



## **International Employee Volunteer Programs**

In 2001, the Points of Light Foundation commissioned a study on international employee volunteer programs (EVPs) with a diverse group of businesses. The purpose of the study was to examine the operating structures of global volunteer programs, effective practices and strategies for program management and challenges in operating a global program. The program's surveyed had structures ranging from all of a company's EVP being aligned under one banner, to unrelated and autonomous grassroots programs that operate under the name of the company.

All of the companies surveyed provide resources to support employee volunteer programs in international countries. Specifically, all provide written and/or electronic materials on how to set up or manage an EVP in another country. The majority of programs have a designated person within their U.S. headquarters to provide long-distance program management and support. Most of those surveyed tended to form partnerships with NGOs for their volunteer programs.

Companies surveyed, shared the following recommendations for building a global program. These recommendations come from lessons they learned in building their programs. They include:

- Be sensitive to the individual cultures.
- Never underestimate the importance of local knowledge.
- Get leadership buy-in.
- Start slowly with easy wins.
- Get help from external resources.
- Create a globally run, local grassroots structure.
- Check the laws.
- Build motivation and empowerment.
- Provide information on volunteer management.

### **Be Sensitive To The Individual Cultures**

Cultural sensitivity is identified as the most important success factor by managers of global volunteer programs. It is vital to find out the motivations in the country for having an employee volunteer program and accept that cultural interpretation. Companies should consider the following factors when embarking on establishing a global volunteer program:

- What works in the U.S. won't necessarily work in other countries – don't impose American values.
- Learn the culture and be sensitive to the culture in all ways possible. Don't be arrogant.

- Use a model that is adaptable so the country's program can pick and chose what works best for them. Provide training and direction to explain how they can tailor the program to meet their needs.
- Respect cultural differences – volunteerism means different things in different parts of the world.

### **Get Leadership Buy-In**

Equally important, companies operating global employee volunteer programs, all underscored the importance of having executive leadership buy-in and endorsement of the global program to achieve success. Leadership endorsement must be visible so staff will want to be involved and know that they have the sanctions of leadership to do so. With a leadership prominently displaying their support for the program, staff will see that caring and the commitment for community service comes from the top.

### **Start Out Slowly With Easy Wins**

Most of the countries interviewed recommended starting slowly, picking one country to develop an employee volunteer program where there would be a strong possibility for success. Factors considered when identifying the country to pilot included, countries where the language was similar, good business relations, similar organizational structure and a history of volunteerism.

One company interviewed did start with a different, global approach. Their CEO sent a message to the company's senior country managers worldwide urging them to participate in a global volunteer initiative. The first year, three countries adopted the EVP. Six years later, 32 countries have adopted the program. The company acknowledged this approach would not have worked if CEO hadn't sponsored the global initiative.

### **Get Help From External Resources**

Knowledgeable resources organizations and individuals were deemed important in helping the companies set up their programs.

*“Get help from someone who understands the culture and laws -- consider working with State Department.”*

*“Utilize experts—United Way International helped us.”*

*“Work with community leaders to identify needs of community. These needs may not be the most glamorous projects but go with what the locals need.”*

*“Find a local champion at each location.”*

One company cautioned that companies should ensure that potential resources and partners are compatible with the company's image.

*“Have a process to select the NGOs you will work with. You want to be able to effectively use your volunteers to help the NGO's mission. Volunteers do represent the company so you must be*

*sensitive to the image of company with the partners you chose. You need to be able to say 'no, it is not appropriate to be involved in this area because it is not in line with our strategy.'*

### **Create A Globally Run, Local Grassroots Structure**

Even though the structures of the EVPs varied, there are certain common themes the companies stressed.

*"Make sure you have a well organized EVP in your own country. Bring the basic model but allow for cultural adoptions. This builds a bridge between the two countries."*

*"Let locals run this as early as possible so they own it."*

*"Have an organizational structure that allows local volunteers to see they are part of a global effort. This creates pride to form a chapter that is part of whole organization and global movement yet they have the ability to direct their activities to the needs of the community and interests of the volunteers."*

*"Global communication is a key. You need a structure that allows global communication so you have common themes. It is the organizational hierarchy that helps the communication in framing examples, themes."*

*"Make sure everyone gets the same message at the same time through variety of communication methods."*

*"We did bring together all our EVPs and it was very successful. The EVPs learned from one another and created a strong bond by flying under one company flag."*

### **Check the Laws**

Several companies noted that just as cultural interpretations of volunteerism vary between countries, so do the many laws affecting EVPs.

*"Check the laws—some countries have strict laws on gatherings and the forming of groups for volunteering. "*

*"Be aware of local laws on fundraising, charitable giving and related financial issues."*

### **Build Motivation and Empowerment**

The companies structured their EVPs so that the local employees would be motivated and empowered to run their programs.

*“Group volunteering projects are a great way for people in a hierarchical setting to show their leadership.”*

*“Build enthusiasm by having those with enthusiasm and passion lead the activity.”*

Several of the companies addressed motivation through multi-faceted recognition strategies.

*“We promote a Global Volunteer of the Year Award in which the winners get flown to the States for lunch with the CEO and they also receive stock options. We also have a global Dollars for Doers Program.”*

*“Having a match of company money with volunteer efforts is important.”*

*“Recognition strategies should be a combination of local, country and international efforts.”*

### **Provide Information on Volunteer Management**

The companies understand that providing information on basics of volunteer management is also a key to their success.

*“Our biggest obstacle has been keeping people connected and involved.”*

*“Train people in volunteer management generics and relate them to the respective country.”*

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The [Points of Light Corporate Institute](#) is the go-to resource for community-minded companies looking to build and expand effective employee volunteer programs. With our global network of 250 affiliates and a team of experts, we can help you create a customized volunteer program, engage your employees, learn best practices, network with other leading companies, and gain visibility for leadership and excellence.

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