
Companies are from Mars; Nonprofits are from Venus

Companies -- from the *Fortune* 500 to small local firms -- are investing in programs that support their employees' community activities, greatly increasing the pool of talented volunteers ready to serve community needs.

This should be terrific news for agency directors and volunteer resources managers. Yet many nonprofits find it very difficult to tap into this expanding resource. Could it be a communication and expectation gap? Are "*companies from Mars and nonprofits from Venus*" when it comes to figuring out how to best involve employee volunteers?

The Root of the Issue

Imagine you come into your agency's office on a Monday morning, get a knock on the door, and find there are 30 employees from XYZ Widget Corporation outside ready to "volunteer for the day." Never happens? Right!

While this may be an extreme example, most nonprofits are challenged to integrate groups of employee volunteers into their programs.

One reason for this is that workplace volunteer managers -- like the person at XYZ Widget Corporation who called you to set up the project -- have their own organizational imperatives. Their bosses are looking for outcomes -- a "return on investment" (ROI) for the resources (time, people, dollars, "stuff") put into their workplace volunteer program. Those desired outcomes might not align with yours.

After all, your ROI measure is pretty straightforward: How well you deliver on your agency's mission. To be honest, while business volunteer managers certainly want to help you succeed with your mission, their ROI for workplace volunteering is not solely about that.

The Business Case for Workplace Volunteering

What are companies after? Research from several sources, including the Points of Light Foundation, points to the following as key reasons why companies invest in workplace volunteerism:

- They want to "do good" for their community.
- It fits the company's traditions and values.
- It improves reputation and image.

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- It is important to customers that the company demonstrates “good citizenship.”
 - It helps recruit/retain employees.
 - It helps build employee morale and job satisfaction.
 - It helps build teams among diverse employees.
 - It allows employees to develop new skills that are useful in their “real job.”

Note that none of these is mission specific. In every community, there are many nonprofit agencies that a company’s workplace volunteer or community relations manager can direct their employees to gain these outcomes.

How, then, can you get your piece of the workplace volunteering pie?

Meeting Expectations - From Both Sides

The first thing to decide is whether dealing with organized workplace volunteer programs is worth the effort. All nonprofits have staff and budget constraints, and dealing with company volunteers can be more time intensive than other volunteer groups. Most nonprofits have a small staff and/or limits on the kinds of casual volunteers you can use. For example, do most volunteer positions require specialized training to work with your client population or are the positions only available during the workday? Perhaps a direct connection with corporate programs is not an efficient way to get additional volunteer resources.

So, step one: Take an honest look at the plusses and minuses.

- Can you get some things done that will advance your mission and that otherwise wouldn’t happen or would be delayed?
- Does your staff buy into the need and the solution?
- Is there someone on your side to manage and direct the effort? (This is a very vital element!)
- Are you positive it won’t divert your team from other mission-critical activities?

There’s no harm if this review comes out negative. In fact, you now have good rationale for a polite “thanks, but no thanks” if that XYZ Widget Corporation volunteer manager calls, rather than giving what may sound like a knee-jerk “no,” or worse, getting into a project that fails.

That doesn’t mean you should ignore corporate volunteer resources totally, however. Many companies post volunteer opportunities on their bulletin boards or in employee newsletters. They may link their internal employee website to community resources, such as the local

volunteer center's volunteer matching pages. These and other avenues can be very helpful to advertise your mission and volunteer opportunities, and to add to your cadre of individual volunteers.

Another opportunity comes from knowing for whom your current volunteers work. Many companies have "dollars-for-doers" or other programs that provide monetary grants based on an individual employee's volunteer activity -- \$100 for 20 hours of volunteering at a single agency, for example -- or they match employee donations. If you know where volunteers are employed, you can ask the companies if they have such programs. (Employees often don't know. Just by asking them to find out, they -- and you -- may get a positive surprise.) You may even discover that Peter, Latisha and Jose, three stalwart volunteers, work for the same company in different locations -- but they don't know each other. Make that connection and they may work together to get others from their company involved.

Getting to Success

Let's suppose, however, that your review gets to "yes," and it does look worthwhile to formally engage with workplace volunteer programs. How do you go about it?

A good place to begin is to evaluate your capabilities and requirements against the potential ROI needs of the company program.

- What tasks/jobs do you have that are good for done-in-a-day teambuilding? (e.g., facilities work, painting, garden planting). A great time to do this is when planning your annual facility maintenance program. One executive director told me she keeps "a number of projects in a drawer," all planned and ready to go should she get a call from a group looking for "something to do."
- Can you provide a company's IT department "training opportunities" for a group of new hires by having them help you with your website or volunteer database? Or find other tasks that will use the professional skills of employee volunteers?
- Do your client services offer opportunity for casual, rather than ongoing, volunteerism by groups of employees? (For example, helping host or chaperone a holiday party or taking over an entire shift serving meals at a community center.)
- Consider schedule. Do you have opportunities in the evening or on weekends? Or can you "bring the volunteering to the workplace?" (Such as a project that a group of employees can do during lunch in the company cafeteria. This eliminates the need for travel and time away from the job during the week.)

