

VOLUNTEERS FROM THE WORKPLACE

By Betty B. Stallings

"We need to move beyond the walls of the corporation . . . with the same energy and commitment we invested to build the enterprise within the walls. Moving beyond the walls is not a matter of altruism; it is enlightened self-interest, a business necessity."

**--Frances Hesselbein, President and CEO of the Drucker Foundation
(from the Foundation's journal, *LEADER TO LEADER*, No. 8, Spring 1998)**

A growing "army" of employee volunteers is working in communities across the United States. Wearing t-shirts with company logos, they clean off graffiti, collect and distribute food to the hungry, build houses for the poor, coordinate and assist at athletic competitions for the physically challenged, or teach children with learning disabilities how to read.

For years, employee volunteerism was viewed as peripheral activity. Recent research on the purpose, value and impact of this corporate employee movement, however, has demonstrated that it has strategic value to the communities, to the corporations and to participants themselves.

A corporate volunteer program is any formal or organized company effort for employees and retirees who wish to volunteer their time and skills in service to the community. Such support might include:

- serving as the information and referral agency for volunteer opportunities in communities in which the corporation is situated and operates.
- developing and managing group employee volunteer projects such as clean-up days.
- conducting recognition programs to show appreciation to employees who volunteer.
- team-building and human resource development activities around volunteer projects.

It is increasingly common for corporations to release workers during the day or early at the end of the day to perform these voluntary services. Recent studies indicate that more than 50 percent of the top firms in the United States have a release time policy.

The Evolution of Employee Volunteerism

The development of this type of service stemmed from growing recognition, early in this century, of the inherent interdependence between business and communities. Businesses' stability and success are closely tied to their local economy and social environment.

Early philanthropic efforts focused more on donated dollars than on volunteer time. They stressed giving, or in-kind services, to a variety of causes rather than on creating a niche interest in a particular sector such as education or health.

In the 1970s, under the leadership of the Business Roundtable's "statement of responsibility," the term "socially responsible corporation" suggested a corporate community strategy based on a constituency involving customers, suppliers, communities and shareholders. (The Business Roundtable is an association of chief executive officers of leading U.S. companies who examine and develop positions which seek to reflect sound economic and social principles.)

In the decade that followed, the American Express Corporation coined the phrase "cause-related marketing," describing the mutually beneficial relationship between sponsorships and promotions for nonprofit organizations

and social causes. Because of cynicism regarding this apparent self-serving activity, the business sector -- in the 1990s -- moved into more issues-based marketing strategies focusing on a community issue particularly relevant to the corporation. (For example, a pharmaceutical company might contribute corporate funds and volunteer resources to health-related issues.)

More recently, the focus is on designing philanthropic programs parallel to the strategic business goals of the corporation, and focusing on partnerships with community organizations. By creating joint venture initiatives with nonprofit organizations, businesses can now share their resources in new, creative ways that encourage mutual gains for themselves, for individual employees and for the community.

During the 1990s, employee volunteering soared. Percentages of cash versus noncash contributions changed from 80/20 in the 1980s to 60/40 in the 1990s (Corporate Philanthropy Report, 1996). During the administration of President George Bush, corporate volunteering received a boost from the Office of National Service, and from the Points of Light Foundation, formation of which President Bush spearheaded to promote volunteerism.

A 1993 report by the Conference Board (a non-profit, non-advocacy group, one of the world's leading business membership and research organizations, connecting senior executives from more than 2,900 enterprises in more than 60 countries through its publications and meetings) and the Points of Light Foundation revealed the following:

- 92 percent of corporate executives surveyed encouraged their staffers to become involved in community service.
- 77 percent of companies agreed that volunteer programs benefit corporate strategic goals.
- about four-fifths of volunteer programs studied were reported to improve employee retention and enhance training.
- half of the respondents made community service a part of the company's mission statement.
- 31 percent claimed to use volunteer programs as part of the strategy to address critical business issues.
- more than half of the participants acknowledged the linkage between such volunteer programs and profitability. Even more agreed that employee service built morale, teamwork and productivity.

The latest such study, a 1997 poll by the Boston College Center for Corporate Community Relations, noted that the most significant new trend is an increase in the number of corporations now allocating resources to global corporate citizenship. More than four out of ten companies with multinational operations have an established community relations program at their international sites. Another development, on the domestic front, is the increased support for community relations by senior management. These days, the most critical issues for the business community are education, health care, job training, economic development, crime, the environment, literacy, substance abuse and child care.

Some Exemplary Employee Volunteer Programs

Current surveys and research involving the Fortune 500 companies -- the preeminent firms in the United States -- reveal an exponentially increasing number of employee volunteer programs. The largest arena of corporate involvement, by far, is education. But employee volunteerism is a major factor in the areas of health, human services, economic development, the arts and the environment. For example:

- *Allstate Insurance Nationwide* focuses specifically on urban issues. It teams up on neighborhood revitalization projects, advises low income homeowners on creative financing plans, and provides help when disaster relief is needed.
- *Adolph Coors Company*, the beverage manufacturer, is providing leadership training for students from predominantly African-American colleges.
- *Lucent Technologies'* volunteer wing sponsors an annual "global day of caring" involving 10,000 employees and retirees in community projects in 25 U.S. states and 17 other countries.

