

# How Volunteerism Enhances Workplace Skills

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The idea of fostering learning through service is surprisingly controversial. Employers should plan carefully.



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Attract and retain top talent, boost morale, build brand awareness, give back to the community — these are among the most common reasons companies support employee volunteering, often through flexible scheduling or paid time off.<sup>1</sup> But a new rationale is emerging: If managed appropriately, volunteer work for a charitable cause can help employees develop valuable capabilities that can be put to use at work.

*Skills-based volunteering* is a rapidly growing channel through which businesses engage in corporate citizenship.<sup>2</sup> Traditional volunteer activities (serving people at a soup kitchen, for instance, or planting trees) tend to leverage general competencies. Skills-based volunteering, on the other hand, involves applying job-related expertise in specialized areas such as marketing, project management,

and IT and often enables participants to acquire new skills along the way.

Employers have begun to view skills-based volunteering as a “win-win-win” opportunity for all parties involved — the nonprofit, the employer, and the volunteer. Nonprofits clearly gain from the infusion of material and intellectual resources to help them achieve their missions. Companies benefit from the follow-on effects of greater employee engagement in terms of individual and organizational performance.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as HR departments are exploring the potential for volunteering to complement training, the lines between corporate social responsibility and talent development are beginning to blur.<sup>4</sup>

Several studies have found that there are positive outcomes for the volunteers, too (although research that focuses on skills-based volunteering is sparse). For instance, when employees frequently apply their professional skills, they find their volunteer assignments more valuable and report higher levels of skill development.<sup>5</sup> And when they acquire new skills, they feel they are more likely to succeed in their jobs.<sup>6</sup> The inverse appears to be true as well: When employees do not learn from volunteering, their job performance actually suffers.<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, though, declaring skills-based volunteering to be a clear win-win-win is overly simplistic. Despite the positive implications overall for talent development, this body of research does not shed light on how people respond when

their organization explicitly positions volunteering as a way to develop or acquire skills. But such positioning matters. Since employees can, depending on their outlooks, either embrace or derail corporate programs, we decided to examine their responses to employers' efforts and messaging around volunteering.

Our early findings show that skills-based volunteering programs can backfire if employees believe that profiting — in this case, through improved employee performance — is the real aim. The very notion of skills-based volunteering may, at least for some, undermine the purpose of volunteering: to give, not to gain.

We spent one year investigating two companies that deliberately folded volunteering into learning and development initiatives. Both had clear policies and internal marketing campaigns that stressed the link between volunteering and skill development, and employees were encouraged to note their volunteering efforts in their performance reviews. Alongside our observations and informal discussions with managers and with employees who were volunteering, we conducted interviews with the corporate relations teams, facilitated focus groups, and interviewed volunteers across different geographic locations.

The responses to our questions about developing skills through volunteering were surprising. Although prior survey-based research has found a correlation between skill development and positive impressions of volunteer activities, in our qualitative investigation, employees did not naturally make the connection on their own.<sup>8</sup> In fact, many admitted that they had never thought about learning from volunteering before. For about two-thirds of our interviewees, the interview process itself helped them identify and articulate how and what they had learned.

Even more surprisingly, the remaining third of our interviewees responded defensively or expressed outright anger at the suggestion that volunteering could be used for personal or employer gain. These volunteers were enraged by the idea that volunteering could be anything more than giving back to the community and refused to view it as an opportunity to develop skills.

What explains the difference in responses? Our analysis

suggests that it depends on how people interpret their employers' motives. We'll discuss why in more detail — but first, let's take a closer look at each type of response.

## When Giving Back Turns to Blowback

The interviewees who had the most extreme responses got angry when asked whether they had gained skills from volunteering. One volunteer was adamant that volunteering and skill development should be “completely separate” and snapped, “OK, I'm going to throw that back at you. ... How would you answer that question?” In a sharp tone, he insisted, “I wanted to volunteer purely to offer my own personal assistance,” and he accused management of being immoral for suggesting that volunteering is a route to skill development. Another volunteer asserted that the motive for volunteering should be altruism and that “adulation from your manager or department ... is totally irrelevant.”

These volunteers displayed what anthropologist Ward Goodenough would have called *moral outrage*: anger, disgust, or frustration directed toward those perceived to have violated one's ethical standards.<sup>9</sup> It seems that this response surged in some of our volunteers because they felt that our question challenged their moral identity and integrity: They questioned how the business could think that their work with charities was motivated by anything but a desire to help others. One volunteer who said, “[I want to] make my point very clear,” stated, “For me, it's about putting into the community; it's not enough to say, ‘Well, I am going to put into the community if I get something back out of it.’” Although these volunteers found their experiences meaningful and important, many said they were insulted by the suggestion that they or their companies could gain from volunteering. They happily donated their skills but were aghast at the thought of developing new ones in the process. With a raised voice, one volunteer argued, “It's not about developing me as a person for the benefit of my company; it is about using my skills to give back to the community.” We found that moral outrage was strongly associated with outright rejection of the idea that learning could, did, or would take place.

