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Volunteer events benefit workers, act as retention tool

Triangle Business Journal - by [Sonia L. Johnson](#)

DURHAM - Companies increasingly are offering workers volunteer opportunities as rewards and as a way to enhance employee satisfaction. Yet, many companies, while touting the value of such programs, fail to include such opportunities in their planning process.

A report titled The State of Corporate Citizenship from **Boston College**'s Carroll School of Management in December found that 73 percent of executives agreed that corporate citizenship needs to be a priority, while 61 percent said it helps their company's bottom line.

Yet, only 39 percent of these executives made corporate citizenship part of their business planning process, the report revealed, and only 28 percent wrote corporate citizenship policies or statements.

Experts say that employees gain more from employer-coordinated community service than just a sense of personal satisfaction. They often develop new, marketable skills or become seasoned in existing ones. For instance, some companies encourage promising employees to take on leadership positions at local nonprofits.

"If you make your employees raving fans, then you'll retain them," says Matt Nash, associate director of the Center for the Advancement of Social Entrepreneurship at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business.

At FM: Systems, a facilities management software company in Raleigh, marketing specialist Barbette Byarlay Ramsey travels to Mexico with fellow employees to help set up computers at schools as part of a community service program.

"I thought it was an opportunity to get out of my comfort zone," she says. "I knew I'd be uncomfortable, but it was an opportunity to do some good in the world. It opens you up as a person. It changed my world view ... I knew it would change me before I went."

GETTING EMPLOYEES INVOLVED

Byarlay Ramsey went to Mexico as part of a program launched by FM: Systems CEO and founder Michael Schley. While working with the St. Andrews Presbyterian and Faith Ministry,



Steve Wilson

Victor Velazquez is chair of the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants' Corporate Citizenship Task Force.

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Schley got the idea to launch the Mexico Computer Project.

That program rebuilds, delivers and installs computers in Reynosa, Mexico, mainly in poor, elementary schools. At one point, Schley wondered if his employees would like to contribute to the program. After meeting with FM:Systems' 25 employees, he offered to fund the trip for seven participants including paid leave. Since 2003, the program has installed more than 200 computers at over 20 elementary schools in Reynosa.

"There's a huge number of used computers looking for a useful purpose," Schley says.

Having nudged employees to sign up, Schley is now looking to create a formal community service program. Such a program will highlight the company's identity, says Schley. "(Community service) helps define us in a subtle way," he says. "It helps in understanding who we are."

FM: Systems is zeroing in on the right mix of volunteer activities, with an emphasis on programs that give workers a chance for a novel experience. Lessons from a new experience can be innumerable, Schley says. Much of the success of the Mexico trip, he says, was not from installing the computers but in surmounting the hurdles that came with the task, such as affordably transporting computers to schools and overcoming technical challenges at installation sites.

As a way to foster a continuous stream of projects, some companies choose to partner with specific nonprofits. Such relationships allow companies to not only measure output - say five miles of cleaned roads or 100 trees planted - but to measure impact.

Gauging impact takes three or more years, says Jen Kim Field, director of **VolunteerMatch Solutions**, an organization that plays matchmaker for companies and nonprofits.

For instance, Field says, measuring the effectiveness of tutoring kids in an attempt to reduce dropout rates takes years and can only be confirmed when such children successfully graduate.

Such "pushing the cause forward" programs require steady support from senior management and must be implemented so that employee turnover does not threaten them, Field says.

MAKING ITS PRESENCE FELT

In the Triangle, the **American Institute of Certified Public Accountants** has launched one such partnership with the Durham Public Schools. Created in August 2007, the partnership requires AICPA employees to provide input and expertise to improve the curriculum of the Finance Academy at Hillside High School. Volunteers began in-class participation in December. In January, AICPA held an open house for students, with options such as job shadowing and staff presentations.

The AICPA is relatively new to the Triangle, having relocated most of its operations from New Jersey in 2006.

"From a practical perspective, we wanted to get to know our new community and also wanted the community to get to know who we are," says Victor Velazquez, vice president of service and

operations and chair of AICPA's Corporate Citizenship Task Force.

