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The Promise Employee Skill-Based Volunteering Holds for Employee Skill and Nonprofit Partner Effectiveness: A Review of Current Knowledge

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Corporate America is embracing employee skill-based volunteering at a rapid pace. Proponents believe employee skill-based volunteering is more effective than other forms of employee volunteering in furthering social sector causes and in developing participant workplace skills. This win-win potential makes employee skill-based volunteering of high interest to corporate-community involvement practitioners who are increasingly pressured to make their community giving strategies both high impact and business-smart.

There are no studies that measure the value that skill-based volunteering adds to recipient nonprofit organizations. However, research has established the nonprofit sector's need for skilled human resources and employee skill-based volunteering appears to be an effective way to meet this need.

Similarly, due to a lack of scientific studies, there is no way to definitively answer whether skill-based volunteering has an effect on workplace skills. Nevertheless, a review of existing knowledge makes a reasonably strong case that properly designed employee skill-based volunteering develops workplace skills.

The five factors that appear to help ensure that an employee skill-based volunteer program is successful at developing workplace skills and at promoting nonprofit partner effectiveness are: full compliance with adult learner theory, team approach, sound support structures, financial resources and process and outcome evaluation.

In sum, employee skill-based volunteering is a nascent practice that has yet to be rigorously assessed in terms of its ability to effect meaningful change in its nonprofit beneficiaries and the causes they serve, and in employee workplace skills. Nevertheless, there is reason to expect that it promotes both of these outcomes and, thus, holds great promise as a win-win corporate-community involvement strategy. Companies willing to accept the risks and responsibility inherent in blazing new paths might greatly benefit from an employee skill-based volunteer program.

INTRODUCTION

Employee skill-based volunteering is spreading throughout corporate America. A review of the literature finds that it is one of the top seven trends in employee volunteering (Points of Light Foundation, 2005). Numerous companies selected as finalists in the Awards for Excellence in Workplace Volunteering have volunteer programs that draw from the skills of employees or aim to develop employee workplace skills (Points of Light Foundation, 2006). Below are examples of skill-based volunteer programs:

- BD, a medical technology company, sends a select group of employees to Zambia to work with healthcare professionals and NGO staff in the fight against AIDS. This work helps to bring new perspectives on global health challenges in the workplace.

- Cisco's Leadership Fellows Program puts high-potential employees in a job with a nonprofit organization for six to twelve months with the charge of ensuring a specific project is successful.
- IBM's On Demand Community has dozens of state-of-the art online presentations, videos, Web site reference links, software solutions and documents to assist IBM volunteers in not-for-profit organizations and educational settings.
- McGraw Hill's Writers to the Rescue program matches individual employees to nonprofit organizations to serve as volunteer writers, editors, communication and/or public relations specialists.
- UPS's 40-year-old Community Internship Program (CIP) immerses senior level executives in a variety of social and economic challenges facing today's workforce. Managers leave their jobs and families to spend a month living and working in one of four CIP sites run by local nonprofit agencies. This intense training program exposes managers to situations they would rarely encounter in corporate America such as poverty, drug dependency and alcoholism. The goal is to make better, more empathetic managers.
- Xerox Corporation's F.I.R.S.T. program has technically competent employees mentor student teams competing in a national robotics competition.

As an emerging concept, skill-based volunteering lacks a universal definition. Indeed, the term itself is not standard. Some use terms like pro bono, skilled and skill-building interchangeably with skill-based. This paper uses the term skill-based volunteering to mean volunteer work for the "benefit of nonprofit organizations and/or their causes that uses technical or professional skills." Technical or professional skills can include writing, IT, legal, accounting, graphic design, welding or any other workplace skill. Skill-based volunteering is distinct from "extra-pair-of-hands" volunteering in which volunteers perform tasks that require minimal specialized skills such as painting walls, planting trees, reading to children or selling raffle tickets.

This paper further focuses on employee volunteering, meaning that the volunteering is supported by the volunteer's employer through examples such as organized volunteering activities, dollars-for-doers grants or assistance in finding board service opportunities.

In sum, this paper is on company-supported employee volunteer work that requires specialized workplace skills to be performed well, referred to as skill-based volunteering. More specifically, this paper reviews the state of knowledge regarding the singular benefits that skill-based volunteering generates for the company and for the nonprofit partners. Proponents of skill-based volunteering make two principal claims regarding its value above and beyond extra-pair-of-hands employee volunteering:

- Skill-based volunteering is a more effective way to support social sector causes, such as eliminating hunger, providing health care for all or preserving the environment.
- Skill-based volunteering develops the workplace skills of participating employees, and thus plays an important role in making the employee volunteer program business-smart,

a prerequisite of excellent employee volunteer programs (Points of Light Foundation, 2004).

