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Is corporate volunteering falling short?

AUSTRALIAN companies are spending millions of dollars developing corporate volunteering programs for their staff. While volunteering initiatives can be good for staff morale, are they succeeding in their aims of having an impact in the community? DRANNIE DUNCAN and KATHY RICHARDSON look at some of the issues facing major companies in coming up with a scheme that does as much for the community as it does for the company.

Ever since the Body Shop began a trend of paying staff to help out at a local charity more and more companies have decided that sending volunteers into the community is a great idea.

All over Australia business staff are switching off their computers, swapping suits for brightly coloured T-shirts and boarding buses destined for the local homeless shelter, or park, or school, to dole out soup, plant trees, or take up paintbrushes.

It is an activity that is often described as a “win-win-win” – with benefits flowing to the staff involved, the business who employs them and the community group who hosts their volunteer effort.

And it is one that has been steadily growing in popularity since the 1990s.

Volunteering Australia says corporate volunteering is one of the most effective forms of Corporate Social Responsibility, involving the contribution to a community group of time, talent, energy, skills and resources.

“Prosperous companies need stable, healthy communities in which to operate. Corporations also recognise that volunteers play a key role in developing and maintaining these healthy communities,” Volunteering Australia says.

In the US – the home of corporate philanthropy – corporate volunteering has become extremely widespread, particularly among the country’s biggest companies.

While the exact number of corporate volunteering programs in the US is difficult to come by, a 2003 study found that 47 of the Fortune 50 companies mentioned on their websites, in one fashion or another, the volunteer activities of their employees.

The US Points of Light Foundation, an organisation set up to encourage more people to take part in volunteer community service, says corporate volunteering has become “central to the corporate philanthropy missions of a growing number of companies of various sizes around the world”.

Yet despite the potential that seems to be offered by such activities very little research has been conducted on the phenomenon.

As a result, the Points of Light Foundation points out, there are no basic measures of

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success relating to corporate volunteering programs, and little ability to compare one program with another.

“Yet, despite this, employee volunteering programs are flourishing and most companies are eager to associate themselves with this sort of activity,” the foundation says.

Business leaders, who in all other aspects of their working lives demand to deal in evidence and facts, are, it would seem, going with their gut on this one; and they may not be getting it right.

The win-win-win

There is no denying that at their best, corporate volunteering programs provide manifold benefits for all concerned.

In the win-win-win equation, according to Volunteering Australia, staff members benefit from a sense of personal satisfaction and fulfillment, new learning experiences and pathways to community involvement, interaction with people from other areas within the company, and opportunities to meet new people and explore new situations and challenges.

Indeed, some studies have found that volunteering may even contribute to better health, with the “helper’s high” that results from a release of endorphins believed to give the immune system a boost, speed recovery from surgery and cut down on sleeplessness.

The outlook is similarly healthy for companies that put in place employee volunteer programs.

Like other Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives, volunteer programs help companies portray a more positive corporate image, create heightened and positive recognition by customers and consumers, new business opportunities, a transformed relationship between the company and the local community, and an improved triple bottom line.

Volunteering Australia says such programs can also help to create among staff an increased pride in and loyalty to the company, better employee attendance, recruitment and retention, improved staff morale, motivation, team spirit and initiative, enhanced workplace relationships, and new skill development.

For the community, employee volunteering programs can result in transferal of skills, knowledge and technical expertise, access to teams of volunteers for major tasks and free or subsidised resources, improved understanding between the business and not-for-profit sectors, and increased public awareness of community issues.

Volunteering Australia says such programs can also help to change the business behaviours and practices that create social, economic and environmental problems and create new income streams for community programs.

[csr in action]

Company:

Collex & McDonald’s

Non-Profit partner:

Clean Up Australia

Activity:

Sponsorship of Clean Up Australia Day, held each year in March. This year’s resulted in over 670,000 volunteers removed more than 8,450 tonnes of rubbish from our beaches, parks, streets, bushland and waterways.

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Avoiding the “Pat a poor person” approach

What is not spelled out in the various reports, websites and other promotional material that champion the benefits of corporate volunteering programs is that if they are not done properly, they can have little impact or – worse – can actually do harm to the very groups they are trying to serve.

