Corporate Volunteering: An Introduction

Corporate volunteering is the practice of utilizing a corporation’s employees in community engagement programs. These programs vary in size and scope. Usually there is some tangible form of support by the company for the employees. The activities may range from individual involvement to team events, from localized programs to international placements, from one time events to long term partnerships.

The popularity of corporate volunteering is on the rise. In 2009, due to the economic collapse, charitable donations from corporations have fallen by as much as fifty percent. To make up the difference, businesses have looked to their employees to provide tactile connections with the communities in which they operate. In providing assets to non-profits such as enthusiastic participants, key skill sets, and company resources, business hopes to see meaningful good come of it.

Employee volunteering has been around well over a hundred years. But until recently, these volunteering efforts were tied to the philanthropic efforts of the company. Now with the momentum of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), corporate volunteering is increasingly viewed as a strategy to benefit the community, the business and the individual employee. This is a positive development in that the employee volunteering efforts are now becoming more strategic, more essential, and more sustainable.

Yet, given this new strategic focus, there seems to be some lack of understanding surrounding employee volunteering. Moving forward from ad hoc charitable activities, which were largely uncoordinated, decentralized and without any measurement, corporate volunteer advocates may promise far more than is being realized.

For example, many nonprofits enter into community partnerships with business, offering employee volunteer opportunities in the unspoken hope of financial support. When the financial gift is small to paltry, or non-existent, many nonprofits resent providing ‘free team building’ exercises. On the other hand, business leaders are regularly frustrated by un-returned phone calls, emails and letters. Many executives express grave
concerns about partnering with organizations that cannot seem to function at the most basic of levels.

Beyond functional social partnerships, there are questions that arise from the purported benefits of employee volunteer programs. The great majority of these programs are episodic events, taking place once a year for only a few hours. Even then, much of the time is spent coordinating the volunteers, taking pictures, handing out volunteer awards and meal time. How much impact can be realized in only 3 hours one Saturday each year, even when spread across thousands of volunteers? Habitat for Humanity has discovered a formula that can capture the value of such efforts, but the vast majority of nonprofits are unable to offer similar activities and lack the infrastructure of an organization the size of Habitat for Humanity.

Despite these observations, corporate volunteering continues to grow in popularity. More and more companies are beginning to formalize an employee volunteering strategy and pour resources into these programs. But why?

Why So Much Interest? The Push & Pull Effect:

During the first half of 2009 there was a significant surge in volunteering.

According to Tara Weiss, writing for Forbes.com by the end of February 2009, “The Ronald McDonald House of New York has had a 10% increase in volunteers” compared to February 2008. In Boston, during the same period of time the United Way, Big Sisters and Boston Cares all report significant increases in volunteer numbers. Rick Wallwork, the Associate Director of Boston Cares, reflected that although February is usually pretty quiet month, “the numbers are through the roof. We have more than 1900 volunteers signed up for month of February compared with 1150 volunteers throughout the month last year. That represents a 65 percent increase over last year.” (read the full article on wbur.org)

Two significant ‘pull’ factors

First, President Obama’s call to service had a significant impact on volunteerism. The Corporation for National and Community Service (the federal agency that tracks volunteer numbers) estimates that one million people participated in January’s Martin Luther King Day of Service last year, which doubled the numbers for 2008.
AmeriCorps, a federal agency promoting volunteerism, had received three times the applications during the first quarter of 2009 compared to 2008. Even applications to the Peace Corps spiked by 37%, most notably during the days before and after President Obama’s inauguration. (read the full article by The Canadian Press)

Second, there is increasing attention by corporate America to matters of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). For several years now companies have become increasingly aware of CSR and the potential benefits to both the business and the community. However with the economic downturn, outright cash gifts were largely set aside. Instead companies opted to increase their volunteerism within communities. In March 2009, the Conference Board had determined that among their members;

> 45 percent of those surveyed had already implemented a reduction in their 2009 giving budget and 16 percent were now considering it. Thirty-five percent said that they would make fewer grants in 2009 and 22 percent are considering doing the same. Twenty-one percent said that they would make smaller grants and 27 percent were considering doing so.

By contrast volunteerism was projected to increase with 45 percent of respondents indicating they would be pouring more of their efforts into these programs.

The “push” factor

Certainly, the Obama Effect is pulling people into the arena of community service....but there has also been a pretty strong push which many people are all too familiar with: unemployment.

