



COUNCIL *on* FOUNDATIONS

# SOLUTIONS BRIEF

## Employee Volunteerism

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## Employee Volunteerism

With the majority of companies today having at least one formal domestic volunteerism program<sup>1</sup>, employee involvement is a topic of increasing relevance to the corporate world. Companies are realizing that volunteerism is not necessarily an ancillary strategy, but rather one that can be aligned with their core business and differentiate them in both the marketplace and the workplace. This Employee Volunteerism Solutions Brief examines what makes a successful employee volunteer program for companies at all stages of the process—**Starting from Scratch**, **Building off the Basics**, and **Going from Good to Great**. It provides practical solutions and tips to help you be more effective in your work.

***“In designing your program, you must map and match it to the culture and values—the DNA—of your company.”***

— Ann Cramer, IBM

Consider that nearly two-thirds of respondents to the 2007 Volunteer IMPACT survey by Deloitte & Touche USA<sup>2</sup> said they would prefer to work for companies that give them opportunities to contribute their talents to nonprofit organizations. According to the Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship<sup>3</sup>, the public consistently indicates that they think companies should improve the communities in which they operate. Combined, these data illustrate a nexus of opportunities for both companies and communities, where human capital, passion, and core capabilities are applied to the arena of civic change.

So what makes for a successful employee volunteerism program (EVP)? It's all about alignment with corporate strategy and senior leadership buy-in, according to Ann Cramer of IBM. Brevard Fraser of Deloitte adds that employee buy-in is also critical: When employees feel passionate about a cause, they are more inclined to lead volunteer efforts. Not only can employee engagement build momentum among peers, employee volunteers can lighten your workload, addressing the all-too-common challenges of short staffing and limited resources.

While a true gold standard might be difficult to pinpoint, on the following pages are some practical solutions for any company interested in developing an EVP—whether building one from scratch or enhancing a preexisting program. While this brief lays out a logical course of action, realistically, there is not just one recipe; every company's path to success will depend upon its own norms, values, culture, and priorities.

<sup>1</sup> 90% of 139 companies surveyed by the Committee Encouraging Corporate Philanthropy for *Giving in Numbers, 2007 Edition*.

<sup>2</sup> From a survey of 1,000 adults ages 18-26

<sup>3</sup> 2003, 2005, and 2007 State of Corporate Citizenship surveys, Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship

# PHILANTHROPY SOLUTIONS

## Starting from Scratch

No matter what form a program takes, it is often the upfront planning and introspection that determines success.

- **Setting your objectives.** Determine what you hope to accomplish with an EVP and build your program around those goals (see sidebar).
- **Defining your program.** Employee volunteerism can be defined in many different ways; you must therefore establish your own definition. Consider whether the EVP will support any activity with a charitable purpose, such as a golf outing or charity walk, or only certain types of volunteer activities or those with selected partners. Determine whether you will count activities in which employees are engaged outside of work or only company-sponsored ones.
- **Taking inventory of your assets.** If your company is similar to most, you likely have fewer dollars, hours, and other resources to devote to your EVP than you would like. Think creatively about putting to work the assets you have. Consider the following:
  - budget (national as well as local)
  - staffing resources, including employees willing to volunteer their time and expertise
  - ability to contract with outside vendors (e.g., software companies that provide volunteer matching and tracking services)
  - existing databases or methods for tracking (e.g., using charge codes to track activities)
  - company-wide communication vehicles (both online and off for employees without computer access)

- data on employee interests/priorities
- incentives (e.g., token gifts, paid time off)

- **Establishing buy-in.** CEO and senior management buy-in are key elements for a successful EVP<sup>4</sup>. By engaging executives in the planning process, you help to ensure that they feel a part of the program and that the program reflects their business interests. Engage employees across the board as well. Learn what they care about most by soliciting their input via surveys, focus groups, or one-on-one conversations.
- **Setting the stage for measurement.** There is a difference between tracking data and measuring impact. Both are important; neither is easy to do. Determine first how you wish to utilize your data; there is no sense in collecting data if it will not be put to good use. For instance, if you want to create an employee involvement brochure, what type of information would you highlight? Who is the audience and will they be compelled more by numbers or by a touching story—or both? How will your success as the creator of an EVP be determined? While it may take some time

**When determining your program goals, consider what's good for your business. Do you hope to:**


- **Attract a new, younger generation of employees?**
- **Generate visibility in the community?**
- **Unite the company around a common cause?**
- **Develop leadership or talent?**
- **Establish opportunities for team building or mentorship?**
- **Reflect the value placed on employees as a strategic asset to the company?**

## HOW SHOULD YOUR EVP BE STAFFED?

**On average, the best programs have 1.9 full-time staff members, which translates into one full-time position for every 32,000 employees; the average cost is \$30 per employee.**

*Source: Excellent EVPs  
Points of Light Foundation*

<sup>4</sup>In an informal poll conducted during the Philanthropy Solutions teleconference, 48% of 35 respondents agreed this was the most important element.



to establish your measurement system, give thought to performance indicators up front, based on *your* program goals and plans for utilizing results.

