

Everyone benefits

There is a strong business case for organisations to support employees in volunteering for worthy causes, and powerful personal and career advantages for the volunteers

There are as many reasons to volunteer as there are causes worthy of our time. And while the primary motivation is a desire to make a difference and give back to society, there are also personal benefits to be had from giving time to others – a sense of satisfaction, a broadening of personal networks and social circles, and even picking up new skills and work experience.

And it's not just individuals. Companies are also realising the benefits. Already well established in the US and elsewhere, employee volunteer programmes (EVPs) are increasingly part of broader corporate social responsibility initiatives. More and more of us expect companies to do their bit for society – and many of us want to do the same.

'Expectations are rising for brands in Asia to both grow their profits and contribute to improving the communities where they do business,' says Yvonne Siu Turner, senior manager for corporate programmes and resources at Points of Light, an international non-profit that promotes, recruits and mobilises volunteers. 'According to Edelman's 2016 Earned Brand study, the public across Asia believes that doing good should be part of a brand's DNA, with China, India and Singapore beating global expectations. These markets also report higher than global average belief that brands can do more to solve social ills than government.'

For businesses, harnessing the benefits of volunteering doesn't equate only to staff satisfaction and wellbeing, but can also help



forge community ties and a positive reputation – all the while supporting worthy causes.

Reciprocal relationship

Global financial services company State Street is a proponent of corporate social responsibility. Its commitment includes grants, financial donations and support for individual fundraising efforts, and

two paid days annually for volunteering on work days.

Natalie Wu, vice president and head of global inclusion and corporate citizenship for APAC, says most State Street offices have a committee with representatives from different departments to help run the volunteering programmes. The committees identify suitable community partners and manage donations on behalf of State Street Foundation. In Asia Pacific, partner organisations range from those supporting the elderly, children and women, to environmental education. 'Tree planting programmes in Sydney, Korea, Beijing and Hangzhou are popular with employees,' says Wu.

For Wu, a successful EVP should forge long-term relationships with community partners, facilitated by regular cooperation. In Hangzhou, that includes an annual summer camp for migrant children; and in Hong Kong, State

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Street works with the English Schools Foundation on career workshops for students with special needs.

Volunteering can help develop and hone skills – communication in particular. One State Street Hong Kong initiative, for example, sees staff visit elderly residents during local festive periods to chat and play games. And projects with special needs students reinforce messages around diversity. 'It's a way to see something not in their day-to-day activities and helps give new insights and fresh perspectives,' Wu says. 'Volunteering widens windows to see how other people are working in other parts of society.'

Pro bono

While any form of volunteering – independent or corporate, planting trees or teaching migrant children – has a positive impact on volunteers as well as communities, finance professionals have particularly valuable skills to share. 'Pro bono volunteering is a very high-impact way to help improve the sustainability of a non-profit organisation,' says Siu Turner, whose network can help accountants connect with worthy projects. 'The value of skilled volunteer support for general operations, technology and professional services can be 500% greater than the value of other forms of volunteering,' she says, citing a report by social impact measurement organisation True Impact and the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. 'However, for a pro bono project to be effective, it must be scoped and managed appropriately.'

UK-based Accounting for International Development (AfID) matches qualified volunteer accountants with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community projects worldwide to instil and instruct financial management. Dave Busby, AfID's volunteer services manager, says: 'Our partners are a blend

Effective employee volunteer programmes

'CFOs could play a big role in helping to get an employee volunteer programme up and running,' says Points of Light's Siu Turner. From greater brand value to higher employee engagement, workplace volunteering can boost productivity and reduce costs via greater staff satisfaction and boosted retention. However, such programmes require careful planning, communication and monitoring.

'There may be regional differences that influence how employees want to volunteer,' Turner says. She cites Silicon Valley Community Foundation research that found, in China, having fun and meeting new people are among the most prized aspects of volunteering for staff, as well as opportunities for face time with company leaders. Success would accordingly be enhanced by hands-on projects with opportunities to interact with leadership during service activities. Other tips include:


1. Celebrate small wins, especially for global offices starting out on a programme.
2. Create volunteer councils to engage employees who are passionate about a cause and to help global programmes remain locally relevant.
3. When identifying beneficiary organisations, long-term partnerships help.
4. Offices and partners should work together to define goals and measures of success, taking into account the needs and capacities of both sides.

of international NGOs and grassroots community-based organisations such as street child centres, hospitals, microfinance organisations, conservation projects, women's empowerment programmes and schools. The common theme is that they are all doing amazing work to tackle extreme poverty and inequality in their communities but due to their limited resources are unable to access vital accounting and financial management training.'

AfID sends volunteers to 52 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. They include newly qualified accountants, those between jobs, professionals on a sabbatical and retired accountants – Busby says AfID's oldest volunteer was 78. Around half come from outside the UK, including Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong and China. Volunteers pay for placements spanning two weeks to a year. Typical areas of focus include internal and external audits; bookkeeping and cash management; creating, monitoring and evaluating budgets; risk management; and training local finance personnel.

CV enrichment

In addition to the broader benefits of volunteering, pro bono programmes are a way for finance professionals to gain valuable experience in the highly competitive sector of international development. 'Taking on even a short volunteer assignment will help accountants stand out from the crowd,' Busby says. 'The invaluable experience to be gained in how NGOs manage their programmes with limited resources and report to international donors, as well as the insight into effective cross-cultural work practices, is exactly what many charities are looking for when they hire.'

With win-win advantages aplenty, volunteering is a rewarding way to drive change, support communities and even pick up some valuable work experience and skills along the way. 

Frances Arnold, journalist



More information

Download the Points of Light report *What's Working: Effective Employee Volunteering in Asia* at bit.ly/Vol-Asia