

ACCESS is a unique model of serving and supporting expatriates, internationals in the Netherlands. In commemoration of its 30th Anniversary we are grateful for the support of the Netherlands Foreign Investment Agency (NFIA) for allowing us to capture, and share the history of our organisation. Much has changed in 30 years, especially in terms of information availability, nonetheless, having expats help expats remains at the heart of what we do.

*We reside in a humble country, yet a nation of progress, one that recognises and embraces the tremendous good that can come from globalisation. The Netherlands is a leading state when it comes to inviting, welcoming and settling internationals into the everyday narrative.*

Mandie van der Meer-Danielski, Editor ACCESS Magazine

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# The story of ACCESS

*a 'Dutch' model for supporting expatriation*

A large, stylized graphic of a windmill is positioned on the left side of the slide. The windmill is composed of several geometric shapes: a light blue base, a white body, and a light blue cap. The sails are represented by white and light blue shapes. The background is a light blue gradient.

# The story of ACCESS

*a 'Dutch' model for supporting expatriation*

[WWW.ACCESS-NL.ORG](http://WWW.ACCESS-NL.ORG)

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The opportunities for education for children,  
work for spouses, housing and understanding

Jeroen Nijland  
Commissioner at NFIA



## Foreward ACCESS

A lot has changed in the last thirty years. Internationals coming to the Netherlands have changed in their experience, outlook and expectations. Information has changed: much more English-language information is available via (local) government and service providers and in modern ways, and there is healthy competition for provision of expat services, commercial information and paid assistance.

And yet ACCESS is still a vital part of the picture.

Counselling remains at the heart of ACCESS's DNA. The thirst for free-at-source, accurate and impartial information remains at an all-time high, be it via the expat desks, our website, helpdesk, courses, email or walk-ins. And, there is a growing appreciation for personal, face-to-face contact in a digital world.

The most important factor is our volunteers. They remain the bedrock of the organisation, which allows us to be truly expats for expats. They have been through the same experiences as those seeking information. Our volunteers and the work they do enables ACCESS to be recognised as a professional organisation, that not only has a social value, but also an economic value to organisations employing internationals, and national & local governments welcoming foreign investment.

ACCESS has supported the international community in the Netherlands for the last 30 years. And, thanks to our supporters and our volunteers will continue long into the future.

Dr Gary Hays  
Chair ACCESS Board

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## Introduction

What follows is the history of a unique not-for-profit organisation: an organisation which was born in and has been encouraged to flourish and grow in the Netherlands, and which to this day serves the ever-growing and changing international community in the Netherlands.

The Netherlands has been crucial to ACCESS' evolution as it has provided the ground in which we have taken root. Already an attractive destination for internationals, the country continues to invest in and support a welcoming environment for international companies and their employees. Offering corporate incentives such as a 30% tax ruling, as well as investing in and advocating for benefits such as international education, and more easily understood and accessible health care. In doing so, the authorities at national and municipal levels have seen and supported the value of the services ACCESS provides and have been allies in our development. A testament to this support is the partnerships ACCESS has been able to make with the cities of The Hague, Utrecht, Amsterdam and Leiden.

A welcoming environment further encourages more internationals to arrive and make this their home, providing ACCESS not only with the volunteers it needs to do what it does, but ensuring that new arrivals can find services and opportunities geared towards them. It is, of course a cyclical situation: the more attractive the destination, the more people come; the more people arrive, the more need for guidance and support.



As in any country in which internationals arrive there are many grassroots initiatives to support their stay, to make them feel at home, from national clubs and associations, to special interest groups. These are invaluable to the successful settlement of individuals and their families, and essential for a country to appeal to internationals. ACCESS was born of such groups and continues to work with many with one goal in mind: to make the Netherlands as accessible as possible to expatriates. While many of the local, community groups continue to reach out and help create connections for individuals throughout the country, ACCESS helps further, by answering the larger questions people have as they arrive in a new home, and sharing this collective experience and knowledge with anyone in search of guidance, regardless of where they are from.

We dare to say that we are a unique model world-wide, not so much because of what we do, but how we do it: through the input, time, experience and expertise of volunteers who have themselves expatriated – here or elsewhere. The model for ACCESS was inspired by several similar organisations which were aiming to do the same, in the 1980s, in other parts of the world: in Cairo, Egypt (Community Services Association); Manila, the Philippines (In Touch Community Services); in Malaysia (Community Counselling Programme), to name a few.

What differentiates our ‘Dutch’ version is that in doing so a parallel goal has also been key – that of providing the spouses of expatriated employees with an opportunity to share and use their skills in order to enhance their own settlement.

ACCESS serves all internationals arriving, settling into and living in the Netherlands. We make no distinction about who can access our information, another factor that sets us apart from membership-oriented models in other countries. Yet, we know from experience that for accompanying spouses/partners the road can be a little more difficult, and that the consequences of not navigating the new terrain well are more significant. Without their contribution to the mission of ACCESS it would not have been possible to reach this anniversary, and from testimonials and research conducted (2014) we also know that without ACCESS, our volunteers would not have settled as well as they did.

In the story which follows we trace the various development phases of this unique organisation, from infancy, through youth and adolescence, to where it is today. Throughout, always at the service of internationals living in the Netherlands and with the conviction that it really is a good location for internationals to expatriate to. We believe this because we have experienced, and seen, the opportunities – for families and for spouses. It was not a lack of available resources which heralded ACCESS’ establishment; it was the need to make these visible, and accessible.

