

Corporate Shares Community Profits

A guide to engaging your employees

Corporate social responsibility makes good business sense

In today's global business environment, the philosophy driving corporate social responsibility is based on the belief that the social, as well as the economic, wellbeing of society is fundamental to business competitiveness and ultimately, business success.

Companies throughout the world are increasingly promoting the ideal of corporate social responsibility. Such companies share the belief that business has a significant role to play in addressing global poverty, social inequity and environmental concerns. In partnership with government and non government organisations, these companies engage with their communities in order to build stronger, healthier societies.

Corporate social responsibility involves much more than writing cheques. In combination with financial support, companies are offering the use of business premises and facilities, providing management and technical expertise, donating gifts in kind (including company products) and sharing company networks. Many businesses and community organisations enter into partnerships to achieve a social outcome.

One of the most effective forms of corporate social responsibility is corporate or employee volunteering.

What is corporate volunteering?

Corporate, or employee volunteering, is one way in which businesses can fulfil their social responsibility. Companies which engage in corporate volunteering actively support and encourage their employees to volunteer their services to a local community organisation. Steadily growing in popularity since the 1990s, corporate volunteering involves the contribution of time, talent, energy, skills and resources by the company's workforce.

Today some 4.4 million Australians (or 32% of the adult population) are volunteers.

How is corporate volunteering good for business?

Benefits for business

Companies which run corporate volunteering programs can attest to the many advantages for their businesses. There are six commonly recognised benefits for business. These include reputation and risk management, employee satisfaction, innovation, access to capital and financial performance and may manifest themselves in the following ways:

- increased company pride and loyalty by staff
- better employee attendance, recruitment and retention
- improved staff morale, motivation, team spirit and initiative
- enhanced workplace relationships – unique opportunities for staff to work with people from different areas and levels of their organisation
- new skill development opportunities for staff
- a more positive corporate image
- heightened and positive recognition by customers and consumers
- new business opportunities
- transformed relationship between the company and the local community
- improved triple bottom line.

"Our corporate volunteering program impacts positively on the morale and teamwork of our employees and shows them that at Ford we are committed to community support and at the same time want to have some fun!" Ford Australia

How is corporate volunteering good for business?

Benefits for employees

Encouraging staff involvement in a well-structured and supported corporate volunteer program has wide-ranging benefits for the employees involved. These include:

- a sense of personal satisfaction and fulfilment
- new learning experiences outside normal job parameters
- new and more positive perception of career, workplace, peers and management team
- unique opportunities to interact with people from other areas within the company thus improving communication and teamwork
- opportunities to meet new people and explore new situations and challenges
- providing opportunities to create pathways to community involvement for employees reaching retirement age.

ANZ volunteers let off steam

The much loved century-old steam train, Puffing Billy, still runs on its original mountain track from Belgrave to Gembrook in the scenic Dandenong Ranges, 40 kilometres east of Melbourne. Now a major tourist attraction, Puffing Billy's operation depends on the dedication of hundreds of volunteers. This year ANZ staff joined their ranks and spent a productive and rewarding day cleaning up the surrounding area. Motivated by seeing the huge difference their efforts made, the volunteers also enjoyed the benefits of participating in a valuable team-building exercise.



How is corporate volunteering good for the community?

Benefits to the community

Corporate volunteering programs that can respond to the needs of the community within which they operate have real and practical benefits on a number of important levels. These include:

- transferring skills, knowledge and technical expertise into the community
- providing access to teams of volunteers for major tasks
- improving understanding between the business and voluntary sectors
- providing access to free or subsidised resources
- increasing public awareness of community issues
- changing company behaviours and practices that create social, economic or environmental problems
- creating new income streams for community projects.

Cool in an emergency

Like all emergency service groups, the Sale Country Fire Authority relies heavily on the efforts of volunteers. During one of Gippsland's worst fire seasons on record, 16 volunteers from Esso's Longford plant joined the fight. Each year Esso and Mobil award Volunteer Involvement Program (VIP) grants to organisations supported by their staff volunteers. As a recipient of a VIP grant, the Sale Country Fire Authority used their \$1000 towards purchase of equipment used to fight the fires.



Types of volunteering activities

A corporate volunteering project may involve a short-term or ongoing commitment from staff. It can be organised in response to unexpected community need, as a result of a long-term partnership, or as a one-off request from a community organisation. Volunteer work can be undertaken as an individual or in a team. Employees can choose to use their business skills or pick non-skilled tasks. Many teams prefer an outdoor to an indoor activity or opt to volunteer in work hours rather than out of hours. Some highly successful employee volunteering activities take place at the weekend when family and friends can also participate.

