



Employee Volunteer Programs: **Building Blocks for Success**

for Small to Medium Size Businesses

A publication of the Points of Light Foundation

This paper is one in a series designed to help employee volunteer program professionals refine and enhance their programs to meet business, employee, and community needs. While each employee volunteer program is unique — reflecting the business culture of the organization and the individuals who comprise it—there are approaches and program features that work consistently across a wide range of small to medium size businesses.

By harnessing the power of employee volunteering, small to medium size businesses can affect a sea change in the way private enterprise contributes to public good. This paper provides an overview of successful strategies for small to medium size businesses to assist you in making your employee volunteer program as strong as possible. Much more extensive and detailed information can be obtained through Points of Light Foundation publications, strategic consultation, training seminars, the National Conference: Community Volunteering and National Service, and other services of the Points of Light Foundation Corporate Volunteer Development Department.

With 85 percent of American companies having fewer than 100 employees, and 37 percent of American workers—nearly 40 million people*—employed by such companies, small to medium size businesses are a major force in American society. By harnessing the power of employee volunteering, small to medium size businesses can affect a sea change in the way private enterprise contributes to public good.

* Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Statistics of U.S. Business.

Why Your Volunteer Effort Pays Off: The Benefits of Employee Volunteer Programs

When the Points of Light Foundation was established in 1990, there were few formal employee volunteering programs, and measurement of the benefits of employee volunteer programs was rare. In little more than a decade since then, however, organizations nationwide and even worldwide have planned, implemented, and evaluated a rich variety of employee volunteer programs and have found that the pay off is significant — in many ways.

The most immediate and obvious benefits are in enhanced employee satisfaction, which supports employee retention and recruiting. In addition, teamwork among employees across all departments is fostered in volunteer activities, which leads to increased productivity on the job.

And this heightened sense of team builds a strong foundation for camaraderie and continuity during organizational changes. In addition, company support for volunteering can make employees feel empowered to make a difference in their communities.

Volunteering in the community offers many employees a service learning opportunity, giving them new and additional avenues for professional development as they practice increased management, professional or technical skills. Volunteer programs can also be aimed at workforce preparedness when businesses partner with schools and school systems to augment educational curriculum and/or mentor students toward careers.

The company's overall positive reputation in the community is strengthened by employee volunteering. Increased visibility and networking for the company and its employees lay a foundation for stronger, more effective marketing, public relations and community relations activity. Companies can select their volunteer activities to complement their area of business, underscoring their expertise. And, volunteering can offer opportunities to build relationships with customers and clients, elected officials, regulatory officials and the media.

- 53% of companies agree that employee volunteering provides a way to implement corporate business goals
- 85% of companies agree that employee volunteering helps to create healthier communities
- 74% of companies agree employee volunteering is a means to improve a company's image
- 56% of companies strongly agree employee volunteering is a way to help employee morale

The Points of Light Institute, The Corporate Volunteer Program as a Strategic Resource: The Link Grows Stronger, 2000

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But perhaps the most rewarding benefit is that a company commitment to employee volunteering builds stronger communities. When business leaders apply their talents, resources, and personal passions to addressing serious social problems in their communities, they help create a healthier environment in which to work and live. They make a significant and lasting contribution to the lives of their customers, neighbors, friends and families — a contribution that goes way beyond the goods or services their companies provide.

Former Publisher and CEO Chuck Cochrane of the Yakima Herald-Republic daily newspaper in the Yakima Valley area of Washington, was concerned about the friction between ethnic and cultural groups in the community. He helped create an annual festival called “One World, One Valley” to give residents a chance to experience each other’s heritage and culture through food, music, arts and crafts. Newspaper employee volunteers staffed the event, 37 cultural and ethnic groups participated, more than 3,500 citizens attended, and the festival is well on its way to becoming an area tradition that enriches community life and bridges ethnic and cultural divides.

8 Steps to Success for Small to Medium Size Businesses: How to Build an Employee Volunteer Program that WORKS

Resource materials to help you build or enhance your program are plentiful. Points of Light Institute products and publications, your local Corporate Volunteer Council, or local Volunteer Center can help. To ensure that the investment of time and resources you dedicate yields the dividends you should expect, learn from the leaders in the field. This will ensure that you avoid well-known pitfalls and take advantage of proven strategies. By building on the experience of other businesses, you can develop your program for maximum benefit. Other small to medium size businesses have shared these eight steps to build a successful program:

1 Start by assessing employee interests and community needs. Contact your local Volunteer Center at 1-800-VOLUNTEER or visit www.1800volunteer.org to ask about an assessment of community needs. Conduct research internally with a short written or email survey to assess employee interests and to identify any employee volunteer activity that is already occurring. Use the information you gather in your survey to develop activities that appeal to your employees and top management, while also fulfilling a real community need that will make a difference.

Alibris is an e-commerce company in Oakland, CA, that supplies hard-to-find books to retailers, distributors, libraries, and book-lovers around the world. With less than 100 employees, most people on staff are interested in books, literature, publishing and reading in general, therefore the volunteer program centers on books and literacy. Alibris employees do individual literacy tutoring at targeted schools. With one “partner” school, the company helped write, design and publish a fundraising cookbook, capitalizing on the expertise of Alibris employees. Alibris employees even tested the recipes at home in their free time!

2 Align with business objectives. What is the product or service your company provides, and what can you do to improve it? Who are the clients and customers you serve? When planning your employee volunteer program, choose activities that support your company's ability to reach its objectives and also are visible, meaningful or helpful to your clients and customers. The volunteer program should be structured to help the company and community thrive.

