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[Wes Gay](#) Under 30

I discover how companies find and keep great millennial talent.

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4 Reasons Why A Corporate Volunteer Program Is A Smart Investment

An article in the November issue of [Harvard Business Review](#) says \$160 billion is spent annually on employee training and education in the U.S. Globally, that number is more than \$350 billion. Yet despite the significant amount of money spent, the article reports many leaders believe these programs do not bring lasting change.

But what programs can work? How can leaders bring lasting change to their company?

The answer to these questions lies in the growing trend of corporate volunteer programs. [Mars, Incorporated](#), the company behind brands like Wrigley and M&M's, places a high value on volunteer programs for their associates. One program they offer is the Mars Volunteer Program, or MVP for short.



Corporate volunteer programs are an effective way to engage millennial employees. (Credit: Shutterstock)

“We want to make it available to as many associates as possible,” says Kelly McGrail, Global Staff Officer, Corporate Communications, Mars, Incorporated. The company pays up to 16 hours per year for associates to volunteer in their communities. Mars, Inc. associates logged more than 90,000 volunteer hours globally in 2015.

Many companies now offer some form of paid time off for volunteer opportunities, but Mars goes a step further in what they offer associates. Along with the MVP, they also have the Mars Ambassador Program, or MAP for short.

About 90 ambassadors are chosen each year out of 80,000 associates worldwide. “The associate is selected for a great opportunity for development and to learn something [associated with their jobs]. This marries strategic imperatives with associate development,” notes McGrail.

Why are these programs worth the personnel and financial investment? Here are 4 ways a volunteer program produces a high ROI for a company.

1. Improved collaboration

One way programs like MVP or MAP can impact daily business is increased collaboration among team members. Many companies assume more meetings means more collaboration. Or if the office space is open, collaboration will improve.

Those who have tried these two approaches know collaboration does not accidentally improve. *Collaboration improves when people trust others more*, and volunteer opportunities are a great way to strengthen trust.

“The magic happens in these programs when you bring together these folks from different backgrounds and different generations,” says Annette Aitkenhead, Senior Manager Global Community Engagement Manager, Mars, Incorporated. “There are opportunities to connect with each other on a human level that you don’t find in an office environment,” notes Lacy Reinhardt, Learning Manager for Banfield Pet Hospital.

2. Increased self-awareness

A team of Ambassadors from Mars spent a week this October in New Orleans, LA, doing volunteer vet work under their Banfield Pet Hospital brand. They did everything from a free vet clinic in the lower 9th Ward to educational programs in local schools.

One of the people on the trip, Dr. Andrea Sanchez, told me how the trip helped give her a better understanding of herself. “[This trip] helped me to be more self aware in my situations with people, particularly when you’re stressed out with little sleep in difficult conditions.”

Greater self-awareness is not simply a feeling from a volunteer experience. It directly affects decision-making, coordination, and conflict management. In fact, [this study shows](#) significant improvements in those areas when self-awareness is higher.

3. Impact on revenue

Providing volunteer opportunities goes far beyond feeling good. Employees who participate in these programs often become more engaged in their daily work, and increased engagement directly impacts the bottom line. A study done by SAP showed [roughly \\$40 million revenue](#) fluctuation when employee engagement rose or fell by just 1%.

Julie Clugage runs [Team4Tech](#), a non-profit focused on connecting large tech firms to global non-profits. They lead employees from companies like Adobe and Intel on trips around the world to places like Costa Rica and South Africa. Their focus is on equipping these non-profits with the tech support they need to thrive.

Clugage has led a number of trips around the world, and she’s seen additional revenue benefits for companies trying to retain top millennial talent. “The cost benefit around recruitment and retention for the investment is cheap,” she notes. She points to [one study indicating](#) it costs \$15,000 – \$25,000 to replace a millennial employee. The small investment in a volunteer program can save a company thousands in retention alone.

4. Important to millennials

Earlier this year, Gallup [released a massive survey](#) focusing on millennials. They discovered roughly half of the generation values things other than salary when searching for a new job, and opportunities for growth and development sit atop the list.

What does this mean for employers? Those who want to keep great millennial talent create ways to more fully engage them. While millennials do bear the [job-hopper](#) label, they are more likely to stay when opportunities for development exist.

This generation also looks for opportunities to give back in tangible ways. The [2015 Millennial Impact](#) report indicates 77% of millennials prefer to donate their skills instead of their money. “This generation is so altruistically motivated,” says Dr. Sanchez. “They want to leave their world better than they found it.”

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