## An Expatriate looks at Holland

by Naomi Greenberg-Slovin, Co-chairperson of counselling services for ACCESS. 1989.

*Woody Allen once said that he was thrown out of college because he cheated on a metaphysics test when he looked in to the soul of his neighbour.*

*In a way, many of us who number among the non-nationals, living and working in the Netherlands sometimes feel that we would like to cheat a little and look in to the souls of our Dutch neighbours to reassure ourselves that we are properly integrating in to Dutch society.*

*With that touch of insecurity that comes from being a stranger in a strange land, we question our behaviour. Are we too aggressive? Are we too reserved? Are we eating enough potatoes? Is our coffee too weak or too strong?*

*Can we pronounce Van Gogh and Scheveningen? And as we sit in the smallest room in the house do we stare at a special calendar hanging on the door listing the birthdays of every relative in the family including the cat?*

*Living in Holland is an experience that means much more than tulips and herring and water and mint.*

*There is the fascinating mixture of the tranquil and hectic. Hiding behind the crassly commercial Damrak one finds the serene and stately Begijnhof. Or as you ride 120km per hour under a water-filled viaduct spanning a super highway, a sailboat glides silently overhead.*

*And indifferent to it all, one sees sheep and cows grazing bucolically in the shadow of high-rise flats.*

*Everywhere the country abounds in paradoxes. It is provincial and worldly; restrictive and permissive; it is conservative and avant garde; it is self-effacing and fiercely proud.*

*Its universities have spawned some of the finest minds in science and philosophical thought but just let the canals freeze over and the whole educational establishment grinds to a halt as aging professors and wobbly-legged-3-year olds compete for space on the ice.*

*Though the pattern is changing, Holland has more women who stay at home than any other country in the western world, which would imply a solid, stolid, traditional home-centered society.*

*Yet the government, elected by the people, does not shy away from considering a law on Euthanasia that addresses the ethical implications of honouring the request of the terminally ill to be released from inexorable, dehumanising pain.*

*It is self-consciously tolerant; championing the underdogs of the world, right or wrong, but a little less so on the domestic scene. Above all, it thrives on compromise.*

*Yet, if we should place on the global scale of values this flat little, wet little, flower-flecked little land, I think its virtues would balance out its faults and in the true Dutch spirit lead one to say "It's no better or worse than any place else." I am not sure, Holland, if I have looked into your soul; but I have the feeling you have seen in to mine.*

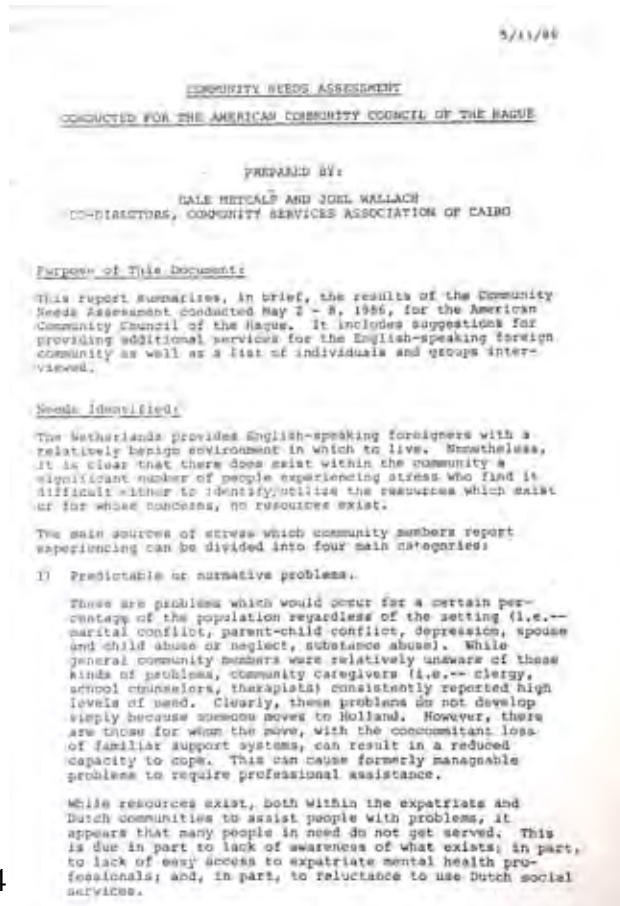




## Early Years 1985 - 1989

ACCESS was a response to a need first identified in the American community and then more broadly in the international English-speaking communities of the Netherlands. The American Community Council was an organisation composed of representatives of all American groups in The Hague region, such as schools, churches, women's clubs, etc. The Council recognised the sombre reality that numerous families were experiencing significant stress and personal problems during their settlement and integration. Families were unable to find trained counsellors who could communicate in English, those with cultural sensitivity and most importantly with an understanding of what it was like living outside of one's known environment. The Netherlands of course was not unique in this problem but certainly in the solution.

In 1985 the Council took steps to address the concerns initially raised by a counsellor at the American School of The Hague, and planned a formal Needs Assessment. The US State Department had funded programmes that provided mental health support and community services in numerous other countries around the world, and it was from the largest and most successful of these that help was brought in. In May of 1986, and with the support of then US Ambassador H.E. Mr Paul Bremer, Gayle Metcalfe and Joel Wallach, co-directors of the Community Services Association in Cairo, came to The Hague and undertook a comprehensive review of the situation.