- *Honeywell, Inc.*, in partnership with the Atlanta-based Habitat for Humanity, has brought 4,000 employee and retiree volunteers together to build affordable housing around the world.
- *Target*, a merchandise firm, has "good neighbor" teams that select local schools worthy of support and then sign a one-year contract to assist them as needed.
- *Hewlett-Packard*, the electronics firm, has created an e-mail mentoring program that matches employees with students in grades five through 12. All communication between students and volunteers is conducted via electronic mail.
- *Home Depot*, the nationwide supplier of building materials and a variety of household equipment, works with Habitat for Humanity in 60 locations around the United States and Canada to construct homes for low-income individuals by donating funds, housing supplies, expertise and the service of skilled employees.
- *Transmedia Network*, a dining discount card company, involves older children in a mentoring program to encourage younger children to read.
- *Merck and Eli Lilly*, the pharmaceutical firms, lend executives to nonprofit organizations for periods of time for volunteer work.

The Benefits of Employee Volunteering

Corporate volunteering is responding to a society in need of increasing service, to businesses seeking increasingly competent and committed employees, and to individuals in need of opportunities for growth and interaction. It is not surprising, therefore, that these activities have such great potential impact.

The benefits to the community are threefold. First, such programs have brought new talents, skill and energy to various locales, especially in management and technology. Second, they have provided groups of volunteer workers for "done-in-a-day" types of vital assistance -- coastal cleanups and aid on special events, for instance. Third, they have brought corporations and the community together as partners in improving the way of life for all residents.

As for the benefits to the corporations, the picture is much clearer following considerable research and study -- particularly in the 1990s. Volunteer programs can propel the strategic goals of the company (good corporate citizenship, for example) forward, and thus are seen as integral, not peripheral elements. These projects can and do build public credibility for the corporation, and increase name recognition. Furthermore, they are beneficial in attracting new talent to the firm, motivating staff members, and enhancing professional development for both junior and senior managers.

General Mills (food manufacturer) and FedEx (worldwide private mail delivery system) found that their community service programs strengthened employee skills in leadership, teamwork, organization and decision-making. The Intel Corporation (computer technology) found their employee volunteers more skilled in communication, time management, negotiation, budgeting and allocation. In addition, Intel studies noted an increased understanding of, and respect for, diversity, and affirmation of personal capability for growth.

The employees themselves derive considerable benefits as well. Through their volunteering, they have developed new business contacts, gained experience in strategic planning, become involved with community leaders, and learned how to interact with unfamiliar constituencies. There is a decided link, too, between physical and mental health and participation in volunteer activities.

But as the workplace and the workforce evolves, as it invariably has over the decades, some challenges remain for corporations and their employees in their interaction with communities.

Internal management issues -- downsizing and mergers -- are one category. As it turns out, employee volunteer programs often have been the glue to hold companies and people together in times of management crisis -- becoming a point of pride, renewal and team development. Timberland, the shoe and clothing manufacturer, and the IBM Corporation are examples of firms whose volunteer projects have been institutional anchors.

The changing nature of the workforce from long-term, secure and loyal employees to more mobile ones has challenged and changed the nature and structure of some volunteer programs. In most cases, though, these activities have afforded the means for new workers to get to know their veteran counterparts, thus creating, rapidly, a desired sense of community identity within the corporation.

With national boundaries blurring and increased globalization taking place in the corporate world, corporate citizenship programs and other innovative international social initiatives are finding a welcome place as new parameters for competition.

Although, in the past, there has been only limited evidence documenting the strategic value of corporate citizen programs, the picture is brightening. One major effort, *Measuring the Value of Corporate Citizenship*, was published by the Council on Foundations in 1994. Today, the business environment demands that every department and function measure its results, and this is happening. The Points of Light Foundation and Boston College's Center of Corporate Community Relations have joined in a two-year effort to develop program assessment tools and processes that corporate managers can use to determine, quantitatively and qualitatively, the return on investment in employee volunteer programs. Another benchmarking study by the Boston College Center and the American Productivity and Quality Center aims at determining the optimal practices in corporate community relations programs throughout the nation.

"For the first time," Craig Smith, president of Corporate Citizen (a think tank based in Seattle, Washington), observed recently in the *Harvard Business Review*, "businesses are backing philanthropic initiatives with real corporate muscle." That muscle includes, most significantly, legions of employee volunteers. In their activities outside the workplace and the workday, they are finding new worth, and gaining new strength and satisfaction.

Betty B. Stallings is a trainer, consultant and author specializing in volunteerism, nonprofit fundraising, board development and leadership. She is based in the San Francisco, California, area.

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