

Effect of Design Elements for Corporate Volunteer Programs on Volunteerability

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Abstract

Corporate volunteer programs may affect current and future volunteering both through the program and independent of it. This article addresses how corporate volunteer program design and implementation choices affect “volunteerability” (i.e., the willingness and ability to volunteer) and provides insights for both corporate volunteer program managers as well as volunteer resource managers in nonprofit organizations hosting corporate volunteers. Emphasis is placed on program choices regarding the level of corporate commitment, program restrictions, participation encouragement, and benefits emphasized. Predictions of effects are grounded in an understanding of the dynamics of legitimization, resource needs, expectations, socialization, substitution, incentives, and resentment.

Key Words:

volunteering, corporate, program, design, manager

Corporate volunteering, also referred to in the literature and common practice as employee volunteering or employer supported volunteering, is a feature of many contemporary companies (Meijs, 2001; Meijs & Kerkhof 2001; Tschirhart, 2005). As an instrument of corporate philanthropy and corporate community involvement, corporate volunteering fits under the umbrella of

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corporate social responsibility (Burke, Logsdon, Mitchel, Reiner & Vogel, 1986). Corporate volunteers provide service to nonprofit organizations through their workplace or with the assistance of their employer. In this article, we explain how corporate volunteer programs can influence “volunteerability,” the ability and willingness to volunteer both through

the workplace and independently (Meijs, Ten Hoorn & Brudney, 2006).

Corporate volunteer programs have both short- and long-term effects on volunteerability, managers of corporate volunteer programs, and volunteer resource managers in nonprofit organizations hosting corporate volunteers may influence these effects. This premise is grounded in the Dutch and American literature on both organizational behavior and corporate volunteerism, encompassing: 1) a thorough review of 15 exemplar corporate volunteer programs (Meijs & Van der Voort, 2004); 2) interviews with eight experts in the field of corporate volunteering; and 3) discussions with Dutch corporate executives at a conference on volunteerism.

The Concept of Corporate Volunteering

Corporate volunteering is any volunteering that is supported or recognized by an employer. In reality, the distinction between personal and corporate volunteering can become blurred, especially in highly informal, non-pressured, and unrestricted corporate volunteer programs. It may be unclear to an individual employee whether her/his volunteering is personal or work-related, especially if s/he would have volunteered even if the company offered no support or recognition of the activity. This approach is consistent with Meijs and Van der Voort (2004) who suggested, "In corporate volunteering, a company encourages its employees to offer time and expertise as volunteers to nonprofit organizations. These volunteer activities can be undertaken within or outside the employee's official workload and time" (p. 21). Tuffrey (1998) complemented this conceptualization by describing corporate volunteering as employee community involvement with employer supports that vary by program.

Most observers of corporate volunteering assume that it offers benefits for employees, the employer, and the

community (Tschirhart, 2005), and that companies vary in prioritization of beneficiaries (Tschirhart & St. Clair, 2008). Possible outcomes from corporate volunteering include (but are not limited to): employee good feelings and skill development; community improvement; greater financial donations to nonprofits; positive company image; employees' improved understanding of community needs; and increased market share (Austin, 1997; Benjamin, 2001; Gilder, Schuyt, & Breedijk, 2005; Lee, 2001; Pancer, Baetz, & Rog, 2002; Thomas & Christoffer, 1999; Tschirhart, 2005). Different corporate volunteer program strategies may result in different types of outcomes. For example, Peterson (2004) found that the most effective ways for corporate volunteer program managers to gain employee participation in volunteer programs may not be the same as those most effective in maximizing volunteer hours. Peterson's findings suggested a need for attention to the linkage of corporate program elements to effects. The focus in this article, however, is on how corporate volunteer program choices may influence individuals' willingness and abilities to volunteer, now and in the future.

