

[News and Hot Topics](#) » Workplace Volunteerism: Have We Thought this Through?

Workplace Volunteerism: Have We Thought this Through?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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The concept of employers stimulating and supporting community service by their employees has been accepted by our field almost as gospel. I am going to assume that everyone reading this Hot Topic knows the arguments in favor of recruiting volunteers through their place of employment, especially from large businesses but also from nonprofit and government workplaces. So, in the interest of provoking some rarely-done analysis of this practice, * I'd like to outline some of the issues that increasingly concern me about the way that workplace volunteering is evolving – and these issues crop up everywhere in the world.

Issue 1: How does employee volunteering fit into the larger picture of corporate social responsibility?

We have learned to be skeptical of politicians who systematically cut government budgets for social programs and then exhort citizens to volunteer for the very causes just underfunded. In the same vein, some corporations find employee volunteering to be an easy way to add a veneer of social conscience to their business practices – as long as the service is offered to causes removed from anything that might affect the company's reputation.

It's comparatively painless to urge employees to volunteer (particularly on their own time), but a whole lot harder to assure other forms of good citizenship as a company such as:

- Acting both legally and ethically, and encouraging a culture in which employees are rewarded rather than punished for internal activism that uncovers illegal or unethical practices.
- Showing concern for the environment, particularly in the production of goods in ways that do not pollute, affect fragile ecologies, or create waste that is not biodegradable.
- Operate with fair labor practices in hiring, working conditions, and benefits – when possible beyond the bare minimums most governments require.

To me, a company that ignores these responsibilities but extols volunteering by its employees is attempting to deflect public (and employee) attention from its own shortcomings. It's also possible to focus the energies of employees on solutions to problems the company creates or wishes to avoid – a form of community service many employees would truly welcome.

Efforts at developing a workplace volunteer program only make sense as a logical extension of a company's culture and meets the following criteria:

1. Volunteer projects directly relate to the businesses core mission (its areas of expertise). In fairness, this also put some responsibility on volunteer program managers not to request help for every cause under the sun from any business close at hand.
2. The activities of employee volunteers directly affect the company's consumers and/or the neighborhoods in closest proximity to company offices and plants – or help employees and their families themselves (such as scholarship fundraisers).
3. There is tangible involvement of some kind from the company, beyond informing employees of what they can do in their spare time.

By the way, I happen to believe that paid “release time” is one of the least important aspects of employer-supported volunteering. Sure it's nice to see, but it also becomes an excuse for the company to support only a minimal amount of community service time. Far more welcome is sincere *flex time*. For example, it is extremely valuable to allow employees to leave work at, say, 3 p.m. in order to tutor, coach, or be a troop leader after school, or to allow employees to extend their lunch hour in order to deliver Meals on Wheels. People don't mind having to make up those two to three hours a week, they just hate begging for permission to take time off.

Issue 2: Who should be part of workplace volunteering?

For a long time I've found it humorous that business executives had to be “sold” on the benefits of employee volunteering when, in fact, it's the management level that has been doing this all along. Top brass has been walking out of the building to attend community board or civic project planning committee meetings forever. This, however, is never labeled “volunteering.” It should trouble us that most employee volunteer programs focus on the lowest level employee and do not encourage middle management and higher to participate as well.

On a different topic, why do we, as volunteer program managers, focus our attention mainly on Fortune 500 companies? The bigger the corporation, the less direct concern it has for local communities. Really small corner businesses have always been involved in helping the community (just take a look at the backs of Little League baseball team uniforms). Where are mid-sized companies? Where are Chambers of Commerce when it comes to encouraging their members to consider volunteer efforts as community development?

Issue 3: What is the rationale for nonprofit and government agencies to jump on this bandwagon?

I've saved the best for last. In the past five years or so it's become popular for larger nonprofits and various government employers (local, state, and federal) to proudly announce work-release options and days of service for their employees. Huh? What's the justification for that?

Before everyone jumps on me, let me explain that I definitely welcome any employer offering flex time for those workers who volunteer and need to be able to adjust their work schedule to accommodate their commitment. This includes permitting employees to hold planning meetings during the day, if necessary. I also think that any support to volunteer recruitment is great: holding volunteer opportunity fairs, allowing recruitment notices on bulletin boards or intranets, and generally allowing the community to have access to employees to inform them of what the needs and possibilities are. And volunteering as a form of employee training, professional development, or orientation to the community works, too.

My problem is with paying the salaries of nonprofit or government employees to go out into the community and help some other cause. The very purpose of a nonprofit and of government is *already* to be doing socially-responsible work. Their *mission* is to serve the public, work paid for by donors or taxpayers.

I think we have gravitated to expanding what started as business employee volunteering to any "workplace" volunteering largely because we fear no one will be available to help our organizations during the typical work day unless we go to people already employed during those hours. This speaks more to our lack of creativity in recruitment than to justification to move past for-profit businesses. After all, there are still all those mid-size companies to tackle, as well as round-the-clock shifts no one seems to invite to volunteer. The most logical person to serve your organization at 9:00 a.m. on a workday is the one who just finished a work shift at 7:00 a.m. We routinely expect people to give us evening hours after a 9:00 to 5:00 day, why not after an 11 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. "day"? But this would require doing recruiting at 3:00 a.m. (to reach these folks), so instead we fight the work-release time battle on our own work schedule.

OK. I'm ready for the slings and arrows! And also your thoughtful reactions. Please share them all.