A badly conceived, poorly run or tokenistic program can soak up an organisation’s already meagre resources, alienate the company from both its community group partner and its consumers, and leave a bitter taste in the mouths of the very staff the business may be trying to win over.

The most fundamental failure of a corporate volunteering program occurs when businesses give lots of what the groups don’t need and little of what they want.

As one school teacher commented to Business Community Intelligence, “Our school’s been painted so many times I can’t remember what colour it’s supposed to be. I’d much rather companies gave us what we need: expertise, mentoring and resources.”

Problems such as these are far from new.

Seven years ago New Zealander Darren Quirk, investigating the potential way forward for corporate volunteering in his country as part of a Winston Churchill Fellowship, said the imbalance of resources available to business and community groups could cause imbalanced partnerships.

“This can result in businesses perceiving themselves to be the saviours of ‘helpless’ community groups,” Quirk’s report said.

“This outlook, although philanthropic, is patronising. It can result in arrogance where businesses bring their understanding of what is needed, ignoring the knowledge and desires of the community.”

While a one-day painting or tree planting project might well fulfill the business’ aims of boosting morale and encouraging team building, many community groups believe that a lot more value can be derived from deeper and longer-term commitments.

“There are some companies that almost have a ‘pat a poor person’ approach to their volunteering,” said one community group leader who has experienced a number of visits from good-hearted and well-meaning corporates.

“They come out, see the need and suddenly feel this incredible sense of guilt. But their response is they want to do something immediately, often either writing a cheque or sending their staff as volunteers for a day. Once that is done the guilt is eased, problem fixed and they move on.

[csr in action]

Companies:

Ten, Shaver Shop

Non-Profit partner:

Leukaemia Foundation

Activity:

Sponsorship of the World’s Greatest Shave to Care and Cure, in which people ask their friends and family to sponsor them to shave or colour their hair. Money raised helps the foundation care for patients and families living with leukaemia and fund research into better treatments and cures for the future.

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“Cash or volunteering is great but ongoing involvement – a real connection – is what we really want. I would rather have one of their young lawyers express their community passion by sitting on my Board where I could have access to their knowledge and guidance on an ongoing basis.

“I can find people to paint or clean but I can’t find someone I can turn to for legal advice or to work out my books.”

Quirk points to a project involving a large company that built a hall in a depressed area as one example of a high-profile corporate activity that went very wrong.

“Without buy-in of the community and without reading their needs the facility has fallen into disuse,” he says.

Consulting the volunteers

Other serious problems can result when companies adopt a top-down or heavy-handed approach to their corporate volunteering programs.

Case Study: Australia Post

Not all good corporate volunteering programs involve paying staff to volunteer. Australia Post’s new volunteer encouragement scheme brings rewards for staff who have already built the volunteering ethos into their lives.

Australia Post has developed a new scheme to reward employees who volunteer consistently for more than a year at the charity of their choice.

The Australia Post Community Champions Awards were launched in January, with monthly winners receiving \$1000 for the charity of their choice plus a \$100 gift voucher for themselves.

The company is using the program to thank staff who have built volunteering into their busy lives, and to encourage others to do the same.

The great response to the program – more than 90 applications were received for the first selection process – has delighted organiser Janice Mascini.

The first winner, Shirley Freeman, has spent more than 30 years working in virtually every community group in her tiny Tasmanian town of Avoca. Her \$1000 reward is going to Camp Quality.

For further information contact: Janice.Mascini@auspost.com.au

[csr in action]

Companies:

Foster’s Group

Non-Profit partner:

The Alannah and Madeline Foundation

Activity:

Supported the foundation’s first public appeal, which included creating a portal page on the company’s intranet with details of the charity and the three-week appeal, and conducting weekly fundraising activities.

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As many studies – and many staff – have pointed out, it is hardly “volunteering” when employees are told what to do and when to do it.

Worse is when the business’ involvement is perceived as little more than a public relations exercise.

“Staff will not tend to choose to be part of programs that are just about making the company look good. And this disinterest can easily turn into resentment,” Quirk says.

Volunteering Australia is also keen to point out that the buy-in of staff is an often neglected but crucial aspect of corporate volunteering programs.

The organisation urges businesses thinking of establishing an employee volunteer program to put in place processes for encouraging staff to identify their own volunteering opportunities and getting team consensus on the type of volunteer work staff would like to do.

