

# Boost employee engagement: 5 steps to building a corporate volunteerism program

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A company is only as good as the people who bring its business plan to life.

Study after study has shown the value of having an engaged workforce, both to the company and employees, but employee engagement data reflects a dismal reality.

Gallup, a leading public opinion pollster, has researched the issue extensively and has found that for the last three years only about 30 percent of employees in the US say they are engaged at work.

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About 50 percent say they are not engaged and the rest are “actively disengaged.” In other words, about two out of three American workers feel dispirited, and that adds up to a lot of wasted brainpower and stagnation.

One way for employers to drive engagement is to revitalize employees with a greater sense of purpose that extends beyond cubicles and into communities, showing the real-world impact of their skills through volunteerism and community engagement. The Committee Encouraging Corporate Philanthropy has found that these types of programs are being offered by more and more companies.

I spoke with Deborah K. Holmes, Americas director of corporate responsibility at Ernst & Young (EY), about how to create programs that support employee engagement while also aligning with your company’s core strengths to make the most impact on benefitting communities.

Here are five steps to take to develop an international corporate volunteerism program or a skills-based volunteerism program in your own community

## 1. Focus efforts on issues that match your strengths and purpose

Corporate volunteerism efforts have the biggest impact when they leverage the strengths of your employees and your core business as well as your organization’s purpose or mission.

Entrepreneurship is a natural fit for EY, since the firm has helped many ambitious companies grow into market leaders. So its EY Vantage Program aligns well as the program selects top-performing professionals to provide free support to high-impact entrepreneurs in emerging markets to help grow their businesses.

The EY Earthwatch Ambassadors program also embodies the organization’s commitment to entrepreneurs, with a focus on minimizing environmental impacts, by sending professionals to Brazil and Mexico to provide skills-based volunteer services to businesses and to engage in dynamic scientific field research.



Image provided by Getty Images (Susan Chiang)

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Similarly, IBM's Corporate Service Corps program sends groups of employees to emerging markets for community-based assignments focused on technology issues.

## **2. Explore how those skills can be applied in the community**

Whether in an emerging market or your own backyard, once you determine those skills, match them with the need in the marketplace, such as different charities, education groups, or small businesses that could benefit.

For instance, companies in the financial services, education, or technology sectors could consider teaching financial literacy to K-12 students through Junior Achievement (JA). Imagine if your employees could teach one-hour sessions to their own children's schools or in disadvantaged communities nearby

## **3. Find the right partner**

Some companies work in conjunction with a nonprofit partner that really understands the issues to create their volunteerism programs. Nonprofits highly value skilled volunteers from corporate partners to achieve their mission, so it's a win-win.

EY works with Endeavor for the EY Vantage program and AT&T's Aspire Mentoring Academy has connected with a team of nonprofits including national-level service providers such as Big Brothers Big Sister of America to create local employee mentoring opportunities where there are concentrations of AT&T employees.

## **4. Foster employee participation through open understanding**

Encourage employee engagement through an open understanding of where and when volunteerism efforts take place and provide ongoing support. Volunteerism happens in many different ways, and employers must realize that flexibility is key to encourage, facilitate, and support participation.

Employers should clearly illustrate which options are available to employees – short- or long-term, online or in-person, at the worksite or at a local charity –and work with their nonprofit partner to provide training, if needed.

Many top companies allow employees to volunteer during working hours, like Bank of America, which offers employees two hours of paid time off a week to volunteer.

At Microsoft, many employees integrate volunteering into their daily lives. Each volunteer works out what works best for them. Some volunteer a few hours a month, as they can, while others are able to dedicate near second shifts as nonprofit volunteers. In total, employees contributed more than 570,000 volunteer hours in 2015.

## **5. Leverage volunteerism to build leadership skills**

Many volunteerism efforts, like serving on a nonprofit board, not only benefit the community but your employees by helping them build critical leadership skills.

It also presents an opportunity to reward and recognize top performers. Kelly Haynie at EY, for example, put her skills to work pro bono for an entrepreneur as part of the EY Vantage program. An executive recruiter in Houston, Kelly went from mostly handling recruiting to advising Enox, a start-up in Brazil, on how to retain and motivate talent, in a market where labor laws are very different from Texas.

EY's internal metrics show that Vantage advisors return with significantly higher engagement, stay longer, and 96 percent of participants say the program helped develop their leadership skills.

Companies that align their business strategy, strengths, and mission with corporate volunteerism help to develop leaders, engage employees, and transform lives in emerging markets and their own backyards.



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