Taproot is a US non-profit that matches skilled professionals with non-profits that need their expertise. In the first few months of 2009, the saw a whopping 171% increase in applications. Aaron Hurst, Taproot’s president believes this increase was due in part to Obama’s national call to service, but according to information captured on the intake forms, it was also largely due to layoffs. (read the full Rueters article)

Gary Bagley, the director of New York Cares remarked in March of 2009, that "We can't open the doors wide enough. Everything we're doing is full. Our orientations are booked three weeks in advance." Curious as to why there was such a drastic increase in the number of volunteers he was seeing, he began surveying the applicants. About 60% had experienced a change in their work situation, or were now unemployed. (read the full article by The Canadian Press)
The actual result?

While the jury is still out on the actual volunteer rates for 2009, there is some evidence to indicate a downturn versus the increase that was anticipated.

“America’s Civic Health Index for 2009 shows that the economic recession is causing a civic depression. The national survey finds that 72% of Americans say they cut back on the time they spent volunteering, participating in groups, and doing other civic activities in the past year, during the same period when the economy was free-falling.”

The 2009 Tiller Social Action Survey seems to indicate the same thing.

“40% of survey respondents have not volunteered in 2009, and of the 60% of respondents who have, roughly half spent two hours a week or less volunteering.”

Read the full release of these findings here.

If your interested, you may view volunteer rates by state or city on this interactive map provided by the Corporation for National and Community Service.

What’s the problem?

So why haven’t these significant social pressures guaranteed an increase in volunteering rates? There are, of course, numerous and complex reasons why volunteering isn’t catching on at a faster rate. We’ve written about some of these reasons from the non-profits perspective;

3 Reasons Why You’re Finding It Hard To Find & Keep Volunteers, And What To Do About It

We’ve also covered the phenomena from the volunteer’s perspective;

6 Reasons Why You’ll Never Volunteer Again
When it comes to corporate volunteering rates, the issues are a bit more mundane. The fact is, many companies have a hard time understanding the concept of volunteering. What’s more, these same companies struggle to appreciate the situation that most non-profits find themselves in. But the fault doesn’t only lie with the corporations. Non-profits are constantly seem to be focusing on the immediate and urgent issue without considering long-term solutions. As a result, non-profits often lack the infrastructure, skills and administrative capacity to take full advantage of the opportunities presented by corporate volunteering.

That is not to say that both parties don’t want to make improvements. Nor is it to suggest that there is some examples of extraordinary leadership in thought and practice in this area by both business and non-profits.

What is needed is a careful examination of some of the causes and underlying assumptions that limit both companies and non-profits from realizing the worth of corporate volunteering. In order to do that, we’re going to take a look at some of the most popular requests business makes of non-profits when planning employee volunteering activities.

The 7 Requests:

**The Ideal Volunteer Experience....**

1. **can be undertaken in a day**
2. **can be done together as a team**
3. **has intrinsic value**
4. **does not clash with other objectives**
5. **enhances the skills of their employees**
6. **coincides with the company’s chosen cause**
7. **coincides with what their employees want to do**

*(These 7 requests have been adapted from material provided by [www.volunteeringaustralia.org](http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org) and can be found [here as part of a very helpful slide presentation](http:)*

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Nonprofits and corporations are better equipped and more culturally aligned to solicit and manage cash gifts that volunteers. While 61 percent of nonprofit employees with primary responsibility for fundraising have at least eight years of experience, just 25 percent of nonprofit employees with primary responsibility for volunteer management have the same level of experience. Further, while only 5 percent of nonprofits have no one specifically in charge of fundraising, nearly a quarter (24%) of nonprofits have no one in charge of managing volunteers.

2009 Deloitte Volunteer IMPACT Survey

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Realized Worth | 203 Kingston Road, Toronto, Ontario M4L 1T5 | chrisjarvis@realizedworth.com | @realizedworth | www.realizedworth.com
These seven requests actually make a lot of sense from the business perspective. Those charged with organizing employee volunteer events within companies are usually:

- New to the position
- Possess little non-profit background
- Extremely busy with a large workload
- Pressured by upper management to produce effective, yet undefined outcomes
- Eager to explore easy, yet meaningful solutions

As a result the seven typical requests possess these qualities:

- Be obviously important - intrinsic value
- Easy, simple - done in a day
- Make sense to everyone - fits employees interests, fits with companies cause, and doesn’t clash with other objectives
- Makes the company better - allows for teamwork and skill enhancement

There is nothing inherently wrong with any of these requests. In fact, most of these requests are good or at least will lead to good objectives. The problem lies somewhere between making the request and the actual event. Each requests may result in a bad, better or best version of an answer.

