Corporate social responsibility efforts and employee volunteerism have seen a steady rise over the past several years. While the conversation about the virtue of companies doing good in the communities where they operate is ongoing, there's another question that is being asked: What about the business case? Are the time and money that companies put into employee volunteer programs worth the potential return?

Without question, the business benefits of employee volunteerism (defined here as any formal provision of resources that enable employees to volunteer in the community, such as company-sponsored volunteer events, paid time off from work, financial matching programs, and rewards and recognition for volunteering) are numerous. Employees who volunteer for various causes and events are some of the most engaged employees to be found. The 2008–2009 study “Driving Business Results Through Continuous Engagement,” by WorkUSA, notes that companies with engaged employees see 26 percent higher revenue per employee, 13 percent higher total returns to shareholders and a 50 percent higher market premium. A number of companies have reported that their engaged employees bring such benefits as improved communication, lower staff turnover, and greater personal and professional growth, among others. (See “Engaged Employees Bring Benefits,” opposite page.)

Yet to produce benefits like these, employee volunteer programs must be built around real-world challenges. Programs that provide a PR photo opportunity are nice to have, but their long-term effect is minimal. Programs that create better companies, better employees and better communities take into account four essential conditions: motivation, space, movement and structure.

**Condition No. 1: Motivation**

“How can we motivate people to participate?” is one of the most common questions companies ask as they create employee volunteer programs.

People want to be given time to internalize their reasons for volunteering. At first, people volunteer for extrinsic reasons: They believe they should give back to the community, their clergyman suggested they volunteer and so on. Maybe they feel guilty about the amount of money they make and they want to feel better about it. Whatever the reason, it is not yet personal—and that’s OK.

Employee volunteer programs must provide the right kind of space for employees to gradually find their own personal and intrinsic reasons for volunteering. They should not be asked to make a long commitment immediately, they should not be bombarded with reasons why they should volunteer, and they should not be penalized for a perceived lack of interest. At Realized Worth, we call this approach meeting people at their highest level of contribution. When employees are met at their highest level of contribution, no more and no less, they will eventually own the

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**A call for volunteers**

Employee volunteer programs can do much more than help people in need, but setting up a program has its challenges

*by Angela Parker*
Companies with developed employee volunteer programs report a range of benefits stemming from their engaged employees’ activities. These include:

- Improved community perception and marketing potential.
- A positive culture of caring and community service.
- Improved communication as people from different sites, departments and levels of seniority work together on community initiatives.
- Improved relationships with customers who increasingly demand information about corporate citizenship activities.
- More effective networking through community links.
- Improved morale and motivation.
- Lower staff turnover, which attracts and maintains good employees.
- A positive effect on productivity.
- Greater employee fulfillment.
- An increase in employees’ skills and abilities.
- Reduced absenteeism and fewer labor stoppages.
- Personal and professional growth, which strengthens the workforce.

—A.P.

PricewaterhouseCoopers USA has a solid track record of significant community investment and involvement. In recent years, PwC has addressed a variety of issues threatening U.S. students living in difficult circumstances.

In 2010, PwC partnered with Operation HOPE to teach financial literacy and empowerment to high school students through the nonprofit’s 5 Million Kids (5MK) Initiative. For many students, math and money have little connection, so the program is designed to make education relevant through practical lessons in the “language of money,” and to help curb soaring dropout rates in some of the most economically depressed areas across the U.S. 5MK asked PwC to commit 525 intern volunteers to work in some of the nation’s toughest high schools.

PwC began by shifting its corporate view to that of the students in low-income school districts, to understand what their lives are like and what difficulties they face. For example, why do they struggle with learning? One basic need became clear: They’re hungry. PwC solicited the help of Feeding America to provide breakfast for children who would otherwise spend the day distracted by hunger.

PwC also reached out to younger students in low-income schools by engaging the MIND Research Institute, which uses innovative techniques to tap into students’ visual reasoning abilities to solve multistep problems. The goal is to prime these students to learn math for life skills by the time they reach high school.

The choice to focus its community investment initiatives on math and money came naturally to PwC, says Shannon Schuyler, U.S. corporate responsibility leader: “Money is the core of what we do. Our people can teach this because we know it.”

When the time came to implement 5MK, Operation HOPE found the right schools, put together the financial literacy curriculum Banking on Our Future, and trained the 525 interns that PwC found and hired. PwC also committed the time, resources, volunteers and financial support (US$50,000 for the two-week program) to make it all happen. Both organizations were able to draw on the unique expertise and resources of the other for mutual benefit.

—A.P.
CSR GETS DOWN TO BUSINESS

setting up program structure

For an in-depth look at six essential drivers that need to be part of a successful employee volunteer program’s structure, see the study “Mapping Success in Employee Volunteering: The Drivers of Effectiveness for Employee Volunteering and Giving Programs and Fortune 500 Performance,” by Bea Boccalandro, available at www.volunteerbenchmark.com/F500report.cfm.

experience for themselves, and soon, as they continue on the journey of the volunteer, they will become advocates for the company’s employee volunteer program.

One way to meet employees at their highest level of contribution is by showing respect for issues such as time constraints. Software company SAP tackled this barrier by implementing “micro-volunteering” through Sparked.com, a for-profit enterprise that enables convenient, online volunteer opportunities. Micro-volunteering is a brilliant way for companies to enable their employees to take part in meaningful opportunities from their desks in as little as 20 minutes. The tasks are geared specifically to each person’s interests and skills (such as creative design, brainstorming about new products, media relations, etc.) and received periodically through email. When the task is finished, the employee volunteer is given the option to “share” his or her micro-volunteering experience on social platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. (More about SAP’s efforts in micro-volunteering efforts can be found in its 2010 Sustainability Report.)

