

Effects of The Pandemic on Employee Community Engagement

Joint report from Volunteer Canada & Volunteer Ireland

October 2020

Introduction

The health, economic, and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic¹ has created unprecedented challenges for the public, private, and non-profit sector, as well as on the relationships between sectors. Volunteer Canada, in collaboration with Volunteer Ireland, sought to better understand how this global crisis has affected the field of employee community engagement² and how best to support employees “giving back” as we move through the pandemic towards recovery. This snapshot of the employee community engagement lens of COVID-19 was drawn from the insights of business CSR leaders in Canada and Ireland³ between July and September 2020.

Gathering Insights

A short survey was completed by fifty Canadian and Irish companies representing a range of industries: professional services (27%), financial (17%), technology (12%) and energy (10%); with 62% having fewer than 2,500 employees and 19% having 2,500-5,000 employees. To delve deeper into some of the findings, eight

respondents (four from each country) participated in a round table discussion. Other studies conducted during this period on the impact of the pandemic on volunteering and on the charitable and non-profit sector were also reviewed to provide context.

Context

In the spring of 2020, most employee community engagement activities were postponed or cancelled as workplaces adapted to remote working, essential service-providers adopted new safety practices, and the global anti-racism movement gained momentum.⁴ Yet businesses were called upon to respond to these societal challenges, while also attending to the health and well-being of their employees and businesses. Non-profit organizations reported closing programs and services, older adults withdrawing from volunteering, challenges transitioning to virtual formats, financial distress, and increased demands for services to vulnerable populations.⁵



Key Findings

New Directions and Goals

Prior to the pandemic, the priority goals for employee community engagement programs for both countries were: *employee well-being; improving employee understanding of community issues; and employee team development*. In Canada, improving brand reputation and recognition was also reported as a top priority. Since the pandemic, it emerged that *employee well-being* was the highest goal for employee community engagement initiatives according to businesses in both countries. There was acknowledgement from companies about the important part employee health and well-being plays in retention of employees. The top two directives from senior leadership were to: (1) create virtual volunteering opportunities and (2) celebrate employee volunteer efforts internally.

“ How can I ask employees to give or volunteer when they are balancing work-from-home, caring for children, supporting elderly parents, and dealing with job insecurity? At the same time, we know that opportunities to give can also enhance a sense of well-being and empowerment.

Program Adaptations

The activities within employee community engagement programs shifted over time. Prior to the pandemic, most companies had a large range of activities, including group volunteering, workplace giving campaigns and company-sponsored events where employees volunteer. Since the pandemic was declared, Canadian businesses moved from company-organized to employee-initiated activities and anticipate by 2021 an increased emphasis on skills-based volunteering and learning opportunities for employees on community issues and challenges facing the non-profit sector. In Ireland, businesses moved from a focus on company-organized volunteering to a focus on charitable giving activities such as matching employee donations and payroll deduction. Irish companies anticipated an increase in skills-based volunteering and a return to volunteering organized by the company by 2021.

“ We want to give our non-profit partners the help that they really need and in the beginning, that was mostly funding. Now we are both getting ready for the next phase.

Changes in Prevalence of Types of Employee Community Engagement Initiatives	Prevalence Pre COVID		March - August 2020		Anticipated for Aug - Dec 2020	
Type of Initiative	CA	IRE	CA	IRE	CA	IRE
Activities that focus on education such as live or virtual tours of non-profit organizations; lunch & learns						
Company-organized group volunteering						
Company-sponsored events where employees volunteer						
Employee-organized group volunteering						
Financial support to employee run/walk/ride-type fundraising teams						
Green/sustainability activities employees could participate in (other than raising money or volunteering, or waste disposal)						
Match employee donations						
Match employee volunteering outside workhours to donations						
Paid time from work for individual volunteering						
Payroll deduction giving program						
Support employees to engage in skills-based volunteering or pro-bono projects with non-profit partners						
Workplace giving campaigns						

Key - Highest Prevalence: Medium Prevalence: Lowest Prevalence:

Virtual Volunteering

Prior to the pandemic, virtual volunteering was a relatively small part of employee community engagement in Ireland (8%) and Canada (11%). Since the pandemic, it represents over half of corporate volunteering roles and companies expect this level of virtual activity to continue into 2021. In a separate study,⁶ half of Canadian non-profit organizations (53%) reported they have roles, or plan to adapt volunteer roles, to take place virtually. It was recognized that many volunteer roles cannot be easily adapted to digital or remote options.

Current and Anticipated Challenges

Health and safety concerns permeate the challenges of both countries presently and as they look to the near future. Businesses in both countries ranked their top four current concerns exactly the same:

Looking ahead, the highest anticipated challenge for employee community engagement during the pandemic remains health and safety in both countries. While other top challenges are ranked differently by each country, the combined data demonstrates shared concern about finding virtual ways for employees to support community while also being sensitive to employee needs and interests.

