

Volunteer Programs That Employees Can Get Excited About

by Jessica Rodell

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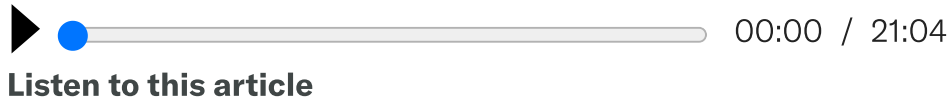


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Across society, volunteerism has been stagnant or trending slightly down in recent years. In the corporate world, however, it has been on the rise. In fact, paid time off for volunteering is one of the few employee benefits that has increased significantly in recent years. According to the Society for Human Resource Management, 47% of

U.S. companies offered community volunteer programs in 2018, up from 40% in 2014. That percentage is even higher for large companies. The Chief Executives for Corporate Purpose—a global coalition of multibillion-dollar companies—reports that 66% of its member firms offered paid-time-off volunteer programs in 2019, compared with 56% in 2016.



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It is unclear whether these trends will continue as the Covid-19 pandemic and global recession continue to unfold. Some crises seem to sensitize people to societal needs: In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, for instance, volunteering reached its highest level in two decades, a bump that lasted for several years. Yet in the wake of the Great Recession, volunteer participation and charitable giving both declined. The current economic downturn is likely to cause corporate belt-tightening, and managers may be pressured to cut volunteer programs. But even in trying times there are good reasons to preserve well-run initiatives.

Many studies have shown that volunteer programs boost productivity, increase employee engagement, and improve hiring and retention. For example, a study I conducted in 2013 showed that the more people volunteered (even if it was on their own time instead of on company time), the better they performed on work tasks. It also showed that volunteers tended to be better citizens at work (helping others, voicing ideas, and so on). Another study, by David Jones of the University of Vermont and colleagues, showed that potential applicants found companies with employee volunteering programs especially attractive, for three key reasons: job seekers' anticipated pride in being affiliated with the company, their perception of how their values fit with the firm, and their expectations about how the

firm treats its employees. Research has also firmly established the benefits of volunteering to people's well-being and sense of purpose, not to mention their physical and mental health.

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In my research and consulting work, I've seen corporate volunteer programs of all shapes and sizes. Some firms allow employees to volunteer for whatever cause or activity they choose; others arrange highly structured outings that teams can participate in together—a charity run, for example, or a house-building effort. Although the constraints associated with Covid-19 have halted many common volunteer activities, they have also given rise to a host of creative programs that allow people to make a difference even during a lockdown—by, for instance, remotely staffing vital hotline services, serving as “phone buddies” to check on seniors, or participating in 5K races at home on treadmills. Companies also differ in how they encourage, recognize, and reward employees' volunteering efforts. And that variation makes sense: Companies should tailor their programs according to factors such as firm size, the expectations of customers and investors, and cultural norms and characteristics. As varied as the programs are, however, the mistakes companies make are often painfully similar. In this article, I talk about the pitfalls companies commonly encounter and some best practices for designing and implementing programs that work.

The Pitfalls

There are many ways in which companies can go wrong when they structure and implement volunteer programs. Three problems are most common:

Copying others. When designing programs, executives are often tempted to take the easy way out and simply copy what they see successful companies in their industry doing. The thinking is “everyone else around me is doing it this way, so it must be effective.” However, this rationale rests on an assumption that may be faulty; the programs of those other firms may *not* be effective or beneficial. The cut-and-paste approach can also cause a disconnect between a company’s mission and goals and its program, limiting its strategic value and its intrinsic appeal to employees.

Prioritizing pet projects. Too often, executives focus their corporation’s volunteer programs around their own personal charitable-giving preferences. (They often do the same when making corporate donations or in-kind gifts to charitable organizations.) Or they allow inertia to dictate a continuation of their predecessors’ philanthropy choices. The result is that corporate volunteer programs tend to reflect the personal priorities and values of top management. But what matters to senior executives doesn’t necessarily matter to employees—who are the linchpin of corporate volunteering efforts.

In conjunction with United Way Worldwide, my colleagues and I surveyed nearly 500 employees in 2014 and 2015—some who volunteered and some who did not—in 50 companies that offered volunteer programs. Among employees who chose not to participate, some said it was because of logistical concerns and lack of flexibility in the program, explaining, for example, that the timing of the opportunity “just wasn’t right” or that the location was “too far away.” But many others reported that they were demotivated by what they saw as programs that prioritized executives’ pet projects, sharing sentiments such as: “I would rather choose volunteer opportunities that I’m interested in and that I feel really need the extra help, not the ones that [my employer] has some association with.” These findings suggest that volunteer programs structured around senior management’s preferences are unlikely to be well received by rank-and-file employees.

