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Can Volunteer Work Can Hurt Your Career?

By Chad Brooks, Business News Daily Senior Writer July 10, 2016 07:43 am EST

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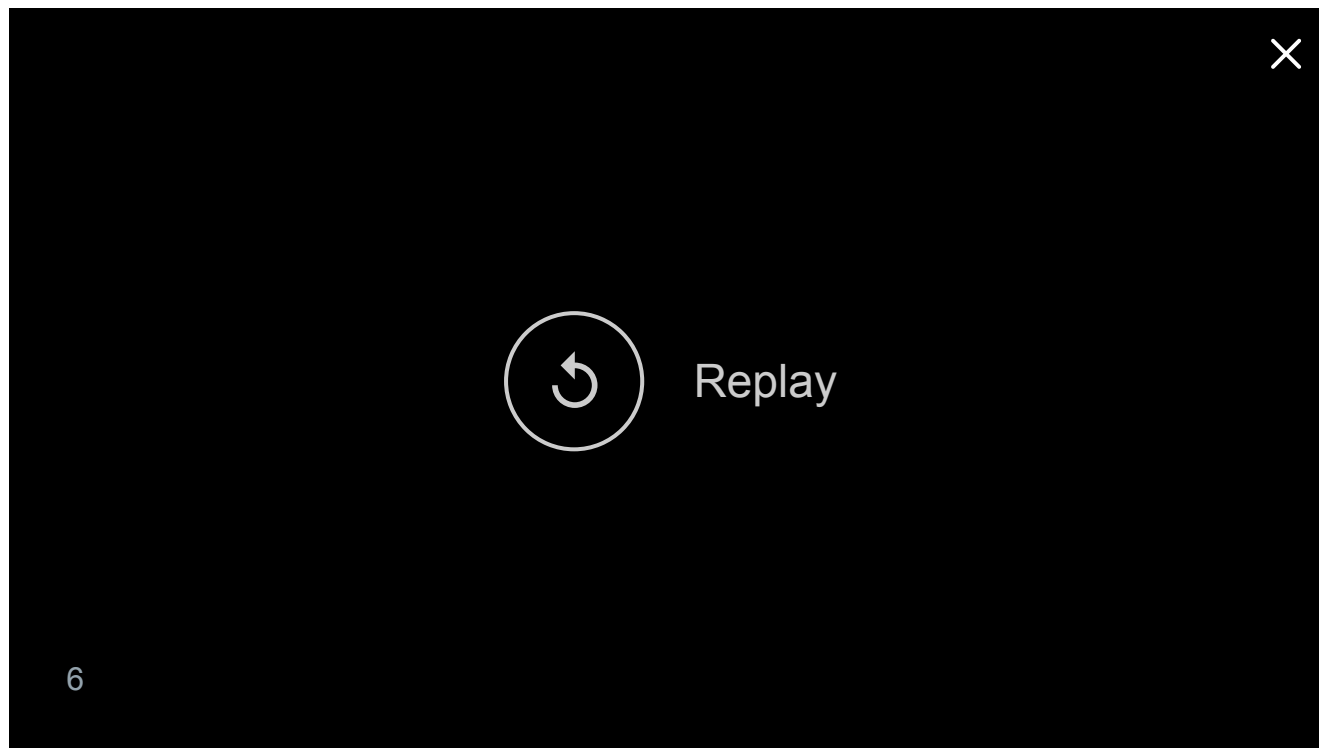


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It might seem like only positives could come from volunteering in the community. But new research finds that it can actually damage your reputation around the office if you do it for the wrong reasons.

Co-workers and supervisors form negative opinions of employees who volunteer simply to enhance their images and get ahead, found a study from the [University of Georgia](#). Only when employees' charitable efforts are intrinsically motivated do their colleagues hold these individuals in high regard.

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"Volunteering is a behavior that traditionally has little to do with work," Jessica Rodell, the study's lead author and an associate professor at the University of Georgia's Terry College of Business, [said in a statement](#). "It's something that can be done with your kids' school or through your church, but it turns out that this behavior can have a real impact on how people view you at work."

There are several reasons volunteering can have negative consequences. The researchers said colleagues may find volunteers to be smug or superior, or think that they are forsaking their office work in order to volunteer. In addition, they might think co-workers are volunteering just to get credit. **[See Related Story: [Need a Job? Volunteer](#)]**

"We're very attuned to certain social cues that help us determine why people do certain things, like volunteering, and there are very real consequences for that," Rodell said.

How company leaders perceive charitable efforts can have a real impact on how an employee is rewarded at work, Rodell added.

"If you have two people who have the exact same performance ratings at their job, but one of them volunteered for what appeared to be good reasons, that person would be more likely to get a raise or promotion, because that volunteering positively affects their reputation at work," she said.

The researchers said co-workers can form a number of positive opinions of their colleagues who volunteer. Such workers are often viewed as thoughtful, caring and good at time management, which can reflect well in the business environment.

"As co-workers, we are OK with the fact that someone might personally benefit from their volunteer work, with the caveat that they are also doing it for good reasons," Rodell said.

The researchers said their results show the importance of volunteering for the "right" reasons.

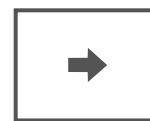
"Employees should know that if they're going to volunteer, it's going to have consequences depending on how they manage it," Rodell said. "And, if done for the right reasons, it's ultimately going to benefit them."

The study, which was recently published in the Academy of Management Journal, was co-authored by John Lynch, a former University of Georgia graduate student and current assistant professor at University of Illinois at Chicago.

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Chad Brooks

Chad Brooks is a Chicago-based freelance writer who has nearly 15 years experience in the media business. A graduate of Indiana University, he spent nearly a decade as a staff reporter for the Daily Herald in suburban Chicago, covering a wide array of topics including, local and state government, crime, the legal system and education. Following his years at the newspaper Chad worked in public relations, helping promote small businesses throughout the U.S. Follow him on [Twitter](#).



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