Corporate volunteer programs resemble volunteer centers in that both recruit, select, place, and support volunteers for nonprofit host organizations. In many situations, corporate volunteer programs work in a larger geographical area than does a volunteer center, but this broadened scope is compensated by the fact that potential volunteers (i.e., employees) can be reached through corporate communication channels. Nonprofit organizations seeking sources of volunteers may look to both corporations and volunteer centers as a source of volunteers. Volunteers need to be matched to assignments, and this matching function may be influenced by the host organization as well as the source of the volunteers. This article primarily

emphasizes the roles of the manager of a corporate volunteer program, and secondarily those of a volunteer resource manager inside a host nonprofit organization utilizing corporate volunteers.

Corporate Volunteering Program Choices

There are four important choices to be made when designing and implementing a corporate volunteer program: 1) company commitment, 2) program restrictions, 3) encouragement of participation, and 4) benefits emphasized.

Company Commitments

Company commitment may be manifested in a variety of ways. One important dimension of commitment is the degree to which the company provides employees with time during the work day for volunteering. For example, lower to higher commitment may be shown by moving from simply recognizing and praising employees who volunteer during their personal time, to giving company donations to nonprofit organizations that engage company employees as volunteers. To demonstrate greater commitment, a company may let employees use working hours for volunteer activities. Companies may show a high level of commitment by hiring paid corporate volunteer managers with a budget and space allocated for the promotion and facilitation of employee volunteering. Less formal and resource-intensive support structures for volunteering within a company (e.g., simply having a bulletin board where employees may post a notice about a volunteer opportunity) show a relatively lower level of commitment.

A nonprofit host organization for corporate volunteers is not necessarily a passive partner to the corporate volunteer program. The nonprofit may require a certain level of commitment before agreeing to work with a corporate volunteer program. For example, the nonprofit volunteer resource manager and the corporate volunteer program manager

might negotiate the minimum number of volunteer hours to be performed by corporate volunteers, or to what extent the volunteers' tasks will be facilitated by the company (for example, by having transportation, supplies, or training provided by the company). In addition, a nonprofit volunteer resource manager may show greater or lesser commitment to the company, with commitment demonstrated by how the host nonprofit manages corporate volunteers. As an example, a nonprofit volunteer resource manager may make a special point to recognize a company's involvement with the nonprofit as a source of volunteers, and not just acknowledge individual volunteer efforts. The nonprofit volunteer resource manager might also provide recruitment and training resources for the corporate volunteer program as a demonstration of the nonprofit's commitment to supporting the corporate volunteer program.

There is an additional complexity to the issue of level of commitment to the corporate volunteer program when one considers the potential role that managers of volunteer centers might play in increasing a company's commitment to its corporate volunteer program. Volunteer center managers may negotiate with a company to increase the company's support to employees who volunteer. For example, a volunteer center manager could advocate for compensation of volunteer hours by the volunteer's employer, or for a formal company acknowledgement of a volunteer employee's service. They could also ask a company to direct interested employees to the volunteer center, promote the idea of volunteering, and/or praise employees who are using the volunteer center to find volunteer placements.

Program Restrictions

Companies may limit what they recognize or support in a corporate volunteer program. To illustrate the range of possibilities, they may set no restrictions on employee volunteer

activities, or set moderate restrictions on activities, for example, by setting a theme such as youth or health-related activities or by restricting the types of nonprofit organizations that will be acknowledged as corporate volunteer hosts (e.g., many companies do not acknowledge employees' volunteer time for religious activities). For the most highly restrictive programs, the company may allow only a limited number of volunteer activities, and the volunteering may be performed only with the coordination of the corporate volunteer program manager.

A nonprofit host organization may be selective in whom it chooses to work with as a source of volunteers. A nonprofit volunteer resource manager may refuse to work with certain types of corporations. As an example, a volunteer resource manager may not wish for her/his nonprofit organization to be associated with a company whose business mission or product conflicts with the nonprofit's policies, values, or mission (e.g., a nonprofit whose mission is focused on health may have a policy not to be involved with a company that sells tobacco products).

