



## A Summary of the Current State of Knowledge: Using Employee Volunteering to Benefit HR Departments

In a recent survey of executives of large Canadian and US companies, more than two-thirds of responding companies reported that volunteerism will grow in importance as a management priority (The Conference Board, 2006). One reason is the growing belief that employee volunteering benefits business. Indeed, the last few decades have produced claims regarding the HR value of company-supported employee volunteer programs.

Thanks to recent research and to the practices of pioneering companies, it is increasingly clear that the HR areas that employee volunteering best supports are employee professional development, recruitment, morale and retention, and teamwork, as specified below.

### ✓ Professional Development

With volunteer opportunities that range from managing a multimillion dollar golf tournament to giving speeches to high school students, many have long considered volunteer service a logical place for employees to develop workplace skills. For example, PricewaterhouseCooper's global leadership program, Project Ulysses, sends teams of employees to work in a developing country for two and a half months on a pressing social issue, and 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 (see Marquez, 2005). Furthermore, many

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companies encourage closer-to-home volunteering as part of employee professional development. For example, when an Aetna employee uses the online tool to craft their compulsory professional development plan, the suggested tactics for developing targeted workplace competencies include volunteer jobs, such as manning a crisis line or running a capital campaign. These volunteer jobs are presented alongside more mainstream tactics such as reading a book or attending a course.

Indeed, research findings are steadily piling up in support of the concept that volunteer service supports workplace skill development. Recent research includes a national study of white collar workers in which 63 percent of all respondents (74 percent of volunteers) reported that volunteering had had a positive effect on their careers (Deloitte / Points of Light Foundation, 2006). Similarly, a survey commissioned by WOMANS WAY of professional women who volunteered found that 83 percent reported that volunteering developed leadership skills, 78 percent reported that it developed communication skills, and more than half reported development of a host of other workplace skills (Markitects and WOMANS WAY, 2006).

### ✔ Morale and Retention

Many companies, including EDS and IBM, have posited that individuals whose employers support employee–community engagement experience greater workplace satisfaction.

Research indicates that there is indeed a connection between employee volunteering and morale. Recent research includes a 2005 GolinHarris survey that found that employees’ view of a company’s corporate citizenship affects employee morale, spirit, and pride; trust in their employer; and willingness to recommend their employer as a good place to work (GolinHarris, 2005). Furthermore, a Walker Information study found employees who work for organizations that are involved in the community are more likely to be engaged at work and stay with the company (Walker Information, 2003).

Similarly, an Aetna all-employee survey found that employees who participated in volunteer events were more likely to rate Aetna as a “good place to work.” In addition, an evaluation conducted at British Gas found that retention was higher among employees who participated in workplace volunteer events (The Corporate Citizenship Company, 2003). Finally, research in Europe indicates that employee volunteer policies have a significant impact on pride (The Corporate Citizenship Company, 2003).

### ✔ Teambuilding

Team volunteer projects could be expected to provide employees an opportunity to work together in an environment that is more forgiving and conducive to developing effective ways for working together. Based on this premise, Aetna, Deloitte, Home Depot, Wells Fargo, and many other companies have designed volunteer events that bring teams of employees together in the hopes that this will positively affect their workplace teamwork.



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Once again, research corroborates this position. For example, a survey of Barclays Bank found that 58 percent of managers reported that their teams worked better and 61 percent of employees reported that their teamwork skills increased, following team volunteer projects..

## 📌 Recruitment

For decades, many business executives have argued that workers, especially younger workers, prefer work environments that reflect their social consciousness and, thus, consider employers with strong volunteer programs attractive. Based on this logic, many companies have made release time for volunteering and other policies that support employee community engagement prominent in their recruitment materials. For example, Weyerhaeuser, a Fortune 500 international forest products company, includes profiles of employees meant to boost recruitment that include a section called “Growing my Community.”

Research supports the popular suspicion that there is a link between employee volunteer programs and recruitment. For example, a study conducted by a Boston-based marketing and communications consulting firm found that 75 percent of Americans consider a company’s commitment to social issues when deciding where to work (Cone, 2004).

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## Conclusions

Studies to date suggest a robust role for employee volunteering in supporting HR functions. Still, more rigorous studies are necessary to truly establish the factual case and to identify what employee volunteer program components lead to which benefits. For example, does family volunteering better support employee morale than strictly employee volunteering?

The data have already made it clear, however, that HR departments that do not leverage employee volunteering for HR purposes may be foregoing substantial gains.



Given this, it is recommended that HR departments work collaboratively with their employee volunteer programs to do the following:

- Apply HR best practices and management standards to the employee volunteer program, as is feasible, in order to ensure that volunteer activities support HR priorities
- Apply HR metrics regarding morale, retention, and promotions, for example, to employee volunteering in order to help identify to what degree and in what ways employee volunteering leads to HR gains, and how to best benefit from employee volunteering
- Continually respond to lessons learned about employee volunteering to optimize effectiveness and impact of employee volunteering

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