*Why does that happen?*

Simple: It’s all about perspective.

**Non-profits and businesses have unique perspectives based on their horizons of understanding.**

Your horizon is “The totality of all that can be realized or thought about by a person at a given time in history and in a particular culture.”

German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002)
As a result, there are bad, better and best answers to these requests.

**BAD REQUESTS & ANSWERS:**
One group benefits at the other's expense

**BETTER REQUESTS & ANSWERS:**
One group benefits at no cost to the other group

**BEST REQUESTS & ANSWERS:**
Both the business and the non-profit win

Let’s take a look at two of these requests to better understand what’s going on.

1. "We want a volunteer experience that can be done in no more than a day, and no less than a half-day."

Why does the company want this? Well, the answer is in the question; the experience cannot be too big, or too small. It must feel significant enough to draw people out of the office, and not so significant that they’re scared away.

Ok so, if the non-profit happens to have stand-alone project, in dire need of completion, that would take about a day to finish, and provide a great photo-op for a group of employees.... then, great. But unless there is an obvious and significant payoff to the non-profit in providing this opportunity then it is a bad idea. Non-profits have limited time and resources, and inventing work is bad for their organization.

Inventing work is also bad for the community. When a corporation volunteers with a non-profit, they are bringing a potential wealth of skills, resources and networks. To access these resources, non-profits must draw the business into more than a “quick and easy” arrangement. Inventing work may be the simplest answer, but ultimately, by offering a one-time, “repaint the wall” experience, value yet to be realized in connecting with that business is stolen. These opportunities are also bad for the community.
In this case a partnership is a much better solution for everyone. It offers the business a genuine CSR strategy toward becoming socially responsible. The community benefits in that there is to the resources the business brings.

The best solution would be for the non-profit to develop an ongoing, open volunteer opportunity. That way they have a great answer for every business who calls. Non-profits are then able to meet the company where they’re at. Because for many companies, they are just curious - really, all they want is to try it out. At the same time, there is a future possibility to develop a partnership that will effectively move them toward their CSR goals, while opening the door for the non-profit to the business’ resources. It’s mutually beneficial and, once the space is set up, the process is more than easy - it’s virtually automatic. To read more about the benefits of a fully automated volunteer process, read this series: How to Offer a Great Volunteer Experience.

2. “We want an activity that can be done together as a team”

It doesn't take a genius to decipher the “why” behind the request for a team volunteering activity. Companies are desperate for innovative and effective team-building experiences. Volunteering together is cheaper than a conference or wilderness retreat, and saving money is a priority these days. As if saving money isn’t enough, volunteering also affords execs the rare opportunity to work alongside the new guys. How else will authentic team-building take place?

This isn’t a bad request. Volunteering in teams creates the opportunity for shared experiences. That’s an essential aspect to internalizing and retaining the learnings of the volunteer activity. But all too often businesses are looking for a large team oriented volunteering event because it’s the only event they are planning for the year. If a company genuinely wants a team-building experience, they need an event that offers space for interaction and reflection. Also, if they are hoping for employees to rub shoulders and connect with people from other parts of the organization, there must be enough time to move past introductions to meaningful connection.
These things won’t happen in 2 hours on a Saturday. They won’t even happen in 6 hours - on any day of the week! Huge employee volunteer events are great for a handful of reasons, but it is ridiculous to assume that they generate loyalty, broaden perspectives or effect productivity - not to mention, build teams. They don’t. Ever. As far as team-building goes, these events are bad for the company.

Examples of achieving sustainable solutions for a community issue between 10am and 4pm on a Saturday are rare. (Even Habitat for Humanity can’t pull that off.) Community issues are complex and take time to resolve - the use of one-day events to create the illusion of simple problems and easy solutions is dangerous. Communities cannot afford to be teased by brief (albeit well-intentioned) “help” from businesses who can walk away from the problem at the end of the day. For companies trying to establish a socially responsible strategy as part of their community engagement, one-day events are obstacles to real solutions and therefore bad for the community.

