Corporate Volunteer Programs

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Abstract

Massive corporations in the United States are well-known for their focus of acquiring wealth and spending millions of dollars on factors that benefit the company. Many organizations are now beginning to incorporate volunteer programs where employees engage in community service activities by assisting individuals in disadvantaged circumstances. Corporate volunteer programs have shown to benefit the organization directly and indirectly, as well benefit non-profit organization partners, employees, and future clients/customers. Social Identity Theory is used to explain how employees commit themselves in volunteer acts to support an organization that they see fit to their identity.

Key Words: volunteers, corporate volunteer program, corporate volunteerism

The United States economy gained income due to the vast increase in small business shops throughout its fifty states. As of 2009, it is reported that an estimated 70% of these small businesses close their stores before they hit the ten-year mark (Peterson, 2004). From the few business that last more than ten years, some keep the tradition of keeping their shops local and family owned, while others generate enough income to become billion dollar industries that hire employees from around the world. With the money that is earned from these companies, it makes sense to give back to the community in terms of donating to a charitable cause. Corporate volunteerism programs have been shown to benefit employers, benefit employees, and result in a positive consumer perception.

In the past 20 years, the fastest growing means of volunteering has been through an individual's workplace. Major corporations have created extensive programs to encourage and enable their

employees to volunteer (McCurley, 2009). Citizens believe that it is the moral obligation of million dollar corporations to assist victims of natural disasters, improve education skills in surrounding communities, and support charity projects (Crittenden, Chrittenden, Pinney, & Pitt 2011). "Corporate social responsibility" is a term used to refer to the assumption that corporations are expected to venture beyond their goal of generating profit and serve social good in the community (Runte, Basil, & Runte, 2010). Companies practice corporate social responsibility in a variety of ways that may include charitable donations, sponsorships, as well as employee volunteering (Runte et al., 2010). When employees work on projects that are directed towards improving the community, consumer perceptions of corporate sponsors become positive. Companies can gain its consumer base from a "cause-related marketing" viewpoint, where portions of consumer purchases are donated for a specific cause that the consumer is in favor of advocating (e.g., breast cancer), or from a "social identity" viewpoint, where people who identify with an organization become vested in the success and failures of the organization (Cornwell & Coote, 2005). According to "social identity" theory, individuals who identify themselves with an organization commit themselves to support the organization under any circumstance, because the organization is a "part of the individual" (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). The majority of employees who volunteer with their companies report a more positive perception of their employer and colleagues, increased job satisfaction, and increased loyalty (Jarvis, 2012).

Professionals with work skills and expertise have dedicated their services for free of charge in *pro bono* cases. Lawyers at one of the world's largest law firms, *Linklaters,* have offered free legal advice for community organizations as part of their *pro bono* services (Wickens, 2014). Similarly, an accounting and consulting company by the name of PricewaterhouseCoppers started a program in 2001 named "Ulysses" that recruits their employees for volunteer reasons (Hirsch & Horowitz, 2006). Since its founding, "Ulysses" has had 58 partners from 29 countries participate in 18 local development initiatives that have taught its employees the importance of gaining a broad perspective on world issues as well as learning about the culture and mission statement of PricewaterhouseCoppers. Every "Ulysses" team member is provided with a sponsor who helps them develop as a leader and then the teams travel to a six-day program that provides an in-depth opportunity to explore leadership, cultural diversity, and sustainability.

Many well-known companies have benefitted from corporate volunteer programs. In 2012, Hilton employees participated in 100,000 hours of hand-on volunteer time in over 50 countries. PepsiCo improved rainwater harvesting in India and built community gardens in New Mexico to encourage healthy eating. More than 111,000 Citibank employees volunteered for community projects in 93 different countries during Global Community Day. Walmart employees generated $18 million in local grants through the Volunteer Always Pays (VAP) program (Wickens, 2014).

Corporate volunteer programs also provides a set of positive features for all personnel in the company. In turn, the company benefits from these programs because they recruit and engage employees (Haberman, 2012). Current employees who are entering the workforce arrive with an expectation that volunteering will be a part of their professional careers, with 88% of Millennials being attracted to organizations that have a Corporate Social Responsibility program and 61% claiming that a volunteer

program would be a factor when choosing between two potential jobs (Haberman, 2012). Unlike organizations that are engaged in volunteer initiatives for philanthropic reasons, corporate volunteerism has been shown to improve brand recognition, add media exposure, and increase customer loyalty (Brammer, Millington, & Rayton, 2007). Indirect community benefits include strengthening the stability of the local community, creating a healthier environment where companies operate, and developing a favorable corporate image (Peterson, 2004).

The benefit that employees receive by volunteering in these corporate programs is a greater awareness of their emotions, increased happiness and life satisfaction, improved development as professionals, and a more balanced work-life relationship (Longenecker, Beard, & Scazzero, 2013). By volunteering in different activities, employees are granted the opportunity to experience sentimental emotions that are not common in the workplace, such as compassion, humility, sympathy, and joy. Employee happiness increase when they are assisting others in less fortunate circumstances and are able to appreciate a greater satisfaction in life. Although employees who volunteer and work full-time carry more work and have time for leisure, the positive benefits of volunteering relieve stress (Longenecker, Beard, & Scazzero, 2013). Volunteering can result in the development of strategic skills through the participation of volunteer boards, emotional intelligence skills by working in community outreach, and gaining a sense of humility by working in homeless shelters (Longenecker, Beard, & Scazzero, 2013). Job satisfaction has also been shown to be positively related to volunteerism, and organization commitment is higher for volunteers from companies with a corporate volunteer program than for non-volunteers

from companies without a corporate volunteer program (Peterson, 2003).

In order for corporations to recruit volunteers for their program, companies must know the motivations of the employees. For employees who wish to volunteer for altruistic reasons, recruitment strategies would include publicizing information concerning the needs of the community (Peterson, 2004). For employees who wish to volunteer due to social relations, such as the desire to interact with others and make new friends, recruitment strategies include organizing employees in teams to work on group projects. For those individuals who are volunteering for reward (e.g., certificates, plaques, or trophies) or status (e.g., publicity), then a recruitment strategy would include recognizing employees for their volunteer contributions through awards and commendations.

If a corporation is in favor of a volunteering program but there is not one that currently exists, there are steps required for establishment. First, company leaders must find out if any formal program already exists, or if there has ever been a program in the company's history (Zimmerman, 2010). Even if the company has had a very old volunteering program, the pre-existing framework can be used to construct a new program. Next, the company must decide on the type of philanthropic programs that they will want their employees to commit. Would employees be willing to work in a homeless shelter, tutor children after school, serve at a food bank, or speak with patients at a hospital? The philanthropic program should be one that is related to the job that the employee is already involved in. Finally, the companies must ask themselves whether there are any risks involved for the name of the corporation. If the volunteering program results in a negative effect, this negativity must not reflect on the company because the company has an important reputation to

hold. Jarvis (2012) states that if a volunteer organization does not exist for a company, then a "Stage 1" approach is to find an open space to serve as the first community service event. The "Stage 1" event should be a low-commitment activity that ranges from one to three hours, there must not be any obligation for volunteers to return, the activity must be open to groups of friends and family, and there should be space for critical reflection after the activity has been completed.

Corporate volunteer programs have been shown to benefit the company, benefit the employees, and also benefit the community. College graduates already have experience in volunteer work from their involvement in student organizations on campus, therefore it is assumed that young employees entering the workforce will seek volunteer activities that benefit a community. Hence every large corporation should have the best intention to offer volunteer programs to its employees in order for new workers to fulfill their needs of identification with the company they work for and respect.

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