



# 80,000 Hours

## Impact on existential risk and the far future

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This document is in three parts.

- Part I provides an overview of the argument for donating to 80,000 Hours as a means of reducing existential risk (or otherwise improving the far future).
- Part II goes deeper into information relevant to one's donation decision.
- Part III provides evidence that 80,000 Hours is increasing the size and effectiveness of the existential risk movement.

This document was written by William MacAskill, the founder of 80,000 Hours, and Robert Wiblin, Executive Director of the Centre for Effective Altruism (the parent organisation of 80,000 Hours). Questions are very welcome, and should be addressed to [william.macaskill@80000hours.org](mailto:william.macaskill@80000hours.org) or [robert.wiblin@80000hours.org](mailto:robert.wiblin@80000hours.org).

## Part I: Overview

80,000 Hours' mission is to increase the size and effectiveness of the effective altruism movement. It does this by promoting the idea of pursuing a career with the aim of doing as much good as one can, and offering in-depth information and advice about how to maximise one's impact.

For existential risk focussed donors, the case for donating to 80,000 Hours goes as follows:

1. *For now, increasing the size and effectiveness of the existential risk community is the best way to reduce existential risk.*
2. *Donating to 80,000 Hours is the best way to increase the size and effectiveness of the existential risk community.*
3. *Therefore, donating to 80,000 Hours is the best way to reduce existential risk (in the near term).*

The rest of this section will flesh out this argument.

### **1. For now, increasing the size and effectiveness of the existential risk community is the best way to reduce existential risk.**

If you are reading this, you likely believe that the long run future of humanity is overwhelmingly important, and that reducing the risk of extinction is one of the most important ways of ensuring we reach our full potential. We expect that movement-building – which is to say, increasing the number of people who believe this, and empowering them to act on that belief – is the best way of ensuring a good outcome in the long run. There are two main reasons.

The first is leverage. With a comparatively small investment of resources at the right stage of their lives, we are able to direct people to commit to donating a substantial proportion of their lifetime earnings or time, often their entire career, to x-risk reduction. Similarly, with a comparatively small investment of resources, we are able to direct people already concerned about x-risk into higher impact careers, improving the effectiveness of the x-risk community.

The second reason is 'option value'. At the moment, it is unclear which organisation or approach will most effectively reduce x-risk. Even if one organisation did appear the best, this would almost certainly change in the future. For these reasons, it is highly valuable to create a general-purpose altruistic community that is concerned about x-risk, talented and responsive to the best available evidence.

Despite these benefits, donating to movement-building might not be the best use of money, in expectation, if some other giving opportunity is a more cost-effective way to reduce x-risk. Here are, in our view, the two most plausible alternatives:

#### *Direct reduction efforts*

The first alternative is to support direct reduction of particular x-risks, like asteroids, bioterrorism or AI. However there is a great deal of uncertainty about what the most worrying x-risk will be, and how it can be most cost-effectively combated. The effectiveness of particular interventions is highly uncertain, and likely to vary by many orders of magnitude. If this is true, then direct

reduction efforts will be inferior to both research and movement building. Research, because it should narrow our estimates on the effectiveness of these interventions, and movement-building, because it can gather some resources that are then donated to whatever intervention is found to be most effective. When more is known about the threats that we face, then the accumulated resources can be directed to reduce them. This strategy is robust and flexible in a way that direct reduction is not.

Given the potential for \$1 on movement building to move much more in just a few years, to justify direct reduction efforts today, one would need to think an x-risk is imminent (in the next 5-10 years). However, most experts believe the greatest risks lie further in the future.

### *Direct research*

One might think that in the absence of good direct reduction efforts, one should support organisations that research x-risk. We believe that research is very important. We work closely with organisations such as the Future of Humanity Institute (FHI) and now share an office with them. We would prefer not to divert funds from these organisations (and in fact are currently helping FHI fundraise). If one is choosing between the two, the decision will depend on who needs the money more (where the marginal impact will be greatest), rather than considerations in favour of one or the other. However, there are good general arguments in favour of movement-building.

