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Employer-supported volunteering

Learn about embedding employer-supported volunteering in your organisation, different types of opportunities, why it matters, and the critiques surrounding it

Introduction

Employer-supported volunteering (ESV) gives employees the opportunity to volunteer during working hours. Organisations have an impact on the communities in which they operate and many employers have introduced different types of volunteering programmes for employees to support community organisations and charities with their time and skills.

This factsheet examines the benefits of ESV for employers, employees and the community itself, and looks at how to put ESV into practice by taking into account organisational, employee and community needs. Lastly, the factsheet explores contemporary critiques of employer-supported volunteering, as well as its proponents.

See the **[full A-Z list of all CIPD factsheets](#)**.

What is employer-supported volunteering?

According to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), employer-supported volunteering (ESV) is where organisations provide opportunities for employees to volunteer in work time, for example by allowing volunteering leave. Organisations may set up more regular arrangements or partnerships with businesses to work on a particular project together on a time limited basis, or develop opportunities for employees to volunteer on an ongoing basis.

Organisations have an impact on the communities in which they operate and well-managed ESV programmes often fit in within an organisation's corporate responsibility

(CR) strategy. Such programmes can help form a bridge between companies, their employees and the wider community.

Volunteering in the time of coronavirus

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen lockdown measures implemented across the world. However, in the UK we also witnessed the rise of volunteering and heard stories of communities pulling together to support one another in the height of the pandemic. Many volunteering programmes adapted and moved online. Whilst some initiatives may well have reverted back now that lockdowns are a thing of the past, it's likely that permanent adjustments to ESV programmes will need to be made. For example, with so many organisations operating hybrid ways of working for their employees, ESV volunteering programmes should reflect this too to enable people to not only work from home, but to volunteer from home.

Types of ESV volunteering opportunities

Individuals have different interests and motivations for volunteering and will be attracted to different types of activities. A good ESV programme focuses on employers giving individuals time off to pursue volunteering opportunities during work time and might also include partnering with the right community and voluntary sector organisations, to provide employees of all levels the opportunity to volunteer and contribute to social change. Employees may also choose to use their ESV time to support charities or causes of their own choice. ESV opportunities can be either short or long term.

One-off or short-term ESV opportunities

This is sometimes called 'micro volunteering'. These opportunities usually involve short and specific tasks that are easy to start and complete. Micro volunteering is ideal for people who have busy workloads, or who want to get a sense of what it's like to volunteer without signing up to a big commitment. Examples include delivering careers talks in schools, running a CV or interview skills workshop, or a team challenge day such as river and park cleaning.

Employers may choose to allow staff time off to get involved in these sorts of opportunities or they may facilitate these activities by working with organisations in the voluntary or community sector.

Short-term volunteering might not be suitable for all organisations however, as often

charities are looking to recruit volunteers on a longer-term basis.

Longer-term opportunities

Longer-term ESV opportunities allow employees to make a sustainable commitment to support voluntary and community sector organisations by participating in initiatives which take place over longer periods. Examples include coaching and mentoring, working on community projects, or taking on positions of responsibility such as a sports coach, school governor or charity trustee.

This type of volunteering might also provide employers with the opportunity to create long term partnerships with community organisations to create unique opportunities that evolve over time. Longer-term opportunities also lend themselves better to developing the volunteer's skills. Examples could include a finance professional helping a charity with their budgeting or forecasting, or an HR professional mentoring a young jobseeker on employability skills such as through our [Steps Ahead mentoring programme](#). Many people use their skills to sit on boards, for example as a charity trustee or school governor, especially where certain skills such as finance, HR, or strategy are highly sought after. Board-level volunteering can be a very rewarding experience - it's tremendously satisfying to see how an individual's efforts on the board can have an impact on the effectiveness of the organisation.

Why does employer-supported volunteering matter?

ESV is important because of the potential benefits it can bring. Our research report [On the brink of a game-changer](#) explores how better collaboration between businesses and the voluntary sector is key to achieving successful ESV initiatives.

Benefits for employers

In [Volunteering to learn: employee development through community action](#) we explored the hidden benefits and longer-term impact for businesses if they link volunteering to staff development. Some of the recognisable benefits for employers include the link between volunteering and employee development and the opportunity to engage with employees, whilst improving communication and understanding of the local community. In addition, employers can also build stronger teams, and improve staff morale whilst improving overall brand reputation and demonstrating a commitment to make a difference to society.

Benefits for employees

Volunteering gives employees the chance to build connections with their local communities and give back to society while working on issues they feel passionate about. They also gain the opportunity to develop key soft skills in areas such as coaching, leadership and organisational abilities. Further benefits have been found to include:

- Improved communication.
- Increased confidence.
- Team working.
- Creativity.
- Resilience.
- Gaining an overall sense of fulfilment.