*Some readers might be interested in the last time I considered employer-supported volunteering in a Hot Topic, which was back in 1997: *Redirecting Corporate Volunteering: Making Welfare Reform Work*
<https://www.energizeinc.com/hot-topics/1997/october>

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Submitted on 21 April 2005 by Marcia Long, Washington Mutual Bank, Asst Vice Pres, Seattle WA USA
Workplace volunteering fills several needs. Many nonprofits need a large group of committed volunteers to manage an annual event -- from set-up to take-down. Employees who are volunteering from the sponsoring company establish a deeper relationship with that nonprofit. Employee

volunteers have various skill sets, allowing nonprofits to engage skilled volunteers. Employee volunteers usually have varied work schedules so they can help at different times, which helps nonprofits and schools. And, employees who can volunteer where they want to have feelings of loyalty to their company, creating less turnover. Many companies support employee volunteering with "dollars for doers" programs, paid staff to manage the volunteer program and release time. These efforts enhance their regular philanthropy. Sometimes it is difficult for a large brick building to show its humanity -- an employee volunteer program demonstrates to consumers that this company truly cares about the community it serves.

Submitted on 10 November 2004 by Reed Dewey, Points of Light Foundation, Director, Corporate Partnerships, Washington, DC USA

I work at the Points of Light Foundation on workplace volunteering issues. In our work with businesses we emphasize that workplace volunteering should be about meeting the needs of the community, employees and, yes, the company. The Foundation works with over 360 member volunteer centers that often provide resources and services to local businesses around volunteering. Find the volunteer center near you at 1-800volunteer. I thank Susan for talking about working to encourage smaller smaller and mid-sized businesses to encourage employee volunteering and flex-time. Right on! I worked with Susan in my old AARP days and she's a gem! Thanks for all you do!

Submitted on 23 September 2004 by Kim Klisch, Guild Incorporated, Volunteer Coordinator, West St. Paul, MN USA

If some businesses promote volunteering to "add a veneer of social conscience to their business practices," I say it's a step in the right direction, albeit for the wrong reason. Involvement of any kind increases the potential for the stirring of real social conscience.

***Submitted on 22 September 2004 by Reenie Marshall
Marshall Associates, Principal, Midlothian, VA USA***

Regarding the point Susan saved for last, about nonprofit and government organizations that engage in workplace volunteering, here's more food for thought. This point is based on economics, from an economist I know and love... The private, for-profit sector is generally the only one that produces cash revenue. The government gets the majority of its money from taxes, and the non-profit sector from donations. If business wants to spend some of its "earned" money on sending its employees into the community to volunteer, that's its choice and considered "giving back." But for a government or nonprofit organization to spend my tax dollars or my donated dollars on sending its employees into the community as volunteers seems not only redundant (as Susan suggests), but also presumptuous!

Submitted on 11 September 2004 by Pat Whifers, WTCS, Volunteer Director, Lawrence, KS USA

Thinking from a feminist perspective, most women who work outside the home actually have 2 jobs -- inside the home and outside the home. That leaves very little time to volunteer. Employers allowing company time for community service is an excellent way to bridge gaps that sometimes exist between the profit and non-profit structures.

Submitted on 7 September 2004 by Jason E Camis, Franklin County CVB, Director, Ottawa, KS

I disagree with the thought that nonprofit and government employees shouldn't be able to do volunteer work during "company" time. We are continually asking that these groups operate more and more like businesses yet we don't want to offer them the same opportunities in terms of benefits, etc. that some of the best companies offer.

Many nonprofit employees I've met don't do a lot beyond their job simply because of the mental/physical demands placed on them in their jobs. Allowing them company time to volunteer, etc. is a great way to get them past that and further involved in a community. It also helps the organization that need it, as well as it should help their own organization by what the volunteers take from the experience. It shouldn't be a reason to not be creative in our recruitment techniques, but it has the potential to create more socially aware and involved individuals beyond their regular work.

Submitted on 6 September 2004 by Hillary Roberts, Project Linus NJ Inc., President, Keyport, NJ USA

Our agency has experienced what we perceive as "pecking order volunteerism" from companies.

Management and board members offering funding and flex time to their staff while employees volunteer as weekend warriors at charity events, or coordinate in-house charity fun-raisers as part of the social/civic company philosophy.

We have also met corporate staffers who prefer to decide for themselves where to volunteer or make a financial contribution rather than have those decisions suggested by their employer.

Having been on the receiving end of generous and impactful company support, I think both sides of the socially responsible table can learn a great deal from each other....and often do.

Submitted on 4 September 2004 by Randi Abrams-Gonzalez, Cabrillo Marine Aquarium, Volunteer Coordinator, San Pedro, CA USA

This topic reminds me of the "pushme-pullyou" from Dr. Doolittle. I too prefer sincere volunteering and I'd say that for 99% of our volunteers this is true, even for our corporate volunteers. It's also true that corporations are some of our major funders.

Corporate volunteers help out mainly at large community events and fundraisers. I like working with the corporate volunteers because they do a lot of these type events and I can be sure that the job will get done with little or no supervision. The corporate volunteers I've met have a sincere interest in our facility and welcome the chance to visit us and help out.

The other side of the coin is that I get asked by staff to make connections with corporations to encourage volunteering for our daily programs. Many corporate funders ask if any of their employees volunteer for us in their grant applications. I'll make the connections but find it's just not fruitful for most of our day-to-day needs. Our daily needs are met by the local community and student volunteers.

This isn't really a response but just some thoughts on the issue. Thank you for the opportunity.

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