Condition No. 2: Space

Meeting people at their highest level of contribution requires designing the kind of space that can accommodate all types of volunteers. Generally speaking, people fall into one of three stages in their volunteer journey: tourist, traveler and guide.

The first stage is one of investigation and curiosity. Like a tourist visiting a new place for the first time, the volunteer is not yet sure if this experience is the right fit. He or she cannot be forced or coerced into liking it; instead, the volunteer must be given basic, experiential tasks that will allow him or her to look, taste, see and discover. If the volunteer is ready, he or she will return to the space and continue through the stages. Tourists will make up between 70 and 80 percent of any group of employee volunteers.

The second stage is one of meaningful discovery. Like a traveler who has begun to feel a sense of belonging to the place he or she has visited, second-stage volunteers begin to internalize their motivation for returning. As they own the experience for themselves, they become ready to take on leadership responsibility and tasks that require increased commitment. Travelers can be hard to recognize, but they’re worth looking for. Travelers will make up about 15 to 20 percent of employee volunteers. They’re on their way to becoming advocates and leaders for the volunteer program.

The third stage is one of alignment and internalization. Like a guide who introduces friends and strangers alike to the charms of his or her favorite country, third-stage volunteers are motivated entirely by personal, intrinsic reasons. Guides can be trusted to run the program when no other leader is around and will recruit new volunteers without being asked. Guides usually make up only about 10 percent of any group of employee volunteers, and should receive the greatest percentage of time and energy from their managers.

There are numerous companies that understand what it looks like to design space that meets people at their highest level of contribution. Take Deloitte, for example. Each year for its IMPACT Day, tens of thousands of Deloitte employees from across the U.S. spend an entire day participating in more than 800 projects nationwide, such as improving facilities and providing tutoring or mentoring in low-income communities. The cable services provider Comcast is another example: Every year on Comcast Cares Day, employees come together to make a positive impact in neighborhoods across the country. Lilly’s Global Day of Service, FedEx Cares and Kraft’s annual day of service all provide excellent spaces in which to welcome tourists, travelers and guides. Unfortunately, companies that only offer annual volunteer opportunities cut the journey of the volunteer short. When they are able to offer these events on a regular basis, volunteers are enabled to gradually fall in love with the cause and internalize their reasons for volunteering. Once-a-year events simply do not provide enough time for this process to occur.

Condition No. 3: Movement

While motivation and space are essential to the success of an employee volunteer program, one of the biggest reasons for low participation is the lack of a sense of movement. Coming back to the same situation again and again, without see-

about the author

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ing distinct progress, is disheartening and emotionally exhausting for volunteers. Managers of employee volunteer programs who are unsure whether volunteers have a sense of accomplishment—a sense of making a difference—are missing a key metric that informs the program’s sustainability.

It only takes a few simple steps to establish the condition of movement in an employee volunteer program. At each volunteer event, coordinators should take time to communicate clearly to volunteers what will be accomplished. Usually this is done by holding a 15-minute brief before each program or activity, to set expectations and realistically define success. This should be done every time, even if the same statements are made to the same people again and again. For example, if the task is to serve food at a soup kitchen or shelter, it’s important to explain to volunteers that they are not there to solve hunger problems, but they are there for something equally important.

Programs should also have clear, achievable objectives. Edelman Canada offers an inspiring example of what this looks like with “The Little Give.” Edelman’s Toronto office was strategically divided into 10 teams. Each participant donated 48 hours of his or her time to help 10 local charities and nonprofit organizations with the most daunting of their challenges (for example, building awareness for a fundraising campaign). At the end of the 48 hours, the teams gather to present the results of their efforts while a panel of judges determines who “wins.” Edelman employees benefit from The Little Give as they build teams and gain new skills, the community benefits from problems solved and money donated, and Edelman as a whole benefits as its employees become better, more educated people and their reputation increases in the community.

**Condition No. 4: Structure**

Unfortunately, no amount of attention to motivation, space or movement will make up for poor structure. As with any business initiative, the structure of an employee volunteer program is paramount to its success. Structure includes elements such as time-off incentives, risk policies and partnership parameters. Elements like these will come up naturally in the program design process, but other key components are often overlooked. In order to ensure that a program’s structure is realistic and sustainable, key decision makers and influencers must come together to develop a logic model that ensures that all the necessary inputs, such as resources and activities, are accounted for. More important, a logic model forces the consideration of the outcomes and lasting impacts of the program. The benefits produced by the program and the resulting changes to systems and societies, as well as the business, are where the greatest value of employee volunteer programs are found.

Structure becomes more important over time, as companies are asked to prove whether their CSR strategies and employee volunteer programs are worth the investment. One company that planned for long-term success is PricewaterhouseCoopers. In 2010, PwC began a partnership with Operation HOPE to teach financial literacy and empowerment through the nonprofit’s 5 Million Kids (5MK) Initiative, to ensure that students are being taught the skills they will eventually use at companies like PwC. 5MK is structured perfectly to benefit PwC, its employees and the community for many years to come. (See “Making a Difference: PwC and the 5 Million Kids Initiative,” page 31.)

A steadily increasing number of companies are beginning to see the potential of engaging their employees through volunteer programs. Yet even in light of the impressive potential business benefits, relatively few companies are realizing these benefits in a material way. By paying attention to the real-world conditions necessary for a successful volunteer experience, companies can begin to expect a future of compelling and exciting results—for their employees, the community and the bottom line. •