW TO CHANGE CAREERS IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

What are the barriers to making a career pivot and what do you need in order to make progress? Career coach Simone Anzböck offers guidance. **WATCH THE EVENT RECORDING.**

HOW TO PIVOT

THE BENEFITS OF VOLUNTEERING



> *"It's a little bit of healing yourself by giving yourself and being part of something that's bigger in a positive way, rather than just 'I was part of a mass firing.'"*
>
> **— Andrea Grimaldi, former U.S. Department of Health and Human Services worker**

For job seekers navigating a highly competitive market, volunteering can build skills, expand connections, and open doors to new opportunities.

PURPOSE AMID UNCERTAINTY

It can provide a much-needed confidence boost and ease rejection because you know that your skills are needed somewhere, says Andrea Grimaldi, who calls volunteering her "secret sauce" for regaining purpose.

A FOOT IN THE DOOR

Another perk of volunteering is having access to internal job opportunities that may come up, says Douglas Mercer, managing director of talent attraction and acquisition with Save the Children US.

DEVELOPING NEW SKILLS

Jan Cartwright, who volunteered before she was laid off as an institutional support contractor at USAID, learned InDesign at a local music festival — skills she later applied in her agency work.

READ: THE PROS AND CONS OF VOLUNTEERING DURING YOUR JOB SEARCH

Could volunteering help you land your next role? Devex spoke to job seekers and sector experts about their own experience and how it can help those on the hunt. **READ MORE**.



Are you a development job candidate looking to stand out to recruiters?

Our in-house recruitment specialists are currently compiling talent pools based on specific global development skill sets, including communications and food systems experts and many more.

Candidates can update their Devex profiles to be considered, and employers can learn more here.

We hope you found this guide helpful. For more insights aimed toward global development professionals, visit our Career Center.

This report was curated, edited, and designed by:

Justin Sablich.

Original writing, reporting, and analysis by:

Natalie Donback, Michael Igoe, Whitney Isenhower, Rebecca L. Root, Justin Sablich, and Emma Smith.

We thank you for being a Devex Career Account member! Please contact us with any questions or comments.

devex
Do Good. Do It Well.

www.devex.com
careers@devex.com
@devex