



Engaging Front Line Workers in Service

September 2014

These findings are drawn from a series of Learning Labs held in 2014, featuring presentations of CSR and employee volunteer leaders and practitioners from Corporate Service Council member companies. Thanks to the following speakers for providing their expertise and support in making this series possible: David Albritton, Exelis; Jessica Graham, Belk, Inc; Roger Hancock, CSAA Insurance Group; Malika Harrison, Alcoa Foundation; Kaye Morgan-Curtis, Newell Rubbermaid; Suzanne Osten, UnitedHealth Group; Jessica Rodell, University of Georgia; Gretchen Templin, Cummins Power Generation and Chris Waits, The Home Depot.

Engaging Front Line Workers in Service

How do you engage front line workers, such as factory floor, shop floor, call center, and remote and mobile workers in volunteering? Through a series of Learning Labs in 2014, Points of Light's Corporate Service Council (CSC) discovered key challenges, opportunities and best practices to inspire and engage this unique workforce in volunteer service.

Key considerations when engaging the front line include:

1. Providing flexible and meaningful volunteer opportunities at the workplace, including virtual and on-site activities;
2. Adopting policies, practices and infrastructure to make it easy for front line workers to participate;
3. Tailoring communications to fit the needs of the front line;
4. Engaging and equipping middle managers.

Findings also support the positive impact that volunteerism has on productivity and workplace behavior, and the valuable role that service can play in enhancing the engagement and retention of the front line. Additional insights and examples from the Learning Lab series are summarized in this brief.

What are the main challenges of engaging front line workers in service?

While a critical community goal of volunteerism is to drive social impact, a key goal for employers is often to increase engagement and participation among employees. There are unique challenges associated with engaging front line workers, however. These challenges vary depending on the function and schedule of the employee. They center on:

- **Scheduling:** Scheduling is especially a concern for managers needing to maintain consistent coverage and staffing levels, and for front line workers with limited ability to "step away" from their work.
- **Location or geography:** Location is also a challenge faced by telecommuters, remote or mobile workers.
- **Culture:** Organizational and cultural stigma or perception of volunteering as being separate from the core of the business and a distraction from work instead of supporting business and performance goals is also a challenge.
- **Policy:** Lack of clarity and awareness about volunteering policies and incentives, such as paid time off (PTO), Dollars for Doers and criteria on what the organization considers and does not consider to be volunteer activities.
- **Communication:** Communicating with workers who don't have access to e-mail during the day.
- **Middle Managers:** Gaining middle management support for enabling workers on the front line to volunteer. More than 70 percent of Learning Lab participants felt that middle managers at their companies only "somewhat" support volunteering, indicating that this is a prime area of opportunity for improvement.

What is the relationship between workplace attitudes and volunteer participation?

- Research by Jessica Rodell, Assistant Professor of Management at the Terry College of Business at the University of Georgia, finds that **employees gravitate toward meaningful volunteer experiences**, especially if they believe it can make up for a lack of meaning in their jobs. This has implications for front line workers and their managers, who may have performance and retention goals.
- Rodell's findings are drawn from a survey of 172 volunteers who participated in service projects organized by the United Way and Junior League, on behalf of employers. Her findings also support the argument that **employees who volunteer engage in more productive behaviors at work**.

What are best practices for engaging the front line?

Provide on-site service opportunities

- Creating **on-site service opportunities provides shift workers and workers who can't step away for long a convenient way to give their skills and time** to the community.
- Project examples from Cummins Power Generation include: Bundles of Love, where volunteers create newborn care packages for hospitals and needy families; Fridley Giving Garden, a vegetable garden maintained by volunteers on the manufacturing plant's grounds; Rice Creek Cleanup, where volunteers clear the creek from invasive species near the manufacturing plant.
- CSAA Insurance Group, a AAA insurer and winner of the Points of Light Corporate Engagement Award of Excellence, offers on-site projects like food sorting with Stop Hunger Now, teddy bear builds with BearsToGo.com and job shadowing opportunities through Junior Achievement.



Provide on-site and virtual opportunities like food sorting, teddy bear builds, park cleanups near the worksite, or job shadowing and microvolunteer opportunities.

Provide online or remote service opportunities

- **Online or remote service opportunities work well for telecommuters and travelling teams who can't access on-site projects**. As the Innovation Sponsor, UnitedHealth Group has had success with a VolunteerMatch mobile application that enables volunteers to find online virtual opportunities and track hours right from their smart phones. UnitedHealth Group also uses SkillsforChange.com, powered by Sparked, to provide microvolunteering opportunities—in increments as short as 15 minutes—for their remote and call center workers. Online mentoring also offers a great volunteer opportunity for telecommuters or mobile workers.

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- Finding a creative solution for remote workers, UnitedHealth Group encourages telecommuters to participate in service projects, each in their own locations on the same days, so they don't have to travel far and still feel like they are engaging in a team activity.
- At Newell Rubbermaid, travelling sales teams can access virtual volunteer opportunities, like doing translation work for schools, which help them feel connected to their communities.

