Corporate Employee Volunteer Programs: Considering the Interests of Multiple Stakeholders

William A. Brown
Associate Professor
The Bush School of Government and Public Service
Texas A&M University
College Station, TX 77843-4220
Telephone: 979-458-1372
FAX: 979-845-4155
E-mail: wbrown@bushschool.tamu.edu

Robert F. Ashcraft
Director and Associate Professor
Center for Nonprofit Leadership and Management, and
School of Community Resources and Development
Arizona State University
University Center – Mail Code 4120
411 N. Central Ave., Suite 550
Phoenix, AZ 85004-0691
Telephone: 602-496-0500
FAX: 602-496-0952
E-mail: ashcraft@asu.edu

Abstract

Corporate employee volunteer programs are administered to achieve many objectives, such as improved organizational reputation, employee training, and the serving of community needs. This paper presents research into the practices of corporate volunteer programs in Phoenix, Arizona, and considers how different stakeholder groups influence program activities. Results indicate that program administrators assume primary responsibility for running the programs fairly independent of employees or community members. They desire improved public recognition for their programs, but lack consistent practices to encourage promotion. Primarily the programs are operated to encourage employee participation, and the number of hours donated is the most consistent indicator of success. Implications provide guidance for how nonprofit volunteer coordinators can work with employee volunteer programs.

Key Words:
corporate, employee, volunteers, stakeholders, volunteer management

Employee volunteer programs are one aspect of a corporation's community involvement and social responsibility initiatives. For many organizations, employee volunteer programs are positioned within broader strategic initiatives that have multiple objectives. These include enhancing the corporate license to operate, improving customer relations and attraction, building a stronger corporate culture, retaining employees, and enhancing the organization's public image and reputation (Dowling, 2001; Rochin & Christoff, 2000; Waddock, Bodwell, & Graves, 2002). Acknowledging these lofty and ambitious goals helps community organizations and volunteer coordinators understand how they might benefit from the opportunities posed by employee volunteer programs.

This paper will consider how different stakeholder groups influence the administration and implementation of employee volunteer programs. Three primary groups or interests are reflected in the potential reasons why corporations operate employee volunteer programs (Snyder & Jimmerson, 1988-89). First are the business interests, such as improved public image and reputation, which might serve to attract customers and potential employees. Second are the employees themselves. Employees have mixed motivations for engaging in corporate volunteer programs: not only do they have pragmatic career objectives such as enhancing opportunities for career advancement and skill building, but they also join these programs as an opportunity to give back to the community. As well, corporations also want to express a commitment to their communities. Nonprofits and community members represent the third constituency group. These three groups have different interests in the employee volunteer programs, and consequently may attempt to exert control over how these programs are operated. The consideration of stakeholder interests will begin to explain how these programs

operate and help community volunteer coordinators access these programs more effectively (Brammer & Millington, 2003).

Methods/Participants

A survey, developed by Benjamin (2001), was distributed to 45 members of the Phoenix area Corporate Volunteer Council. Thirteen individuals participated in the survey. Respondents represented a broad range of industries including health care, manufacturing, and insurance. Nearly 70% of the employee volunteer programs had begun in the period since 1990, while 15% had started prior to 1981. The organizations ranged considerably in size, with 23% (n=3) of the organizations having less than 500 employees, and 23% (n=3) having 5000 or more. Seven of the organizations were national, two were regional, and four were local.

Results

The survey covered a range of questions related to program development, administration, services provided, evaluation strategies, and reporting mechanisms. The analysis will draw upon the three stakeholder perspectives to demonstrate how their interests are represented in corporate employee volunteer programs.

How are the business interests of the corporation reflected in the community volunteer program?

Business interests are revealed by investigating where the programs are operated, and what administrative controls are used to guide program decisions. Phoenix area organizations are most likely to operate their corporate employee volunteer programs through a communications or public affairs department (46%, n=6) or by the philanthropic staff (n=4, 31%). Over 60% (n=8) of the programs are operated by an individual instead of a committee. When compared to Benjamin's (200 1) study, which found that slightly less than half the sample

indicated that "employees" provide input into the program, only one respondent in the Phoenix study indicated that employees provide "input into the design of the employee volunteer program."

Seventy-five percent of the respondents indicated that their organization did have a formal policy related to the employee volunteer programs, and most of those with formal policies established program goals and had formal budgets. However, nearly 40% (n=5) of the Phoenix sample operated their programs without an established budget. The lack of a formalized budget reflects an informality that might not be conducive to effective program growth or accountability. Policies and program goals tended to be developed by program administrators and were approved almost exclusively by senior managers with a communications, public relations, or marketing orientation. Employees and nonprofit community members are not extensively incorporated into the goal development or approval process.