Movement-building can leverage one's donation. By donating \$1 to persuading other people to donate and enabling people to donate more, one can move far more than \$1 to research organisations. Another issue to consider is whether these research organisations are more funding-constrained or talent-constrained. Insofar as talent is the primary constraint, then movement-building becomes even more attractive, as one of the few ways to find the people necessary to do x-risk research. 80,000 Hours achieves this by getting people interested in x-risk and directing them into relevant positions. For example, 80,000 Hours has identified researchers and project managers for FHI such as Nick Beckstead, Kristian Ronn, and Lance Bush.

We are also in discussion with some leading academics, and potential funders, about starting a "Global Prioritisation Institute", which would bring in considerable further financial resources to x-risk relevant research.

## **2. Donating to 80,000 Hours is the best way to increase the size and effectiveness of the x-risk community**

This section describes 80,000 Hours' current model and growth potential.

### *Our model*

80,000 Hours' model for producing an effective community of far future focussed individuals is:

- **Promotion:** First, we encourage people to make doing good a core consideration of their career choice, and to ensure that the altruistic activities they pursue are as effective as possible, via social networks, the media, events at elite universities, and so on.
- **Research:** We then engage them with online content about how they can make a difference in an effective way with their careers. As part of this we introduce them to high

priority causes to support, which include the far future focused causes.

- **Consulting:** We progressively deepen our engagement with the most promising people through workshops, one-on-one coaching involving up to one week's worth of individualised research which we publish online, and internships. For those who aren't already convinced, we discuss the overwhelming importance of the far future, seeking to raise awareness of these considerations and the opportunities for impact available.
- **Community:** We maintain contact with these people, and help to forge connections between them and other members and organisations in the effective altruist community. This network of like-minded people support one another to stay true to their ideals, and help each other to be more successful.

A significant share who don't receive personalised attention, nevertheless become engaged with the effective altruist and far future focussed communities.

Specific cases of people who have been through this model are listed in Part III.

### *Achievements of the model*

Since we first took on paid staff a year ago, our primary focus has been on rapidly iterating our careers research and coaching process to improve its ability to grow the effective altruist movement as quickly as possible, once we decide to move to a growth phase. Despite not focusing on far future outreach, we have started many people on the road to becoming far future focussed donors. From February to July 2013, the £55,000 invested in 80,000 Hours has resulted in 500 new members, amounting to a cost of £110 per member. Many of these members start by reading our blog which has hosted future focussed content, including [How to make a difference in research: An interview with Nick Bostrom](#), [How Important are Future Generations?](#) and [The Future of Humanity Institute is hiring a high-impact project manager](#). Others have found out about us due to our international media attention, including in [The Washington Post](#), [The New York Times](#), [The Daily Mail](#), [CNBC](#), [NPR](#), [Quartz](#), and Peter Singer's [TED talk](#).

We have found that involvement with the effective altruism community, and in particular 80,000 Hours, is a remarkably effective way to convince people of the overwhelming importance of influencing the far future. Once in the movement, people are soon exposed to far future considerations in an environment in which they are considered completely normal. They talk to smart and honest people who are acting on these considerations and through personal contact are convinced to the point that they are willing to radically alter their careers.

One instance of this process in action would be our recent 'Weekend Away', which featured lectures on x-risk topics alongside more mainstream topics. At one debate on 'The Most Important Cause', the audience went from 25 supporting poverty reduction and 13 supporting x-risk in a vote held before, to 13 voting for poverty reduction and 25 for x-risk afterwards.

80,000 Hours also increases the effectiveness of the existing x-risk community. We can identify the most promising people and give them tailored career advice, and leads on good career opportunities. We also widely publish the findings from this process, so that as many people can benefit from our knowledge as possible. So far we have provided one-on-one careers coaching sessions to over 100 people.

For instance, we are consulting with two x-risk focussed members on their political careers. We also regularly advise people on how to increase their earnings in order to be able to give more money to far future causes.