## WHERE WILL YOUR PROGRAM RESIDE?

- corporate affairs
- communications
- public affairs
- marketing
- human resources
- office of the CEO

- **Collaborating.** Engage relevant departments, such as human resources or marketing, from the start<sup>5</sup>. Identify their business objectives and determine how your EVP can help to address them. Look for ways to use applicable resources, e.g., an existing company-wide survey designed to

gather employee opinions or an external branding study that measures customer awareness and loyalty.

- **Building partnerships.** Whether you select your nonprofit partner(s) based on employee preferences, cause alignment, pre-existing relationships, or an entirely different reason, cultivating open communication from the outset is critical. Setting expectations and a framework for working together is the key to preventing confusion or “scope creep” down the line.

**Because IBM’s employees are so spread out, the company has created “spirit communities” based on zip code. A “spirit mayor” in each community leads volunteerism efforts and other gatherings.**

## Building off the Basics

The following are considerations for those who already have an established EVP and are looking for ways to increase its scope or sophistication.

- **Expanding across sites.** Employees company-wide like to be part of the same story, yet every community has its own culture and idiosyncrasies. Effective expansion requires a theme broad enough to accommodate local needs as well as enough flexibility to allow local decision making. Don’t expect a program that succeeds in one site to achieve similar success at another. Instead, expect to face unique challenges, such as difficulty in persuading local nonprofits to accept volunteers, and issues of consistency and quality control. The following are suggestions for effective expansion:

- Survey employees company-wide to determine local priorities; customize the program based on the market.
- Assess the needs of local nonprofits before entering any new community.
- Conduct a day of volunteer training for employees when expanding into a new region.
- Highlight national charities that you know are doing great things and encourage involvement at their local chapters.
- Identify employee “champions” who can lead volunteer efforts locally.
- Develop an online program to connect employees company-wide around volunteer activities.
- Provide a transition year when replacing an existing local program with a national one.

<sup>5</sup>In an informal poll conducted during the Philanthropy Solutions teleconference, 51% of 35 respondents housed their programs in corporate affairs and communications.

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- **Engaging employees.** Employees will be more apt to participate in the EVP if they believe it is a priority for the company. Emphasize the importance of the program at various touch points throughout an employee's corporate experience.
  - Educate new hires about your program from day one. Capture their interests and priorities during orientation.
  - Provide ample recognition for volunteer efforts. Reward employees with token gifts, personal thank-you letters, hand-delivered packages, receptions, or dollars-for-doers grants. Recognize stellar efforts on posters and the web. According to one EVP leader, "you never know what will get people jazzed."
  - Partner with human resources to integrate volunteerism into professional development plans or the review process, particularly for senior executives on whom you rely to set an example. Market the program to employees as a "safe space" to hone new skills or enhance their professional portfolios.
  - Secure CEO engagement by planning a small but strategic number of opportunities for the CEO to become personally involved; place the CEO among corporate peers known to place high value on their own EVP.
- **Capturing data.** Even if you have developed and executed a strategic program with a strong measurement plan in place, you may still have trouble capturing the data you need to prove it. Use incentives such as prizes or gift cards to encourage employee tracking and reporting of data. Incentives can recognize group success (e.g., holding a pizza party) or individual efforts (e.g., allowing employees to select their own gift or offering "dollars-for-doers" grants). If you are conducting a survey to capture data, make a major push during a short window of time, e.g., 72 hours.

Consider building your technical abilities to help capture data. For example, IBM's On Demand Community allows employees to not only track their volunteer time but also access "tools, tips, and treasures" to locate volunteer activities and foster effective volunteerism. If building your own system is a daunting task, then consider engaging a vendor to help capture and track results.
- **Communicating internally.** An EVP will only be as strong as the enthusiasm it generates and the momentum it sustains. Effective communication is required for both. Communicate as much as possible using multiple methods—both "push" tactics, like broad email blasts, and "pull" tactics, like opt-ins to request more information. (Sometimes using "opt-outs" rather than "opt-ins" will increase involvement.)

*"It's always amazing to me that as many times as you think you've communicated, you still need to do it one more time."*

— EVP leader



Here are just a few ways to get the word out:

- Populate the intranet with stories about individuals and work units involved in volunteerism efforts, photos, and testimonials from employee volunteers and nonprofit partners.
- Send targeted messages to specific groups and make direct personal requests to onboard employees.
- Use existing forums, such as company meetings, to spread the word to employees.