The range of volunteering activities is wide and varied, and includes:

- teaching office and computer skills
- doing a 'makeover' of a local kids' playground
- joining a management committee
- helping create a sensory garden or cleaning up the local beach or creek
- staffing a soup kitchen or assisting with community meals
- setting up a website for a local community group or helping network its computers
- mentoring
- selling fundraising badges, helping marshal at a fundraising fun run or answering calls for a telethon
- developing databases, roster systems or policy and procedure manuals.

Tip

Corporate volunteering requires the same management commitment and support as all other corporate initiatives. The most successful programs often involve employees from different management levels and teams.

Types of volunteering activities

Tip

Corporate volunteering programs are often most successful when developed to align with the company's corporate and human resource objectives.

One in, all in

Staff from GE Consumer Finance's call centre found that the breakfast shift at the Brotherhood of St Laurence Coolibah Centre coincided with the slow time at the call centre. While a large number of the GE staff were keen to help out serving breakfast to homeless people, it was only necessary for a few people to be involved each day. Over the course of a few months all interested staff were rostered on breakfast duty. So, although all staff helped out in the same way, only 2 or 3 people were absent from the office at any one time.



Setting up and planning a volunteering program

Whether a company is introducing corporate volunteering, or building and improving on an existing program, there are several tried and tested approaches that will ensure success from the outset. These include:

- assessing the current workplace situation – the number of staff, their skills, location, preferences, diversity, employment status (eg part time, full time, contractors, etc), the number of staff already volunteering, as well as the public perception of the company
- establishing a business case for the introduction of a volunteering program
- consulting employees and getting input from different levels of management
- identifying and allocating resources
- aligning the program to the business and human resource objectives of the company
- setting objectives for the program
- drafting volunteering guidelines and policies including investigating the insurance and health and safety requirements for the program
- setting limitations for the program (eg will staff be able to volunteer for political parties, direct action or lobby groups, etc?)
- developing an ongoing recruitment strategy.

Tip

Start small and gradually expand the corporate volunteering program. Learning from experience and building on past success will ensure a greater take-up rate.

Managing a volunteering program

Once the volunteer program is up and running, it is crucial that it continues to be monitored, evaluated and refined.

From the outset, records of individual employee or team contributions should be kept. This also provides a listing of the number of volunteers and indicates whether the same people are volunteering each time, or whether new recruits are being attracted. Surveys should be conducted with both staff and the not-for-profit organisations that the company has worked with to gain feedback, and consideration given to how volunteers will be acknowledged.

Managing the program also involves managing the expectations of staff volunteers. Remember that:

- many not-for-profit organisations are very small and do not have the capacity to place large teams
- some organisations have vulnerable clients where police checking requirements would make it too difficult to organise one-off volunteering
- the training required for some positions may be too onerous for a one-off activity
- the lead time needed to organise volunteering activities may vary
- the team is making a real commitment – it doesn't look good if it withdraws at the last minute, letting the community organisation down
- sometimes there will be a need to provide resources (eg company funds or fundraising activities may be required to pay for the paint volunteers will use to renovate a room).

Managing a volunteering program

Tip

Get senior management on side. For corporate volunteering programs to succeed, management must be fully committed and prepared to allow staff the time and resources needed to undertake the work.



Becoming the Guide Dogs' best friend

One of the hidden benefits of corporate volunteering is the opportunity it offers for people from different levels or departments of an organisation to work together. This is exactly what happened when a group of 15 from Esso

and Mobil donated their services to exercise some appealing and highly intelligent guide dogs, clean up their kennels, and generally help out around the place. Representing every level of staff, including directors, admin assistants and IT specialists, the volunteers forged new and valuable friendships they'll take back to their workplace.

Finding the right volunteering opportunities

To ensure the longevity of a corporate volunteering program and to justify the company investment, the match between the community organisation, the project and the volunteers must be right. Volunteers rarely return to volunteer work if their initial experience has not been positive. To make sure the match is good, suitable and worthwhile community projects will need to be identified.

Some relevant questions to ask include:

- Is this the type of project or cause volunteers will benefit from and be interested in?
- Does the project provide a team opportunity, or is it more suitable for an individual volunteer?
- Will the project offer volunteers an opportunity to use their skills differently? Build their professional confidence? Develop new skills?
- How far will staff need to travel? (often people only want to travel locally)
- Can financial assistance or other resources be provided to the not-for-profit organisation to ensure that the job gets done?
- Is there a process for getting team consensus on the type of volunteer work they would like?
- Is the team encouraged to identify its own volunteering opportunities?