Benjamin (2001) found, as we did, that business objectives are not the most salient concern for program administrators when selecting a new program. According to Benjamin, slightly less than half the sample in Chicago indicated that it was very important and even fewer (16%) in the Phoenix sample identified "business objectives" as a significant factor in determining new programs. (See Table 1.)

How are the interests of employees reflected in the employee volunteer program?

When asked about the strongest motivator for promoting employee volunteerism, the most common response reflected employee interests, such as building skills and employee satisfaction. Secondarily, corporate interests such as social responsibility and good business practices were referenced. Community service was identified as a motivation by only two respondents. These results align

with the findings in the Chicago study, where over half the respondents indicated that the program was established for employee benefit, secondarily for corporate image or benefit, and lastly for community benefit. When asked about a variety of factors that might be important to consider when developing project sites, the two highest-rated concerns were related to employees. (See Table 1.) Almost 70% of the respondents indicated that employee preferences were very important.

TABLE 1

Importance of Various Factors in Selecting Volunteer Opportunities

How important is	M	SD
Day and time of activity	5.83	1.75
Employee preference	5.78	1.77
Community need	5.67	1.23
Agency need	5.67	1.16
Location	5.18	1.25
Business objective	5.00	1.60
Type of task	4.92	2.10

Note: n=12; indicated on a scale of 1-7 with 7 being very important; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation

Program budgets also reveal that these programs were primarily run to support employees. For instance, nearly all programs budgeted resources for recognition events, which were offered by three-quarters of the programs in this study, and gift items for employees. Half the programs included internal marketing as part of their budgeted expenses but only 25% specified that they had funding for external marketing. Similarly, the types of programs offered were predominately designed to engage employees and their families at pre-selected volunteer opportunities. Nearly all the programs solicited employee feedback about their volunteer experience and the most common method was online or e-mail surveys.

Nearly everyone indicated that accomplishments for the program are documented through the number of

employees who engaged in the service activities, the number of hours served, and the number of projects accomplished. Similarly, when respondents were asked to tell about program accomplishments, they were most likely to discuss how employees had benefited. For instance, "employees get a sense of accomplishment," "it increases their awareness of community issues," and "it improved relations among employees." These ideas resurface when viewing what respondents considered as important

TABLE 2
Importance of Possible Results

How important is (are)	Rank	M	SD
Community/Nonprofit Centered Results		**5.79**	**1.12**
Helping needy people in community	2	5.92	1.17
Assisting nonprofits	3	5.83	1.19
Solving community problems	4	5.75	1.14
Building relationships with nonprofit	5	5.67	1.50
Employee Centered Results		**5.48**	**1.50**
Bolstering employee morale	2	5.92	1.68
Experiencing teamwork among employees	2	5.92	1.24
Enhancing employee self-confidence	6	5.33	1.56
Developing employees' individual skills	9	4.75	2.10
Business Centered Results		**5.44**	**1.45**
Creating positive publicity for company	1	6.08	1.00
Reinforcing corporate culture	5	5.67	2.10
Encouraging company cohesiveness	7	5.08	2.07
Increasing exposure to potential customers	8	4.92	1.73

N = 12; indicated on a scale of 1-7 with 7 being very important; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation

results. Ranked within the top four were enhancing employee morale and fostering teamwork. (See Table 2.)

How are the interests of the community reflected in the employee volunteer program?

When asked to specify why their company started the employee volunteer program, respondents specified 20 different rationales. The most common explanation, expressed by eight individuals, related to the community, such as "It is important to give back to the community." Employee benefits such as team building and building morale were specified in six of the comments. Three comments reflected potential business rationales, for instance, one individual stated it "increases our visibility." When asked about what results are important for the program, community-related results were consistently ranked the highest, (see Table 2), for instance, helping needy people and nonprofits were ranked second and third. Unfortunately, only about 40% of the programs actually sought feedback from agencies, and even fewer reported to community agencies about program results.

Conclusion/Discussion

According to these results, the Phoenix area corporate employee volunteer programs were run primarily by program administrators, in conjunction with selected senior managers. The programs tended to emphasize employee interests and increased public relations as benefits from the volunteer activities. The informal and relatively new nature of some of these programs (three had indicated they were relatively new), limited their ability to achieve these benefits. In addition, it is not clear that systematic measures, or reporting, reinforced any of the desired objectives, since the vast

majority of these programs only account for hours served and employee attitudes. Only a little over a third of the programs actually have a process to measure results or develop formal reports of their programs. Most appear to communicate results more informally one-on-one with direct supervisors and in general meetings. They do not necessarily integrate with the charitable giving of the organization in that only four of the programs operate in conjunction with the offices of corporate philanthropy. Predominately, the programs operate to meet the interests and desires of employees, and it is employee involvement that constitutes success for these programs; yet, respondents clearly desired additional outcomes such as improved public relations and community assistance. They do not, however, have resources allocated or structures in place to ensure these additional objectives are obtained.