“Volunteers rarely return to volunteer work if their initial experience has not been positive,” the organisation says.

Case Study: Adidem

Not all of the causes chosen by Adidem staff for their voluntary efforts are high-profile; it’s all about getting staff involved and making a real contribution to the communities in which the companies operate.

In Australia the Adidem Group operates retail chains The Body Shop (70 stores) and Accessorize (18 stores).

The Adidem Group’s Community Projects Program requires staff, as part of their paid working hours, to participate in community volunteer work.

The objective of the program is to make an effective and real contribution to the communities in which the companies operate, as well as creating stakeholder fulfilment by empowering staff to become active citizens.

In 2004 The Adidem Group volunteered 7216 hours (159 working days / 31 working weeks).

Some community projects chosen by staff are not high-profile and need all the volunteers they can find.

One such project is the Mercy Care Women’s refuge, where Adidem staff have used their retailing experience to sort donated clothing and make up age-appropriate packs for women and children.



[csr in action]

Companies:

AGL

Non-Profit partner:

UnitingCare

Activity:

Sponsorship of Pancake Day, UnitingCare’s only national fundraiser, which aims to help alleviate poverty.

The company made a \$50,000 donation and AGL staff raised a further \$8000 holding their own Pancake Day events across Australia.

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Volunteers also made meals, which could be frozen and reheated for women and children who arrived unannounced and hungry at the refuge.

This service reduced the costs for the refuge, and gave the women and children the opportunity to have a healthy, comforting home-cooked meal.

As one staff member who volunteered at the Mercy Women's Refuge said: "This is the best project I've ever been involved with. I completed my full number of hours and now I want to do more in my own time".

Other volunteering activities undertaken by Adidem employees include:

- Teaching English to refugee children
- Talking to teenage girls about healthy self-esteem and doing facials
- Providing administration for The Big Issue, visiting and chatting with vendors, magazine delivery and front desk support
- Pamper sessions for different women's and men's groups
- Working with the RSPCA washing and cleaning animals, and learning and teaching obedience training
- Delivering meals for Meals on Wheels programs
- Planting 10,000 native trees with Greenfleet
- Walking dogs for elderly and disabled people
- Working with the Good Start Breakfast Club in local schools setting up breakfast facilities, helping children make breakfast, encouraging children to eat a healthy breakfast
- Working in the Salvation Army Opportunity Shop, assisting with merchandising
- Clean up Business Day and Clean Up Australia Day
- Providing assistance with training, development and administration for Women's Referral Information Exchange (WIRE)
- Preparing sandwiches and soup for the homeless.

Building a solid foundation

If the concept of a staff-business partnership is fundamental to a successful employee volunteering program, so too is the notion of a partnership between the business (and its volunteers) and the community group they are hoping to help.

It is in this area particularly that so many well-meaning companies come unstuck.

[csr in action]

Companies:

Foster's Group

Non-Profit

partner: The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne

Activity:

Supported the hospital's Good Friday Appeal by providing beverages to the team of volunteers as they finished their day at the central collection location.

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It is possible and even probable that a volunteering program that involves staff downing business tools for a day to plant or paint or prepare food for a soup kitchen will achieve a company's team-building objectives.

However, if a company wants to make a truly lasting connection with and contribution to their community, much more can be achieved by recognising and harnessing the often expensive skills of employees and using them to work with strapped-for-cash community groups.

goodcompany, an Australian organisation that aims to encourage volunteerism among young professionals by linking members with community groups, has recognised the valuable contribution that can be made when professional skills are put to use in a voluntary capacity.

"It is often difficult for community groups to find skilled individuals who can help in a variety of ways," the organisation says.

"The goodcompany program can help community groups save money that would otherwise have been spent on fees for services ... Skilled professional assistance allows a community group to focus on what they do best – typically, helping the community in their own unique way."

goodcompany lists on its website dozens of examples of groups that have benefited from this type of very valuable volunteering, with community groups receiving a range of accounting, finance, business, fundraising, graphic design, IT, media, PR, publishing, marketing and legal help and advice.

The new Melbourne CARES program aims to facilitate similar linkages between volunteers with business skills and community groups needing such expertise.

Getting on Board

Other organisations [including publisher of this newsletter Our Community] are urging businesses to swap or combine their more traditional employee volunteering programs with a "Business on Boards" approach – encouraging and helping staff to serve on not-for-profit governance structures.