### *Growth Potential*

Currently, no other organisation in the world offers the kind of information and advice about impact that 80,000 Hours offers, even though this is an issue that the majority of undergraduates care deeply about. We therefore see a very large upside potential — we ultimately envisage a presence at most elite English-speaking universities. The growth potential of the effective altruism community, and therefore of the x-risk community, is enormous.

Though the above results are promising, we are committed to tracking and iteratively improving this model, which is still in early stages. As we grow, we expect that we will become more rather than less effective, as we learn how to best promoting concern for the far future, and each piece of our research reaches a larger audience.

### **3. Therefore, donating to 80,000 Hours is the best way to reduce existential risk (in the near term).**

In the near term, we believe that donating to movement-building is the best way to reduce x-risk. Increasing the size and effectiveness of the x-risk movement will lead to more and better research, and will ensure that when something can clearly be done to directly reduce x-risk, there is a large and effective group of people ready to do it. Movement building preserves option-value and provides opportunity for leverage unlike any other giving opportunity currently available.

80,000 Hours has proven that the movement-building model has great potential. At low cost, we are able to reliably convince people of the importance of x-risk and ensure that people who are convinced are in the most high-impact careers we can find. Furthermore, 80,000 Hours has an excellent and now experienced team that will continue improving its recommendations and model, which can then be copied by other groups.

## **Part II: More details about 80,000 Hours.**

### ***How much funding are you seeking?***

Our fundraising goals are as follows: By 31st January 2014, raise **£150,000**, of which we have raised an additional **£40,000**. If we hit this target, then we will have sufficient funds to follow our 'moderate growth' path for 2014 which involves growing to three three staff and several full-time interns. 80,000 Hours is seeking to raise **£360,000** over the next 12 months to cover operating expenses for July 2013 - June 2015. 80,000 Hours currently has only two months' reserves, so is reluctant to take on new staff without further funding commitments.

If we exceed our targets and (i) are confident that increased donations will continue, then we hire an additional staff member, expanding on 80,000 Hours' current activities; (ii) if we are not confident that increased donations will continue, then we use this money to continue our current operations further into the future. In case (ii), the donation is still spent in the same way as other donations, but spent further in the future. The donor may then wish to apply a discount rate to the value of this donation; but it is not different in kind from other 80,000 Hours spending.

### ***What will marginal donations to 80,000 Hours do?***

There are two ways in which donations will be used, first to maintain current staffing, and secondly, to hire a new career coach.

#### ***Sustain current staff***

We pay new hires £18,000 p.a. We offer raises and inflation-adjust by increasing pay by £1,000 p.a. every six months, subject to good performance. These current pay levels are significantly below market rates even for non-profits employing students straight out of university, and the people we hire are significantly more talented than the average non-profit worker (generally with postgraduate level qualifications from top universities). We also have about 4 unpaid interns at any one time (though we pay living expenses). Staff costs typically account for 80% of our budget.

#### ***New staff***

Our marginal hire is a Career Coach, who will have the sole aim of advising the most dedicated effective altruists about their career plans and doing research on their optimal career path. They will be responsible for doing in-depth case studies — spending up to a week of research on the most promising and dedicated individuals. This will involve both exposing highly talented people to far future arguments, and ensuring that people who are already convinced are in the best careers.

### ***Who are your current staff?***

All the key staff members at 80,000 Hours think that effects on the far future are the dominant moral consideration, and that mitigating x-risk through movement growth is the most obvious way

of increasing the likelihood of achieving a high-value future.

**William MacAskill - President**



In 2009, Will co-founded Giving What We Can, a leading charity evaluator that has advised the UK government and World Bank. In 2011, he co-founded 80,000 Hours with Ben Todd. While a Fulbright Scholar, he writes a column in Atlantic spin-off Qz.com, gives 30% of his stipend to charity, and has published in top philosophy journal Ethics.

