

Community Connections: Managing an Employee Volunteer Program¹

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The workplace is an excellent place to promote volunteerism and recruit volunteers. Whether large or small; local or national, any business can be a source of volunteer power in the community.

Because employee volunteering is a relatively new field, you may hear the terms *corporate volunteering*; *employer-supported volunteering* and *workplace volunteering* used interchangeably. The basic idea is that "employees perform work in the community with some form of support and/or encouragement from their employer" (Graff, 2004).

Volunteer programs in the workplace are most successful when they are based on "integrating the priorities of the company, the interests of the employees, and the needs of the community" (Points of Light Foundation, 1996).

From the blending of needs and interests, employees can participate in a wide range of volunteer activities and programs that are supported by employers.

"A good company delivers excellent products and services, and a great company does all that and strives to make the world a better place."

William Ford Jr., Chairman,
Ford Motor Company

Developing an Employee Volunteer Program

An employee volunteer program can be initiated by a business/corporation, a non-profit organization, or a partnership between the profit and not-for-profit sectors. Regardless of who initiates the program plan; all partners should review and understand how each benefits from employee volunteer programs.

The following steps, defined by the Points of Light Foundation (1996), can help develop a successful employee volunteer program.

1. Identify corporate values, goals, and priorities that might be met by a volunteer program. Company administrators need to see how its employees can perpetuate the corporation's mission and goals in the community.

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2. Determine employee interests through surveys to determine volunteer experience and specific volunteer interests.

3. Determine community needs and consider how an employee volunteer program can address one of those issues. Business leaders want others to know that their corporation is helping to address real issues. An employee volunteer program is an opportunity to communicate that message to all employees and to the community.

4. Develop a program structure that encourages and facilitates employee participation at all levels. For example, initiate an employee steering committee to determine volunteer activities that reflect employee interests or have an employee contest to name the employee volunteer program. Contact a local community volunteer network to learn more about resources or opportunities available to corporate volunteer programs.

5. Develop written corporate policies to support an employee volunteer program. Will the opportunity to do volunteer work exist during “company time?” (“Released time” for volunteering is a powerful incentive for employee participation in volunteer projects.)

6. Select volunteer projects that relate to the corporation's interests and the needs of the community.

7. Evaluate the employee volunteer program to measure its impact on the employees, the corporation, and the community.

8. Publicize the employee volunteer efforts and accomplishments both internally to senior management and internal newsletters, and externally to community media, the Chamber of Commerce, and partnering non-profit organizations. Provide a link on the company's website where employees can learn about current volunteer opportunities.

9. Reward and recognize volunteers through awards, visibility, and appropriate benefits. For example, take photos of the volunteers in action and place them in the company newsletter or on the company's website; or develop a “Volunteer for

Vacation” program where volunteer activity can earn additional vacation days.

Motives for Employees to Volunteer

Motives for volunteering have been classified by various researchers. Peterson (2004) uses six categories of volunteer motives with corresponding strategies to recruit volunteers within corporations. Volunteer program directors can adopt several strategies that will influence various motives of their employees. See Table 1 at the end of this publication to learn more.

Employer Support for Volunteerism

Employer support can range from a simple recognition of their employees volunteer work, to paid time-off, or financial donations to organizations for which employees volunteer. Therefore, the type of support and encouragement that an employer gives to its employees varies according to the needs and goals of the business as well as its commitment to employee volunteerism.

Employer support can be organized into five basic categories. Each category includes a range of activities and strategies that businesses can use to achieve their goals and meet specific needs (Lautenschlager, 1993).

1. Employer acknowledged, but not formalized

Employee volunteer work is acknowledged but is not necessarily formalized into a policy statement or philosophy. Examples are that the employer may:

- count relevant volunteer work as experience when screening prospective employees;
- allow leave of absence without pay for volunteer work;
- allow employee schedule adjustments to accommodate volunteer work activities; or
- allow employees access to facilities and equipment on their own time for volunteer work activities.

2. Employer gives formal recognition

Employer support is shown formally through recognition of employee volunteer activities and achievements. Examples are that the employer may:

- publish articles in company newsletters profiling the volunteer work of employees;
- send a thank you note to employees during National Volunteer Week (or any time during the year); or
- give awards or some form of special recognition to one or more employees who have been nominated as outstanding volunteers.