Making volunteering mandatory. Once corporate volunteer programs are formed, companies often feel compelled to engage as many people as possible and then continually expand their initiatives. Unfortunately, this can put pressure on employees to volunteer—creating de facto “mandatory volunteering.” Research by psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan shows that a problematic contradiction then ensues: If people perceive that they’ll be rewarded for participating in a task or punished for choosing not to, their intrinsic motivation and satisfaction with the activity are often diminished.

Corporate pressure may also lead to what researchers call “virtue signaling” in employees, as they participate just to make a good impression on coworkers and supervisors. In theory, this could result in a virtuous cycle of employees’ cheering each other on, but that’s not what happens in practice. When employees respond to pressure from management to volunteer, their efforts are often perceived by coworkers as insincere attempts to ingratiate themselves with higher-ups. In a longitudinal field study of U.S. employees, my colleague John Lynch and I found that employees who volunteered in order to make a good impression were often stigmatized rather than applauded. Far from being viewed as moral paragons, they were characterized by their coworkers as distracted from their work, self-righteous, and narcissistic. Employees in our study noted how they commonly avoided or shunned colleagues who drew attention to their volunteering in this way, resenting what they felt was a subtle attempt to push the activity on others. Even supervisors were more likely to overlook those individuals when making important decisions, such as recommendations for promotions.



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Companies often measure volunteer-program success in terms of the percentage of the workforce that participates, but my research suggests that the mere existence of volunteer opportunities can help employees feel more engaged. In our study with the United Way Worldwide, we discovered that among companies that offered programs, employee loyalty increased not only among those who volunteered but also among those who did not. People who chose not to volunteer made comments such as “It is great that [my company] offers volunteer programs” and “I am happy that volunteering is available.”

Best Practices

Although companies should avoid pressuring employees to volunteer, they can still take steps to encourage engagement. My research provides some guidance on what to think about when designing or refining corporate volunteering programs.

Prioritize meaning. A study I conducted with the United Way and the Junior League found that volunteer experiences must be seen as meaningful in order to create a natural draw for employees. We heard time and again that people sought to make a difference. “It was more meaningful that we were able to do things that were literally helping,” one participant noted. “Not monetarily—you can put two dollars in a jar and be blind to what you’re doing. But when you’re thinking it’s going to be cold soon and there are homeless people who need blankets—or those children need blankets—that’s really meaningful.” In a study for the American Cancer Society, sociologists Jean Grube and Jane Piliavin found that people devoted more time and effort to volunteering when they believed that their efforts “contributed in important ways.”

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How can companies ensure that volunteer opportunities are viewed as meaningful by employees? According to Roy Baumeister at Florida State University, people derive meaning from situations in three ways: when they see purpose and value in what they are doing, when they have a sense of personal efficacy and control, and when they feel a sense of self-worth. The best volunteer programs offer some combination of the three. For example, when building homes with Habitat for Humanity, volunteers have the satisfaction of seeing a house going up as they work, they interact with Habitat representatives who come to the building site to explain how

volunteers drive the organization, and they often get to hear directly from the recipient of the home, who is often also on-site to talk about his or her personal situation and experience. This raises a critical question: Is the goal of corporate volunteering to make an impact on society or to make an impact on workers? For example, it would likely be more impactful for the community if an employee spent a day organizing supplies at the food pantry and ordering necessary items, but the employee might find it more rewarding to hand out meals to people in need or deliver them to people's homes. The truth is that corporate volunteerism must strike a balance between impact and meaning.

Well-designed programs find ways to infuse even quotidian activities with meaning. Suppose a company organizes a volunteering initiative to prepare mailers for a charity's major fundraising campaign. The task is critical to the charity's survival but may be mind-numbing for employees. The company could, for example, invite a beneficiary of the charity to come and speak about his or her personal experience while volunteers are working. This transforms a boring task into something more. Indeed, a 2008 study led by Adam Grant, an organizational psychologist at Wharton, found that when call center agents soliciting donations for college scholarships actually met some of the students their work supported, their productivity and persistence skyrocketed.