This paper reviews the evidence for each claim and summarizes the lessons learned. It also summarizes the lessons from this review and from the Points of Light Foundation's experience with skill-based volunteering into guidelines for employee skill-based volunteer programs.

IS EMPLOYEE SKILL-BASED VOLUNTEERING AN EFFECTIVE WAY TO SUPPORT SOCIAL CAUSES?

There are no studies that measure the value that skill-based volunteering adds to recipient nonprofit organizations and the social causes they serve. However, research has established the need in the nonprofit sector for more human resources, especially given the enormity of its task, and for more effective strategies to solve serious community problems, many of which have proven to be virtually intractable. Assuming that employees engaged in skill-based volunteering would represent productive human resources and that they would add value to nonprofit strategic planning, then employee skill-based volunteering would contribute to nonprofit sector effectiveness.

Various nonprofit representative surveys support the claim that employee skill-based volunteering could make a meaningful contribution to nonprofit organization effectiveness. For example, more than three quarters of nonprofit leader respondents in one survey believe that skilled volunteers could significantly improve their organization's business practices. Yet, only 12 percent of nonprofits actually put volunteers to work on such assignments (Deloitte, 2006). Similarly, an Accenture study found that attracting and retaining skilled volunteers is key to improving nonprofit operations and an Urban Institute study found that nonprofit organizations sought greater availability of volunteers with specialized skills (Accenture, 2006; Urban Institute, 2004).

Similarly, several academics and practitioners have posited that corporate employee involvement in solving community problems can greatly contribute to resolution of such problems. Work conducted by Harvard University and the Foundation Strategy Group in the areas of corporate-community involvement led investigators to the conclusion that "it is the joining together of those capabilities (corporate and nonprofit) that gives cross-sector partnerships extraordinary power" (Kramer and Kania, 2006).

DOES EMPLOYEE SKILL-BASED VOLUNTEERING DEVELOP WORKPLACE SKILLS?

Due to lack of scientific studies, there is no way to definitively answer whether skill-based volunteering has an affect on workplace skills. No experimental design studies have compared workplace skills, competencies or productivity of employees who conduct skill-

based volunteering to those who do not engage in any type of professional development or to those who engage in other types of professional development such as, for example, online training programs.

Nevertheless, a review of the knowledge that does exist makes a relatively strong case that properly designed employee skill-based volunteering would be expected to develop workplace skills. Still, even assuming that the direction in which existing data point us, existing knowledge does not provide much insight on the magnitude of the effect or the relative efficiency of using skill-based volunteering as compared to other learning methods.

Existing knowledge that is germane to understanding whether employee skill-based volunteering affects professional development consists of the following:

- The conceptual model of adult learners.
- Scientific or other moderately rigorous research in related areas, mainly service learning in academia.
- Non-scientific studies and other soft evidence.

The summary results from an analysis of each of these follows.

Analysis of the Adult Learner Conceptual Model

From what we know conceptually about adult learning, well-designed skill-based volunteering would be expected to develop workplace skills. A review of the literature of adult learning uncovers that skill-based volunteering provides several of the long-accepted and thoroughly-proven conditions for effective adult learning and that the missing elements can easily be incorporated.

The dominant paradigm in the training field is andragogy, better known as adult learner theory, as espoused by Malcolm Knowles. Knowles, who built on the work of John Dewey, William James and others, listed the conditions necessary for effective adult learning (Knowles, 1975). Empirical research over the last few decades has validated the positive impact the presence of such conditions have on learning, at least with regard to western hemisphere adult learners (Davenport and Davenport, 1985; and Zemke and Zemke 1981). Per this established conceptual model, adult learners need the following conditions for optimal learning:

1. Involvement in the planning and evaluation of their instruction.
2. Relevance of the content area to their job or personal life.
3. Experiential activities.
4. Problem-centered rather than content-oriented emphasis.

Employee volunteering does not necessarily meet the first two conditions, but it is not difficult to design it so that it does. Involving employee volunteers upfront in the design of the skill-based volunteer activities is easily done through employee volunteer committees, for

example. Likewise, making the employee volunteering relevant to work is a matter of having it use workplace skills.

