



Your Strategy is Our Business

Critical Job Skills Don't Care Where They're Learned: The Business Case for Development Through Volunteering

You would think that 396 of the largest companies in the US would have robust workforce development strategies.

Not so fast. Even [some of these companies](#) have gaps in their talent development and HR processes when you consider promotions, rewards, and retention.

It's safe to assume that most of the remaining [8,299,604 US-based companies](#) have gaps in their employee development programs as well.

There's still a reason to be optimistic. Important job skills don't have to be developed at work. In fact, strategically-curated off-the-job volunteer activity is [often mentioned](#) as a valuable development option but remains in the shadows of its company-sponsored alternatives (on-the-job, formal learning, learning from others, etc.)

Some important considerations related to developing skills through volunteer work:

- **Strategically-Curated** – Companies need to be clear on the skills they want to develop AND choose volunteer assignments accordingly. While placing flyers on windshields is critical to a non-profit's mission and noble in and of itself, it alone will not likely advance important workforce skills.
- **One-and-Done** – There are countless opportunities for employees to participate in short-term volunteer events less than a day. These too are noble and valuable, but don't count on them to build skills. Prolonged exposure to development activity (e.g. once a week for a year or more) is a vital part of leveraging volunteerism as a workforce development strategy.
- **Different is Good** – Working with or leading volunteers eliminates the commitment that normally accompanies traditional paid work. As a result, volunteers will realize the value of personalized engagement strategies like leveraging an organizational mission and vision, an inclusive mindset, facilitation (v. directing), asking (v. telling), retention, and productivity.
- **Low-Risk Laboratory** – Volunteer organizations tend to have cultures that allow more latitude in terms of acceptable behavior on the part of their volunteers. Further, the impact of a mistake tends to be less severe relative to a comparable mistake in the workplace. Combined, volunteer opportunities tend to be a "safe space" for employees to try out new skills.

Want Some Examples?

An informal survey of our colleagues revealed the job-related skills they developed through their own volunteer work. Just a few of these are:





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Preparation/Presentation/Vocal Variety – If these are important for your business, there’s nothing like holding a microphone in a gym filled with 250 people to build them. Mistakes are amplified (literally)...particularly those that involve pronouncing a player’s name.

Being accurate on the mic is table stakes, but Athletic Directors and Coaches rely on the announcer to inject energy and fun into each event too. Vocal variety is critical.

Team Leadership & Executive Presence – The opportunity to develop a mission/vision/strategy is relatively rare as a paid employee leader, but common when leading volunteers. Add that volunteer leadership accentuates the need for alternative engagement strategies (see [Different is Good](#) section above). All of these activities demand that the volunteer convey confidence and hone in on an effective and natural leadership style.

Diversity and Inclusion – If your business requires engaging with diverse internal or external populations, consider leveraging volunteer assignments dedicated to helping groups with whom employees don’t typically work (e.g., high school students, homeless, incarcerated, etc.) Volunteers in this situation cite learning the importance of empathy, broadened communications skills, interpersonal adaptability, problem-solving, and many other skills with direct application to their paid gig.

Technical Knowledge – Does your team need to grow their financial acumen? There is no shortage of organizations that need help tracking and reporting their financial results. Most neighborhoods even have resident volunteers to do “the basics” in support of its P&L! Even if an employee starts with nothing, many volunteer organizations will accommodate volunteers who want to learn from their financial volunteers or retrieve financial data. Supply Chain, HR, Operations, Warehousing & Transportation are just a few of the myriad of technical disciplines where your employees can gain knowledge through volunteering.

And don’t forget that volunteers benefit more from understanding the “why?” of their assignment. Encourage them to become clear on the mission/vision/strategy of the organizations for which they volunteer.

Want to Get Started?

While the value of developing your workforce through volunteer work is clear, how to establish a formal program may not be. The Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) captures [common issues that companies face](#) when launching volunteer programs. This is worth reviewing early in your decision process. (Subscription may be required.)

Differentiating work performed as part of a company’s volunteer program from the employee’s “regular” on-the-job work can be challenging – particularly when 1) it is suggested or mandated by





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a manager and 2) longer-term. The SHRM article referenced above touches on legal issues in this context. We also recommend consulting with your employment attorney.

Thanks to [Christina Olsen](#) for her thoughts on an earlier draft!

Share what you learned by volunteering [here](#). We'll publish additional themes as they arise.

Comments or questions? Email rick@talentalignment.net or click the  icon on [our site](#).

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