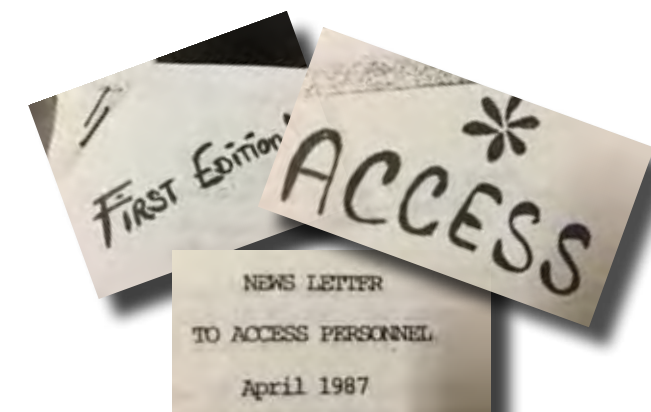


Their conclusion, following an intensive week of interviewing a wide range of representatives of the English-speaking international community, provided the framework for what ACCESS was to become. The Assessment recommended the establishment of a central clearing house for community information; educational programmes on personal development; and a professional counsellor's referral system. As the Administrative Committee (of the American Community Council) to Coordinate English Speaking Services, ACCESS responded to those conclusions of the Assessment.

The Assessment acknowledged that there was much to be found within the community, but these were often acting in isolation and were unable to respond to the stresses the community was experiencing.

Such stresses were identified as:

- issues which occur regardless of location, but which intensified in the absence of a normal support system and stresses of relocation. Among the predictive or normative problems referred to were marital conflict, parent-child conflict, depression, domestic-abuse, substance abuse, etc.;
- adjustment issues – expectations of an easy adjustment in a country 'presumed' to be familiar, but which remained nonetheless foreign;
- employment issues – causing frustration for those who were not able to work, or had given up a career;
- and for some national groups, uncertainties resulting from security/terrorism issues.



## Workshop series for the English speaking community

A workshop series is available for women interested in learning to handle stress, make decisions, plan goals effectively and communicate assertively.

The workshop series, sponsored by Access, begins with Stress and Stress Management, scheduled Tuesdays, November 1 and 8. Participants will learn to recognize and understand the effects of stress as well as ways to cope effectively with stress.

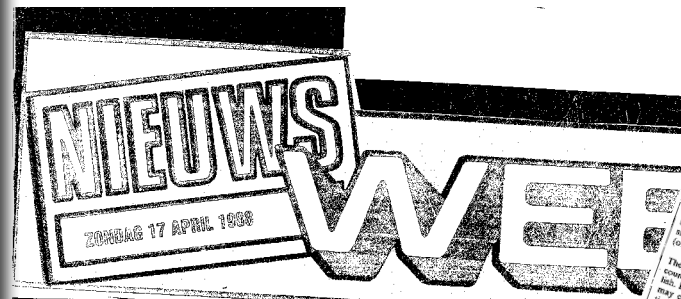
The second topic, Decision Making and Effective Goal Planning will be presented Tuesdays November 15 and 22. This workshop is designed to help participants make workable plans that will help them achieve what they want in life. Instruction is given for identifying barriers to success, clarifying and prioritizing goals and formulating short and long term plans.

The third and final workshop Communication Skills and Assertive Communication is set for Thursday December 1 and Wednesday, December 7. Effective communication skills are presented with an emphasis on speaking and listening techniques and presentation skills. The focus is on communication as an ongoing process.

Workshop leader, Christine Fitzgerald is an American who has been living in Holland more than three years. She has a Masters' degree in Developmental Psychology and teaches at Webster University.

Participants may sign up for the entire series or individual workshops. All the workshops are from 9:30 a.m. tot 3:00 p.m. and will be held at the Haagse Vrouwenraads private house, Iste Sweelinckstraat 5, Den Haag.

Cost is Dfl. 120 for one, Dfl 200 for two, or Dfl. 300 to attend all three workshops. A discount is available for those who make payment the Friday prior to the beginning of each workshop. Call the Access office to register: 070-55.85.51.



## For the English speaking community: ACCESS TO 'YOUR NEW HOMELAND'

In onze regio werken en wonen veel Engelsprekende mensen, nu spreken de meeste Nederlanders aardig Engels zodat het vaak moeilijk is voor deze mensen thuis te rekenen in het dagelijkse Nederlands bruik. Vandaar dat er binnen die groep een organisatie is opgezet. Deze mensen helpen zich nog meer thuis te voelen in ons thuisland. Op verzoek van deze vrijwilligersorganisatie plaatsen we ook het volgende bericht. Mocht u in uw directe omgeving Engelsprekende en hier woonachtige mensen of vrienden hebben, dan zou uw mening daar kunnen helpen bij deze informatie, geef dit artikel. U doet er hen wellicht een plezier mee.

### In English:

ACCESS announces a program for English speaking expatriates living in the Netherlands. The program will focus on learning how personal values, attitudes and beliefs influence how one feels about and reacts to a new culture. Participants will explore how their reactions are based on their own upbringing which is a first step in adjusting to and accepting Dutch ways. Most expatriates live easily and enthusiastically in Holland for a few months for a few years. They find it a warm and hospitable country where the people speak English. But adjusting to any new culture may create difficulties due to variations in

customs, basic attitudes, food, use of the English language. So often many find something missing: clarity that messages are clearly received - supportive, positive relationships - feelings of belonging and inclusion. They may become more a disoriented, become irritated with the situation in which they find themselves. The ability to communicate, friends and establish relationships manage psychological stress requiring a different set of values, positive attitudes, and strengthen interpersonal skills. This is what cultural adjustment is all about. And it is difficult to accomplish alone.