Skill-based volunteering is inherently a superb method for meeting the last two conditions. Virtually all volunteering is practical and, thus, meets the third condition for effective adult learning. From public speaking to board service or designing an ad campaign, skill-based volunteering can be an excellent application of emerging skills. Skill-based volunteering also provides a problem-centered approach, meeting the fourth condition for effective adult learning. Few problems are as compelling as those of the nonprofit sector such as ensuring safe communities, properly caring for the mentally ill or finding the cure for cancer. Indeed, a classic Harvard Business Review article stated that, because of its intrinsic and meaningful challenge, the nonprofit sector was a natural place for corporations to develop the capacity for skill of innovation (Kanter, 1999). Similarly, a more recent article reported that companies, such as GE and Nike, that take on the thorniest societal challenges in their giving strategy, benefit from increased capacity to conduct their commercial work (Kramer and Kania, 2006).

In sum, skill-based volunteering intrinsically and naturally provides some, although not all, pre-conditions to adult learning. Furthermore, the other pre-conditions can be easily added through the design of the volunteering. Thus, based on an analysis of adult learner theory, skill-based volunteering is naturally positioned to develop the workplace skills of the volunteers.

Analysis of Relevant Findings from Higher Education

While employee skill-based volunteering is a rare practice in corporate America, its equivalent in academic America — service learning — is not. Service learning, or the educational strategy that combines the academic learning objectives of a course with community service, has become moderately common across US institutions of higher education (Bringle and Hatcher, 2000). This has led to a body of research, including some experimental design studies, on the effect service learning has on students. This research can help answer the question as to whether employee skill-based volunteering develops workplace skills.

An experimental-design longitudinal study of the effect of service learning on various outcomes found that service learning, that was integrated into an academic course, increased academic performance as measured by GPA, writing skills and critical thinking skills (Astin and Sax, 1998). Indeed, an analysis of service learning research conducted from 1993 to 2000 found that most, although not all, research on course-based service learning linked service learning to increased grade point average, degree completion, graduate degree aspiration, civic responsibility and life skills such as interpersonal, leadership, social, self-confidence, critical thinking, conflict resolution and understanding national and community problems (Eyler et al, 2001).

One development that might be of particular interest to companies looking into skill-based volunteering, is the adoption of service learning in many business school curricula,

suggesting that it might be an effective methodology in developing business competencies. Service learning has been effectively used in accounting courses (Gujarathi and McQuade 2002), statistics (Root and Thorne 2001), public relations (Patterson 2004) and marketing (Easterling and Rudell 1997; Petkus 2000).

Nevertheless, service learning research leaves the question as to whether these findings, generated from academic-course service learning (e.g., not extra-curricular service learning) apply to workplace skill development. The answer appears mixed. As covered earlier, that classroom learning is enhanced with the practical and meaningful application in volunteer work is a well-known tenet on how all adults learn and would, therefore, be expected to hold true in workplace professional development situations. However, it would be a misinterpretation of these data to suggest that having employees conduct skill-based volunteering in itself, without the accompanying classroom presentation of theory and post-volunteering reflection, develops workplace skills. Indeed, service learning research finds that the strength of linkage between academic and service components, the degree of written and oral reflection, and other factors ancillary to the volunteer work influence the effectiveness of service learning (Gray et al., 2000 and Ikeda, 2000).

Analysis of Employee Volunteering Studies

The third and final source of information to help determine if employee skill-based volunteering develops workplace skills is data collected from employee skill-based surveys. Of the three sources of information, this is the least valid as it consists entirely of self-reported data without control groups or other methodologies for controlling other factors. Nevertheless, these data corroborate the findings from the other two sources. They further build the case, albeit with low-rigor evidence, that well-developed employee skill-based volunteering develops workplace skills.

A handful of employee surveys administered over the past few years have asked employees various questions as to whether employee volunteering has developed workplace skills. For example, a Deloitte survey asked whether “volunteering offers me the opportunity to develop skills I can use at work” and whether “volunteering offers me the opportunity to enhance leadership skills” (Deloitte, 2005). Similarly, an Aetna employee volunteer survey asked whether volunteering helped develop decision-making, communication and other skills. Across virtually all these survey items, the majority of respondents reported that volunteering helped them develop that specific skill (Deloitte, 2005; Deloitte and Points of Light Foundation, 2006; Markitects and Woman’s Way, 2006).

SUCCESS FACTORS FOR EMPLOYEE SKILL-BASED VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS

As the review of current knowledge shows, employee skill-based volunteer programs that effectively develop workplace skills and support nonprofit partners requires careful design. This section draws from the review of current knowledge, covered above, and from the experiences of Points of Light Foundation member companies to identify the success factors

of excellent employee skill-based volunteer programs, as best can be identified at this early point in the evolution of employee skill-based volunteering.