**Benjamin Todd - Executive Director**



Ben leads the team in forming and carrying out our strategy. Ben co-founded 80,000 Hours in 2011 while studying for a Masters in Physics and Philosophy at Oxford. Outside of 80,000 Hours he has broad interests, and has published in Climate Physics and speaks Chinese. Before 80,000 Hours, he was the first and only undergraduate to intern as an analyst at a top investment fund, Orbis. Rather than taking the job, he persuaded the Chairman to donate £60,000 to 80,000 Hours.

**Roman Duda - Director of Content**



Roman did a fully-funded Masters in Philosophy at Oxford, during which he also consulted for a top 30 FTSE company on their business strategy, whilst also studying Mandarin Chinese. With a strong interest in Quantified Self, he has worked at the start-ups Memrise and Self Spark.

He leads the management of the content development team, as well as our impact evaluation.

**Robert Wiblin - Executive Director of CEA**



Robert studied Economics and Genetics at ANU, topping his year in Applied Economics, before working in the Australian Department of Innovation, Treasury, and Productivity Commission, before becoming Research Director of Giving What We Can. Rob works half for 80,000 Hours and half for Giving What We Can.

**Niel Bowerman - Director of Communications (on study leave)**

Niel has six years of experience in climate advocacy, during which he was on Obama's 2008 Environment Policy Team, adviser to the President of the Maldives, founder of Climatico and named a Young Global Shaper by the World Economic Forum. He joined us in January 2013 after submitting his PhD in Climate Physics.

In addition, we usually have about 4 full-time interns. They each work for 2-10 months in Oxford while being paid expenses. To date, we have been able to attract top students from Oxbridge and the Ivy League, who have worked for us before going on to top PhD programs or jobs at companies like McKinsey and Google. During their time with us, interns often become convinced that reducing x-risk is the most important direct cause. Specific examples can be found in Part III.

