

Corporate retirees: new breed of volunteers

An effort in Minneapolis to place retired professionals in challenging volunteer positions is so successful, some agencies have more people than they need.

"We have to restrict the number of volunteers," says Mary Wiser, coordinator of volunteer services at Courage Center for the physically disabled. "If we had room to expand," adds Ray Fulford, supervisor of the center's rehabilitation engineering department, "we could find as many volunteers as we'd have room for."

This success story is the result of corporate efforts to help retiring employees find high-level volunteer jobs that make use of their skills and experience.

In 1977, the Junior League of Minneapolis created the project VIE (the French word for *life*) to encourage retirees to do volunteer work. Two years later, Honeywell Inc. asked for the group's help in setting up its own program for retiring Honeywell employees. Out of the cooperative effort came the corporate retiree volunteer program.

Elmer Frykman, a retired Honeywell field engineer and volunteer manager of the company's retiree program since its inception, describes how it works: "Before people retire, we invite them to attend a pre-retirement seminar. At the seminar, we introduce the program and tell them what it's all about. Then, we wait three to six months before we contact them again."

If a new retiree is interested, he's scheduled for a two-hour interview during which his interests, skills and talents are revealed. A researcher then goes to work matching the volunteer with an appropriate position at one of the area's many agencies that keep the program informed of its needs.

"We're not interested in numbers," says Frykman of the quality-

versus-quantity issue. "Our focus is on the retiree. We cater to his life-long interests and skills."

Since Honeywell initiated its corporate retiree program, 21 other companies have either followed its lead or plan to. Representatives from the various groups meet once a month under the sponsorship of VIE to share ideas. "We act as a catalyst," says VIE member Donna Anderson.

The Junior League of Minneapolis also sponsored a conference last October to promote the idea of corporate retiree volunteer programs. The agenda included speeches from nationally known corporate and government leaders, and discussions and seminars on such topics as corporate responsibility, retiree programs that work, and public-policy issues that affect aging.

At Honeywell—the oldest and largest of the programs—retiring union workers, office workers, and administrators sign up in equal numbers. Currently, six retired vice presidents are participating. The program also attracts an equal number of men and women.

One major beneficiary of the program is Courage Center, a rehabilitation center for the physically disabled and a transitional residence for young adults who receive training in skills for independent living. Many of its 475 volunteers were recruited

professionals, plus others who are called in on special projects. They customize equipment for the center's clients. They have designed a dressing tree for a person unable to use his arms, built a hand-propulsion tricycle for a paraplegic child, converted the controls of a model race car to a "sip and puff" system so a man who could move only his face would have a diversion.

"I really feel I'm doing somebody some good," says volunteer Phil Sjoquist, a tool-and-dye maker who's been at the center since his retirement from Honeywell in 1983. He's one of supervisor Fulford's "stable core of volunteers who come in faithfully." Without them, Fulford adds, "we wouldn't be able to afford the service we provide now."

But would Sjoquist have volunteered if it weren't for the corporate volunteer program? "No, I wouldn't have," he replies. "I wouldn't have known about it."

And that's what makes this program special. It reaches a segment of the population that otherwise probably would not get involved; a population with much to add to a community, but whose talents for many years have gone untapped.

"Normally, a retired executive vice president isn't going to go down and volunteer at the local YMCA," says Harlan Cleveland, VIE advi-

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through corporate retiree volunteer programs, particularly those whose work involves highly skilled technical expertise.

The center's rehabilitation engineering department has a volunteer staff of 15 retired engineering pro-

sory board member and dean of the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. "There's a difference in culture, particularly for men who've held high positions. Volunteering, to them, is something their wives do. But if the company says,

'the Blue Cross needs someone to go in as an executive officer, they need help,' it gives volunteering a respectability."

And it's relatively easy for corporations to be able to make those connections. "The corporation has an advantage in making placements because it knows our people and what they can do," says Frykman. "It's very difficult for agencies to go through the phonebook and come up with the right volunteer."

Another reason for the program's success is its popularity with the retirees. The number of participants from Honeywell has grown steadily, and the staff that manages the program has increased from three to 26. More than 300 corporations around the country have inquired about the

program.

Retired corporate volunteers enjoy their work for many of the same reasons other volunteers do. They feel useful. They can see how their work improves someone else's life. It gives them something to do. But finding their work through their former employers offers an additional benefit: the chance to maintain relationships with coworkers.

"Strong peer relationships develop over the years and people miss that when they retire," says Frykman. "It's one thing that draws people into the program. They like to get back together."

Wiser of Courage Center agrees: "The volunteers like the work because they keep up their skills and feel useful, of course, but also, they

maintain a certain comradery. They come in here and at lunch they sit around and chew the fat. They remember one another from Honeywell. It's an extension of the worksite."

Everyone involved seems to benefit by the corporate retiree volunteer program. The retiree feels he's still contributing to society and the volunteer job adds a new dimension to his retirement. The community's social-service organizations have an increased bank of volunteers to call on and a more efficient way of locating people with specific skills. The corporation improves its public image at little cost and gains a reputation for responding to the needs of its former employees and to the needs of the community as well. ■

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