Others made comments that amounted to what behavioral scientist Chris Argyris would have called *defensive routines*: actions or responses designed to avoid threat. As Argyris pointed out, defensive routines prevent learning because they inhibit reflection, stop conversations short, and deflect attention from a perceived attack.<sup>10</sup> “Oh, that’s interesting,” is one example that came up repeatedly in our interviews. Others included “Right, OK,” “It could be a good idea,” and “Aha.” Such replies, coupled with defensive body language (crossed arms and body shifts to the sides of chairs), signaled indifference, filled in the blank spaces of a conversation without supplying substance, and ultimately shut down the discussion. When probed about learning from the experience, many volunteers refused to engage and simply reiterated their personal moral motive: “You don’t volunteer for the benefits for you.”

We were taken aback by the outraged and defensive responses. Even though prior research indicates that most volunteers appreciate opportunities to apply and develop skills, and the organizations we studied had an explicit goal to increase skills-based volunteering, this subset of volunteers adamantly denied that they engaged in volunteering to develop skills. Despite our best efforts to assuage their frustration and our apologies that our line of questioning had elicited negative emotions, they left the interviews discouraged at best and incensed at worst.

## Making Sense of Learning From Volunteering

Now let’s consider the approximately two-thirds of volunteers who responded with curiosity rather than hostility or defensiveness. For instance, one stated, “I have never thought about volunteering as me learning something; volunteering, in my mind, is always like giving up my time to help others.” At least initially, many volunteers did not focus on the fact that activities such as participating in mentorship opportunities, delivering job preparation workshops, or serving on a nonprofit organization’s board enabled them to leverage their existing skill sets or gain new ones.

As the interviews progressed, though, we noticed that these volunteers embarked on a sensemaking journey.<sup>11</sup> They

reflected on their experiences, rationalized their activities, connected the dots between volunteering and learning, and acknowledged that volunteering had changed their behavior at work. Sensemaking is critical for learning; research shows that people who don’t deliberately process their experiences are much less likely to learn from them.<sup>12</sup> Our respondents noted how the interview process aided their sensemaking. One pointed out, “I think that just talking to you, what I am realizing is that we are doing this volunteering and most people participating probably aren’t understanding what they are learning from it, including myself.”

Once interviewees started to make sense of their experiences, they were able to articulate how and what they had learned. Take, for example, a business manager who discussed his volunteer experience as chair of a nonprofit group that supports vulnerable youth who are called to legal hearings. “Absolutely, volunteering has given me skills to bring into the organization. I think the biggest skill is facilitation,” he said, noting that he has grown by “developing empathy and [an] understanding of other people’s circumstances and bringing that to my day-to-day role.”

Many volunteers emphasized the acquisition of soft skills, such as resilience, leadership, and team building, rather than technical skills. For instance, an HR manager who volunteers in a mentorship program for young entrepreneurs commented that seeing progress in her mentee “has given me confidence that my advice and skill set [are] helpful.” She acknowledged that “volunteering makes you a much more compassionate person” and that as she gets older, “it becomes much more important to flex those skill sets.” Developing soft skills is an important benefit to identify, because such skills are hard to teach in a training environment and transfer into practice — and leadership skills in particular are more likely to be acquired through action and reflection.<sup>13</sup>

Sensemaking not only enables learning but also prompts individuals to *springboard into action* and ask, “What now?”<sup>14</sup> We found that volunteers discussed the potential to gain and share skills in ways that they had not considered before. For instance, a customer service analyst, who volunteers as an event facilitator (selling tickets, distributing

flyers, and orienting guests) for a children’s hospital, felt that her business skills were underutilized. She stated, “I think some skills-based volunteering would be really rewarding. ... I think that would be really good, actually, to do something like that.” She mentioned that she would look for opportunities to volunteer as a mentor to “help somebody in Excel skills ... which is stuff that I do day in and day out.” She thought that mentorship could also develop her people-management skills by providing her with opportunities to appreciate different learning styles and to practice communicating clearly. Once interviewees had made sense of skills-based volunteering, many suggested that they would seek, as one put it, “volunteering that fits in with what I want to give and gain.”