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- Can you create “family oriented” volunteer projects so that employees who work long hours can bring spouses and children to volunteer with them?

Targeting potential companies whose business interests align with your mission is another good step. Many companies concentrate their efforts, and it won't make sense for your agency to bang on a door that is not likely to open for you. For example:

- Pharmaceutical companies are often most interested in health-related projects for their employees.
- When Tyco Corporation moved into its new headquarters in Princeton, New Jersey, they identified “housing” as a key community need that fits nicely with the company's product scope. The result is that most of Tyco's employee volunteers, and company grants, are directed to housing-related nonprofits.
- GE (where I directed the global employee volunteer program) emphasizes education, the environment and children's services. It is neutral to negative on support for the arts.

Company websites are a great source to learn about a company's volunteer program and grant criteria so you can tailor your pitch to their interests.

But what if you don't have time to research area companies and still want to get involved with workplace volunteers? List projects with your local volunteer center and use their contacts and knowledge of area companies. Many companies look for projects to get employees involved as part of their United Way solicitation campaign, so timing may be key. Link also to the “seasons of service” calendar of sponsored events throughout the year that seek to engage volunteers, such as Martin Luther King Day (January), National Volunteer Week (April), Join Hands Day (May) and Make a Difference Day (October). These have built in publicity and organization behind them that often attract corporate participation and make it easier to find a match.

Managing the Process

At the end of the day, though, successful agencies know that engaging workplace volunteers needs to be a managed process based on open communication and a spirit of partnership. On the often-winding road to success, these steps are key:

1. Set your organizational goals. Know what you have to offer and what you want to get from a company relationship. Know, too, the limits of your capabilities so you don't

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- get into more than you can handle.
2. Make contact with an interested company, either directly or through an intermediary like a volunteer center or the Corporate Volunteer Council. Think early about building a long-term relationship, not just about the one-time transaction.
 3. Know who on your staff is going to manage the relationship. And, just as important, who at the company will champion your needs within their organization.
 4. Align your goals and the company's. Be sure the expected ROI is attainable and fair to both sides.
 5. Agree on scope, schedule, budget, etc. What is the time frame? What will the volunteers do? How many will be needed? Who pays for what?
 6. Reach agreement IN WRITING. This doesn't mean a formal contract. No nonprofit should have to get caught up in the bureaucracy of a corporate legal structure. But an exchange of letters (emails) of understanding signed by both the agency and company lead representative will verify that the project outline discussed in meetings or on the phone is understood by both sides.
 7. Plan, plan, plan... and plan some more. Do it jointly with the company. Don't let them off the hook. Getting to the details is vital. Sophisticated company volunteer programs will assign a "project manager" to work with you. This may be different from the champion working on the general outline. If they don't, ask them to. The bigger the project, the more important the project manager is. They will be the liaison with company volunteers, help acquire resources (e.g., extra tools, lunch for the volunteers) and secure agreed-upon financial support. They should also be on site to direct the company resources.
 8. Include an introduction to your agency in the project. Provide information about your agency's vision, mission and services. Provide a tour if appropriate. Each satisfied volunteer is a new PR person in the community.
 9. Implement the project -- the proof of good planning is a plan that works!
 10. The day after? Sorry, you are not done yet! Measure the results against the ROI goals and the specifics of the plan. Did the work get done to satisfaction? Did the volunteers enjoy the experience? Did the agency get value from the project? Did the company? This again should be done jointly between agency and company representatives. It is vital that assessments be honest and open about the bad as well as the good.
 11. Celebrate your success. This can be as simple as a pizza party at the end of the

project or a thank you letter to the CEO. Creativity can bring dividends, and build the relationship for the future. Can you “bake a cake” for the volunteers, deliver it to the company workplace and present it in a public ceremony? That gives the volunteers recognition in front of their peers, gets the message about your mission to a broader employee population, and helps the volunteer manager recruit more employees to participate next time. Did you or the company take video or photos? Can you make a display board for the company lobby?

12. Finally, don't forget publicity. Some nonprofits are shy. Very few companies are. While there can be tension about a company putting out a press release that appears to exploit their volunteer efforts just for PR purposes (we call this the “gee what a great company we are” press release), there are many ways to give appropriate positive credit to all involved, and at the same time get your message across about mission and service. Often the company partner will have an internal PR team or outside agency that can do the work.

Is all this worth the effort? Remember the saying: “From little acorns come mighty oaks?” Many times, a long-term relationship between an agency and a company starts with a single-day event. Success breeds success, and soon you've formed a vital partnership that provides access to a host of company resources:

- Professionals in a variety of functions to help you build your organization's capacity to serve;
- Committed long-term volunteers who got a taste of your mission by, for example, painting your walls, and stayed to serve your clientele;
- Potential board members and grant opportunities;

· Contacts to other area businesses.

Workplace volunteering is a growth industry. It's time to start cultivating your own place in this effort!