THE SECRET SAUCE IN ACHIEVING MEANINGFUL VOLUNTEERISM

A guide to making your corporate volunteerism program engaging and impactful

MERCY CORPS MicroMentor
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CORPORATE VOLUNTEERISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY: CHANGING & CHALLENGING

Corporations have given back to the community since the days of the Bell Telephone Company and J.P. Morgan and Co.\(^1\), more than 100 years ago. Today, corporate transparency and high expectations from many stakeholders, from employees to customers to society at large, mean that companies are asked to do much more than simply write a check to support local community efforts. Indeed, companies are looking into (and beyond) the communities in which they operate and finding innovative ways to benefit societies—which often have the side benefit of giving companies a boost in areas like reputation and employee engagement. But with strategic consideration, these “side benefits” can become key goals and outcomes of your philanthropic efforts.

Engaging employees in your corporate philanthropy process—through volunteering, matching gifts, dollars for doers and more—is probably a big part of your company’s strategy. And you probably face competing priorities for your department. Whether your role falls under corporate social responsibility, community affairs, the corporate foundation, human resources or somewhere else, you’re managing a lot of internal and external expectations, goals and desires. If you work for a company with multiple regions (even just regions of the U.S.) you’ve probably experienced how challenging it can be to execute a volunteer program across geographies in ways that are meaningful for everyone involved. And of course, your company’s leadership will want to know how volunteerism will impact metrics like retention, recruitment and engagement—which ultimately impact the company’s bottom line.

This is the context for professionals striving to create volunteer opportunities that are meaningful for employees and beneficiaries—as well as help employees hone their professional skills in the process. How to make sense of it all?

82% of employees who volunteered with their companies felt more committed to their organization.

Source: Realized Worth
A SOLUTION

The answer to these challenges lies in the strategic alignment of employee and company values with volunteer opportunities. This means making sure that employees are excited about volunteer opportunities and have the will (and time!) to contribute meaningfully. To begin this process, it’s valuable to start by taking a step back to define your company’s alignment with a cause, social issue or challenge. By aligning your company with one or two specific social issues on which you’ve determined you have the potential to impact, you bring a sense of focus to every volunteer opportunity you put in front of your employees. You might even find an issue that could explicitly focus on employees, such as Walmart’s focus on creating economic opportunity for its hourly associates.

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ALIGN YOUR BRAND

Clear alignment with a cause that “clicks” with your brand will make sense to your employees, your nonprofit partner(s), and most of all, your company’s leadership. In fact, it’s become a best practice in the world of corporate philanthropy, as evidenced by the many companies that have decided to go beyond supporting traditional charities, and have extended their CR efforts to make a meaningful impact for the stakeholders (customers, employees, neighbors) who are critical to elevating their brand identity to be regarded as a positive player in the global market. Good alignment also involves leveraging the resources that a company is uniquely positioned to provide in order to achieve maximum impact.

Panera Bread and Capital One are just two examples of many companies who are rising to this challenge.
PANERA BREAD: LEVERAGING COMPANY STRENGTHS

Panera Bread has long been committed to reducing food insecurity in local communities through traditional approaches like donating day-old bread and providing philanthropic support to anti-hunger nonprofits. Through its foundation, the company founded Panera Cares Community Cafes in 2010 to truly leverage the company’s strength as a restaurant company. Though the Panera Cares Cafes look like any other Panera location, they operate on a “pay as you can” model and offer job training programs in partnership with local nonprofits. The cafes create a sense of pride in employees, both in those who work within the Panera Cares Community Cafes and in those who know that their company is taking a leadership role on a tough issue. The cafes are the centerpiece of a variety of company initiatives and volunteer opportunities related to food insecurity.

CAPITAL ONE: CLEAR BRAND ALIGNMENT

Capital One’s program, Investing for Good, centers around human capital, financial capital and social capital. By choosing a broadly defined issue—access to capital—the company has the flexibility to address a swath of issues, from job skills training (human capital) to supporting home ownership (financial capital) to building nonprofits’ capacity through skills-based mentoring (social capital). And it’s no accident that the financial services company’s program is focused around investing and capital, creating clear brand alignment.

CHECKLIST FOR STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT PROCESS

As you may have already guessed, there are nearly as many ways to approach strategic alignment as there are companies; many choose to hire an outside consultant for an external perspective and to manage what can be a detailed process. The checklist below provides a rough guide for beginning this very worthwhile process.

Be sure to secure the support of an “executive champion” to provide important strategic insight—and vouch for the value of your efforts to their peers.
Form an internal working team so that a variety of interdepartmental and cross-geographic viewpoints inform your strategy.

