Developing a new Employee Volunteer Programme

Volunteer
Ireland
Obair Dheonach Éireann

Employee volunteer programmes come in many different styles and formats. There is, no one-size fits all and it's important that each company implements a programme that works for them, that interests their employees, meets an identified need in the community and fits with their company values, aims and objectives.

When starting out we would recommend starting small. Engage in some smaller scale activities at first, building interest and ensuring employees have a good experience and a positive impact on the cause or community.

What causes or charities should we support?

A great place to start is to ask employees what organisations and causes they would be interested in supporting. Choosing organisations that are close to employee's hearts can help to increase engagement and participation in employee volunteering activities. Another approach is to align your chosen cause or charity with your organisation's strategy, products/services, and/or the skills your employees have to offer.

Some other things to ask yourself:
Are there particular non-profits or causes (STEM, youth, education, older people, environment, disability) you would like to support or are you happy to support a range of charities and community groups?
Will your company support registered charities only or include the many smaller community groups such as Tidy Towns and resident associations? When starting out you might consider supporting a wider range of causes and organisations, including those that are not registered charities. This will give you greater flexibility when identifying volunteer opportunities thereby allowing you to support a wide variety of local and grassroots organisations in the community.

Should we select a charity of the year?

Selecting a charity of the year is a good option for some companies and depends on what stage you are at in developing corporate social responsibility in your company. Choosing a charity of the year allows you to support a non-profit in a more sustainable fashion i.e. financially and provides you and your employees with greater insights into their work and the challenges they face. Many companies who choose a charity of the year continue to support other groups and organisations during this time.

How many volunteer days do employees usually get?

Most companies give 1-2 employee volunteer days. That said there are companies that give their employees 3, 4 and even up to 7 days. From our conversations with companies here in Volunteer Ireland it seems that the average uptake on company volunteer days is between 10-20% so we recommend starting with 1 or 2 days.

How and when will employees take these days?

There are a number of things to consider here. Will you develop a long-term financial partnership with a charity who may also be in a position to provide you with an agreed number of volunteer slots or activities across the year?

Will the company organise volunteer activities or will you encourage teams to source their own opportunities? While encouraging teams to source their own opportunities may be easier for the company it puts pressure on the non-profit sector to respond to the many, many small teams contacting them in an ad-hoc manner.

Will you allow employees who volunteer outside of work to use their volunteer days or take a day in lieu, for the volunteering they do in a personal capacity? It's worth considering this as it helps build a strong culture of volunteering and recognises and celebrates those staff who are already actively engaged and passionate about giving back.

How will we resource volunteering within our company?

Remember, volunteering doesn't happen without someone (often a team of people) planning, recruiting and managing the activities. It's important that those at the highest level of the company understand this and support the employee volunteer programme. Like any other part of your business this is an area that requires time and human resources to ensure it is managed well, staff are engaging and it is of benefit to you, your employees and the community.

Where will responsibility for the programme lie? Companies often designate a lead department and at the same time set responsibilities and targets for volunteer engagement across all departments. Some companies put a community committee or employee resource in place to help ensure the company is responding to employee interests and ideas at the grassroots level.

What sort of finances will be made available to support employee volunteering? When setting budgets think about the costs of volunteering, the cost of supplies and materials, donations or maybe you would prefer to support a charity at a higher level through a charity partnership.

Is a volunteer day the same as a company day out?

If planning a company 'day out' you will pay a company that specialises in running group events or activities and the main aim is usually to build relationships as a team. Volunteering works differently! The main aim of a volunteer day is to achieve an agreed outcome for the charity, while working as a team. Often a result of this is building team relationships but the focus is to deliver for the charity.

When volunteering you are partnering with a charity that has a mission and a client group that is their top priority. They may not have the time or resources to engage with you or they may know nothing about company volunteering. Keep in mind: most charities do not have a list of volunteer projects or activities already developed; it may take them time to figure out how you can help and they will likely develop a project or activity just for you; they may not be experts in engaging a volunteer group so you will need to work together to make sure the volunteer activity is successful and meaningful; they will assume you will complete your volunteer project or activity to a high standard and your company will be viewed according to the standard of volunteer engagement.

Should we set targets around employee volunteering?

While volunteering should not be mandatory, setting targets for managers around employee volunteer engagement can help to make sure volunteering is on the agenda, is resourced and takes place in a meaningful, sustainable and impactful way for all parties. When companies take responsibility for organising and managing employee volunteer opportunities, targets are more likely to be met. Setting and tracking targets also supports the ability to report on employee volunteering activities internally and externally.

How will I find volunteer opportunities for my employees?

Sourcing volunteer opportunities is a time and resource intensive activity. There is no single list of corporate specific volunteer opportunities which generally means that companies must reach out to community organisations to establish partnerships and develop ways to work together and support one another. Keep in mind that not all community groups are looking to or are in a position to engage teams of volunteers, so finding the right activity might take some time.

Along with connecting into your employee's personal networks we recommend reading our guides on 'Routes to Developing Employee Volunteering' and 'Looking for Employee Volunteering Ideas?'

Do we need insurance?

You will need to check with the group you are volunteering with along with your own insurance company. Many community organisations will already have volunteers and a listing of volunteer activities added to their volunteer policy and in this case you should be covered under their current insurance.

If a volunteer slipped or tripped separate to the volunteer activity e.g. on a wet bathroom floor then the volunteer should be covered under the organisation's public liability insurance.

The company's own insurance usually covers employees traveling to and from the volunteer activity.

What database will I use? How will I record data about my employee volunteer programme?

Companies with larger, more established volunteer programmes often employ an online reporting platform database to keep track of their employee volunteer opportunities and volunteer engagement. There are a range of databases out there from Benevity to HandsOnConnect, Your Cause + Blackbaud, Deedmob and so on.

Be aware that when you purchase , or set up, a reporting platform – That while they provide you with a way to log and track your data such as numbers of employees volunteering, hours contributed etc - they do not come with a list of a pre-identified volunteer opportunities. The volunteer opportunities must still be identified and posted platform or internet by your company and relationships with non-profits managed.

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