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Nieuws Week, 1988

41e jaargang nummer 2398



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strengthening interpersonal skills. This is what cultural adjustment is all about. And it is difficult to accomplish alone. English speaking expatriates may benefit from discussions on cultural adjustment with a group of women. Such an experience will be offered by ACCESS. Building Bridges To Dutch Culture. Interpersonal values and assumptions about ways of behaving will be examined and principal differences identified. They will discover that each person has a choice of many levels of adaptation. Expatriates living comfortably within the expatriate community in shipping, also will discuss how to develop the interpersonal skills which help people to adjust. Interculturally help people and rapidly.

The program will be presented by Susan Davis who has lived in the Netherlands for 10 years and presented many programs on this topic. She teaches at Webster University. She holds a Master of Science in Education. She has been involved in intercultural education, training and research since 1972 and has been a member of the ACCESS Board of Directors. Building Bridges To Dutch Culture will be held on Wednesday, November 16, 1988, from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

And so, in August of 1986, a year after the problem was highlighted, ACCESS was born.

From the start ACCESS relied on the contribution of skills, knowledge and experience of volunteers from within the international community. These volunteers were, almost exclusively, the spouses of people sent to work in the Netherlands. It was their skills and knowledge that allowed ACCESS to hit the ground running and build up an organisation which in its first year could already rely on 70 volunteers, 10 Counsellors, and at least 12 different course programmes for the community.

Within four years ACCESS had their own home; was producing an ACCESS Newsletter for the corporate community; producing a newsletter for the volunteer network; creating an innovative 16 month Information and Planning Calendar; and publishing its first 'book' to support new parents in the Netherlands, the Baby Book. Courses were offered by and for the community, taking advantage of resources and expertise available there. Finally, at the heart of ACCESS, the Counselling Service Association (CSA) - a group of on-call English-speaking, expatriate experienced counsellors who the community could reach out to in confidence - was growing.



Information for Newcomers	Emergency Numbers, Utilities and Hospitals	Legal, Housing, Finance and Disposal	Parenting, Schools and International Holidays	Clubs and Places of Worship	Embassies and Travel Information	Dutch Vocabulary and Yellow Pages
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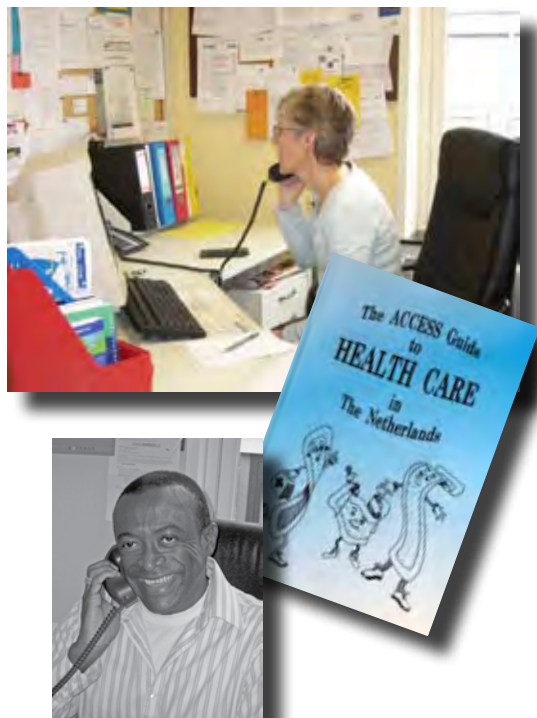




## Youth 1990 - 1999

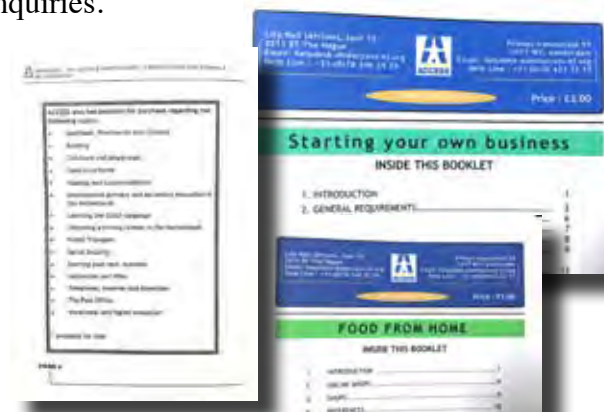
By 1994 ACCESS, in response to increasing inquiries about working in the Netherlands, had produced another book, the Job Book, and had moved to de Witte, at Plein 24 in The Hague, which we were to call home until 2009. From this established location ACCESS was able to take bolder, stronger steps as it marched forward, gaining confidence and experience and growing our volunteer base, which averaged around 100 at any given time. Given this central location in The Hague, people could drop in and have their questions answered, attend information mornings to find out about volunteering for different departments within ACCESS, or attend a course offered by a growing number of professionals (again often partners of people sent to work here) within the community in The Hague region.

For the first eight years of our existence ACCESS benefitted from an annual grant from the US State Department's Medical Services which we supplemented with donations received from the local international community. Over time a large portion of ACCESS' main income source came from the sale of publications, in particular the Information Calendars and the offer of tailor-made services to international employers. Besides the popular Baby and Job books, a Health Book was added to the series – reflecting the need for information on subjects the community required to live here successfully. These topics today remain among the top five categories inquired about at ACCESS: navigating the health system and looking for employment.