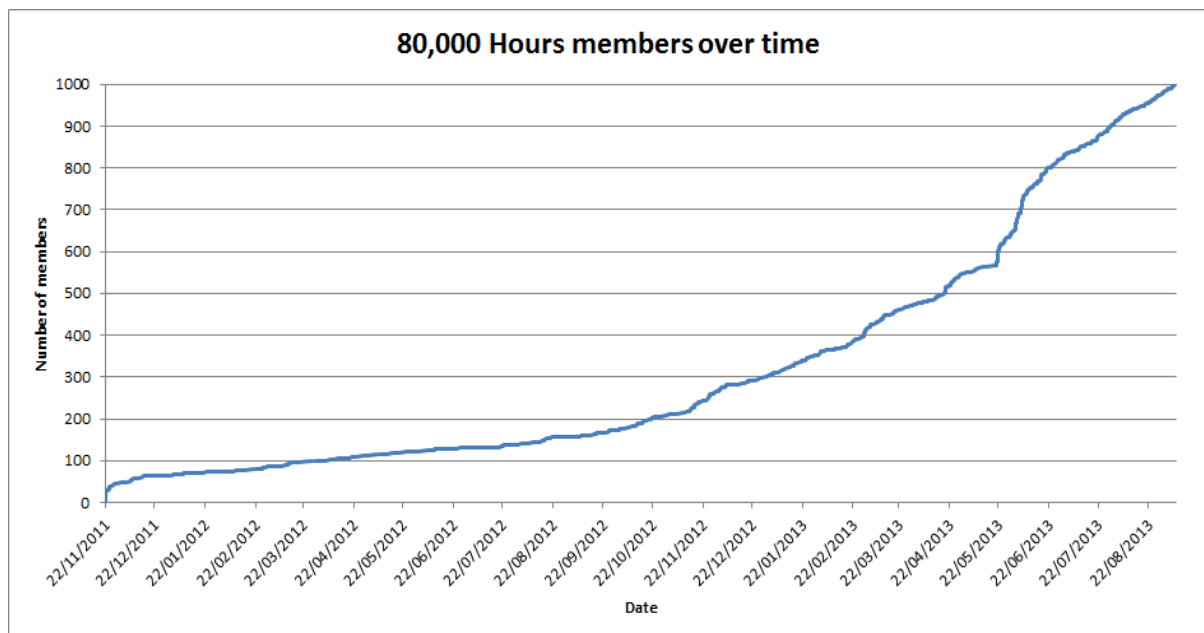


### **Part III. Evidence that 80,000 Hours is increasing the size and effectiveness of the x-risk movement**

An important piece of the case for 80,000 Hours is that it really is increasing the size and effectiveness of the x-risk movement. In this section we'll support this with data and cases that we have collected. These examples are intended to be illustrative of 80,000 Hours' impact – we do not claim that they represent either the average member or the full impact of the organisation. We have been seriously engaged in careers advice for only the past 12 months, and we are changing people's career over their entire life. These stories help demonstrate proof of concept, showing that we are putting people on the right track by exposing them to x-risk ideas and by guiding x-risk concerned individuals into good career paths.

#### ***New Members***

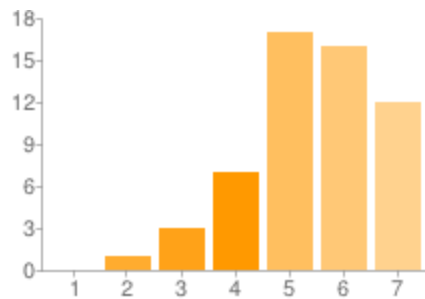
In the period from December 2012 to May 2013, we gained 395 new members, 53 of whom (13%) reported that we had made a significant change in career direction. Of these new members, 20% pledged to donate, and the average pledge was 25% of income.



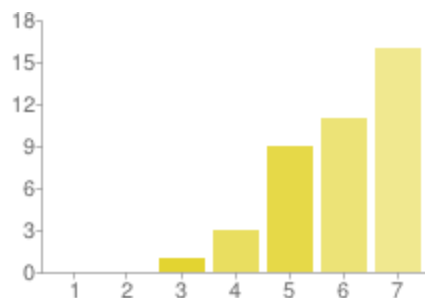
#### ***Consulting***

In this same six-month period we gave over 44 one-on-one advice sessions. We received about 150 requests, so only talked to about 1 in 3 of the people who made requests. This demonstrates that we are prioritising our advice sessions, and that there is demand for more of our advice. Feedback on our coaching has been generally strong over the six months. In our follow up survey to clients (completed by 56 of 95), we were given the following ratings:

***How useful was the coaching session? (7 = extremely useful)***



***How likely are you to recommend our one-on-one careers advice to a friend? (7 = definitely will)***



### ***Individual examples***

This section is split into three:

- New x-riskers
- Improved x-riskers
- Wider Effective Altruism success stories and potential x-riskers

### **Individual examples: New x-riskers**

This section lists examples of people changing their behaviour through interaction with 80,000 Hours. In every case the person was convinced of the importance of x-risk reduction through their interaction with 80,000 Hours and the wider Effective Altruism movement.

Matt Wage

**Background:** Princeton - Philosophy

**What they were doing before:** Undecided between earning to give and a philosophy PhD. Once he became involved with the effective altruism community, he was undecided between working to promote effective altruism directly, and earning to give.

**How CEA/80,000 Hours intervened:** We gave him extensive feedback, advice and discussion of his plans, in person and in writing, weighing up the relevant arguments and providing relevant information, over the course of months.

**What they are doing now:** He is working for a proprietary trading firm. He was able to donate \$40,000 in his first three months, and plans to donate upwards of \$100,000 (and perhaps as high as \$200,000, depending on his bonus) after his first full calendar year. Given his particularly high earning potential, we thought the arguments clearly supported earning to give, and he agrees that this was the right decision. We continue to offer him advice on how to be successful and maximise his earnings within his role. He has also helped to convince a recently retired Partner of his company to support 80,000 Hours financially.