Take stock of what you’re already doing—do you have successful programs in the area of corporate philanthropy or volunteerism already? Do you have an overarching CSR strategy under which a clear alignment with a social issue would fit nicely?

Research social issues in the communities in which your company operates. Start with broad issues, like economic development, and narrow down to more specific issues, like social entrepreneurship among young people.

Research social issues supported by competitors and companies similar to yours. This helps avoid “me too” programs.

Working collaboratively, narrow down a list of potential social issues, using the lens of what will be most relevant to the largest number of employees and communities.

Choose 2-3 broad issues and have team members from different geographies identify the specific issues that apply in their areas.
- **Research potential nonprofit partners**, with a focus on those with community-based, on-the-ground experience—employees in local markets are a great resource for this.

- **Survey employees** on which issue they’d like to support, what type of volunteering appeals to them, why they volunteer (e.g., social time with colleagues, building skills, making an impact in the community), what barriers they have to volunteering (e.g., time, availability)

- **Consider employee locations** when discussing potential volunteer opportunities: are the employees located in the same country or region, or dispersed throughout the world? If so, a virtual opportunity may be valuable in offering a unified volunteer activity that’s widely accessible

- **Present the chosen issue** and potential volunteer opportunities to leadership. Depending on your company’s organizational structure, you may need to bring in management at an earlier phase

- **When initiating partnerships with nonprofits**, consider whether your volunteer programming will be best aided by many local partnerships, or company-wide global partnership

- **Determine potential metrics** for volunteerism success, both in terms of employee engagement and in terms of social impact. Sample inputs in determining metrics include employee survey results and guidance from nonprofit partners
CREATE MEANINGFUL VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES THAT ALIGN WITH WHAT EMPLOYEES WANT

The benefits of volunteerism are many. We all recognize the “warm fuzzies” we get after giving a friend a hand or contributing to our communities, and most companies give to local communities both financially and through employee time. Make sure those within your organization are aware of the real business benefits of employee volunteerism—and how to get the most out of those programs, not only for the community but for the company itself.

The key place to start is with employee engagement. With Deloitte’s 2015 Human Capital Trends report showing that 87% of companies surveyed cite engagement as a top challenge, it’s clear that this is top of mind for most corporate leaders⁴. Though employee engagement is a surely a complex,
multifaceted concept, research from True Impact showed that 94% of employees surveyed believed volunteerism was a core component or positive influence on job satisfaction.5

Since engaging employees is likely a key goal in creating volunteerism opportunities, it’s important to consider how to incorporate skills-based volunteerism into your program. While activities like painting murals on the walls of a local nonprofit can be a fun way to spend the afternoon, unless you’re a company of artists, the nonprofit may better benefit from employees’ skills in accounting, fundraising or operations. This is where skills-based volunteerism comes in, allowing employee volunteers to share the skills they use each day to benefit a nonprofit. Not only does the nonprofit benefit from a variety of skills for which they’d otherwise hire staff, the employees are allowed to stretch their talents beyond their usual workday application and feel good while doing it.

Skills-based volunteerism:
“an innovative approach that is rapidly gaining recognition as a powerful driver of both social impact and business value.”
– Points of Light Corporate Institute

These good feelings translate into real business benefits. For example, skills-based volunteerism outperformed traditional volunteerism in recruiting benefits by 125%. And it helps to keep employees around, too: 47% of skills-based volunteers were more likely to report high satisfaction with their company than traditional volunteers. High satisfaction is just one piece of engagement, and further research reports employees gaining more skills and feeling happier at work when they’ve been given the opportunity to engage in this type of volunteering. Finally, skills-based volunteerism is a growing field: the rate of pro bono service jumped from 40% in 2012 to 51% in 2014.

Before developing different types of opportunities, it’s important to begin by assessing your company’s existing incentives to volunteer. For example, six out of 10 companies offer paid time to volunteer, which can be a key to employees being able to make time within their workday. Other companies may include participation in general company CSR activities as a component of employee performance reviews.

Employees are 3x more likely to gain material job skills from pro bono service vs. traditional volunteering.

Source: True Impact

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
Once you’ve established how effective your existing incentives are, it’s time to think about types of opportunities. The most effective plan will leverage employee skillsets in a variety of short- and long-term skills-based opportunities—but if a couple opportunities to do more traditional manual projects, don’t discount those, as long as it’s aligned with your chosen social issue and your nonprofit partner indicates it’s a need.