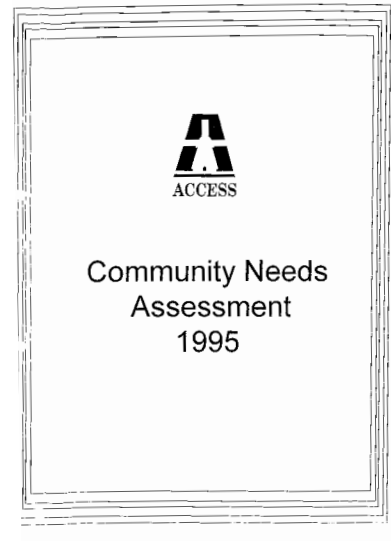
From archival records it appears there was little difficulty in recruiting volunteers for ACCESS – people whose skills, enthusiasm and dedication were invaluable to the development of everything noted so far. Manning the telephone helpdesk; producing publications; running information mornings; coordinating training programmes for the volunteers; leading many workshops; and much of what was researched and produced were all done by volunteers, themselves part of the expatriate community. More often than not these were the partners (at the time predominantly women) of individuals sent to the Netherlands by their employers. ACCESS was, as the original Needs Assessment intended, a refuge and place from which to create community, be of value and as such feel better about the adjustments their expatriation to the Netherlands entailed. At the same time, without them, ACCESS would not be here today. We remain in that sense an unusual organisation, which makes our anniversary that much more of an achievement because we serve two communities: ourselves, the volunteers, as well as the boarder community at large.

Through a system which ACCESS continues to apply today, records are kept of the nature of the questions and inquiries received at the telephone helpdesk, and through interactions with people at fairs and events. Among the most important sources though, of actual information needs within the growing community at the time, and today, is the input received from our volunteers. Many, as new arrivals, are able to point out, in detail, what they saw as a current need or gap in information. This information feeds into what was to become the Information Research Department and the Publications team, which would not only research where the answers were to be found, but translate these into English, and into products which people could use, and which ACCESS could sell, as part of our ongoing fundraising campaigns. Producing books for each subject proved not only costly but would sometimes mean that before the books were sold, some information could be found to be out of date due to changes in laws or procedures. For this reason, around 1999 ACCESS started producing Fact Sheets as a response to some of the more specific areas of inquiries.



Managing all the information ACCESS was gathering proved quite the task. ACCESS made this information easily accessible to the volunteers who were assigned a role at the helpdesk or served as 'personal consultants', and kept track of the many individuals who were contributing their time and expertise but also coming and going with some frequency. It did not take long before the well-used rolodex needed an update so in 1991 ACCESS started the process of transferring these records to computer systems. Today this beating heart of ACCESS is fondly referred to as DAISY - Database of ACCESS Information Services.

While the original purpose of ACCESS was to work for and with the English-speaking community, it was clear from a 1995 Needs Assessment that our services were increasingly of use to far more nationalities than those of English-speaking countries. More and more people were coming from all over the world, reaching out for support and looking for answers; English was simply the common denominator. The population ACCESS was reaching may have been different to that intended, but not surprisingly, the needs and areas of concern were precisely the same. In the mean time, within the Counselling Service Network additional languages started to be represented, allowing people increasingly to find support they needed in their own language. The working language of ACCESS remains English, a global working language, but the nationalities reached cover many more cultural and linguistic areas.



“Great environment to meet other expats sharing similar adjustment experiences and a great opportunity to practice skills in a professional environment.”



“It was always a good feeling walking into the office, everyone worked hard and as volunteers it was important to be valued and thanked for the work carried out. Volunteers looked forward to coming in and the social aspect of it was important and also fun. Volunteers learned so much about each others culture and always respectful toward one another.”

“Overall great experience -- allowed me to meet new people going through same transitional issues, volunteer in the community and keep up with my work skills. Great experience and I would recommend it to anyone moving to the Netherlands.”





## Adolescence 2000-2009



If the first 15 years of ACCESS are to be considered our birth, and infancy, then the following can be seen in terms of an adolescent period. By no means a reckless one, but certainly an active, exploratory and adventurous one, with challenges faced and daring steps made. Much was to happen in this period which would set the path towards a more mature, professional and comprehensive service organisation.

Comfortably housed at de Witte, ACCESS continued to grow and spread our wings, and in that characteristic quality of an adolescent, of exploring boundaries. One of the first bold steps the organisation was to make was changes to our statutes (2003), whereby we became independent of the American Community Council. We dropped the original acronym, the Administrative Committee to Coordinate English Speaking Services, and took on our first, own, tagline: 'We help anyone from anywhere to settle with ease in the Netherlands'. The tagline would change a few times over the course of the next ten years, from the one mentioned above, to: 'Supporting the International Community in the Netherlands since 1986' (2004); to 'Free information, advice and support for your life in the Netherlands' (2006); to 'Information, Advice and Support for your Life in the Netherlands' (2010); to the one still in use today, 'Serving the international community' (2012). The changes in taglines did not so much reflect changes in our mission or vision, but rather, a sign of the times, and a reflection of the adulthood ACCESS was growing into.



The start of the 21st century also saw ACCESS moving with the times, a website being the first significant step in that direction. Now anyone anywhere could reach out for the answers and support needed. A few years prior ACCESS had implemented an email address, through which the community could submit their questions, and as time went on this grew in importance. By 2004 ACCESS was receiving as many emails as we were phone calls, around 5,000 per year. The original basic website (page really in today's terms) would be quickly updated in 2004 but did serve to place ACCESS firmly on the map as an organisation which could support not only individuals, but organisations as well. The website also provided a platform through which ACCESS could sell its books, as well as fact sheets, and later, 'booklets'.