Remember, the program itself and the policies around it can send a powerful message. Closing the office for a day of service or offering paid time off can show employees just how committed the company is to giving back.

***“There is still a need for traditional volunteering, even with a skills-based volunteerism program in place. Often, employees’ talents and passions are very different after hours than in the workplace; what they do during the day is not necessarily what they want to do as a volunteer effort .”***

— Brevard Fraser, Deloitte

## Going from Good to Great

Do you have a well-oiled EVP and are now looking to win some awards? Consider the following:

### ■ Building skills-based volunteerism.

Aligning your volunteerism program with your workforce’s core abilities can be a mutually beneficial proposition—it provides a nonprofit with services for which it would otherwise pay and hones the skills and leadership abilities of employees. Creating an effective program, however, takes time and work. Here are some tips for getting started:

- Set appropriate expectations.
- Know your business. Companies expand into new areas all the time and people have special skills for volunteerism that may not be obvious.
- Take inventory of employee skills and priorities. Deloitte, for example, surveys employees from partner level to administrative staff to set volunteerism priorities. A survey can also function as an effective awareness-building tool.
- Set a clear work plan on the front end to avoid “scope creep.”
- Challenge nonprofit partners to identify areas of opportunity for strategic assistance. Replace requests for funding with requests for service.
- Send an “advance team” into the nonprofit to prepare for the project before your volunteers get started.
- Consider an “outside-in” program that brings people from the community into the workplace for training on a range of topics, including Budget 101, résumé-building, and career counseling for high school students.

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- Offer training to employees for specific projects where there is interest and need.
- Assign junior executives to manage projects at nonprofits on whose boards senior executives sit, to encourage interaction and mentorship.
- **Measuring impact.** While you may have figured out how to track bodies and hours, it may be more difficult to measure your effect on the community. First, know there is no magic bullet for moving from traditional tracking to measuring true impact. The solution will likely lie in finding the right balance between numbers and anecdotes. For example, IBM's measuring efforts include commissioning studies by external organizations, such as Harvard and the Points of Light & Hands on Network, as well as capturing inspirational stories from employees. Consider the following techniques for getting to the root of impact:
  - Talk to your nonprofit partners. Did it matter to them that company volunteers were there? What difference did the volunteers make in the nonprofit's performance?
  - Think about the core business objectives executives face. How did the personal relationships forged through your EVP help to address them? For example, when your company receives a request for proposal, can you add value to the bid by highlighting the company's commitment to the community through its EVP?
  - If you don't have the money to conduct a comprehensive assessment, piggyback on others' efforts. By participating in studies and surveys, you will often gain access to valuable benchmarking and trends data for which you would otherwise pay.
- **Communicating externally.** Now that you have a great story to tell, you will want to ensure that it's told. Work with your nonprofit partners to capture human interest stories and articulate the value your company brings to the organization. Stories of nonprofit success sell, so work with your marketing department to package them nicely. To ensure your partners work with you in this respect, include a reporting process in your agreements with them. Work in a public relations plan from the start, if appropriate. Let your elected officials know how your company EVP affects the areas they represent. And always be sure to leverage the "low-hanging fruit"—the thank you letters and other impromptu responses you receive along the way.
- **Ensuring longevity.** To ensure your EVP stands the test of time and turnover, assign more than one person to oversee each nonprofit partnership; that way, if one individual leaves, the relationship survives. Similarly, consider employing an intermediary to manage the program and ensure continuity in the face of corporate flux. Also, instill the value of the company's EVP early in their careers so that it remains a priority as they move up the ladder. Senior executives, as well, should be cultivated in this respect—e.g., through board service and highly encouraged involvement in other volunteer activities—in order to ensure that the future CEO is appropriately groomed for the job.



# Employee Volunteerism

## The Million-Dollar Question

And now for the question that's on everyone's mind: how to get more with less? Whether diminished resources are a reality—or just seem that way—there never seems to be enough time, money, or bodies to go around to get the job done. Here are a few more tricks to help you get the most from what you've got.

- **Securing “free” staff.** Believe it or not, there are many folks around you who think your job is pretty glamorous. Leverage the admiration around you by creating volunteer positions for those who covet your job. Deloitte, for example, created Community Volunteerism Councils. Through this model, teams of employee volunteers agree to lead community efforts in each market for a minimum two-year term.
- **Working with your peers.** Since many EVP leaders seem to be in the same boat, why not paddle together? Team up and pool your resources with other companies to lend more expertise and hands to the community and ultimately achieve a greater impact for all.
- **Setting boundaries.** Sometimes the greatest challenge is not shrinking resources, but rather increasing expectations. You can help combat this by setting a clear framework from the start around what can be done—and thus, what you will do—given the resources you have. Remember, you can't be all things to all nonprofits, so pick and choose what's most important for your program and your company.



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