Benefits for the community

Community and voluntary sector organisations often have low budgets and value enthusiastic volunteers with specialist skills, expertise and knowledge. ESV programmes work well when employers and volunteers have an open, mutually beneficial and respectful relationship with the organisation they wish to support. It also helps when the organisations in the voluntary and community sector are clear about support they require, and don't create a need for an activity unless it's genuinely required, otherwise they will find they create more work for themselves.

Putting employer-supported volunteering into practice

Some key factors must be considered when embedding ESV into an organisation: the organisation, the needs of the community, and what employees can offer. We outline these below but there's more in our [Employer-supported volunteering guide](#) which brings together practical tips from employers who've successfully embedded ESV into their organisations.

The organisation

Many organisations support causes that best align with their vision and values or their core business. This helps employees build a stronger connection with the community. Many organisations also recognise that employees have their own preferences and allow them to use their volunteering time to support a charity or community group of their own

choice.

Employers must consider whether they will implement volunteering into employee learning and development plans, what they want their employees to gain from the volunteering experience, the number of paid days they will offer for volunteering and put a policy in place along with any terms and conditions to reflect this.

Community needs

Organisations can explore the opportunities of working or partnering with a charity that best aligns with the organisation's values. When partnering with a charity, a commitment to a two-way relationship must be made, setting and managing expectations at the very beginning, usually in a written contract. This allows businesses to create meaningful relationships without any misunderstanding.

What do employees feel passionate about?

Employers could consider undertaking an employee survey encouraging employees to share views on causes they feel passionate about. Some employees might be already engaged in volunteering so employers may have the opportunity to provide further support or build on existing relationships.

Critiques of employer-supported volunteering

Critiques of ESV argue that organisations are failing to make the most out of ESV because they lack understanding of how to make it work most effectively.

Charities and organisations can sometimes have mismatched expectations of volunteering activities. Many charities express the benefits gained from involving skilled volunteers, such as help writing strategies, producing campaigns and support from skilled tradesman to make renovations. However, some voluntary sector organisations find that individuals are less likely to volunteer in their professional capacity and are keen to work on unskilled tasks such as painting and gardening as it takes them away from their day-to-day role.

Our report with the NCVO On the brink of a game-changer highlights that through ESV schemes, charities will have the opportunity to partner and work with a higher number of organisations and volunteers. However, charities and organisations could face risks if they fail to collaborate. The report also found there was often a lack of understanding between charities and organisations about the support needed, benefits to be gained and the overall costs incurred. Similarly, some of the businesses reported that charities often

overlooked the additional benefits of a one-off placement, including the potential for longer-term support from the organisation in the future.

Proponents of employer-supported volunteering

Adopting ESV has many benefits, not only connecting employers with their local communities but allowing individuals to 'give back' to society whilst providing employers with the opportunity to engage with and develop staff.

On the brink of a game-changer found that individuals were likely to work for an employer that encourages and promotes volunteering. Over 80% of those who took part in volunteering reported increased community awareness, 65% had increased communication skills, and 59% reported an increase in confidence. The 2012/13 community life survey From Big Society to the big organisation? The role of organisations in supporting employee volunteering found that the most commonly cited barrier to volunteering is 'work commitments', suggesting that more individuals would be likely to volunteer if the opportunity was provided directly by their employer.

Our Volunteering to learn report explores the links between volunteering and learning, with interviewees from case study organisations recognising a clear link between experiential learning and volunteering. Some organisations interviewed have specifically focused on producing communication tools which enable employees to understand how they can develop through volunteering. For example, National Grid have developed an online portal where employees can directly see how different volunteering opportunities link to skills and their own development.

Useful contacts and further reading

Contacts

CIPD volunteering

National Council for Voluntary Organisations

Volunteering Matters

Employee volunteering

Do-it

Education and Employers Taskforce

[Inspiring the Future](#)

[Step Up to Serve](#)

[Team London - volunteering opportunities in London](#)

Books and reports

ROCHESTER, C., PAINE, A.E. and HOWLETT, S. (2010) *Volunteering and society in the 21st century*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Journal articles

AGOVINO, T. (2016) The giving generation. *HR Magazine*. September, pp37-44. Reviewed in [In a Nutshell](#), Issue 61.

BUTTERWORTH, S. and HILLMAN, C. (2020) [Why staff volunteering is more vital now than ever](#). *People Management* (online). 18 June.

RODELL, J.B., BREITSOHL, H., SCHRODER, M. and KEATING, D.J. (2016) Employee volunteering: a review and framework for future research. *Journal of Management*. Vol 42, No 1, January. pp55-84.

RUDIGER, K. (2018) [Why HR professionals should consider volunteering](#). *People Management* (online). 1 June.

WHITEHOUSE, E. (2019) [The power of corporate volunteering](#). *People Management* (online). 12 December.

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