In the year 2000, the trusted ACCESS newsletter became a bi-monthly ACCESS Magazine, produced in house by a team of writers, designers and contributors, and distributed widely, by the volunteers, throughout the community in and beyond The Hague. Advertising revenue from the magazine provided another much needed source of income, to complement income raised through book sales as well as the sale of the still popular Information Calendar – not yet made redundant by a digital download world.

The Information Calendar was to remain a central source of income, through advertising sales and bulk purchases by companies, until 2010 when efforts in putting it together, as well as advertising sales, outweighed the need for such a hardcopy product within the community. So much of the information the calendar had provided over the years – important dates, phone numbers and resources for everyday life and listings of other support options – was now so easily available online. Finally, with changes in the economy and the rise of more commercial operations offering this information, ACCESS needed to look for new revenue options to run and maintain our operation.

Opening an office in Amsterdam in 2003 was a next bold step for ACCESS. This space provided not only a telephone help line to residents of the Amsterdam region, but also offered, as per our model, locally-based internationals the chance to share their own skills, build their own community and do so in the service of others. In the elegant offices on the Herengracht in Amsterdam, provided by a benefactor, the Amsterdam ACCESS team further expanded our network and presence. This included offering, in 2005, space to a similar organisation: the Japanese Helpdesk. By this time ACCESS had, between The Hague and Amsterdam, around 150 volunteers, and had increased our Counsellors to around 30 in total.

With such a growing team, the need to manage people's time and attendance became significant. As with many of the systems in place today at ACCESS, the suggestions and skills within the network presented the solution: an online system allowing ACCESS to continue our services in a professional manner, meeting expectations of the community and ensuring teamwork.

This step built on the manner in which ACCESS works with and respects our volunteers. Signed agreements by all volunteers ensured both parties knew what was expected of the other – in terms of time commitments and conduct – and facilitated a team approach. The volunteer agreement, which has always had a confidentiality clause as a direct result of the link to Counselling referrals, was to be complemented by a Code of Conduct (2012) thus further establishing the professionalism which underpins the organisation.

During this period was also the first Feel at home in The Hague Fair in 2006. ACCESS launched the Fair together with TheHagueOnLine, a local online news site, with the support of the city of The Hague. The Fair, an information and networking event, was a resounding success. In fact, it was quickly evident on the day that the location provided by the Carlton Ambassador Hotel in The Hague was not going to be able to accommodate the Fair beyond its first year. Now a fixture on the international calendar of The Hague region, this annual event takes place in the heart of the city, The Hague's City Hall. Today ACCESS is responsible for coordinating the presence and attendance of social clubs and sports organisations at the Fair. Our role reflects the very core of what the original Needs Assessment in 1986 indicated; that the community would benefit from coordination, so that newcomers and their families could find the activities and groups which met their interests, and thus facilitate their settlement and adjustment in the country. Over the years this event has branched out, to welcome internationals not just from The Hague, but from the surrounding region, including groups from cities such as Delft, Rijswijk, Rotterdam and Leiden.

Looking back it was certainly a busy period for ACCESS. Perhaps not so much defined by adolescent 'hormones' but rather by the pace and extent of changes which took place internally, and within the ever growing international community in the Netherlands.



'Thank You' cake from departing volunteer.

“ Thank you so much for helping. Really. For me, all is new so it's very important to know some people like you, who give to expats some advices and try to find answer to our problem... So if I could become a member of your association or do something it'll be with pleasure. ”

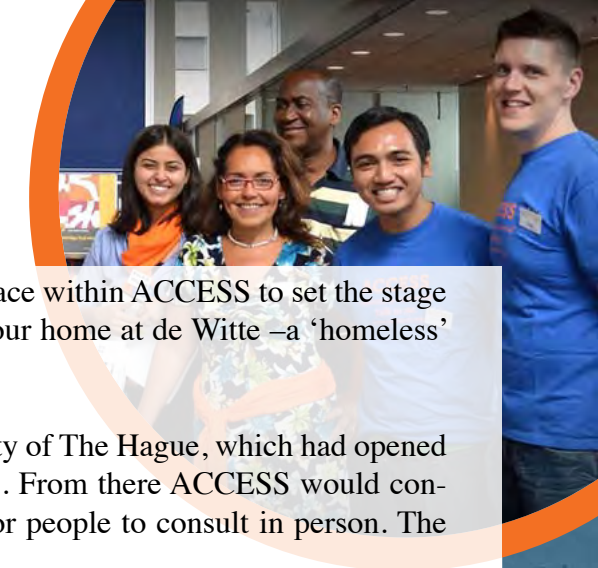
From a client to one of our volunteers at a fair, 2012

“ I wanted to express my gratitude to both the ACCESS team for supporting us Amsterdam volunteers on this newly born project, as well as the Expat Center colleagues for their friendliness, positive attitude and constant help offering today. I felt welcome, relaxed and I enjoyed my shift all the way. Like in every new venture, fine-tuning is needed, but, I think, we are all open to learn from each other. ”

From one of our volunteers at Expatcenter Amsterdam, 2016



## Maturity 2010 - 2016



As the first decade of the 21st century closed many things took place within ACCESS to set the stage for maturity. Not the least of these was the need to move out of our home at de Witte –a ‘homeless’ period which affected our volunteers.

