Survey finds volunteering programmes are a vital component of good corporate citizenship

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Pandemic lockdowns and the need for social distancing caused employee volunteering to decline in 2020 - but nine out of ten employees are keen to volunteer in future. This is according to research conducted by corporate responsibility consultancy Trialogue and employee volunteering platform forgood.

Cathy Duff, director at Trialogue

The first such research into employee perceptions of and participation in employee volunteering programmes (EVPs) saw Trialogue and forgood canvassing 493 respondents from eight companies, mostly Standard Bank (24%) and Liberty/Stanlib (20%).

According to Trialogue director Cathy Duff, EVPs are growing in popularity in South Africa, with most large companies now having them. Volunteers had a positive view of their companies, with more than 90% agreeing they would recommend the company as a good place to work, as well as recommend its products and services.

Two-thirds of volunteers in 2020 (65%) strongly agreed that a comprehensive EVP is a vital component of good corporate citizenship. Nine out of ten volunteers (90%) said their company's commitment to the community made them proud to work there, and almost one-third (32%) of employees had considered the company's EVP when deciding to join the company.

In 2021, two-thirds of companies (71%) indicated they had EVPs. But volunteering activity declined during the pandemic, with more than a quarter of companies and non-profit organisations (NPOs) saying that all volunteering ceased because of the pandemic. Additionally, three-quarters of employees surveyed (77%) reported that they did not volunteer in 2020, due to the virus, lockdowns, and social distancing requirements.

Duff explains: "Although many volunteering programmes were put on hold during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to some drop-off in interest in volunteering, virtual volunteering undoubtedly helped many employees to stay connected and experience a shared sense of purpose at a time of crisis. Almost one-fifth of companies introduced new

online volunteering programmes and 28% of companies shifted their existing volunteering programmes online."

The survey noted that although slightly more volunteers had volunteered in 2020 without company support (35%), one third of respondents (33%) had participated in company-organised group volunteering initiatives, followed by individual volunteering facilitated by their employer (29%). The most common type of volunteering in 2020 was time spent working with the end beneficiaries of an NPO (42%), followed by time spent providing other services to an NPO or charity (35%).

Of those respondents who did volunteer (23% of all respondents), a full 93% said they volunteered to give back to their community or country, 68% wanted to support a cause they cared about, and 29% did so to learn more about the needs in their communities. A further 11% said they volunteered to have an opportunity to interact with their colleagues, while 4% did so to gain recognition from their employer (4%) or to get time off work (1%).

"Encouragingly, nine out of ten employee respondents who did not volunteer in 2020 said they intended to volunteer in the future, with 49% saying they planned to volunteer in one to three years' time. Half of those that did not volunteer said they would volunteer if lockdowns were eased and the pandemic was brought under control, while 24% said that time off work to participate in volunteering initiatives would be a motivating factor (interestingly, only 1% said time off work had driven them to volunteer previously)," says Duff.

The survey found that social and community development (63%) and education (61%) were the most popular causes for employees who volunteered during 2020. This mirrors support from companies, which is focused on these two sectors. However, religious causes and animal welfare were both supported by more than 10% of employee respondents, despite being unpopular causes for companies.

According to respondents the top reasons for selecting an organisation were an alignment with the respondent's interests (70%) and the specific needs to which the organisation responds (61%). Respondents like to support causes physically close to home or work (39%) and organisations that can demonstrate proven impact (29%). Most volunteers (93%) feel their volunteering makes a positive difference to the organisations and beneficiaries they work with.

However, the survey found that volunteers would like to be involved in manual labour for NPOs (56%), followed by putting in volunteering time as a board member of an NPO or charity (46%), while only 17% and 11% respectively were actively involved in these activities in 2020. While 43% showed interest in providing fundraising assistance and 43% want to offer professional services to NPOs, only 27% and 11% of volunteers participated in these respective activities in 2020.

"This means there is a mismatch between what volunteers would like to be involved in and what they actually do. Therefore, gaining insight into why employees volunteer, and which causes they support, can help companies to design fit-for-purpose EVPs that inspire and motivate staff," concludes Duff.

Trialogue

Trialogue is one of only a few consultancies in South Africa that focus exclusively on corporate responsibility issues. Over 25 years of experience puts us at the forefront of new developments in sustainability and corporate social investment (CSI).

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