Such service helps individuals and their employer companies to build up a meaningful, ongoing and useful relationship with community groups, many of which struggle to fill Board and Committee vacancies and to attract the business and strategic skills they need to survive in today's tough environment.

The trend for corporate volunteering programs to encourage professionals to sit on Boards has its roots in the US.

As Quirk notes, "In many US corporations service on external Boards is already a virtual requirement for executives seeking promotion to the highest levels."

[csr in action]

Companies:

Caltex

Non-Profit

partner: *Starlight Children's Foundation*

Activity:

On-pack promotion for Star Day, the foundation's major national fundraising event; \$1 from every special edition Starlight pack of Havoline Premium Motor oil purchased at participating Caltex outlets was donated to the foundation.

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The trend may well take a stronger hold in Australia as time goes on.

Indeed, the goodcompany website already lists Board members, particularly those with law, business development, finance and marketing skills, among the top requests for assistance from community groups.

Case Study: IBM

The expensive skills of IBM staff are put to good use in the global computer company's employee volunteering program.

IBM's global program of community engagement, IBM On Demand Community, encourages and sustains volunteerism by arming employees with technology tools targeted to not-for-profit community organisations and schools.

The program includes grants, discounted IBM products, mentoring and volunteering of computer expertise.

In Australia, the principal expression of the program is through IBM MentorPlace, a program involving IBM employees volunteering their time to mentor school students, providing advice and guidance.

The "e-mentoring" program is designed to provide an opportunity for students to gain real insight into the business community and increase their confidence about future career options.

"Our research shows that as much as communities appreciate donations of money and equipment, local agencies and schools are most interested in receiving volunteers who can share their skills and intellectual capital," says IBM Vice President of Corporate Community Relations Stanley Litow.

To assist staff with their community volunteering, IBM has made available support materials including state-of-the-art online presentations, videos, reference materials and software.

Victorian and NSW IBM mentors and primary and secondary students initially meet in person at IBM locations, enabling students to experience a "real" workplace.

Students and mentors then begin communicating online through a series of projects and activities. Initially, this involves getting to know each other, moving on to topics such as leadership, careers, inventions and technology's role in society.

The program usually lasts for two terms. ▶

[csr in action]

Companies:

National Australia Bank

Non-Profit partner:

The Australian Ballet

Activity:

Lead sponsor of The Australian Ballet and, as a part of the three-year arrangement, will also be the major sponsor of the national education program to promote ballet through classes and workshops across metropolitan and regional Australia. (announced in March).

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Computer Expertise

IBM also donates hardware and technical expertise to community organisations and schools.

Technicians work with the organisation to assess its current computer situation, plan its technology needs, upgrade software and train staff. Some organisations are also eligible for grants or discounts on computers.

Many IBM employees set up a long-term individual partnership with a school or community group, working with them to access all the available grants and types of assistance IBM can offer.

“No company can mandate volunteerism,” says IBM Chairman Sam Palmisano.

“The decision and self-sacrifice comes from within the individual. What we can do is encourage and support this distinctive aspect of our culture by providing education, technology, funding and recognition to tens of thousands of IBM colleagues who enrich their communities with their expertise and caring.”

Further information about IBM's On Demand Community and other partnership programs can be found at: <http://www.ibm.com/ibm/ibmgives/>

Making it real

Despite a growing trend, identified in a range of studies around the world, towards one-off or annual, rather than ongoing, volunteering efforts few would argue against the notion that a real commitment requires a genuine allocation of resources, particularly time.

In the end, it is about creating partnerships – between the company and its staff, and between the company, its staff and the community group it is volunteering to help.

And a true partnership, Quirk says, involves working “with” rather than “on” the community.

“Companies with good community involvement practice respect the autonomy, knowledge and expertise of their community partner,” he says.

“These businesses make a sincere attempt to understand the issues of the group and work alongside them. They agree on the objectives, priorities, and methods to implement them. They consider themselves as equal partners.”

Only by pursuing such a partnership can a corporate volunteering program truly become a “win-win-win”. ■

[csr in action]

Companies:

St George Bank

Non-Profit partner:

The Children's Hospital
at Westmead

Activity:

Sponsorship of a
book: "The Complete
Parenting Guide
– Caring for your
child from toddler to
teenager."