When we had to leave our offices, it was serendipitous that the City of The Hague, which had opened an Xpat Desk at City Hall, offered space next door for ACCESS. From there ACCESS would continue the Telephone Helpdesk function and was also available for people to consult in person. The stage was inadvertently set for an exciting future.

In hindsight, not having a place to call home – where the ACCESS volunteers could gather to work together – had a negative effect on the volunteers and the organisation. The ‘team spirit’ was affected and many volunteers left. Managing an entire organisation virtually, while possible in principle, did not allow ACCESS to serve our volunteers well, and thereby, the community at large. Not having a place from which to work and create and find a community resulted in a small crisis moment for the organisation. But, as we know, from a crisis, a phoenix can rise.





When the City of The Hague embarked upon a new format for supporting the growing international community in The Hague – providing, as Amsterdam had done before them, a one-stop shop for the formalities associated with people moving to, living in and working from a new country – little did they, or we know, the value that ACCESS could add. With the opening of The Hague International Centre (THIC) – the ‘one-stop shop’ referred to above – ACCESS received support for a back office, in exchange for providing volunteers to serve as Information & Hospitality officers at THIC. It was from this new home base that ACCESS was able to start re-building the community of volunteers and in doing so, our ability to respond more effectively and efficiently to the increasing demands of the community.



Nevertheless, despite the momentary internal crisis within ACCESS, recognition for the good work we continued to do was rewarded. In 2010 ACCESS won the ‘Expat Service Provider of the Year’ Award from Expatica, an English language news and information website in the Netherlands. Recognition from the public, peers and our partners was a reward which would set the tone for our next phase of growth.

Regrettably, due to financial pressures, in 2011 ACCESS had to close our offices in Amsterdam. Determined to continue serving internationals throughout the country, while having to consolidate our operations in The Hague, ACCESS introduced a nation-wide service number and a revamped website. In fact, the improved website ensured that ACCESS continued to expand on the number of consultations we were receiving from people before they arrived. The move from comprehensive books, which were selling less and becoming more expensive to produce, to the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) series further ensured we were able to serve internationals far and wide. Based on the questions received on the helpdesk, and updated annually, the FAQ series on subjects ranging from Healthcare to Winter Driving have proven to be a popular way of providing direct answers to questions posed. In 2014 alone, the 13 guides produced by ACCESS and countless feature articles written by internationals on living in the Netherlands were downloaded 68,000 times, and continue to be a well-used resource. Phone calls may have dropped, but email consults from the community also continue to rise, and given that we were now also responding to inquiries face-to-face at The Hague International Centre, our ability to serve was continually growing.



Also due to financial pressures, the quarterly ACCESS Magazine stopped being printed, and became, from 2012-2015, an online publication only. It has since returned to print (Spring 2016) in response to calls from the community for something tangible and a desire for ACCESS to complement our online presence with an offline product. The magazine supports the work of ACCESS, which is to encourage and facilitate the successful settlement of internationals in the Netherlands, providing content which allows internationals to get to know their host country better, and hopefully encourage communicating with their Dutch hosts on Dutch life until they are able, as many try, to do so in the local language.



Another initiative to support internationals settling was a project ACCESS undertook with DutchNews.nl – the leading online English-language news and current affairs website. Through an online survey we asked internationals already living in the country to share personal experiences on all things ‘Dutch’, from the health care system to the public transport system. The resulting book, *Ready, Steady, Go Dutch*, not only provided another income stream, but through the testimonials shared has helped thousands in understanding how things are done here.

The model ACCESS was a part of pioneering with The Hague International Centre, whereby ACCESS complemented the ‘formalities’ with personal attention provided by expats and for expats, was acknowledged and validated when the City of Utrecht approached ACCESS to help them. Their goal was to provide the same type of service and same quality of service at their own Expat Center, which opened in 2015. In April of that year ACCESS signed a partnership agreement with the City and ACCESS currently provides the Expat Center with Information & Hospitality Officers, volunteers, to serve internationals and expats in the Utrecht region. Needless to say, being able to offer volunteering opportunities to internationals living in and around Utrecht is an added feather in our cap.

The success of this model – adding a soft, personal touch to the settlement formalities – has even more recently been recognised when ACCESS, in June of 2016, started a similar pilot with the Expatcenter Amsterdam, one of the first expat centres in the Netherlands, and has since been called by Expat Centre Leiden to do the same. The calls upon ACCESS’ services are two-fold: the increasing numbers of internationals arriving necessitates it; and recognition that ‘expats serving expats’ is not only more efficient, it is more effective. After all, as expats, ACCESS volunteers know what new arrivals do not (yet) know and therefore are better positioned to guide new arrivals in decoding their new home.



First client at Expat Center Utrecht



ACCESS in this period was also called upon to accompany missions to Denmark, Belgium and within the Netherlands to help in answering questions from companies and organisations about relocating to and within the Netherlands. Many of the concerns employees had and questions they posed were related to the very themes and subjects ACCESS has built up a wealth of knowledge on. Our role in these missions was one of reassurance and responding to questions related to living, housing, schooling and healthcare. The feedback from these missions has been extremely positive – from the City of The Hague on whose behalf ACCESS accompanied the missions, as well as the organisations involved. It builds towards a new priority for ACCESS, that of serving international employers and their HR departments in responding to the needs of incoming staff.