"The AICPA is a national organization, but we weren't necessarily a known entity in the Triangle. Also, as one of our criteria for selecting a community, we wanted to be able to have a connection with the community - have our people make a difference. We believe that when their employer supports their desire to make a difference, employees gain greater satisfaction from their work life."

In 2007, AICPA sponsored the Durham Bulls Education Rewards Program; made contributions to organizations such as the State Employees Credit Union Family House at **UNC Hospitals** and the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival; and donated \$15,000 to the Volunteer Center of Durham and participated in its Share Your Holiday Program, where employees fulfilled the wishes of six families with 21 children. This year, the organization intends to increase activity hours by nearly 50 percent, says Velazquez.

To launch its partnership program, AICPA created an employee task force comprising workers from diverse business units and levels. They spent three months fine-tuning the activities AICPA would take on, sorting through hundreds of employee surveys and suggestions. The end product is an approach that combines leadership activities, volunteerism, company donations and fundraising drives, says Velazquez.

By offering various types of programs, AICPA hopes to attract greater participation from employees, based on their time availability, talent and energy, he says.

VOLUNTEERS AND CAUSES

At AICPA, employees also wanted - and received - paid time off for individual efforts outside those sponsored by the organization. In 2007, AICPA employees also got a day off to volunteer with Project Homeless Connect.

"The Triangle has been very good to the AICPA. When we relocated here, we were welcomed immediately as a member of the business community. It has been an extraordinary experience, and it's clear we made the right decision to move here. Our community engagement is our way of saying, 'thank you for the support,'" he says.

AICPA's task force approach to creating an employee volunteer program may be a sound one.

"(Committees) need to have a clear charter with a clear sense of empowerment with a fair amount of authority for decision-making," says Nash.

Participating in community activities also comes with a selfish motive for employees. They help in career advancement.

An employee serving on a nonprofit board brings real life experiences to his job. Such programs also result in a more cohesive team of employees, improved employee morale and loyalty, an extra edge in recruiting, a better company image, a strengthened company identity and increased support for business goals.

Field says that programs that meet a company's business objectives, match employees'

passions with causes and improve the community likely hold the winning formula. "Hitting those three - that's the sweet spot," she says.

VolunteerMatch is celebrating its 10th anniversary as a national nonprofit offering online matchmaking that connects volunteers and nonprofits. Corporations use VolunteerMatch to manage and track employee volunteer programs, learn best practices and measure volunteer impact. Clients include Google, the Peace Corps and Merrill Lynch.

That organization's client list is growing as community service becomes an everyday facet of life for businesses.

A DEFAULT OPTION

Attention to community service among businesses grew through the 1990's. Interest has increased over the past five to seven years with growing awareness of the environmental and social impact of companies, says Nash.

The end result is a movement that unites companies, employees and nonprofits in working toward a common goal.

"It's becoming kind of a default option," says Paul Bloom, interim faculty director of CASE at Duke's business school. "(Companies) do it to compete in labor markets and in consumer markets and in the investment arena."

At Kilpatrick Stockton, a law firm with more than 500 attorneys in nine offices, including one in Raleigh, about 94 percent of the firm's Triangle attorneys and staff participated in community projects last year.

"Community service is part of the firm's DNA," says Whitney Munn, manager of community relations.

Each office has a volunteer council that picks firm-sponsored projects. For 2008, the firm picked education as the company-wide focus. In 2007, the Raleigh office worked on 37 community service projects, including March of Dimes WalkAmerica, Big Brothers Big Sisters and the Raleigh Rescue Mission.

Betsy Cooke, a partner in the litigation group, says the Raleigh office this year plans to expand its activities and take on new causes. A new, company-wide initiative will acclimate new hires to the firm's focus on community service by tasking them with being responsible for a project.

"We encourage our employees to follow their passions - we want the experience to be personally rewarding for the individual and the community," says Cooke.

When a company gives employees the chance to pursue community service they feel passionate about, Field says, "It easily lets them buy in and become ambassadors for the company."

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