Not everyone loves roll-up-your-sleeves work—but some will jump at the chance to get out from behind their desks. Manufacturing and retail employees might welcome the chance to meet folks from the corporate office and work towards a common goal, while others might want an independent project. Online opportunities may appeal to busy parents who need flexibility. Having something for everyone answers the eternal question “what’s in it for me?” and provides additional incentive to participate. If you face resource and time constraints, you can roll out different types of opportunities in a phased approach.

Ensure that your volunteer opportunities will support your employees’ professional development goals with this tool from Taproot Foundation.
There are a wide variety of skills-based opportunities that you can put together in collaboration with your nonprofit partner. Pro bono services are a specific type of skills-based opportunities, in which volunteers use the professional skills that they use in their everyday work to complete a clearly scoped project, often related to the nonprofit’s operations. This type of volunteerism began in the legal field and has been growing steadily to include professional services such as architecture, marketing/PR, and technology. It can include employees from a variety of departments and include both short- and long-term tasks.

If your company necessitates a broader approach to skills-based volunteerism, mentoring is an additional option to consider. This allows a more personalized approach for those employees who prefer a more independent project. It also captures a broader range of employee “soft skills,” such as networking and interpersonal communications.

74% of skilled volunteers are interested specifically in mentoring opportunities.

Source: LinkedIn for Good
AN ENTREPRENEUR, A RETIRED EXEC: EZICHI AND ELLIOT

A born entrepreneur, Ezichi* decided math was a lucrative field when her family immigrated to the U.S. when she was in eighth grade. Now a licensed math teacher, she runs a tutoring business and needed some help with her business and marketing strategies. She partnered with Elliot, a retired Match.com executive with decades of experience in business, to take her business to the next level.

Learn more about how mentoring can engage your employees in supporting social entrepreneurs.

*indicates MicroMentor client
A NEW PERSPECTIVE, A NEW WEBSITE: BEN AND JUSTFOOD

Mentoring isn’t just for senior executives with decades of experience. American Express* business strategy director, Ben, joined a group of colleagues to assist food advocacy nonprofit JustFood with a website redesign. Ben, a millennial, was refreshed by his experience, saying: “This helped me to look at work from a different perspective. A nonprofit has different ways of planning, different constraints, and different resources.”

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MEASURE IMPACT: THE NONPROFIT, THE SOCIAL ISSUE AND YOUR COMPANY

Beyond employees gaining new perspective from their volunteer experiences, it’s important to try to quantify the business and societal benefits of volunteering. CECP’s 2015 Giving In Numbers study found that nearly one third of companies measure the business value of corporate volunteer programs, with sample metrics including retention and promotion rates of volunteers as well as level of engagement. Further, CECP notes that “internal decision-makers hold societal engagement departments to the same standard of proving value as they do other business units. Examples of impact are compelling, but quantitative results support the case for budget increases [for volunteering programs] that ultimately can lead to an increase in social impact.”

11 Ibid.
Regularly reporting the program’s business and social metrics to internal stakeholders can help you adjust the program and improve outcomes over time. Sometimes it can be helpful to bring in a vendor to measure outputs, outcomes and impact—and many offer platforms to connect companies with nonprofits in need of skills-based volunteers.

Rewarding employees is important too—and is in fact the most popular way to recognize employees for volunteerism in companies outside the U.S.\(^\text{12}\) It’s important to recognize employees not only for how they impacted the nonprofit and/or its beneficiaries, but how their professional skills really filled a need.

Entrepreneurs who work with volunteer business mentors add 3 jobs to the economy each.

Source: MicroMentor Impact Study
IN CONCLUSION:
WORTH IT? ABSOLUTELY.

Creating alignment between your company or brand and a social issue or cause will take more than a few weeks, and you can’t go it alone. However, it is the strategic foundation for creating meaningful volunteer opportunities that will inspire and engage employees, invigorate communities, impact social challenges and, ultimately, benefit your company’s bottom line.

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About the Author

Amelia Brandt is a freelance consultant helping companies and nonprofits bring global environmental and social issues to the forefront through sustainability reporting, employee engagement, social media, nonprofit marketing and corporate communications. During five years at Cone Communications, an early leader in aligning companies with social causes, she supported development of cause and brand marketing campaigns connected to social issues, as well as award-winning employee engagement campaigns related to behavior change in sustainability, working with a broad range of clients, including L’Oréal, Timberland, Nestlé Waters North America, Keurig Green Mountain and IKEA. She left Cone to spend six months as a full-time skills-based volunteer for Global Mamas, a Ghana-based nonprofit empowering female artisans through selling handmade, fair trade products. At Global Mamas, she saw firsthand the benefits and pitfalls of skills-based volunteerism, giving her insight into what nonprofits need from companies and individual volunteers to build successful partnerships.