3. Employer has supportive policies

Employer support is offered through Human Resource policies that encourage employees to become active volunteers in their community. Guidelines and procedures are established to address the needs of the workplace as well as the needs of the employee volunteer. Examples are that the employer may:

- encourage volunteer work as a good way to learn new skills for professional development;
- hold a volunteer fair on company premises or participate in a larger event in the community;
- invite speakers from non-profit organizations to talk to employees;
- allow employees to promote volunteer opportunities in the office (through newsletters, bulletin boards, or information in pay packets); or
- establish formal volunteer programs for employees and retirees.

4. Employee credit

A business may establish a personnel policy that credits employees for leisure-time volunteer activities. A corporate personnel policy may offer to record and file volunteer hours for each employee, even when volunteer activities are done during non-work time. Then volunteer hours may contribute

to employee evaluations, promotions, or bonuses. Examples of employee credit are:

- for every 20 hours of volunteer work, an employee or retiree receives a free lunch in the corporate lunchroom;
- for every 50 hours of volunteer community work, an employee or retiree receives an appreciation gift from the business; or
- for every 100 hours of volunteering, an employee receives a monetary bonus.

5. Employer works with a nonprofit

Employers can work directly with voluntary organizations to encourage employees to participate in volunteer activities. Examples are that the employer may:

- offer released time, allowing time-off with pay to employees to volunteer during regular work hours. In this case, the employee remains on the company “time clock” and does not use vacation time. (e.g., a TV reporter is made available for two days to host an educational video for a nonprofit organization)
- allow organizations to recruit volunteers on the company's premises;
- offer cash support to organizations for which employees volunteer;
- offer in-kind or free services to organizations without requiring the organization to identify or publicize the source; or
- publicize the work of employee volunteers in a public way in the community.

Employer Sponsored Volunteer Work

Volunteer work can be sponsored by the employer. The business may link the employee to volunteer opportunities or provide direct support to a community organization, event, or cause. The activities in this category often play a role in the public relations of a company. In addition, the demonstrated support for employee volunteer

activities is an important part of the “business strategy” of a company (Lautenschlager, 1993). As a result, this form of employer support is more corporate-driven than employee-driven. Specific types of volunteer activities and organizations are chosen by the employer, and staff time is set aside to coordinate a formal employee volunteer program. Examples are that the employer may:

- appeal to employees to volunteer for a specific organization;
- offer programs to recruit and refer volunteers to a specific organization in the community;
- give cash, goods, or services to voluntary organizations for which employees volunteer with the employer clearly identified as the donor (e.g., supplies donated for a youth program);
- nominate employees to serve on the board of a specific voluntary organization;
- support employer-sanctioned volunteer time (e.g., employees spend time on a United Way campaign during regular working hours);
- loan employees to a company-sanctioned voluntary organization at the employer's expense; or
- identify projects that take place during regular working hours (company-sanctioned programs or committee-chosen causes or events that have been approved by the company; could be one-time or ongoing projects).

Conclusion

There are many reasons why an employee would be motivated to participate in an employee volunteer program. And there are many reasons why a business or corporation would want to initiate and support an employee volunteer program. When done successfully, everyone can benefit, as long as there are mutual goals established and valued work accomplished with benefits and recognition for all partners.

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Table 1. Motives for volunteering and common recruitment strategies in corporate volunteer programs

MOTIVES FOR VOLUNTEERING	EMPLOYEE VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES
1. Altruistic – motivated by the desire to be useful, helpful to those in need, or to contribute to society	1. Publicizing information concerning community needs and the opportunity to volunteer
2. Social relations – motivated by the desire to interact with others, socialize, or make new friends	2. Organizing team projects in which employees work together on a community project
3. Ideological – motivated by a specific cause the individual believes is highly important (e.g., fight against AIDS)	3. Offering an incentive program in which the company makes a financial donation to a cause chosen by employee(s) in return for a specified number of volunteer hours contributed by the employee(s)
4. Status reward – motivated by rewards, such as publicity, title, indirect goodwill, or status in the community	4. Recognizing employee volunteer contributions through articles, awards, and commendations (bulletin boards, etc.)
5. Material reward – motivated by tangible benefits, such as prizes, free passes, awards, or privileges	5. Encouraging participation in volunteer projects that develop job related skills or benefit the company; or acknowledge volunteer participation during job performance evaluation
6. Time – motivated because the individual either has or does not have sufficient time to participate in volunteer activities	6. Offering "release time" or hours off from work to participate in volunteer activities.

Source: Peterson, D.K. (2004)