Robbie Shade

**Background:** Oxford University - Robotics DPhil

**What they were doing before:** Student. Intention to go into academia.

**How 80,000 Hours intervened:** Robbie came to the original 80,000 Hours talk on earning to give, and was immediately convinced. This moved him to work in industry rather than academia, and to pledge to donate more (25% rather than the 10% he was convinced to give by Giving What We Can, our sister organisation).

**What they are doing now:** Earning to give by working as a Software Engineer for Google.

Matt Gibb

**Background:** Oxford University - Psychology and Philosophy

**What they were doing before:** Student. Intention to go into academia, no specific research direction.

**How 80,000 Hours intervened:** Matt came to an 80,000 Hours talk, was exposed to the idea of earning to give, and was immediately convinced. He started volunteering for 80,000 Hours. Says he had never previously considered the long run effects of his actions, but now regards it as an important cause "because I have met many people much smarter and more informed than me that say it is important".

**What they are doing now:** He is earning to give through entrepreneurship, pledging 33% of his earnings. He plans to look into which cause to give to in detail once he has made a large amount of money through the companies he founds.

Max Siegel

**Background:** Princeton - Philosophy

**What they were doing before:** Aspiring for an academic career in philosophy.

**How 80,000 Hours intervened:** Max began to think of far future concerns as the most important

cause following personal discussions and the CEA 'weekend away'.

**What they are doing now:** Max continues to aim for an academic career in philosophy, but intends to focus on questions related to the value of the far future.

Roman Duda

**Background:** Oxford University - Philosophy BPhil

**What they were doing before:** Roman was planning to do psychology research into improving people's intelligence, altruism and well-being.

**How 80,000 Hours intervened:** Through career advice from 80,000 Hours staff members he realised that the cause he cared most about at the time - improving the far future - wasn't best served by his current plan. Roman described the process this way:

"I heard Paul Christiano argue for far future stuff being really important at the weekend away, and in my mind quite decisively beat poverty and animals. I was also influenced by spending time with Niel Bowerman, Will MacAskill and Robert Wiblin. Spending time with people who are smart and honest with evidence and take this seriously, made me internalise this and get my 'system one' on board. I'm not seen as 'weird' for taking this stuff seriously among my peers, which reduces any cognitive dissonance."

**What they are doing now:** He started considering other options - eventually coming to decide that working at 80,000 Hours was his best next step. Roman was persuaded that EA movement building was a promising way to reduce x-risk for the reasons given above. In his own words:

"I'm working at 80,000 Hours to get the organisation to move the most high potential people into the most pressing talent gaps in the world. I don't think we know what these are yet, and so doing research is the first step. It seems that I can have a multiplier on my impact by moving other people than if I took those opportunities myself."

Owen Cotton-Barratt

**Background:** Oxford University - Maths PhD

**What they were doing before:** Maths teaching. Giving 10% to poverty reduction through Giving What We Can.

**How 80,000 Hours intervened:** Through 80,000 Hours, Owen became convinced of x-risk mitigation as the most important cause. He said we had a 'significant impact' on his beliefs because we introduced him to the relevant arguments for the first time. He adds "One of the major influences of 80,000 Hours was the idea of framing a career as part of what you can achieve for good in the world rather than just thinking of achieving good via donations."

**What they are doing now:** Mathematics postdoc as part of a career in academia. Intends to

research global prioritisation.

Sam Bankman Fried

**Background:** MIT - Physics

**What they were doing before:** Thinking about journalism

**How 80,000 Hours intervened:** Sam was convinced of x-risk through discussion with William MacAskill; introduction to the 80,000 Hours community; and lectures on the core concepts.

**What they are doing now:** Interning at Jane St. Intention to earn to give everything he doesn't need to live on and do well in his job.

[Anonymous]

**Background:** Oxford University - Politics, Philosophy and Economics

**What they were doing before:** A student with vague goals to earn to give for developing world charities.

**How 80,000 Hours intervened:** We carried out an in-depth case-study on this person's career and the general question of politics and x-risk. We reviewed the recent literature and interviewed highly-placed insiders.

