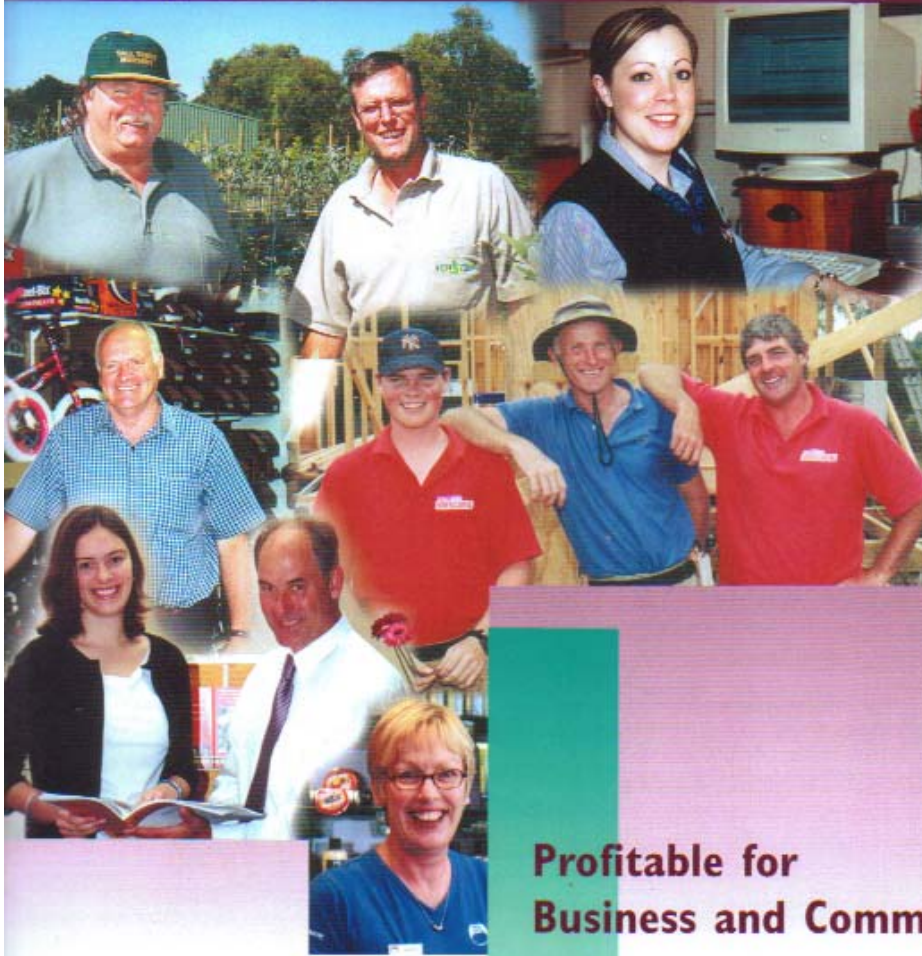


Employee Volunteering



**Profitable for
Business and Communities**

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Community Connections**

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1. WHAT IS EMPLOYEE VOLUNTEERING?

It involves businesses encouraging and supporting the involvement of their employees in community volunteer work. Government employees can do community volunteer work as well.

Company-sponsored studies have found that employee volunteering results in clear benefits for businesses, employees and communities.

There are many areas of community volunteering. They include:

- education
- environment preservation
- sport and recreation
- emergency services
- health and welfare
- church
- animal welfare
- arts
- heritage

Within each of these areas there are many different volunteer activities. They range from administrative and technical tasks to customer service and manual work.

Around 90 per cent of big companies in the U.S. and 30 per cent in the U.K. have employee volunteer programs. Employee volunteering is becoming more popular in Australia.

Employee volunteering involves staff doing community volunteer work most often in company time and on full pay.

Sometimes a group of employees from a company can work as a team on community projects. Companies have reported this approach to be effective for team building.

Involvement in community volunteering can be ongoing for company employees or it can be a one-off activity entailing a short-term project over a day or half-day.

Through employee volunteering companies develop a closer relationship with community groups, often involving a longer-term commitment or partnership to work together. In many instances, this approach can be more beneficial to community groups and to companies than a donation of money.

2. WHY SHOULD EMPLOYEES VOLUNTEER?

Volunteering provides many benefits for companies and communities.

Business operates most successfully in strong communities which have access to plentiful and well-managed natural resources, stable governments, good education, health and welfare systems, and minimal problems such as unemployment, poverty and crime.

More companies throughout the world are recognising the relationship between community well being and company well being.

Studies undertaken by companies have found that the benefits of employee volunteering are as follows:

For companies it:

- develops a reputation as a responsible business leading to a greater competitive edge and increased customer support
- develops new markets for products and services through increasing community networks
- increases staff morale, company pride and job satisfaction leading to better quality of work and reduced turnover of staff
- strengthens employees' ability to initiate and cope with change
- develops greater teamwork among employees
- helps to create stronger communities in which to do business
- develops a better understanding of community issues, how they affect business, and how they can be addressed
- provides satisfaction from doing something worthwhile for the community.