A better solution would be to have ongoing opportunities for groups to come and work as teams. The best solution would be to have teams form around issues through self-selection. The non-profit would outline issues and problems to be addressed and provide clear parameters for each project. This process is called crowdsourcing.

Crowdsourcing is basically taking a problem (meaning anything you want to figure out) and asking a crowd to solve it. It’s an open call for solutions. The crowd is sorted into groups and these groups brainstorm and submit solutions. The crowd also sorts through the solutions, finding the best ones. Then the non-profit receives and owns the solution. Sometimes the “winning” group is rewarded, sometimes the reward is simply intellectual satisfaction or, as in this case, effective team-building. Crowdsourcing can produce solutions from anyone - amateurs, volunteers, experts. All you need is a crowd. (Of course, this explanation had been adapted from Wikipedia.)

How to always have the Best request & answer

As we’ve pointed out:

**BAD REQUESTS & ANSWERS:**
One group benefits at the other s expense

** BETTER REQUESTS & ANSWERS:**
One group benefits at no cost to the other group

**BEST REQUESTS & ANSWERS:**
Both the business and the non-profit win
BUSINESS: What should businesses do in order to ensure they are asking for something that allows for a win-win situation for themselves and the non-profit?

Partnerships:

Social partnerships between businesses and non-profits have a much better chance at discovering shared objectives and finding the necessary mutual support to achieve those objectives. In order to work well, these partnerships must;

- ensure the mutual benefit and risk of the partnership through a defined ‘vetting’ process
- be willing to make changes in the partnership design as the relationship develops
- share both the objectives and the resources to achieve the desired outcomes
- be equally committed to objectives that may not be shared, such as employee retention for the business and program development for the non-profit
- be willing to freely exchange perspectives without concern that the other party will dismantle the partnership when there is disagreement
- be reciprocal in all aspects, and peer in all interactions.

A DEFINITION OF SOCIAL PARTNERSHIPS

A commitment by a corporation or a group of corporations to work with an organization from a different economic sector (public or nonprofit). It involves a commitment of resources – time and effort – by individuals from all partner organizations. These individuals work cooperatively to solve problems that affect them all. The problem can be defined at least in part as a social issue; its solution will benefit all partners. Social partnership addresses issues that extend beyond organizational boundaries and traditional goals and lie within the traditional realm of public policy – that is, in the social arena. It requires active rather than passive involvement from all parties. Participants must make a resource commitment that is more than merely monetary.

Shared Objectives:

Shared objectives refers to those goals that are both in the interests of the business and the non-profit. Often these objectives are found in brand alignments, but they may also grow out of shared values within each organization. For both the non-profit and the business, a shared objective will:

- fit the mission statement
- show up in year end reports
- make sense to the employees
- have a budget line
- create a sense of achievement
- be integrally connected to other goals and objectives
- be an obvious connection to the public

Employee Volunteering Teams:

Create a team of employees from throughout the business that are veteran volunteers. Make sure the represent a horizontal and vertical perspective of your organization. Ideally, this team will have ‘role’ counterparts on the team created by the non-profit. For example, if they have a finance person on their team, you’ll have someone from the financial department on yours. Some of the benefits of this approach are:

- multiple points of reference within each partner’s organization consisting of a widespread network of people
- development of trust among the team members and in effect among the two organizations
- avoiding over-centralized power in one or two individuals in each organization
- better operationalization of the partnership
- enables the relationship to institutionalize beyond singular personalities within each organization

For more information on the design and use of these teams please refer to Implementing CSR Through Partnerships: Understanding the Selection, Design and Institutionalisation of Nonprofit-Business Partnerships, by Maria May Seitanidi & Andrew Crane, Journal of Business Ethics (2009)
NON-PROFIT: What should non-profits do in order to ensure they are asking for something that allows for a win-win situation for themselves and the business?

Partnerships:

When creating partnerships with businesses, non-profits should work to include the same qualities as those listed for businesses above. The benefits of such a relationship are enormous:

- access to huge amounts of social capital in terms of resources, skills, and networks
- the potential for a loyal and long-term funding source
- greater awareness that comes from alignment with a known business brand
- infrastructure support and growth

Training:

Most employees who come to work at non-profits have no previous exposure to the issues facing the non-profit on a daily basis. Providing occasional training will enable these new volunteers to better carry our their activities. But training also serves another important purpose. It provides these employees the language, knowledge and information they need to talk about their experiences with their co-workers. This story telling will help the employees internalize and personalize their reasons for volunteering with you. It will also enable them to better recruit new volunteers to the program, helping both your non-profit and the business.

