Why You Should Volunteer Before Launching Your Career

Published September 14, 2016

Entrepreneur.com

With the weight of the world's future resting on modern students, young people are bombarded with advice from the get-go on college majors, internships, salaries and beyond. On some level, it's understandable: this world is a competitive one and we all want success for ourselves, our families, our economy. But what if instead of entering the workforce with money and power as the only goal posts, our careers were informed by developing our more selfless interests, too?

For me, volunteering was not so much a choice I made than it was something I felt compelled to do, partly due to my Jewish heritage and partly due to my urge to make a difference. After joining Dartmouth College Hillel's Project Preservation, I led two separate trips to Eastern Europe -- Belarus and the Ukraine, respectively -- where my classmates and I worked to rebuild Jewish cemeteries destroyed under Nazi occupation.

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These trips were incredibly formative for me, perhaps more so than any classes I took during my college career. By the time I graduated and moved to New York to start my career in real estate, I better understood my abilities and instincts not only as a businessman but as a human.

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Some people are so eager to get out there and start working their way up the corporate ladder that they forget to develop their sense of self. I think volunteering is one way to prepare young people for the world to come, both career-wise and on personal level. Here's why:

Volunteering gives you a sense of perspective.

It's easy to have an inflated sense of self-worth as a young person; some may even say it's natural. But the last thing you want entering the workforce is to preserve this state of invincibility -- you are not and never will be invincible. On a similar note, your problems are not the only ones that matter; the world can be your oyster if you want it to be, but it isn't yours alone.

Volunteering knocked me down a couple of pegs. Knowing -- and witnessing, via the destruction of their cemeteries -- how the Jewish people suffered under Nazi occupation, my perspective on life was altered. It didn't matter as much if a teacher, friend, or colleague didn't like me. I could handle my personal and professional issues with a level head.

Most forms of volunteering involve providing aid to those in need. When you have the privilege to be on the helping side and not the needy side, you realize how blessed you are. This attitude goes a long way when you start your career without a chip on your shoulder.

It helps with time management.

Juggling volunteering with academics, family, and a social life was not an easy feat for me; nor I imagine would it be for anyone. One major reason people don't volunteer is because they think they don't have the time.

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You could really make this excuse for anything: "I don't have time to go to the gym," some say, or "I don't have time to cook." True, some people may not have the time for volunteering, let alone other activities, but the truth is most of us can make time if we want to. This takes time management, and a lot of it.

Being able to juggle school with volunteering and an active personal life is good preparation for the workforce. Young professionals often get a grunt of the workload and are expected to handle it if they want to advance. Volunteering teaches you to manage your time in an organized way so that you can balance your priorities and still squeeze in the occasional happy hour.

You develop new skills and passions.

Few people choose organizations to volunteer for arbitrarily. Finding a philanthropy that fits your personality and values can be just as important as finding a career that does and I would make the case that finding the former first helps with the latter.

Through volunteering, I learned how to be a leader; I learned to value teamwork and collaboration. Looking back, I can also see the parallels between my volunteer work and the career I've built since then. In Eastern Europe I restored and rebuilt cemeteries to preserve their histories; today, I oversee real estate development and restorations in historic NYC neighborhoods. It's not the same, but there are overlapping themes about preserving history and community I'd be foolish to deny.

People who volunteer with animals from a young age may find that they want to go into veterinary sciences, or they may simply develop a strong compassion for underdogs. People who help the homeless may pursue careers in government, or they may learn not to judge colleagues by their appearance or income level. Whether a big or small, the impact on your career is almost certain to be positive.

It looks great on a resume.
There's no denying that for all of volunteering's personal benefits, it's also something that can boost your resume by adding experience and depth. Philanthropy helps candidates stand out to employers in a positive way, especially if the company is a socially-minded one looking for a cultural fit.

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For me, volunteering was key to defining my professional and personal identity, a link without which the whole of my persona would not stay strong. Whether I knew it or not at the time, my experience became a critical foundation for my success today, defining both who I am and who I want to be.

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