The success factors presented below are specific to the skill-based aspect of a program and assume that those components that help ensure excellence of employee volunteer programs, generally, are already in place. Such general guidelines and best practices to establish excellent standard volunteer programs can be found in *Developing Excellence in Workplace Volunteer Programs: Guidelines for Success*, which establishes the basic requirements of an excellent volunteer program, and in the *Benchmarks of Excellence* series, which presents the practices of employee volunteer programs selected as finalists in the Awards for Excellence of Workplace Volunteer Programs.

Below are the factors that appear to help ensure that an employee skill-based volunteer program is successful at developing workplace skills and at promoting nonprofit partners effectiveness.

Full Compliance with Adult Learner Theory

From a long tradition of adult learner theory to scientific research in service learning, everything we know about volunteering suggests that it builds skills when used as practice for concepts learned, and that it might not develop skills when it is the entirety of the learning experience. In other words, volunteering is one part of a well-designed learning by experience. Therefore, it is best augmented with the other components of adult learner theory. This means, for example, that skill-building employee volunteering should include the presentation of theoretical information before the volunteering, and reflection and application of the learning after the volunteering (Dubinsky, 2006). One of the most effective ways for a company to ensure that employee volunteering develops workplace skills is to treat it as it treats other workplace development strategies. For example, the employee skill-based volunteer program is given the same care in design and is submitted to the same evaluation of learner outcomes as other corporate professional development programs.

Team Approach

Although individual skill-based volunteering has a long tradition in pro-bono legal services and board service, for example, it appears that team volunteering amplifies many of the positives of skill-based volunteering. For example, when in teams employees seem to better learn from each other, develop a sense of esprit de corps, connect the experience more to their employer, and are able to provide a variety of integrated services.

Sound Support Structures

One of the principal sources of failure of employee skill-based volunteer programs, per the experience of Points of Light Foundation member companies, is expecting employees to be able to design an effective program for helping the nonprofit partner. Employees with specific technical or professional skills or knowledge do not necessarily know how to apply these in assistance to another organization. This requires project management and consultancy skills that may or may not be competencies they have. Therefore, it is not surprising that the most successful skill-based employee volunteer programs are either in companies that do consultancy-type work or that establish clear and easy-to-follow instructions and support systems to help employees plan out a successful job. Accenture is an example of the former. Employees who are in between commercial jobs conduct successful volunteer work without needing much assistance. Many law firms also fall in this category. Other successful employee skill-based volunteer programs, however, make up for their employees not having such consultancy skills by developing robust structures that guide employee volunteers toward success. For example, the Taproot Foundation helps its teams of employees successfully complete marketing projects for nonprofit organizations by providing them a manual that instructs them on the activities week by week, including details such as the recommended agenda for each client meeting. Similarly, Xerox' F.I.R.S.T. program, which uses employees' vast science and technical knowledge to mentor student teams competing in national robotics competitions, provides employees complete kits to support them in this endeavor.

Financial Resources

Almost any employee skill-based volunteer project requires certain expenditures for its success. For example, the success of a project might depend on being able to provide the nonprofit organization a software product, have a nonprofit staff member attend training or rent a facility for an event. The benefiting nonprofit organization cannot be expected to cover such costs, especially if it is a small community-based organization. Thus, the most successful employee skill-based volunteer programs budget for incidental expenses and even encourage employee volunteers to expend company resources if this will augment the success of the project or the ease with which it is implemented.

Process and Outcome Evaluation

As this paper makes clear, employee skill-based volunteering is a nascent field. This list of success factors notwithstanding, the elements of a successful employee skill-based volunteer program are still ill-defined. Given the limitations of current knowledge, an evaluation-informed feedback loop is essential for an employee skill-based program to identify its path to success. A program's evaluation should cover operations and nonprofit partner and

employee satisfaction (process evaluation), as well as the type and magnitude of changes in employees and the nonprofit organizations (outcome evaluation).

CONCLUSIONS

Employee skill-based volunteering is a nascent practice that has yet to be rigorously assessed in terms of its ability to effect meaningful change in its nonprofit beneficiaries and the causes they serve, and in terms of employee volunteer skill development. Nevertheless, there is reason to expect that employee skill-based volunteering positively affects both nonprofit partners and participating employees. Research in the nonprofit sector suggests that the sector would benefit greatly from an infusion of skilled volunteers. Similarly, a solid theoretical foundation based on adult learner theory and service learning research supports the claim that employee skill-based volunteering develops workplace skills. Further corroboration of the apparent value of employee skill-based volunteering comes from the experience of pioneering companies that have developed thoughtful employee skill-based volunteer programs. In sum, employee skill based volunteering appears to hold promise as a win-win corporate-community involvement strategy. Companies seeking increased sophistication in their community involvement and willing to accept the risks and responsibilities inherent in blazing new paths might greatly benefit from an employee skill-based volunteer program.

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