Encouragement of Participation

A company may be more or less aggressive and explicit in encouraging employees to volunteer. A corporate volunteer program may limit pressure to volunteer by simply announcing volunteer opportunities to employees without encouraging them to participate. A corporate volunteer program manager might use social and collegial pressure through invitations to volunteer from peer employees or supervisors, employee sharing of reasons for volunteering, and the use of colleagues formally appointed by the company to encourage and coordinate participation. There may also be a hierarchical expectancy established with participation goals set by those higher in authority. As an example, being a board member for a nonprofit organization may

be expected of partners in a consulting firm. There may also be formal obligations, such as when an employee is told that it is part of the job requirements to volunteer and is given a specific assignment. Implicit encouragement to volunteer may be perceived by an employee even if the employee is not directly asked to be involved in the volunteer program.

A nonprofit host organization may find that having a board member who is employed by a specific company may come with an expectation that other employees from that board member's company will volunteer with the nonprofit and be encouraged by the nonprofit to do so. The corporation may wish to have multiple opportunities for employees to be involved with a nonprofit. By agreeing to host corporate volunteers for one activity, the nonprofit may feel pressured to offer more activities consistent with the corporate volunteer program.

Benefits Emphasized

Corporate volunteer programs vary in their likely outcomes, and a company can decide how to prioritize the three main potential beneficiaries of the program: employees, company, and community. The choice of volunteer projects may vary depending on whether the goal is to maximize employee skill development, company visibility in the community, or value to a nonprofit organization. A project involving the use of high level skills by having a few employees design an information system for a nonprofit may be good for employee development, but have less public relations value for a company than a project which involves a much greater number of employees working together to give gifts to disadvantaged children. Any volunteer resource manager needs to balance the volunteers' needs and desired benefits, as well as those of the nonprofit and its clients. In addition, a volunteer resource manager in a nonprofit host organization

should consider the benefits desired by organizational sources of volunteers, whether the source is a corporate volunteer program or some other type of volunteer clearinghouse.

Effects of Commitment, Restrictions and Encouragement on Volunteerability

Table 1 summarizes potential effects of choices related to commitment, restrictions, and encouragement on both short- and long-term volunteerability. Short-term refers to volunteerability during the current corporate volunteer activity; long-term refers to volunteerability after the conclusion of the current corporate volunteer activity. The potential effects identified are based upon an understanding of the dynamics of legitimization, resource

needs, expectations, socialization, substitution, incentives, and resentment effects. By understanding these dynamics, a manager can make informed choices about how to design and implement a corporate volunteer program, and nonprofit hosts for these volunteers can consider the implications of being involved with these programs.

Drawing from resource dependency theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), when a corporate volunteer program is seen as more legitimate, it will attract more participants. A corporate volunteer program manager may encourage perceptions of legitimacy by demonstrating that the company is committed to the volunteer program.

Table 1
Program Elements and Effects on Volunteerability

Program Choice		Low Level	High Level
Commitment to Corporate Volunteer Program	Short Term	weak legitimization effect on corporate volunteerability	strong legitimization effect on corporate volunteerability
	Long Term	weak resource effect on corporate volunteerability	strong resource effect on corporate volunteerability
Restriction of Diversity of Corporate Volunteer Program Activities	Short Term	strong substitution effect with corporate volunteering more likely to displace independent volunteering	weak substitution effect with corporate volunteering unlikely to displace independent volunteering
	Long Term	weak socialization effect on opinions on community needs	strong socialization effect on opinions on community needs
Encouragement of Participation in Corporate Volunteer Program	Short Term	weak incentive, resource and substitution effects with corporate volunteering unlikely to displace other volunteering	strong incentive effect for corporate volunteering
	Long Term	weak resentment effect for corporate volunteering	possible strong resentment effect reducing volunteerability

Possible mechanisms for improving perceptions of legitimacy include explicit company commitments (such as endorsements by company leaders) and financial and staff investments in the program. While perceptions of legitimacy affect willingness to volunteer, available resources also affect ability to volunteer. Company commitments not only demonstrate company values and norms, but also provide tangible resources that can make it easier for an employee to volunteer. Corporate volunteer program managers may be able to give employees time off from work, and provide coordination support, training, and tools to facilitate volunteer tasks. By deploying more company resources to support volunteer efforts, corporate volunteer program managers are likely to increase volunteerability.