Adopt policies and practices and design opportunities that work for workers and managers

While volunteer programs should align with corporate priorities and company culture should drive the effort, consider adopting these policies and practices:

- **Offer incentives and recognition like PTO for volunteering**, newsletter spotlights, simple incentives (like T-shirts), Dollars for Doers, or gamify the experience by awarding badges or creating individual, team or business unit competitions for most volunteer hours with prizes.

- CSAA Insurance Group offers 24 hours of PTO every year for volunteering, which increases to 80 hours if volunteers are trained by the American Red Cross (training is provided on company time and premises) and deployed to respond to a disaster. The company also offers volunteers a \$300 gift card after volunteering 30 hours through a Dollars for Doers program. Employees who volunteer 60 hours receive \$600 and those who volunteer 90 hours receive \$900 for their nonprofit partners.



Offer incentives and recognition for volunteering, such as Dollars for Doers, paid time off or gamify the experience by creating volunteer competitions with prizes.

- **Design volunteer opportunities based on what works for middle managers and their teams.** This includes on-site projects, creating space for service activities and storage of materials, having computers or kiosks where volunteers can engage in projects virtually, designating a team leader as the main point of contact, and engaging and equipping middle managers to make it easy for them to share service opportunities.
- **Determine whether your employees are looking to find meaning, social or networking opportunities, or professional development experiences** through volunteerism. Communicate these benefits of service projects when marketing them to employees. They want to choose options that are meaningful to them and want to choose when and how they volunteer.
- The Home Depot engages its store associates, including 35,000 veterans, through the Company's associate-led volunteer force Team Depot. Through this volunteer program, associates lead and participate in projects that improve the homes and lives of veterans all across the country, in partnership with groups like Team Rubicon and American Legion. **The Home Depot finds volunteering particularly helpful in increasing engagement among part-time workers**, who participate because they believe in the missions of their nonprofit partners and because volunteerism is supported by their managers.

- **Align your volunteer program with existing employee resource groups** or leadership development programs, and allow personal volunteering to count towards company goals.
- **Adopt the appropriate technology, infrastructure or resources** to train and equip volunteer leaders or middle managers, find volunteer opportunities, communicate policies, track and recognize volunteer hours and share success stories.

Tailor communications to fit the needs of the front line

- Many front line workers don't have regular access to email during the day, so **communicate volunteer opportunities through a variety of channels** and media.
- You can communicate opportunities through digital TVs, e-newsletters, break-room posters, intranet sites, social media, bulletin boards or paycheck stubs. Don't forget that middle managers and supervisors are the key drivers of the message, and they can be a powerful champion for volunteering through in-person communication and team meetings.

Engage and equip middle management

Middle managers are the critical bridge between program design and employee participation. Effective ways to engage them include:

- **Share the business case** and let middle managers know volunteering can support performance and business goals. For example, you can organize a CSR Boot Camp for middle managers where CSR teams can share the business case and toolkits with middle managers to help them support their teams in service activities.
- **Adopt a cross-functional approach** when designing your volunteer program and get feedback from middle managers so they can recommend what works for them and their teams.
- Belk, Inc. found that providing busy middle managers access to a toolbox of resources, including a calendar of volunteer activities, helped them better share opportunities.
- UnitedHealth Group found that sharing volunteer data collected through their annual Vital Signs Survey helped gain middle-management buy-in. When managers saw the volunteer rates in their departments, they were incentivized to drive up their numbers because they have seen first-hand that higher volunteerism rates are tied to higher employee engagement.



Share the business case for service with middle managers and share tools and information so they can easily support volunteer opportunities.

Conclusion

Corporate volunteerism is on the rise. As we continue to hear and see more and more stories of social and business impact, a natural question for corporate volunteer practitioners is: how can I expand my volunteer program and engage even more employees? This brief recommends strategies and best practices for engaging front line workers who face unique challenges to participate in volunteer activities. There are a number of things you can do to make it easy for the front line to participate, by offering on-site, online or remote opportunities, paid time off or other incentives, volunteer toolkits, tailoring your communication using a variety of channels and highlighting relevant benefits, and gaining the support of your middle managers.

In 2015, we look forward to sharing our next series of Learning Labs, which will address global volunteerism, social impact measures, and effectively engaging and preparing employees and partners for service.

Corporate Service Council

Points of Light Corporate Service Council (CSC) is the premier global platform for advancing corporate volunteerism. Since its inception in 2005, the CSC has convened an elite group of companies to leverage the power of corporate volunteerism to create change in communities. CSC members include more than 75 of the world's largest and most successful companies. To learn more about the CSC, visit:

www.pointsoflight.org/corporate-institute/corporate-offerings/corporate-service-council or contact corporateinstitute@pointsoflight.org.

About This Brief

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For additional resources on employee volunteerism, please visit: www.pointsoflight.org/corporate-institute/resources

The [Points of Light Corporate Institute](http://www.pointsoflight.org/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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