Do companies understand what employees want from their social engagement experience?

Dana Burr Bradley

Abstract

Until recently, employee involvement with social engagement was often marginalized. Consider the current environment where interest in increasing diversity is increasing, and when ensuring that volunteers are satisfied with their experience is important. How do non-governmental organizations recruit volunteers of different backgrounds when little is known concerning what they hope to achieve? How can corporations support volunteer opportunities? This paper examines the “match” between what a volunteer expected and then received in his or her volunteer opportunity and strengthens our understanding of how differences and similarities could inform effective corporate volunteer programs.

Keywords: social engagement, volunteers, workplace, employee;

1. Introduction

Workers who volunteer through their workplace feel more positive toward their employer and report a strengthened bond with co-workers (United Healthcare, 2010). However, while businesses can play a key role in promoting volunteerism, only 25 percent of workers who volunteer do so through their employer,

- 84 percent of employed Americans surveyed who volunteer through their employer agreed that more people would volunteer if the employer helped provide the means and motivation.
- 88 percent of those who volunteer said the experience provides networking and career development opportunities vs. 75 percent of non-volunteers who said the same thing.
- 81 percent of those who volunteer through their employer said it strengthens their relationships with colleagues.
- 57 percent of employed Americans surveyed said their company does not encourage its employees to volunteer.
- 21 percent of employed Americans said they would not be a volunteer if their employer had not provided them the opportunity (United Healthcare, 2010).

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Until recently, employee volunteering and giving often were relegated “to the margins of corporate citizenship,” (Boccalandro, 2009). When brought to the forefront, employees strengthen corporate citizenship from the inside out with compassion, promising ideas and unparalleled energy. Consider the current environment where the quest for diversity among volunteer workforces is on the rise and when ensuring that volunteers are satisfied with their experience is an emerging challenge for nonprofit organizations. How does an organization recruit volunteers of different backgrounds when little is known concerning what they hope to achieve from their experience? How can corporations hope to support rewarding volunteer opportunities if they pursue a “one size fits all” strategy? This paper examines the “match” between what a volunteer expected and then received in his or her volunteer opportunity. The subsequent analysis strengthens our knowledge bases of how differences and similarities could inform effective corporate volunteer programs.

2. Background

To recruit and retain a diverse volunteer workforce, a non-governmental (or non-profit) organization must know what prospective volunteers want to achieve from their volunteer work. A review of the prevailing volunteer literature suggests that little is known about the relationship between generational age and volunteerism. The focus of volunteer research related to ethnicity addresses participation and level of involvement of the volunteer (Mattis, et al, 2000; Musick, et al, 2000; Reddy & Smith, 1973; Rogers, 1999; Smith, 1994; Snowden, 2001; Stanfield, 1993; Steinberg, et al, 2002; Wallace, 2003). There is a dearth of research related to volunteer satisfaction and limited research examining work-related motivational factors.

To obtain a complete picture of volunteerism in the United States, especially among populations groups where formal activities may be less attractive, it is important to look beyond the confines of formal volunteering and explore a broader definition that includes informal volunteering and civic responsibility. Traditional surveys under-represent the volunteerism of African Americans and individuals of Hispanic origin because they do not include charitable behaviors that are considered civic responsibility by these ethnic cultures (Kutner & Love, 2003; Standfield, 1993; Steinberg, et al, 2002). For example, by asking probing questions concerning volunteer activities designed to capture both formal and informal volunteering, an AARP study of Americans over 45 showed an increase in participation of 36% for Non-Hispanic whites and 41% for both African Americans and respondents of Hispanic origin (Kutner & Love, 2003).

In addition to studying both formal and informal volunteerism, the methodology used to evaluate volunteer trends must be carefully considered. Increases shown in the AARP study as a result of additional probing provides compelling evidence that methodologies used to obtain the volunteer data can prevent a clear picture of who volunteers. A distorted view of volunteer participation can prevent nonprofit organizations from spending time attempting to recruit from a particular ethnic group. Despite studies showing a significant variation in volunteer participation among racial and ethnic groups (Harootyan & Voreck, 1994; Mattis, 2000; Stoll, 2001), other studies have also shown that volunteerism does not vary with ethnicity when controlling for socioeconomic factors (Reddy & Smith, 1973; Smith, 1994; Steinberg, et al, 2002). The incongruent results in the various studies related to ethnicity and volunteerism indicate other factors must also be considered when developing a volunteer recruitment and retention plan.

Motivation provides a basis for attracting and keeping a diverse volunteer workforce. Scholars have theorized a range of factors, including wanting to help society, personal growth and social privilege, that may help explain why people volunteer (Sokolowski, 1996; Clary et al, 1996; Morrow-Howell & Mui, 1989). Much of the prevailing literature on African-American volunteering is based on the premise that African Americans participate in voluntary associations because they historically were not allowed to be active in White America (Rose, 1944; Stanfield, 1993; Yearwood, 1978). The literature also indicates that volunteer participation by African Americans is influenced by their history of discrimination and racism (Nápoles-Springer, et al, 2000; Reddy & Smith, 1973). Preliminary research has examined motivations of ethnic volunteers within specific organizational settings. Studies of HIV/AIDS volunteerism have focused on the role of communalism and religiosity as primary motivators of African-American participation (Mattis et al, 2000; Christenesen et al, 1999). However, these studies do not address what types of benefits might attract a particular ethnicity and generally suggest that people volunteer because they want to help others (Davis, 2000; Kutner & Love, 2003; Reddy & Smith, 1973; Rogers, 1999). A helpful vantage
point for this question lies in examining values within a motivational context. The Rokeach Value Survey is one instrument well suited to measure these relationships...