**What they are doing now:** This person is entering a career path in party politics with the main aim of reducing existential risk. They say "without 80,000 Hours, I would not be pursuing this career".

## Individual examples: Improved x-riskers

These are people who already supported the idea of x-risk when we first spoke to them, who 80,000 Hours helped by improving their effectiveness. We did this primarily through offering career advice, but also having them as interns and advertising particularly good job opportunities.

Jacob Nebel

**Background:** Princeton - Philosophy

**What they were doing before:** Building on his perfect GPA (4.0) he was planning an academic philosophy career.

**How 80,000 Hours intervened:** Convinced him of existential risk mitigation as the most important cause. Helped him get a Marshall Scholarship to come to Oxford for postgraduate study.

**What they are doing now:** Coming to Oxford to start postgraduate study. Plans to research existential risk and global prioritization.

Kristian Ronn

**Background:** Lund University - Maths and Philosophy double degree

**What they were doing before:** Student with no concrete intentions.

**How 80,000 Hours intervened:** Kristian interned with CEA, and 80,000 Hours connected him to his current job at FHI.

**What they are doing now:** He works for the Future of Humanity Institute in a project management role.

Jon Harris

**Background:** MIT - Maths

**What they were doing before:** Working for a socially/environmentally focused investment fund. Previously 'improving the far future' was just an intuitive aspect of Jon's desire to do good.

**How 80,000 Hours intervened:** Ben Todd carried out a case-study on Jon's career.

**What they are doing now:** He wants to use his investment fund job to build up a group of people who want to do global prioritisation. Jon is now much more aware and committed to the issues related to the far future, chief amongst them x-risk.

***Individual examples: Wider Effective Altruism success stories and potential x-riskers***

These are examples of people who are pursuing very promising career paths due to exposure to the effective altruism movement and help from 80,000 Hours. Even in cases where they are not donating to x-risk reduction, they illustrate the type of success possible through 80,000 Hours' movement-building and -improving. Also, in several cases these individuals would donate to x-risk if there were a clearly valuable giving opportunity, especially if it were promoted by 80,000 Hours.

Habiba Islam

**Background:** Oxford University - Politics, Philosophy and Economics

**What they were doing before:** Student. Intention to go into politics.

**How 80,000 Hours intervened:** Habiba came to the original 80,000 Hours talk on earning to give, and was immediately convinced. She had a discussion with an 80,000 Hours member to discuss her

plans. This moved her to pledge to give everything she earns above £25,000.

**What they are doing now:** She is finishing a conversion course in law (which gives her the options of both politics and earning to give). She still plans to go into politics, though is considering moving into consulting.

Aveek Bhattacharya

**Background:** Oxford University - Political Theory MPhil

**What they were doing before:** Student. Intention to go into academia.

**How 80,000 Hours intervened:** Aveek read much of 80,000 Hours's material on earning to give. He became convinced that earning to give was a higher-impact path than philosophy, and applied for consultancy firms.

**What they are doing now:** He is earning to give through management consultancy.

Lisanne Pueschel

**Background:** Oxford University - Psychology and Philosophy

**What they were doing before:** Student. Intention to do a philosophy PhD.

**How 80,000 Hours intervened:** Lisanne volunteered with 80,000 Hours, was exposed and had career discussion with several of the core 80,000 Hours team.

**What they are doing now:** She is earning to give through management consultancy.

Dominic Hall

**Background:** Oxford University - Physics and Philosophy

**What they were doing before:** Student. Intention to go into start-ups.

**How 80,000 Hours intervened:** Dominic came to an 80,000 Hours talk on earning to give, and was immediately convinced. He had a meeting with an 80,000 Hours member to discuss his plans. This moved him to work in consulting rather than start-ups, and to pledge to donate everything he earns above \$50,000.

**What they are doing now:** He went to work at Stroud Consulting, earning to give. Now he has set up his own consultancy firm.