

Strengthen Your Workforce Through Volunteer Programs

by Sylvia Ann Hewlett | 1:25 PM March 5, 2012

Time-crunched employees are increasingly looking to their jobs to provide opportunities for the good deeds that they don't have the hours for outside of work, and companies are responding. But karmic satisfaction is only part of the payoff.

Volunteering offers participants the opportunity to strengthen their skills, broaden their networks, break out of a career rut, and find new meaning in their job. All these benefits redound to employers in the form of increased engagement and retention.

Data from the Center for Talent Innovation (CTI) shows that the vast majority of college graduates want to amplify their commitment to good causes through their employer. According to the Deloitte Volunteer Impact Survey (PDF), Generation Ys who frequently participate in their company's volunteer activities are more likely to be very proud to work for their company, feel very loyal, and are very satisfied with the progression of their careers. In fact, for many recent college graduates, a robust corporate social responsibility (CSR) mandate makes a crucial difference in where they choose to work, with 77% of respondents in a recent study (PDF) indicating that "a company's commitment to social issues is important when I decide where to work."

These sentiments hold true across generational cohorts. CTI data finds that 91% of Gen X women and 76% of Gen X men, and 90% of female and 79% of male Baby Boomers, feel it is important to contribute to their community or the wider world through work.

Corporate volunteer programs range from one-day community service activities to mini-sabbaticals that send top performers to developing countries to lend their expertise to nonprofit organizations and proven entrepreneurs. Moody's Afternoon of Service is a good example of a once-a-year opportunity for people who want to dip their toes into volunteering. The program takes place during the workday; employees sign up for a variety of team-based activities, including sorting library books at a public school in a poor neighborhood, planting flower bulbs in a city park, lending a hand at an organization that gathers clothing for and coaches disadvantaged women going out on job interviews, and preparing lunch at a community soup kitchen.

Fran Laserson, President of the Moody's Foundation, remembers the overwhelming response to this program, which was launched in 2008. "We're a quantitatively focused company," she says. "Our culture is not effusive or emotional. This is a group of people who rarely say 'very,' yet close to 100% said they found the activity to be rewarding or very rewarding." And 67% built relationships with colleagues they didn't usually work with. After the event, 51% felt better about the company, and 50% felt better about themselves. Originally offered to just a few departments, the program is now company-wide, with more than half of all employees participating in 2011.

For people who crave a bigger challenge, at least 27 Fortune 500 companies — including Dow Corning, Intel, PepsiCo, FedEx, IBM, and Pfizer — now operate *pro bono* programs in emerging economies such as India, Brazil, Vietnam, and Ghana, according to a survey by CDC Development Solutions. Such initiatives give employees a chance to develop new skills, the company an opportunity to scope out new business in emerging markets, and the local organization the benefits of corporate expertise and relationships. (By the way, although referred to as "volunteer" posts, employees usually receive their regular salaries during their stints of service.)

Ernst & Young, for example, sends participants in its Corporate Social Responsibility Fellows program to Central and South America for three months to do the same work they've been doing in their home offices but for much smaller companies. By helping local entrepreneurs with their most pressing business problems — typically providing help that they couldn't otherwise afford — Ernst & Young hopes to bolster their business and build relationships in these growing markets. Recent projects included developing a human resource strategy for a business in Uruguay that provides road accident prevention and risk management services, and organizing the financial records for a Chilean company that makes reusable shopping bags.

Such volunteer assignments can do more than inject excitement into a humdrum job; they can ignite a career. Like being tapped for a high-potential development track, getting accepted for a volunteer stint is super-competitive — Intel, for example, says that only 5% of applicants win spots in its Education Service Corps. It's also high-profile, with blogs and videos of participants' experiences distributed throughout the company and on the internet. Who knows what kind of connections could result?

In short, corporate volunteer programs deliver more than a karmic paycheck. By providing a practical bonus for both participants and employers, they're not just a "nice to have" perk but a retention tool, leadership development opportunity, and strategic business initiative.