For employees it:

- improves their existing abilities and teaches new skills
- broadens their outlook through providing work experiences outside the company and their usual field of work
- provides satisfaction from contributing to the community
- increases their community support networks
- makes work more interesting and meaningful, especially for staff in less stimulating jobs.

For communities it:

- extends the limited resources of community groups
- improves the quality of community services
- adds new skills and energy to community problem-solving
- provides an additional source of community volunteers
- builds productive links with business groups
- helps to increase management skills in the community sector
- increases active citizenship

3. INCREASING ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

One of the most important benefits to communities of employee volunteering is that it encourages more people to become active citizens.

A strong community is one where a high proportion of the population is actively involved. Membership of clubs and associations, involvement with local issues and problems, and doing volunteer work are some of the main ways that people develop pride in their community and a strong sense of responsibility for its well being.

Often, however, people are so busy with family, study and work commitments that they do not have excess leisure time which they can devote to volunteer work. Not only is the community deprived of the experience, knowledge and skills that these people have to offer, but the people themselves are deprived of the many personal benefits community volunteer work will bring them.

Providing employees with opportunities to do community volunteer work during company time addresses this problem. Importantly, employee volunteering will provide many young people with an introduction to active citizenship. Usually young people are the least involved in community volunteering.

4. TYPES OF EMPLOYEE VOLUNTEERING

For companies there are two main types of volunteering. They involve employees:

1. **Sharing expertise with community groups.**

It is important that companies recognise the value to community volunteering of their own core competencies such as professional knowledge, managerial and technical expertise.

2. **Participating in community groups' services and activities.**

Many community groups require additional volunteers and company staff can become involved in a variety of services and activities.

The type of volunteering chosen by a company will be influenced by:

- The number of employees interested in becoming involved
- The knowledge and skills they already have or need
- The staff time the company can make available
- The volunteer needs of the community
- The preferences of the company and its employees.

5. HOW OFTEN TO VOLUNTEER?

A company's staff can undertake volunteering regularly or just occasionally. Some companies allow their staff to volunteer just once a year, maybe for an environmental clean-up or fundraising for a community cause.

Employee volunteering can be a formal or casual arrangement, although in practice usually a more formal system will work better.

For example, The Body Shop retail chain provides interested staff with four hours release time monthly to become involved in community volunteering. On the Mornington Peninsula Traineeship Advisory Services Australia rosters one or two staff once a week to provide recreational activities to residents of a local nursing home.

An example of a less structured approach is the accounting company which offers free to community groups a minimum 50 hours of staff expertise annually on an as-requested basis. Companies which provide release time to their staff who are volunteers with emergency services is another example.

6. VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES

Using company expertise employees can assist community groups in the following areas:

- Management and planning
- Information technology
- Salary administration
- Financial reporting
- Transport, maintenance and construction
- Public relations and marketing
- Training
- Medical, legal and counselling
- Research and report-writing

Volunteering in the services and activities of community groups can include:

- Providing recreation activities for residents of nursing homes
- Helping unemployed people to prepare for job interviews
- Assisting with the day-to-day activities at animal shelters
- Conducting surveys
- Mentoring young people in job training
- Supervising disabled people on work experience
- Participating in environmental clean-ups
- Cataloguing information
- Fundraising by 'tin-rattling', selling raffle tickets and badges
- Tape-recording reading material for visually-impaired people
- Staffing reception areas
- Painting, landscaping, gardening and maintenance

7. PUBLIC RELATIONS AND MARKETING

Some companies become involved in employee volunteering as a marketing exercise. This practice is referred to as cause-related marketing, social marketing or brand building.

To maximise the marketing opportunities through community involvement, companies usually prefer to support bigger and higher-profile community groups and projects. In return, community groups are required to publicise the support they have received from companies or allow companies to promote themselves using the good reputation of community groups.

Just as companies can gain a good reputation from supporting their communities, they can also develop a poor reputation if they attach all kinds of conditions to their involvement. It is often the case that companies expect too much in return for the support they provide to community groups.

Companies like The Body Shop have been able to build a good reputation without 'grandstanding' about their community involvement.

The Body Shop is fully aware of the positive effects on its profits from being perceived as a responsible business group, but the benefits have evolved naturally over time rather than being contrived by the company as a clever marketing strategy.

A recent survey among customers of The Body Shop revealed that in addition to liking the company's products, most supported the retail chain because they believed it to be a responsible company.

The Body Shop does not choose community projects to support because of their marketing value. Some of the groups and causes supported by the company are not well known.

It is a fitting return if companies gain publicity and more business as a result of their community involvement. Employee volunteering should be mutually rewarding for all parties involved. However, it is important that companies do not make unreasonable or excessive demands of community groups.

8. WHERE TO START

Starting at the Top

It is common for companies contemplating involvement in employee volunteering to commence discussion at a senior management level given that among other things a variation in the use of company resources is being considered.

How other staff are involved in the discussions about and planning for an employee-volunteering program will usually depend on the size of the company as well as its approach to decision-making. A small company with a limited number of employees, for example, may include all staff in the initial discussions. Bigger companies might commence with senior staff and then include middle management and supervisory staff in later stages.