Highest Anticipated Challenges for Ireland

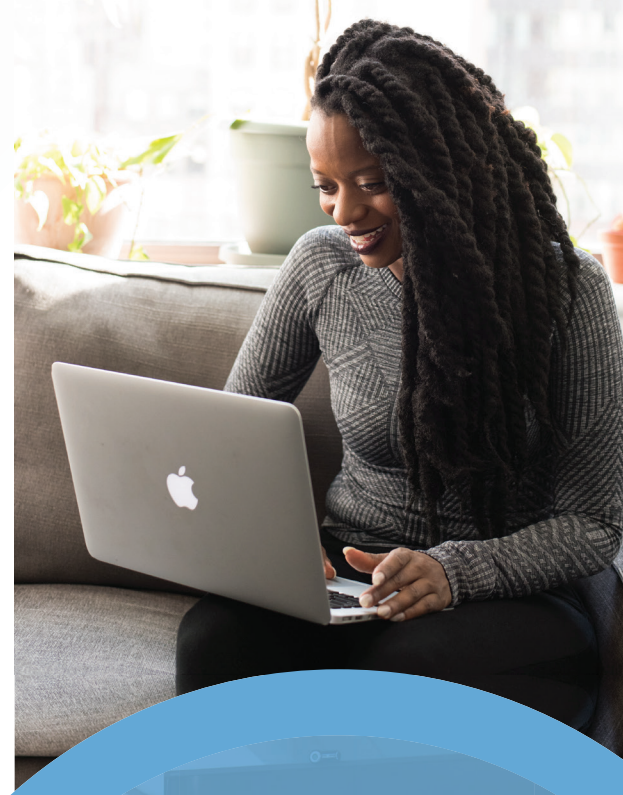
- No.1** Health and safety concerns
- No.2** Lack of volunteer opportunities to match employee interest
- No.3** Engaging diverse employees
- No.4** Re-engaging employees
- No.5** Keeping employees in virtual opportunities engaged
- No.6** Making requests to employees in an unstable employment climate

Highest Anticipated Challenges for Canada

- No.1** Health and safety concerns
- No.2** Not being able to support non-profits in the ways they need
- No.3** Re-engaging employees
- No.4** Lack of volunteer opportunities to match employee interest
- No.5** Making requests to employees in an unstable employment climate
- No.6** Keeping employees in virtual opportunities engaged

Top Concerns

- No.1** Community partners we previously worked with do not have opportunities
- No.2** Available opportunities are in-person and we are not supporting in-person opportunities
- No.3** Employees may be volunteering on their own but they are not sharing this information with us
- No.4** Difficulty recruiting employee volunteers



Implications for Corporate-Community Relations

With these complexities on their minds, it comes as little surprise that businesses in both Canada and Ireland share the same ranking for top areas where they need employee community engagement support: 1) volunteering safely; 2) finding volunteering opportunities (with a focus on identifying virtual and skills-based opportunities), and; 3) working with non-profit organisations to create opportunities that support their needs.

“ We are seeking opportunities that meet both the objectives of our company’s corporate employee giving program and the needs in our communities.

More than ever, employee community engagement programs play a vital role in the health and well-being of employees and their local, national and international communities. The societal changes brought on by the pandemic compel companies to maintain an adaptable approach to employee community engagement programmes, fostering creative approaches to volunteering and giving and learning alongside their community partners.



The situation also calls for companies and non-profits to work together in new ways. Companies have begun to listen closely to what

non-profits need and to be creative with the type of in-kind and skilled support they provide. Now is an opportune time to deepen the relationship between employees and the issues and challenges facing their communities. Lunch and learns and skilled virtual volunteering opportunities support employees to stay engaged and to learn about a specific non-profit, community issue or international challenge.



Skills-based volunteering, favoured by businesses in both countries, requires planning and resources from both the non-profit and company. As such, they should enter into these projects together with this awareness and consider acquiring the support of an experienced facilitating organisation.

Non-profits may not have the time to arrange volunteering or other opportunities for corporate employees. Companies must base the support they provide to non-profits on an understanding of their needs and may need to develop independent ways to support them, such as a fundraiser or sourcing needed supply donations. At the same time, non-profits must become very clear about what they need and should ensure their limited resources are used on corporate partnerships that drive change and increase organisational stability.

References

1. [The World Health Organization](#) declared the novel corona virus, COVID-19, a pandemic on March 15, 2020.
2. Employee community engagement is defined as company-supported activities undertaken by employees to make a positive impact on social or environmental issues. Examples include: volunteering, donating, learning activities, civic action, use of social media, responsible purchasing or waste disposal.
3. [As of September 7, 2020](#), there were 26,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Ireland (6,000 cases per million) and 118,000 confirmed cases in Canada (3,500 per million people).
4. [Black Lives Matter](#) and other social justice organizations mobilized global demonstrations against anti-black racism and systemic inequities, following the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020.
5. Volunteer Ireland (2020), [The Impact of COVID-19 on Volunteering in Ireland](#); IPSOS Public Affairs & Volunteer Canada (July 2020), [The Volunteering Lens of COVID-19](#) survey, reported on the experiences of close to 1000 non-profits and volunteers in Canada; Imagine Canada (June 2020), [Sector Monitor: Charities and the COVID 19 Pandemic](#).
6. IPSOS Public Affairs & Volunteer Canada (July 2020), [The Volunteering Lens of COVID-19](#).



Support & Resources

[Volunteer Ireland](#) and [Volunteer Canada](#) continue to work with businesses, non-profits, volunteers, and communities to strengthen corporate employee community engagement and to address the health, social, and economic impacts of the pandemic.

Resources to support employee volunteering can be found here:

www.volunteer.ca
www.volunteer.ie