2.1. The Rokeach Value Survey

Milton Rokeach (1972; 1983; Rokeach and Ball-Rokeach, 1989) developed a theoretical perspective on the nature of values in a cognitive framework and a value measurement instrument, both of which are widely used across multiple disciplines (Johnston, 1995). Support for the Rokeach Value Survey (RVS) construct and predictive validity is strong amidst a variety of populations (Braithwaite and Law, 1985; Ramkin and Grube, 1980; Munson and Posner, 1980 and Fether and Peay, 1975). The rank-order scoring procedure has been demonstrated to exhibit less measurement error than other scoring methods, and is widely considered to be the best technique for measuring human values. The RVS has a long-standing history of widespread acceptance, and test-retest reliabilities for the terminal values is .78.

3. Methodology

A random sample of 1,450 files containing e-mail addresses was selected from among those returned by attendees at free information sessions for a noncredit training program in nonprofit management offered by universities in the Southeast.

A letter was sent to each member of the sample population that included: 1) a statement that an electronic survey (email) was forthcoming that contained questions related to their volunteer activities; 2) a request for their participation; 3) assurances of the confidentiality of responses; and 4) an opportunity for the subject to decline participation by responding to the e-mail. Three subjects removed themselves in this manner. The remaining group was sent an electronic, self-administered survey along with a reiterative cover letter five business days after the first letter. Five business days following this, the survey and slightly modified letter were sent again. All responses were received within three weeks of this final mailing.

Of the 1147 surveys distributed, 25 were returned as undeliverable. Of the 1,122 completed surveys received, 113 respondents had only partially completed rankings or had given the same rank to more than one item in the listing, and were thus discarded from the sample. Ultimately 1,009 usable surveys were returned for a 70% response rate.

Each respondent was asked to rank 15 work-related motivational factors in terms of their relative importance to them in their current volunteer activity (see Table 1). This ranking comprised the “wants” profile. Next, without referring back to their first ranking, each was asked to rank the same 15 factors in the order that they feel they are best able to attain them in their present volunteer activity. This ranking comprised the “gets” responses to these questions. Additionally, respondents were asked to complete some demographic questions including gender and open-ended questions relating to birthdate, ethnic group, and whether their current volunteer experience is similar to previous such experience. All personal identifiers were removed from the survey and hard copies prints were then generated for database input by a research assistant unfamiliar with the purposes of the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Fifteen Volunteer Work-Related Motivational Factors Ranked by Respondents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chance to learn new things</td>
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<td>Chance to benefit society</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freedom from pressures to conform both on and off the job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity for advancement</td>
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<td>High prestige and social status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chance to use my special abilities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freedom from supervision</td>
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<tr>
<td>Variety in work assignments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chance to engage in satisfying leisure activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly and congenial associates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working as part of a “team”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank you gifts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A stable and secure future</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
4. Results

Table 2 provides a profile of respondent gender, age, and self-identified ethnic group. By ethnic group, the largest respondent pool is comprised of those who self-identified as “white,” for which the term “Caucasian” has been supplanted here. Those who labeled themselves “African American” and “Black” were pooled into one group as the responses between the two were statistically similar. In comparing the responses of those who termed themselves “Hispanic” with those named “Latino,” a statistical disparity was noted and the two groups are treated separately in this analysis. A group self-identified as “Native American” is contains the same number of respondents as “Latinos,” both the smallest ethnic samples in the study. No other responses were provided to this question and no respondent left the item blank.

Table 2: Respondent Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>24%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Age</td>
<td>41 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Tests and Spearman’s Rank Correlation Coefficients for each of the possible ethnic group combinations do not indicate that any of the groups are significantly more similar to one another than any other, and that all are roughly equally disparate in their rankings of wants and gets. Wilcoxon Matched-Pairs Signed Ranks Tests was used to determine the extent of agreement between what each of the two groups said they wanted from their activities versus what they reported getting from them.

5. Discussion

In response to the question, “Is your current or most recent volunteer experience similar to your other volunteer activities in terms of the characteristics ranked above?” 92% said yes, 5% said no, and 3% did not respond. None mentioned differences in satisfaction/dissatisfaction levels, organizational characteristics, or personal preferences. The results point out the differences in what the some groups want and are getting from the same experience presuming volunteers of different ethnicities work together. The reasons why volunteers of different ethnic groups may want different things from their volunteer opportunity is a fruitful area for future research. Several areas could be pursued including the role of differing values in shaping recruiting policies and procedures for volunteers; designing training to highlight specific values and using values as benchmarking for volunteer program successes.

Our findings suggest that these policies could be improved if the agencies attended to what volunteers really want, as opposed to what it is presumed they want. Studies suggest that identifying and communicating the benefits of volunteering serves as an effective recruitment plan (Reddy & Smith, 1973; Tomeh, 1981). One strategy would be to emphasize the match between social engagement and the mission of the corporation. This approach should help the organization to make concrete contributions to its community and to its clients and supports the idea that volunteers must receive something they value from their paid employment. Adopting a person value center requires a shift from thinking about motivation as purely job related to one that encompasses personal values. Shifting policies to insure that volunteers were more satisfied with their volunteer matches could result in significant
cost savings to nonprofits by making their recruiting and retention strategies more effective. If nonprofit organizations can motivate/satisfy better they will be more productive and have more loyal volunteers.

References


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