## Employers’ Motives Matter

What explains the wildly different responses to our questions about learning and development? They seemed to hinge on how people interpreted their employers’ motives.

Volunteers who were morally outraged at the suggestion that they could learn from skills-based volunteering were, on the whole, also suspicious of their company’s reasons for supporting it. Some laughed at the thought that their company might have altruistic intentions. One volunteer commented that “the company looking good” was the real purpose; another sneered, “Everybody goes, ‘Oh, look at my company, aren’t they great?’” Negative impressions seemed to be reinforced by line managers who consider volunteering “a cop-out of doing work” and who hold the “perception that it actually takes people away from what they should be doing.” Volunteers pointed out that their line managers failed to model volunteering as well. As one bluntly put it, “I don’t see the managers volunteering, so no, I don’t [see how this develops me].”

Most interviewees who eventually came to see volunteering as a route to skill development believed in their employers’ altruistic intent. One observed: “The firm’s heart is actually in this.” Another noted, “It’s about values; it’s about doing the right thing.” Several mentioned the importance of senior leader support: “It’s leadership, it’s culture, it’s infectious ... and if the right advocacy is there at the right level, I have no doubt that it infiltrates in a positive way.” Many volunteers

shared stories about such advocacy, often in the form of their line manager allowing them to take time off. One employee even took time out of work to volunteer on a monthly basis.

Attribution theory tells us that people are compelled to determine why others do what they do — in other words, to attribute causes to behavior — and that their interpretation of others’ behavior informs their responses.<sup>15</sup> So it makes sense that volunteers responded differently depending on how they perceived their employers’ motives. Since managers are often seen as embodying the organization, employees whose managers supported their volunteering were inclined to believe that their companies were altruistic, which resonated with their own moral identity. Employees whose managers were unsupportive tended to believe that their companies’ intentions were exploitative, leading to cynicism and a rejection of the idea that volunteering can offer opportunities for development.

## How Leaders Can Promote Learning

Our research and analysis suggest that leaders can help their companies optimize the learning and development gains from skills-based volunteering in the following ways.

1. **Clarify the “whys.”** Leaders need to clearly articulate their companies’ reasons for supporting skills-based volunteering. If employees are led to believe that a company’s sole motive is to give back to the community but they later realize that volunteering is noted in their performance appraisals or professional development plans, they may feel that they have been duped. Many volunteers in our study were cynical about their companies’ intentions and thus cognitively blocked any potential link between volunteering and learning. However, volunteering programs can, in principle, meet multiple goals simultaneously, including learning and development *and* supporting an important charitable cause. The key is being transparent about intentions and potential gains. This involves explaining to line managers and employees how skills-based giving can fuel individual growth — and how that growth can enrich future giving as well as enhance work performance.

**2. Facilitate sensemaking.** Leaders need to carve out time for volunteers to reflect on their experiences and help them with that exploration. Volunteers in our study realized only through the interview process, which became a guided sensemaking exercise, that they had developed or gained skills. Many indicated that they came away from the interview with a feeling of greater pride and with goals to further their development through volunteering. Learning and development specialists can organize sensemaking sessions to provide the place and the space to proactively reflect on skill development and consider how it might be applied to other contexts.

**3. Position volunteering at the heart of leadership development programs.** Important soft skills like communication, coaching, and compassion are difficult to master in traditional leadership development formats. Such capabilities are best fostered through stretch assignments and “action-learning projects” that have real consequences, with time for reflection along the way. Partnering with nonprofit organizations to support their missions is one route to assisting the development of executives and aspiring leaders. This possibility is especially promising for organizations that want to tie strategy to sustainability and to integrate core values in HR functions such as training and development. But again, the business must be transparent with employees about the multiple purposes of the leadership program (giving back, developing employee skills, and reinforcing the company’s mission), and participants must be provided with opportunities to make sense of their growth.

Skills-based volunteering offers a way for companies to support employees’ personal and career development while delivering on their corporate social responsibility goals. However, caution must be exercised in how program objectives are communicated. Managers should clarify the multiple gains that can be achieved, and, to optimize learning, they need to provide ample opportunities for employees to reflect on and discuss their experiences.

## About The Authors

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## The Research

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The authors studied two European financial institutions, examining relevant internal documents, attending meetings about volunteering programs, and participating in four workshops with active volunteers.

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They also conducted formal interviews with the companies' corporate relations teams, facilitated six focus groups consisting of 28 volunteers, and interviewed 30 volunteers across four locations (Dublin; London; Cardiff, Wales; and Edinburgh, Scotland).

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They then analyzed the archival, focus group, and interview data for patterns and common themes.

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