

Employee Volunteering

Tips for working with business volunteers

People who volunteer and also hold a full-time paying job are not unique. Working people have volunteered forever. So, what does "business volunteers" or "corporate employee volunteer programs" really mean?

The key to employee volunteering is that the employing company provides some value-added participation in addition to the community service done by the employees as individuals. Such participation can range from offering flex or work release time, to donating equipment or supplies for the project, to help in recruiting a team of volunteers.

Some businesses engage in the process only superficially, while others pay close attention. So it's important to clarify what the role the company itself wants to take.

Don't assume in either direction. It might be wishful thinking to expect that a corporation will always support its employee volunteers with cash, products, or facilities. But unless you ask for what you need, you could miss the chance to benefit from the full range of what the company is happy to provide.

Similarly, find out:

- The company's goals for the level and impact of employee volunteer efforts;
- Whether or not the business wants publicity for their community service and what kind;
- If the company hopes there will be added benefits from the volunteering that can be brought back to the job, such as training, team-building, or morale boosting; and,
- What record keeping, evaluation, or reports the company wants.

Regardless of the degree of involvement the employer will have, what counts is what happens in your organization when volunteers from the business world walk in the door. In most ways, business volunteers are just like any other new volunteer. They will need the same orientation, training, and supervision any newcomer requires to be effective as a member of your team.

Putting them to work

Once again, the rule is don't assume. Don't assume that any applicant necessarily wants to do the same thing as a volunteer as she or he does all day on a paying job. It's fine to offer an assignment based on the person's work credentials, but allow the volunteer to choose if the person will contribute professional skills or do something totally different. You may get greater enthusiasm by offering employee volunteers a complete change of pace than by typecasting them into the roles they hold at the company.

Interview all candidates. Just because they are employed by a corporation doesn't mean they are automatically qualified to help your organization or fit in with your culture, especially if you are looking for certain types of personality characteristics as well as education and work experience. Don't assume either that people actually want to volunteer! Sometimes an employer "strongly implies" that community service is expected, which is not a great motivator. Most business volunteers fully welcome and enjoy the opportunity, but it's always good to check.

It's also advisable to assess the actual skill level a business volunteer brings to your work, and how open the person is to transferring and adapting the way a job is done at the company to your situation. This is a theme that starts during the interview process and continues in orientation and training.

Don't assume in either direction:

- That every businessperson has or doesn't have skills that are applicable to your setting;
 - That the volunteer can or can't automatically apply business skills to a nonprofit or government setting;
 - That business people can relate to your mission or lack understanding of social issues; and,
 - That the volunteer has access to the company's money or goods.
- Be prepared to explain the things that a businessperson might not know:
- What makes a nonprofit different from a for-profit.
 - Your client base and their problems and assets.
 - The history of the concern or need that led to the business volunteer's recruitment.
 - Current resources available to the agency for handling this concern or need.
 - A profile of the paid and volunteer staff (including their education) and something about their workload; and,
 - How decisions are made in your organization, who

they are appreciated and recognized, and that the time they spend with you is enjoyable. But because these volunteers are coming to you as a direct result of an employer-sponsored program, it's equally important to make sure there are some career benefits for both the individuals and the company itself.

Consider how you can incorporate benefits, such as the following, for business volunteers:

- Opportunities to apply their business skills to new situations.
- Getting introduced to prospective new markets or clients.
- Having a chance to prove their leadership talents to their employer for career development.
- Generating good public relations and visibility for the company, which reflects on each employee and elicits pride and loyalty.

Creative opportunities

Finally, keep in mind that businesses, whether large or small, have a wide range of assets. Be creative in tap-

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makes them, and how long it takes.

The more you introduce employee volunteers to the realities of life in a nonprofit, the more capable they will be in adjusting their expectations to meet yours.

Define the work for success

It is not necessary for a nonprofit to be "like a business," but to behave in a "businesslike" manner, particularly when it comes to respecting volunteers' time. In the for-profit world, time really is money, and most employee volunteers will have little tolerance for inefficiency. A good working relationship starts with a written volunteer role description that sets out a mutual agreement as to what will be done, with what support, and by when.

Pay special attention to timetables and reporting plans. Articulate clear goals and objectives and estimate how long each required activity will take. Agree on intermediate deadlines and on how you will both know when the work is completed. This includes discussing the form and frequency of communications and reports. Do you want written progress reports? Can these be sent by email? How often? Similarly, when will it be necessary to meet in person and who calls such meetings and how? In fairness, be sure to commit to two-way communication: how will you keep the volunteer informed about your side of the work project?

Business volunteers will respond to the same motivators as any other volunteer. They want to feel that their efforts accomplish something meaningful, that

ping these. Make sure employees from all levels of the company hierarchy are recruited as volunteers. This means the top brass and the secretaries.

Similarly, check that all units or departments are notified of the service opportunities: sales, accounting, the lab, maintenance, whatever. Just think of how many different skills are potentially available.

If the company works six or seven days a week, or has an evening or night shift, you can also develop special assignments for those employees who, in fact, are most available during some part of the normal work week. Remember that night shift workers are wide awake at 8 a.m. and might be perfect for that before-school program or breakfast assistance service you need to staff with volunteers.

The volunteers themselves are the greatest resource, but don't be reluctant to ask if the business is willing to help in some tangible ways. How about meeting space or a training room equipped with audiovisual bells and whistles? Can the employee volunteers make long-distance calls on your behalf from company phones, use the color copier for your flyers, or borrow the company van to haul supplies? Sometimes it is simply a matter of making employee volunteers open their eyes to what they usually take for granted on the job, without realizing how much help it might be to you and your clients. *NPT*

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