

Social Responsibility

Reimagine Your Corporate Volunteer Program

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Summary. Meaningful volunteer opportunities are an often overlooked part of a company's purpose and employee development. Too often, organizations try to establish employee volunteer programs as a sort of add on in their spare time. But there is another way to think about volunteering and the time has never been better to reimagine this part of corporate life since businesses are actively and publicly expanding their role in society. This new approach to volunteering involves identifying a nonprofit where your employees can lend their skills and expertise over a designated period of time or on a series of connected events. No matter your industry, your employee's skills are valuable and in need at nonprofits. For some nonprofits, access to your talent and their skills can be just as — or more important — than dollars. [close](#)

While 2020 has led businesses to pledge to step up as good corporate citizens like never before, this shift was long in the making. According to the 2020 Deloitte Global Millennial Survey, employees have been re-examining the companies they work for with an eye toward purpose and impact on society. Employees, potential hires, and especially younger workers increasingly want to work at companies that pursue equity, diversity, and community.

Meaningful employee volunteer opportunities are an often overlooked part of that equation. More and more companies are discovering that when they integrate volunteer programs with their corporate giving plan, it's good for their business. Research has shown that these programs improve employee satisfaction, foster employee engagement, and boost retention. For instance, the Macquarie Graduate School of Management (MGSM) found that 93% of employees who volunteer through their company report being happy with their employer, and 54% of those who are proud of their company's contributions to society are engaged at work.

In my past experience as the VP of CSR at a marketing company and in my current role talking with companies about their volunteer efforts at Working for Women, I have seen many companies try to establish employee volunteer programs as a sort of add-on in their spare time to meet employee interest. The challenge is that this doesn't allow for the time necessary to vet and understand the needs of the chosen nonprofit. This often results in efforts that focus on fundraising or one-time events, or providing hours that employees can use at nonprofits of their choice. These can deliver short-term benefits that everyone can see and feel good about, to be sure. But these "once-and-done" experiences are not always in alignment with the company's purpose and goals, and don't deliver lasting impact for the companies, their employees, or the nonprofits.

There is, however, another way to think about volunteering as something longer-term, which offers more benefits to all involved. After all, businesses are actively and publicly expanding how they define their role in society, so the time has never been better to reimagine this part of corporate life. Consider that, in August 2019, the Business Roundtable updated their statement on the purpose of a

corporation as moving from a shareholder only perspective to a broader stakeholder mindset. These stakeholders are customers, employees, suppliers, communities, and shareholders.

Creating purposeful partnerships

This new approach requires having your team help a nonprofit solve organizational or operational challenges and/or deliver specialized resources to the population served by the nonprofit. This involves identifying a nonprofit where your employees can lend their skills and expertise over a designated period of time or on a series of connected events. No matter your industry, your employee's skills are valuable and in need at nonprofits. For some nonprofits, access to your talent and their skills can be just as important than dollars, if not even more so.

In this strategic model, a tangible and sustained relationship is created between the corporate and nonprofit partners. It also builds and strengthens connections between participating employees – often across departments and hierarchy. The company also makes a solid investment in the professional growth of its staff. And the result generates impact that can easily be observed and measured.

The result in this model is that mutually beneficial skill-based volunteering adds up to a quadruple win when done right. Purposeful partnerships allow for impact to be measurable for all parties involved: the company and its staff, as well as the nonprofit partners and those they serve.

At Working for Women, we have developed the following guidelines to ensure a mutually beneficial volunteering program for the company and the nonprofit.

Identify and match the needs and the skills on both sides. First determine who should lead the employee volunteer efforts at your organization (HR, affinity groups, departments, individual employees, etc.)? What are your corporate social responsibility (CSR) goals? What are your strongest employee skill sets? How can you translate all this into a well-defined project that can be accomplished

by an individual or team of volunteers? Can this be built upon for future projects? This step establishes a trusting and open relationship between the two partners from the beginning.

Building purposeful partnerships calls for a longer and deeper commitment than your employees may typically have available, and it's not always easy to make the right match. To do that you need to identify the organization(s) that aligns with the values of your business and might most need your help. For example, if equity and diversity is important to your business, one direction to consider would be to look for nonprofits that help elevate more women into the workforce.

Once there's a well-defined project and two willing partners, develop a detailed brief for each engagement. Outline objectives, expected outcomes – short- and long-term; timeline; roles and responsibilities; and indicators. The leads from the nonprofit and businesses involved should discuss, provide input and agree on a final plan.

Do the work to understand what your nonprofit partner does and who they serve. Employees may only have cursory understanding of the social context that a nonprofit partner is addressing. Therefore it is important that your team does the advance work to contextualize their knowledge and skills for the project, and invite your nonprofit to either aid in this effort or direct you to the best resources. Taking the time to build that relationship with the nonprofit and understand their challenges is a key factor for a successful outcome for all.

Measure impact after each engagement, and before planning next steps. Were the short-term outcomes of the program met and how will that inform next steps? What longer-term impact needs to be tracked and by when? Use a combination of vital assessment tools, including: surveys of all participants – your staff and the nonprofit leadership and attendees; comparisons of your staff responses to other volunteer efforts; in-depth follow up discussions between

company and nonprofit leaders. Whether everyone feels the project succeeded or missed the mark, the feedback is critical and should be the basis for future engagements.

Replicate and scale as needed. Scaling, which maximizes resources, is at the core of this model — each engagement should be built with that in mind. It can be done on both the business and nonprofit end. For instance, a business with multiple locations can replicate and tailor a successful project for different local communities, multiplying its impact.

Here's an example of how we've used this model at my own company. For the global professional services firm ZS, we tailored and facilitated a skills-based volunteer program starting with employees in their New York City office and our nonprofit partner New Women New Yorkers (NWNKY) — an organization that helps female immigrants gain employment. Based on the assessment steps outlined above, we created and implemented a negotiation skills workshop for women clients at NWNKY.

The main goals of the engagement were to expose the NWNKY clients to a U.S. corporate environment, give them an opportunity to practice networking, and gain vital workplace negotiation skills. Throughout the planning and execution of this service day, ZS employees leveraged their consulting and presentation skills, worked with and learned from senior colleagues, and even honed their own skills in negotiation.

Upon measuring the impact, survey results from both NWNKY and ZS participants showed that this initiative exceeded their other previous corporate volunteer engagements. This success translated into what is now a semi-annual activity in New York City, and led ZS to expand its reach with nonprofits near their Princeton and Philadelphia offices. This initial effort now reaches more women and is engaging more employees while leveraging ZS's investment of resources.

This represents what a quadruple win can look like: all parties received something they could not have gotten without the other.

A company's corporate citizenship plan is like a single drop of water. If the plan is done well, that single drop can create a ripple effect that leads to lasting social change for all involved. For business professionals who crave connection to something bigger than themselves or their employer, you can't get much better than that.

Beth Bengtson is the CEO and Founder of Working for Women, an organization that facilitates relationships between businesses committed to affecting social change for women with nonprofits focused on supporting the success of underserved women in the workforce.