This period of maturity encouraged ACCESS to reflect on what we have meant to the people who have served as volunteers. A comprehensive survey of past volunteers, undertaken in 2014 and published the following year, provides the proof to the anecdotal evidence known: that being able to have a place from which to create community and serve others was, for the majority, what made the difference not only to their time in the Netherlands, but for themselves on an expatriate assignment. Combined with the testimonials collected from our helpdesk, from those we have served, it encourages us to continue doing what we do, and to strive to extend this even further. Over the years ACCESS has served the public in general; continued to serve those in need of extra support through the Counselling Service Network; served the volunteers; and more recently we have been serving the expat services of several municipalities in the Netherlands. Time now, now that we are ‘all grown up’, to reach out and serve international employers.

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*The Agency Staff Relocation is a very complex process in which the right communication plays an essential role. As the move affects not only the employees, but also their families, it raises questions/needs related to housing, schooling, logistics, banks, job opportunities for partners, language and other courses, doctors and hospitals, culture and free time possibilities, etc. And exactly there, it was the external briefers from ACCESS and The Hague International Centre, Ms Deborah Valentine and Mr Wilfred Assink, that made a huge difference to the Agency Communication Staff Relocation Campaign held from 13-17 April 2015. Those guys were amazing. They saw immediately where the concern of people was, and they had the answers ready almost before the questions were raised. They were professional, flexible and very comprehensive. For the Agency, the cooperation with and support by those two entities has been an added value that the Agency hopes to continue build upon also in the future.*

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Lucie Cimoradska, Communication, NATO Communications and Information Agency, Chief Strategy Office | Communication Dpt.

## Afterword

Long before the World Wide Web offered a platform for people, everywhere, to access information about virtually anything, anywhere, ACCESS had a phone number, a group of dedicated volunteers, and a mission to serve the international community, to ensure that people expatriating to the Netherlands could do so successfully. Even as the rise of the internet made this information easily available to many, in the case of many countries, language remained an issue. It would be a while before services, public and private, in the Netherlands would make their information available in English. Till then, ACCESS was a local resource with the knowledge and ability to ‘translate’ that which internationals needed to know, and: we still had a phone number.

Today, with even greater sources of information available online, and through social media, ACCESS remains current, active, and relevant. Why? Because we are still here, we still ‘translate’ the answers from the point of view of experience, the experience of others who have expatriated before, and, that phone number we have, and the email address we use to respond to inquiries, means there is a person at the other end – who knows what new people do not yet know, who can respond with empathy, and who can make the process personal. And, we are still here because the Dutch government, as well as the community, have invested and believed in ACCESS.

Due to the abundance, over-abundance even, of information available, the fact that there is someone who can break it down, keep it simple and respond to the ‘hidden’ question behind the actual questions posed is a relief to many. We manage the expectations of new arrivals, answer their questions, and point them in

the direction of solutions. We help. Our volunteers have often travelled the same road new arrivals have yet to travel, and so we know how to make that a smoother journey, sharing experiences and providing empathy. It is what we do, every day. And, we know from testimonials and statistics that what we do is appreciated. In personal contacts alone - either by phone, email or face-to-face -, in 2014 we attended to 7,177 families; this rose to 8,876 in 2015 and in the first half of 2016 was already at 5,608. Meanwhile our Frequently Asked Questions Guides have been downloaded, on average since 2014, around 35 thousand times per year.

It is a tribute to the Netherlands that we have been able to be a part of the solution. The country acknowledges the value of responding to the issues internationals have when settling in here. This is further evidenced by the cooperation of the expat centres in Eindhoven, Maastricht, Groningen and Rotterdam with locally based international groups. Now that we have also been called upon to collaborate with expat desks and the efforts of the public sector to make internationals feel welcome in the Netherlands, to ease the process of the formalities of moving to the Netherlands, we are able to add a face to our service. Adding offline to online information and making the arrival of new people more personal, and tactile. Doing so through expat desks is one achievement, and as we settle into our adulthood we will strive to do so with the companies and organisations bringing people into the Netherlands – for short or long assignments – and support their HR departments in serving their employees. ACCESS has proven it can help, and serves well, and we are committed to serving for many years to come.

Deborah Valentine  
Executive Director ACCESS



## Acknowledgements

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No part of this story however would have been possible were it not for the dedication and contributions of past Volunteers, Managers, Directors, Executive Directors or Board Members. Nor would the future look so promising were it not for the current team of Volunteers, Managers, Project Managers and Board Members. To all of them the recognition they deserve in making the history, present and future of ACCESS so tremendously unique.

And last, but certainly not least, to all the partners ACCESS has had the pleasure of receiving support from which has allowed us to mature – in particular the public sector working hard to ensure that the Netherlands remains a choice destination for international employers, as well as their spouses, partners and families.





ACCESS



Looking forward to reaching and helping more expatriates!





The ACCESS website provides all the information referred to in this publication. Our Frequently Asked Questions Guides can be downloaded free of charge from [www.access-nl.org](http://www.access-nl.org). For questions to our Helpdesk emails can be sent to [helpdesk@access-nl.org](mailto:helpdesk@access-nl.org) or it may be reached by calling 0900 2 222 377 (2 ACCESS) – calling charges may apply. To call from outside of the Netherlands please dial + 31 70 346 2525. Correspondence may be addressed to our back-offices at Laan van Meerdevoort 70, 2517 AN The Hague, Netherlands. For general inquiries about ACCESS or to contact the Executive Director about our Patron Programme or how we can support you as an employer of internationals please use [edirector@access-nl.org](mailto:edirector@access-nl.org) or call +31 70 345 1700.