Sometimes interest in employee volunteering may originate from non-management staff.

Staff Involvement Important

Whatever way is chosen by a company to 'get the ball rolling', it is important for the success of an employee volunteering program that staff participate in the decision-making about how they might be involved in the community as volunteers.

'Compulsory Volunteering' – a Contradiction in Terms

'Volunteering' means having the freedom to choose to be involved as well as having choice about the type of involvement. Participation in volunteering should not be a directive from the company.

The commitment of the staff member to their volunteer work is an important aspect of employee volunteering. People are more motivated and usually more effective as volunteers if they believe in and are able to make a personal commitment to the community project or activity.

Employee volunteering projects which are driven mainly by the preferences of the company director or senior personnel and which are imposed on lower-level staff rarely have their genuine commitment. Such projects may appear to enjoy early success, but they are unlikely to be sustainable.

Also, community groups are not keen to have company staff involved if they are unenthusiastic and just 'going through the motions'.

In Company Time

Most employee-volunteering programs involve staff doing work for the community in company time.

Sometimes staff from a company may volunteer their personal time on a weekend in the name of the company to an environmental clean-up or special fundraising event. In most instances, however, when company employees do volunteer work outside of their regular hours of work, this is not employee volunteering. An exception may be when the company provides equipment, training or other resources to the staff member to aid their volunteering.

Starting Slowly

Companies should not expect all staff to respond enthusiastically when first introduced to the idea of employee volunteering. They may require time to digest the idea before making a commitment.

Total Participation Unlikely

Some staff may choose never to become volunteers and their decision should be respected. Few companies involved in employee volunteering have the participation of all staff.

Commencing on a Small Scale

Employee-volunteering programs commonly start with a small group of staff. Commencing on a small scale is a sensible way to proceed in relation to a company investing its staff resources for the first time in a community project.

Choosing Areas of Involvement Carefully

It is important that companies and staff choose carefully the areas in which they become involved as community volunteers. While in some circles 'jumping in at the deep end' might be applauded as courageous and a willingness to 'have a go', there are areas of community volunteering where the inexperienced or feint-hearted should not go.

Some areas of the drug and alcohol field, for example, should be approached cautiously by intending company volunteers. Some people may struggle with areas of the disability field while others may be uncomfortable with areas where illness and death are prominent.

Of course, there may be physical risks involved in some types of community volunteering including when doing work such as digging, lifting, climbing or using power tools, as well as from having close contact with people who are mentally unstable.

Management Setting a Good Example

The company's management personnel can set a good example by being the first employees in the organisation to become involved in volunteering. Sharing their experiences during informal conversations at work, at staff meetings, and through various other company communication is likely to gain the interest of other staff.

Forming an Advisory Group

It can be helpful for a company to obtain the support of individuals who are already strongly connected to communities and who have knowledge of community needs, volunteering, and how to engage with community groups.

Forming an advisory group comprising representatives from the company and from the community may be worth considering.

A Policy on Employee Volunteering

Producing a simply-presented and positively-worded statement or policy on employee volunteering will assist with the project's acceptance by employees and the community.

Careful Selection of Community Partners

Companies should be careful in their initial assessment of prospective community partners for employee volunteering. A good reputation and good intentions do not mean that they will be suitable partners.

It may be helpful for the company to scrutinise the community group's recent annual reports (keeping in mind that they are used for public relations purposes); speak to representatives from the group, and not only to staff in management and public relations roles. It is particularly important to speak to other community groups and informed people in the community about the organisation.

Community Groups May be Reluctant

Many community groups have had little to do with employees from local companies volunteering in their organisations.

Because they could be unaware of the range of ways that companies can support them, they may be more interested in your money than in your staff volunteering. The traditional way that companies have assisted community groups has been with money and governments have been encouraging community groups to look to business for money.

It may be better to be up front with a community group and say that you are interested in supporting their group with volunteers from your company rather than with money and indicate the abilities of your staff.

Important to Review

It is important for a company to review regularly its involvement in employee volunteering. Through a review the benefits to the company, the community group and to the community can be identified, problems addressed and any necessary adjustments made.

In a review it is important to include the opinions of employees and people from the community, rather than just take into account the number of staff involved, the number of hours volunteered, and the number of community groups assisted.

9. LOCATING A COMMUNITY GROUP

Most communities have Community Service directories containing contact details for community groups. Usually, they can be obtained from Council offices or through the Community Information Centres. Often Centres can advise about local community groups which may require volunteers.

Not all groups list their contact details in these directories, so you may have to look further afield for information about some groups.

Companies wanting further information about employee volunteering or assistance in locating a suitable community group can contact Mornington Peninsula Community Connections on 5988 4309.

10. WEBSITES

The following websites contain further information about employee volunteering:

www.employeevolunteering.org.uk

www.ozvpm.com/resourcebank/resource_corporate.htm

www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au/builder/volunteering/evg.html

www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au/building_stronger/enterprise/employee_vol.html