Balance bottom-up employee passion and top-down corporate structure. When deciding whether to structure a volunteering program or take a more laissez-faire approach, executives face a trade-off. Employees' interest and sense of meaningfulness are maximized when they get to make choices for themselves and focus on projects that appeal to them personally. Yet structured, coordinated programs are more likely to encourage employee interaction and shared experiences, increasing morale and improving teamwork. In our study with the United Way Worldwide, we found that the strongest volunteering programs include both upper--management and employee input.

There are several ways to make this work in practice. One is to create a corporate volunteer initiative from the bottom up, by giving employees an active role in shaping its focus and features and then bolstering their efforts with corporate support and structure. Suppose a company sees that a growing number of employees are showing a passion for charities focused on sustainable food sources for those in need. The company could encourage this grassroots interest and increase impact by working with the group to articulate their goals, for example, or offering resources such as funds to purchase materials or space to store supplies. Allowing corporate volunteering programs to grow in this fashion may ultimately lead to a better-organized program that brings in more volunteers.

We found that engagement by customers in corporate volunteer programs improved their connection with and opinion of the company.

Alternatively, companies may provide the basic scaffolding for corporate volunteering, allowing employees to create and build specific opportunities that both fit the broader corporate vision and appeal to their personal passions. Take, for example, Timberland's Path of Service program. Consistent with the company's mission—"founded on the outdoor lifestyle"—the program emphasizes opportunities where employees can pull on their boots to help address environmental issues. The medical-technology company Stryker has similarly introduced a program that allows employees freedom to pursue volunteer activities of their choice within five mission-oriented focus areas—for instance, involvement in Operation Smile, a charity that performs cleft lip and palate surgery.

Providing loose direction in this way has the additional benefit of resolving the "paradox of choice" for employees seeking to make a difference. There are more than one million public charities in the United States, according to 2016 IRS registration reports. And as

psychologist Barry Schwartz has argued, having too many options can be debilitating and harmful to people's decision-making. The scaffolding of a volunteering program simplifies the process, potentially encouraging more employees to participate.

A word of caution, however: When management selects programs that align with the company's purpose and mission, the distinction between normal work and volunteering can become blurry. Consider a coffee company that asks its employees to train independent farmers to use more-sustainable agricultural practices. The initiative offers benefits to the farmers—but it also helps the coffee company improve its own supply chain. If the volunteer work is wrongly classified by management as purely charitable, employees may rebel against what they perceive as a cynical corporate ploy. In my experience working with companies in such situations, I've found that transparency and communication are key: Senior leaders should address any ambiguity up front, acknowledging that the volunteering is part of a business strategy that will benefit the company's bottom line.

Involve other stakeholders. Another way to increase the effectiveness of volunteering programs is to extend their boundaries beyond traditional employee involvement. I have seen companies include customers, suppliers, retired workers, and even board members in their volunteer activities. For example, in one community I studied, some residents needed to make their homes handicap accessible but were unable to get government assistance because of their homes' modular structure. A group of retired engineers from a local construction firm worked through its volunteering program to design and build custom wheelchair ramps that worked for the homes. This program took advantage of the company's area of expertise, engaging an unexpected but useful group of stakeholders.

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Although managers should do everything they can to give all their employees a sense of purpose and autonomy in their ...



My research team and I also worked with a microbrewery, Creature Comforts, to examine its involvement of customers in its corporate volunteering initiative. Employees and customers worked side by side one evening a week for five months on a variety of projects including making blankets for a local homeless shelter, assembling hygiene kits for homeless adults and children, and painting and maintaining signs for community gardens.

We interviewed and surveyed customers throughout the process and again more than a year later. We found that their engagement in those activities improved their connection with and opinion of the company. One customer reflected: “As I found out that they were giving back in the community, I thought that was great, and I will go there over other places.” The program not only made customers more loyal to the company—as evidenced by their purchasing decisions more than a year later—but also motivated them to spread the word to others.

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By fostering employee productivity, improving employee engagement, and deepening a company’s ties to the communities that they serve, corporate volunteering can unlock substantial intangible value for companies. Like anything else in business, however, reaping such powerful rewards requires thoughtful planning and consideration. Companies should avoid taking the easy route to

creating their volunteering initiative—such as mimicking others, focusing on pet projects, and forcing employees to engage. Instead, they should consider their company’s specific situation and strengths, capitalize on employees’ interests and engagement, and build the most meaningful volunteering opportunities possible.

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