Windsor Electric Co., Inc., an electrical contracting firm in Owings Mills, Maryland with 120 employees, partnered with a local high school to provide training in construction trades. Windsor electricians provided technical assistance to the teachers, helped build the classrooms and provided manuals and supplies to get the program started. Students who complete the program successfully are promised assistance with employment through the Associated Builders and Contractors. Windsor Electric now has a steady flow of trained electricians, and local youth graduate from high school ready for employment in the construction trades.

3 Get top management support. It is critical that the president, CEO, or top manager believes in the program and leads by example. Top management must also encourage employee participation, and directly acknowledge and reward it. To build or maintain executive level support, identify senior managers to champion the program, and find ways to leverage the employee volunteer program for publicity and other benefits.

At Adams and Reese, LLP, a regional law firm based in New Orleans with over 500 employees, attorneys at all levels including senior partners and Executive Committee members participate in the HUGS volunteer program (Hope, Understanding, Giving, Support). A commitment to community service is a component of the annual role definition of each attorney.

4 Partner with others. Create valuable relationships with other businesses such as vendors, suppliers, customers and clients for larger impact and consider partnering with schools and nonprofit organizations. Work through your local Corporate Volunteer Council and Volunteer Center to network with other companies. Take advantage of national volunteer opportunities such as Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, Make a Difference Day, National Family Volunteer Day, National Volunteer Week, and Join Hands Day. For more information on national days of service, visit the Points of Light Foundation website at www.PointsofLight.org.

5 Align volunteering with financial contributions and in-kind support. Many businesses do not have a formal company philanthropy program, but often the company or its president will make donations of services, materials or money to a few local groups. Whether the support is small and ad hoc or large and formally organized, make your donation and your volunteering time both work harder by reinforcing one another. Consider organizing volunteer activities that support the same nonprofit groups that receive your donations. You may even want to commit to an ongoing relationship with a nonprofit group to focus your philanthropy. Or develop a program, such as “Dollars for Doers” where you award employees with monies to donate in the employees’ names to the nonprofit organizations where they volunteer.

Since formalizing its volunteer program in 1998, Equals Three Communications® in Bethesda, Maryland, a marketing communications firm of 80 employees, has selected a few local organizations per year for its strategic, three pronged social responsibility approach. The company 1) provides design and development of communications materials on a pro-bono basis, 2) employees serve on the Boards of Directors of these organizations, and 3) the company provides financial support. With this three-part strategy, Equals Three Communications is taking a comprehensive approach to permanently build the capacity of organizations, making contributions that will endure.

6 Measure the program and evaluate results. It is critical to measure the results of your employee volunteer program efforts—to show management and staff that the effort is worth it because employees are participating, they find it rewarding, and their efforts are making a difference. Collecting data need not be complex or time consuming. You can develop a simple self-reporting form for employees to complete. The data can track number and type of volunteer hours, people involved, number of organizations served, number of individuals served by the activities, and dollars raised or dollar value of the work provided.

You can also monitor employee satisfaction with the program and its activities; the public’s awareness of your employee volunteer efforts in the community; and whether volunteering has enhanced your company’s competitive position in the marketplace. Additionally, you may consider coordinating an evaluation component with the nonprofit agencies with which your employees volunteer to determine if the efforts meet the nonprofit’s expectations and are making a difference in the community.

7 Establish a recognition or awards program. To keep the program thriving, create a system to acknowledge the time and effort of employees with certificates, coupons, vouchers or other gifts. Consider hosting a CEO reception or luncheon at least annually. In addition, nominate your company’s employee volunteer program for community service awards from the Chamber of Commerce, local Volunteer Center, Mayor or Governor’s office, major newspaper in your area, or the Points of Light Foundation.

Just Born, Inc., the makers of Mike & Ike, Hot Tamales and Peeps candy in Bethlehem, PA, celebrates its volunteers through Volunteer Appreciation Week. The week is marked with event photos posted on the company bulletin board, special postings and articles in the company newsletter, volunteer gear (t-shirts, sweatshirts, etc.) and ice cream social for all its 470 employees at which the co-presidents present their special thanks to volunteers.

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Publicize your efforts, both internally and externally. Use a variety of communications techniques such as the company Intranet and website, newsletters, email, bulletin boards, news releases to the media, retail displays, and in regular advertising and direct mail to tell your community about your volunteer activities.

You can also use some of these communications methods to stimulate participation among employees before events and to recognize and show appreciation after events.

Resources

Others who have developed effective employee volunteer programs in small to medium size businesses are glad to share with you their experiences and success strategies, and tell you how they overcame challenges, as well. Contact the Corporate Volunteer Development department of the Points of Light Foundation, at CVDinfo@PointsofLight.org or (202) 729-8008 for the contact information for a business similar to yours.

To contact your nearest local Volunteer Center, call 1-800-VOLUNTEER or visit www.1800volunteer.org. For more information about Corporate Volunteer Councils or to find one near you, email CVC@PointsofLight.org.

Other important sources of information, available from the Points of Light Foundation, are:

- Developing a Corporate Volunteer Program: Guidelines to Success
- Building Value: The Corporate Volunteer Program as a Strategic Resource for Business
- The Corporate Volunteer Program as a Strategic Resource: The Link Grows Stronger
- Corporate Volunteer Programs: Benefits to Business
- Learning from Leaders: Corporate Resource Directory 2000

To order these resources from the Volunteer Marketplace Catalog, call 1-800-272-8306 or visit www.PointsofLight.org.

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