Implications for Volunteer Coordinators

What does this imply for community volunteer coordinators who desire to benefit from corporate volunteers? Recognizing that these programs are focused on employees will help nonprofit professionals consider how different volunteer opportunities might encourage collegiality and teamwork skills for company employees. For instance, can employees work together on projects? Are there opportunities for them to discuss and reflect on the volunteer experience subsequent to conducting their volunteer work? To what extent can employees design and run the volunteer experience? Nonprofits should consider how they can extend the volunteer experience to include pre-event planning and post-event reflection. In addition, nonprofit agencies should assist in determining the extent to which employee benefits are achieved. For instance, surveys of volunteer satisfaction should consider not only how much volunteers enjoyed the experience, but also how

it helped build relationships with peers at work. In addition, volunteer coordinators should consider how the values of their nonprofit organization align with the expressed values of the corporation. Seeking employee volunteers from corporations with similar work values and cultures provides an opportunity to reinforce the values that are important to the corporation and the nonprofit (Puffer & Meindl, 1995).

Corporations want to know that they make a difference through employee volunteer programs. Nonprofits should measure the benefit of volunteer time and demonstrate how lives were changed as a result. This information should be prepared and shared with corporate volunteer coordinators in making the case that the organization would benefit from corporate volunteers: not only that individual lives were changed as a result of the nonprofit's work but how volunteers are a part of achieving those outcomes. The corporation cannot understand the impact of the volunteer service unless the nonprofit reports those benefits. This is aligned with the public relations/business interests of the organization. If corporate volunteer coordinators can only announce in a press release how many people volunteered, that might or might not be impressive; but, if they can also present the benefits received by the community as a result of those hours-how much better. For instance, a few of the programs were able to talk about how, as a result of their corporate employee volunteer programs, children's academic scores improved. It is up to the nonprofit to demonstrate how the volunteer labor has played a part in transforming lives and the community.

These results are drawn from a relatively small sample of corporate volunteer programs in the Phoenix metropolitan area. These programs do represent a large number of employee volunteers in the area, but they are not necessarily representative of the entire population; hence, direct inferences from

these results should be cautiously extrapolated. In conjunction with the Chicago area study, however, the implications of stakeholder influences and control can be used to guide how specific corporations might or might not respond to volunteer opportunities. Volunteer coordinators can use the framework of stakeholder relationships to determine who runs corporate volunteer programs in different organizations, and how the interests of those stakeholders might influence the objectives and purposes of those programs. Understanding those multiple influences helps frame the case of a volunteer coordinator hoping to access corporate volunteers.

References

Benjamin, E.J. (2001). A look inside corporate employee volunteer programs. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration, 23*(2), 16-32.

Brammer, S., & Millington, A. (2003). The effect of stakeholder preferences, organizational structure and industry type on corporate community involvement. *Journal of Business Ethics, 45*(3),213-226.

Dowling, G. (2001). *Creating corporate reputation: Identity, image, performance.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Puffer, S., & Meindl, J.R (1995). Volunteers from corporations: Work cultures reflect values similar to the voluntary organizations. *Nonprofit Management & Leadership,* 5, 359-375.

Rochin, S., & Christoff, B. (2000). *Making the business case: Determining the value of corporate community involvement.* Boston: Center for Corporate Responsibility.

Snyder, R., & Jimmerson, R.M. (1988-89). Building symbiotic partnerships between corporate and nonprofit volunteer programs. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration, 7*(2), 44-49.

Waddock, S.A., Bodwell, C., & Graves, S.B. (2002). Responsibility: The new business imperative. *Academy of Management Executive, 16,* 132-149.

Authors' Biographies

William A. Brown is an Associate Professor in The Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University. A former faculty member in the School of Community Resources and Development at Arizona State University, his research interests include the management and leadership of nonprofit organizations, organizational effectiveness, board governance, and organizational theory.

Robert F. Ashcraft is the Director of the Center for Nonprofit Leadership and Management, and Associate Professor in the School of Community Resources and Development. His research interests include nonprofit organization leadership and management, youth development, philanthropy, and volunteerism.