How a corporate volunteer program is designed and managed may affect expectations of employees. Employees working for a company with high commitments to a corporate volunteer program may come to expect this level of support for volunteering from their current and future employers. They may bring a psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995) to their employment situations that includes a set of implicit obligations for corporate volunteering. Corporate volunteer program managers and nonprofit host volunteer resource managers can reinforce or weaken these expectations. They may promote the company as unique in its level of commitment to volunteer service, or present the company as acting according to norms of corporate social responsibility (CSR). By emphasizing rationales for company commitments, they may shape employee beliefs and, ultimately, expectations for future company commitments.

A substitution effect may be experienced when current volunteering by employees outside the realm of the corporate volunteer program is replaced by volunteering within the program. By

restricting the types of activities that are acknowledged and supported, a corporate volunteer program manager can influence how much substitution is likely to occur. The more restrictive the program, the less likely an employee's personal volunteering will transfer to corporate volunteering. For employees who are highly devoted to a certain cause, if the cause does not fit under the corporate program umbrella, personal volunteering may be chosen over corporate volunteering. For employees without strong volunteering preferences, a highly restrictive program is more likely to shape their volunteer activities. Nonprofit hosts of corporate volunteers should be aware of possible substitution effects. If the host manages to get on a short list of accepted organizations for a corporate volunteer program, the substitution effect may work to the host's advantage but may harm other nonprofits not on the short list that lose volunteers who switch to the company-endorsed volunteer activities.

When explained by a corporate volunteer program manager as worthy, corporate volunteer choices can draw the attention and interest of employees. Socialization to volunteering occurs when employees accept that there are needs to be served in the community, and that they and their co-worker peers should be involved. Employees become socialized to the idea that it is appropriate for them to give their time, talents, and energies to address certain social needs. By sharing stories about benefits and impacts of employee volunteering upon community needs, corporate volunteer program managers help to socialize individuals to perceive volunteering as appropriate and worthwhile. Nonprofit organizational hosts may also play a part in socializing individuals to the idea of volunteering through their workplaces. By praising companies for their efforts to encourage employee volunteering, nonprofits help to support the idea that corporate volunteer programs are legitimate and worthwhile.

Incentive effects can be used by corporate volunteer program managers to influence volunteerability, especially when participation in the program is linked to perceived career advancement. On the one hand, if employees are not highly encouraged to participate, and/or are given few incentives to do so, they may feel their time is better spent on other activities. On the other hand, if incentives for participation are high, cost-benefit calculations may lead an individual to decide to participate in the corporate volunteer program. However, corporate volunteer program managers should not assume that the more incentives and encouragement of participation, the better the program. Resentment effects may occur if employees feel that their employer is attempting to take over their private time (Tschirhart & St. Clair, 2008). In addition, some employees may feel their volunteer service is degraded if they are rewarded for performing it. Altruistic motivations may suffer if extrinsic benefits of participation are too high. Managers of any type of volunteer program are likely to be aware of the need to give incentives to volunteers. Understanding the need to prevent negative effects of incentives is probably less well-developed, but is also important.

Effect of Benefits on Volunteerability

Table 2 summarizes potential effects of benefits to employees, company, and community on corporate and personal volunteering. In general, the greater the benefits, the greater the willingness and ability to engage in corporate volunteering. However, there are important nuances that must be considered. Individuals and nonprofits are likely to prioritize corporate and personal volunteering according to which offers the greater benefits to them. Companies have the challenge of showing that they benefit from a corporate volunteer program without seeming to be too self-serving. Corporate volunteer program managers who demonstrate

benefits to employees, company, and community are most likely to support their program's sustainability. Placing the highest emphasis on how a program helps the company is likely to backfire with employees who feel discomfort with the idea that an employer is asking an employee to donate time for the company's benefit (Tschirhart & St. Clair, 2008). Offering too many extrinsic rewards to employees may frustrate employees who believe that volunteering should be altruistic and not instrumental, and who do not wish personal recognition through the company for their volunteer efforts (Tschirhart & St. Clair, in press). Nonprofit organization hosts of corporate volunteers can benefit from being aware of the possible negative effects on current volunteers not involved through corporate programs if they give too much praise and other rewards to corporate volunteers. In addition, they should be sensitive to comparisons that volunteers not engaged under a corporate umbrella may make if they feel they are not treated as well as volunteers serving the nonprofit through corporate volunteer programs.