1st Stage Experiences

One of the best ideas for non-profits is to create an ongoing, open volunteer opportunity. This is a space where all types of volunteers can show up on a regular basis (preferably weekly) and involve themselves to any degree they want. The activity provided should be one that can be accomplished with 3 volunteers, or 53. The point is, volunteers see your organization for the first time, and you see them. There is no pressure, no obligation, no disappointment. Volunteers who aren’t worth your effort, weed themselves out. Volunteers who will benefit your organization, stick around. This is the volunteer’s “first stage” - and it's important to meet them where they're at.
If you’re a community kitchen, the activity can involve serving meals. If you work with nature, you can plant trees. If you’re an organization that feels you can’t accommodate this kind of space, trust me: There’s a “first stage” space for everyone. Sometimes it takes some work to get there, but its worth it in the end.

With an ongoing, open volunteer opportunity, you’ll have a great answer for every business who calls. You’ll meet the company where they’re at - really, all they want is to try it out. At the same time, you’ll offer them a chance to develop a partnership that will effectively move them toward their CSR goals, while opening the door for your non-profit to their resources. It’s mutually beneficial and, once the space is set up, the process is more than easy - it’s virtually automatic.

To read more about the benefits of a fully automated volunteer process, read this series we wrote: How to Offer a Great Volunteer Experience.

Examples of Corporate Volunteering:

Cisco’s Leadership Fellows Program puts high-potential employees in a job with a nonprofit organization for six to twelve months with the charge of ensuring a specific project is successful.

BD, a medical technology company, sends a select group of employees to Zambia to work with healthcare professionals and NGO staff in the fight against AIDS. This work helps to bring new perspectives on global health challenges in the workplace.

IBM’s On Demand Community has dozens of state-of-the art online presentations, videos, Web site reference links, software solutions and documents to assist IBM volunteers in not-for-profit organizations and educational settings.

McGraw Hill’s Writers to the Rescue program matches individual employees to nonprofit organizations to serve as volunteer writers, editors, communication and/or public relations specialists.

UPS’s 40-year-old Community Internship Program (CIP) immerses senior level executives in a variety of social and economic challenges facing today’s workforce. Managers leave their jobs and families to spend a month living and working in one of four CIP sites run by local nonprofit agencies. This intense training program exposes managers to situations they would rarely encounter in corporate America such as poverty, drug dependency and alcoholism. The goal is to make better, more empathetic managers.

Xerox Corporation’s F.I.R.S.T. program has technically competent employees mentor student teams competing in a national robotics competition.

Adapted from The Promise Employee Skill-Based Volunteering Holds for Employee Skills and Nonprofit Partner Effectiveness, Points of Light Foundation
List of resources:

Article: *The Payoff to Work without Pay: Volunteer Work as an Investment in Human Capital*  
Kathleen M. Day and Rose Anne Devlin  
(Research demonstrates the return of volunteering is between 6 and 7 percent of annual earnings)  
[http://www.jstor.org/pss/136465?cookieSet=1](http://www.jstor.org/pss/136465?cookieSet=1)

Article: *Motivating Volunteering in Tough Times:*  

Article: *Employee Volunteering and Social Capital: Contributions to Corporate Social Responsibility*  
[http://www.businessinsociety.eu/resources/2878](http://www.businessinsociety.eu/resources/2878)

Taproot Foundation **Resources** for Pro-Bono/Skill Volunteering:  

Idealist.org **Resources** for Employee Volunteering:  

VolunteeringAustralia.org **Resources** for Corporate Volunteering:  

Volunteering.org **Resources** on starting an Employee Volunteering Program:  
[http://www.volunteering.org.uk/WhatWeDo/Projects+and+initiatives/Employer+Supported+Volunteering/Employers/up+and+running/](http://www.volunteering.org.uk/WhatWeDo/Projects+and+initiatives/Employer+Supported+Volunteering/Employers/up+and+running/)

The National Standards for Community Engagement set out best practice guidance for engagement between communities and public agencies:  