"Great to spend a day doing something completely different from our regular work."

Ford Australia volunteer

Finding the right volunteering opportunities

Tip

Remember volunteering is an activity of choice. Don't put pressure on everyone in a department to volunteer – work with staff who really want to be involved!



Making science fiction a reality

The story of the Melbourne Science Fiction Club (MSFC) goes to show that there are virtually no limits on what corporate volunteers can do. The MSFC, a not-for-profit organisation which runs regular activities for people interested in fantasy, science fiction and related genres, is helped out on a regular basis by National Australia Bank staff in their free time.

In addition to providing crucial support to countless authors and artists, MSFC and NAB volunteers help stock and maintain the club's greatest asset – a unique library which houses thousands of genre books, including many rare and out-of-print items.

Organising the volunteering day

It is a good idea to nominate a leader from within the volunteering team who will be responsible for organising the company side of the activity and contacting the organisation before the day.

The team leader should find out about:

- any health and safety issues that may need to be investigated or addressed (including a possible site visit)
- volunteer training requirements or opportunities
- when and where to meet
- what to wear and what to bring (eg tools or materials)
- lunch arrangements – will the volunteering team be cooking a communal barbeque?
Can they invite people from the organisation to join them?
- contingency plans if, for example, the weather is bad or there is a last minute change of plans.

It is good practice to select someone other than the manager to be the team leader for volunteer activities. This can also be more useful to the not-for-profit or community organisation, as a staff member may be more accessible than a manager.

"Hard work (for a bunch of office workers!)! But a lot of fun!" ANZ Bank volunteer

Organising the volunteering day

Tip

Organisations have a good reason for specifying a maximum number of people required on a project. Stick to the number of volunteers requested by the organisation – there's no point in volunteers being bored and standing around with little or nothing to do.

And don't forget to encourage at least one team member to take a camera along to record their volunteering day!



Ford volunteers in for the long haul

Faced with the challenge of repainting Camp Wilkins' Locket Lodge, two volunteer teams from Ford set up scaffolding, opened their paint tins, and got down to work. After two days, the facelift of the 36 year-old dormitory was complete. But at a place like Camp Wilkin, a not-for-profit holiday camp for school children and other charity groups, there's always work to be done. So it's reassuring that the volunteers from Ford have promised to continue their assistance with upcoming major projects.

Who is Volunteering Australia?

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body working to advance volunteering in the Australian community.

Volunteering Australia was established in 1993 to promote the economic, social and cultural value of volunteering. Volunteering Australia serves the interests of almost five million Australians who volunteer and the 700,000 not-for-profit organisations which involve them. It develops tools and resources for both the volunteers and the organisations to ensure that volunteering is a viable and ongoing activity in Australia.

Volunteering Australia is an International Leadership Group partner for the ENGAGE campaign in Australia. ENGAGE is a global initiative of the International Business Leaders Forum (IBLF) in partnership with Business in the Community (BITC) and a coalition of international non-governmental organisations. ENGAGE is a three-year strategy which aims to increase business involvement in the community.

The sky's the limit

Engineers from a local construction company volunteered their skills to help design a climbing wall for a teenage drop-in centre. The engineers' contribution was invaluable in providing specialist skills the centre would not otherwise have access to or be able to afford. The result – the centre's recreation activities were greatly enhanced and the engineers had the satisfaction of seeing their design used and enjoyed.



How can Volunteering Australia help?

Volunteering Australia is equipped to assist companies develop the business case for investing in corporate volunteering programs, help guide the process of initiating and developing policies and offer advice on suitable structures. With a wealth of experience gained through working with businesses around Australia, Volunteering Australia offers expert advice and support on all aspects of corporate volunteering, and has been engaged by a number of companies.

Working through its network of volunteer centres, Volunteering Australia and the state volunteering centres are experienced brokers between companies and not-for-profit organisations, with a proven track record in identifying opportunities and matching individual and team volunteers to the most appropriate projects.

"Corporate community engagement programs work best when they meet community needs as well as delivering core business objectives. The most successful programs are developed in close consultation and collaboration with the specific communities, projects and organisations."
Jerry Marston, Community Investment Director, Whitbread plc, UK and Chair of the Corporate Responsibility Group UK.

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