Conclusions

Corporate volunteer programs can lead to both individuals volunteering for the first time, and for current volunteers, volunteering more hours. Given individuals' limited time and competing demands upon their time, by increasing investments in corporate volunteer programs we may end up trading one form of volunteerism for another. Such claims have surfaced before. As an example, some critics charged that the 1997 Presidents' Summit for America's Future (a national event organized in the U.S. to increase volunteering to help youth) changed existing volunteers' priorities (or organizational accounting for volunteer contributions) rather than stimulated more volunteers or volunteer hours (Brudney, 1999).

Table 2
Benefits from Corporate Volunteering and Effect on Volunteerability

Benefit	Low	High
Employee	Negative effect on willingness if employee benefits less from corporate than independent volunteering	Positive effect on willingness if employee benefits more from corporate than personal volunteering Positive effect on volunteerability if skill and knowledge development
Company	Negative effect on willingness if employee believes company gains little from program	Positive effect on willingness if employee believes company gains much from program. However, there is a potential negative effect by too instrumental use of corporate volunteering
Community	Negative effect on willingness if feeling of ineffective use or value of volunteer time	Positive effect on willingness if feeling that making a positive impact on community If nonprofits see greater benefit from use of corporate volunteers than independent volunteers, they may choose to restrict opportunities for independent volunteering in favor of corporate volunteer opportunities

More troubling is that corporate volunteer programs have the potential to reduce individuals' willingness to volunteer. One possibility is that the motivation to volunteer becomes too extrinsic and, over time, decreases satisfaction with volunteering. Another possibility is that the more interesting opportunities become the domain for corporate volunteers, leaving other volunteers with less attractive tasks. More research is needed to critically explore the conceptual ideas presented in this article. Empirical studies using varied samples are warranted. Although the ideas presented were developed with input from practitioners, and grounded in theoretical frameworks, additional research would help to reveal any interactions among program design elements and threshold factors. Currently, there is little quantitative or qualitative data on the and establish expectations. Willingness alone does not determine volunteerability; ability is also important. By providing resources for participation in a corporate

concept of volunteerability, and how corporate volunteer program choices influences it.

This discussion of the dynamics of volunteerability serves as a useful foundation for corporate volunteer program managers, nonprofit volunteer resource managers, and volunteer center managers to think systemically about corporate volunteering specifically, and volunteering in general. Overall, we suggest that volunteer resource managers consider how their program affects long-term as well as short-term volunteerability. In general, the more legitimate and expected volunteering through a corporate volunteer program appears to be, the greater the willingness to engage in this type of volunteering. Volunteer resource managers have multiple ways to encourage perceptions of legitimacy volunteer program, volunteering through the workplace can be increased. Still, there are limits to how much time is available for volunteering, and encouraging corporate

volunteering, or volunteering with specific nonprofit hosts, may be detrimental to more independent volunteer efforts and to nonprofits that are not connected to corporate volunteer programs. Finally, corporate volunteer program managers and nonprofit host organizations must consider possible negative effects of offering too many incentives for participation in a corporate volunteer program, and over-emphasizing the benefits to companies of these programs.

Rigorous empirical studies are needed to offer guidance on the effects of specific levels of program commitment, restriction, encouragement, and benefits. However, we are confident that high and low levels of each will have differential effects on volunteerability. Volunteer resource managers should be aware of possible short-term and long-term effects, and monitor and adjust program elements to achieve desired results.

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