

Does staff volunteerism really have an impact?

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If we truly want to create value from our corporate social investment (CSI) efforts - the question we should be asking is, does employee volunteerism really move the needle on an organisations' efforts to connect with the communities around them and make the difference?

South Africans are generous, with both time and money. The 2014 World Giving Index stated that 4.5-million more South Africans volunteered their time to good causes in 2013 than in 2012 - a big leap from the 1.5-million people who volunteered in 1999, according to the Volunteer and Service Enquiry of Southern Africa.

According to the *Volunteering in Africa* research report of 2013, South Africa's rich history of voluntary service stems from the mass social movements during the apartheid era aimed at

liberating those previously oppressed. Fast forward to today, this galvanisation of people is harnessed to promote the notion of mutual responsibility, captured in the use of concepts such as *letsema* and *vukuzenzele*, and ultimately, *ubuntu*.

Service programmes in SA

In the context of the 21st century, service programmes in the country include government, civil society organisations and the corporate sector, all playing different roles. Amongst a variety of methods of giving back, the corporate sector uses different methods to encourage employee volunteering.

Corporate volunteerism has the potential to garner great benefits for communities while simultaneously creating business value in the form of increased employee engagement and consumer credibility. It does more than give organisations a presence in their community. It also creates real employee value by giving them an opportunity to directly make a difference on a personal level. There is a definite need (and in fact want) from most people to do something to positively impact the lives of communities in which they live and work. If we make provision for staff to accomplish this, the value created for both employees and the business is exponential.

Formal CSI structures like foundations facilitating sustainable giving aren't the only way to give back to communities. The governance requirements of giving through channels such as these can often impact response time to social issues. The idea of a front-line response team of volunteers on the ground has therefore become increasingly attractive.

Effective employee volunteerism application

Back to our question whether volunteerism has impact. For a start, we need to consider how volunteerism has always been viewed. The very essence of volunteerism is that it makes us feel good to do good. But, we need to apply the same set of rules for structured initiatives to employee volunteerism, to ensure that the gap between the needs of communities and the perception (and often misconception) of these needs by organisations is narrowed. Why should we paint a school's walls when what they need is an accountant to do their books? On the other side of the coin, NPO partners and beneficiaries should be clearer about the types of skills or expertise needed and remain in control of the activities taking place within their organisations, instead of indulging the Mandela Day requests of corporate funders.

Sometimes, volunteerism requires people to use the skills they use daily to earn a pay cheque. Essentially providing the service that you provide in your workday, for free. This is the challenge as people see volunteerism as a form of escapism, which means that performing tasks such as helping an NGO build an online platform, creating PR campaigns or giving financial advice feels like 'work'. The difference comes in knowing that it is work that really makes a difference because you are empowering a community. Organisations should develop an approach to employee volunteering that provides options for participation on every skill level.

Celebrate volunteer champions

We encourage organisations to remember to celebrate their volunteer champions. The MMI Holdings' Foundation's annual Lesedi Awards ceremony recognises employees that have added value to individuals and communities through projects they fund or run themselves.

“I am proud to say that MMI volunteers continue to be a pillar of light and hope for many communities in South Africa,” acknowledges Nicolaas Kruger, CEO of MMI Holdings. “Given the many challenges we face here in South Africa, it is clear that companies have an important role to play over-and-above the day to day business activities. The MMI volunteers have taken on the responsibility of using their privilege to empower those less fortunate than they are.”

The bottom-line is that we want to support employees to do good - to be good citizens, whether they are doing it within company volunteer structures or in their own personal capacity. This in-turn creates an organisation that is a worthy, good corporate citizen, trusted by its staff and the communities in which it operates.

<https://www.bizcommunity.com/Article/196/356/159258.html>

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