

Employee volunteering, a new form of Corporate Social Responsibility

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Summary

In France, employee volunteering is a recent phenomenon which expanded in the late 90s. Axa Heart in Action, created in 1991, was a precursor and most initiatives took form as early as 2002-2003. For example, the Club Med Foundation's changed direction in 1998 and became a "foundation that thrives through employee volunteering", while the SNCF Foundation recently chose to encourage local involvement of its employees.

The study highlights a new practice progressing amongst companies: employee volunteering. This specific form of volunteer work is based on the transfer of employees' professional or personal skills for the benefit of a non-profit organization, during their free time and with the financial or material support of their company.

Employee volunteering is generally acclaimed by companies which have implemented Corporate Social Responsibility policies. It generates collaboration for the general interest: the employee offers his skills during his free time and the employer provides its financial or material support. Used by almost 80% of interviewed companies, employee volunteering can take different forms such as project solicitations, sponsorship programs and special leave.

By involving its employees, a company develops its human capital

The study identifies up to eighteen different benefits for companies. In particular, employee volunteering changes the perception of Corporate Social Responsibility in the company. It becomes a tool for the employees who can act according to their desire to make a difference.

Most benefits for the company fall in the field of human resources: it reinforces the employee's sense of belonging to the company, increases bonds and team spirit internally, develops skills, generates a better image of the company for employees and potential new recruits and helps build communication with unions. It also has a strong social impact: the company takes into account its environment and creates partnerships with local non-profit organizations, therefore giving a social and human dimension to its corporate image.

Most employees underline the feeling of fulfillment generated by these actions, the intensity of the encounters, the development of their skills and the discovery of another reality. Unions are also in favour of employee volunteering if they are involved in the process from an early stage, to make sure companies don't take over.

Therefore, to succeed, companies need the support of their employees, the green light from Management and the support from Unions. It will start an internal network of supporters who will then communicate about this topic. Its role is clear: become a facilitator and give its partners the tools and means to fulfill their ambitions in an extra-professional sphere.

How to put into practice an employee volunteering policy?

A foundation or an organization for volunteering employees is a possible structure which can have complementary roles. Employees can participate in the community involvement policies of a Foundation through project solicitations or sponsorship. A Foundation can also support a club of employee volunteers independently of the company.

Employee volunteering: a significant impact for non-profit organizations

Employee volunteering can have a significant impact on non-profit organizations which must find new ways to develop, as public support is stagnating or even decreasing.

How can employee volunteering meet the real needs of non-profit organizations? By raising awareness of their activities with hundreds of thousands of employees, promoting fundraising, encouraging sponsorship of young people in difficulty or unemployed, providing training or technical expertise.

Non-profit organizations also mention the positive influence of the employees on the people they help and on their own volunteers who sometimes lose their motivation. Finally, non-profit organizations benefit from an experienced staff that would usually be financially out of their reach.

The amounts of money dedicated to these activities in companies like Veolia Environnement (five million euros) or PPR (three million euros) bear witness to what is at stake. The percentage of employees getting involved - 12% for Club Méditerranée and 15% for Ford - is also an indication of success, as is the fact that these activities are now spreading to other companies. For example, the program "Orange Solidarités" was extended to the entire France Télécom group (150 000 employees), the project solicitations of the BNP Paribas Foundation was adopted by its subsidiary Cetelem, or the development of the organization SolidarCité in the European subsidiaries of the group PPR.

A practice that should soon spread to most companies as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policies

It is interesting to note that for forerunner companies (branches of Anglo-American companies, public sector companies or those with a socially committed Management), employee volunteering is the natural consequence of a "social mission" which is part of their identity and purpose and which is now called Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Defined as "*companies' voluntary integration of social and environmental issues into their business practices and relations with their stakeholders*", CSR constitutes the contribution of companies towards sustainable development. The rising interest of companies in CSR plays a role in the development of those practices which end up increasing their "social" competitiveness. The study shows that companies play an important part, in terms of information and training, thereby becoming an actor for change in the community. The Diversity Chart signed by several companies is a very good example of this trend. For Patrick Gagnaire, President of SolidarCité: "*Companies must have a social objective and a mission. In the decade to come, the ones that will survive will be the ones with a strong social commitment and concrete achievements.*"

According to Marianne Eshet, General Manager of ADMICAL, "*the general trend is toward a growing involvement of employees in Corporate Philanthropy. Many companies are starting to do it or thinking about it. I have already noticed that newcomers in corporate citizenship try to systematically involve their employees. In order to have successful citizenship policies, it is necessary to involve employees. By becoming actors of such policies, they grow feelings of pride and belonging towards their company. For all three parties, it is a win-win situation.*"

Can we go as far as imagining, in years to come, a global implementation of employee volunteering? Maybe, if one considers that in order to unite employees it is essential to develop their pride and sense of belonging to their company. And for employees to feel proud, shouldn't they have a role to play?