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Article

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Marketing Review St.Gallen

Provided in Cooperation with:

Universität St. Gallen, Institut für Marketing und Customer Insight

Suggested Citation: Verbücheln, Michael; Edinger-Schons, Laura Marie (2020) : Maximizing Participation in Corporate Volunteering, Marketing Review St.Gallen, ISSN 1865-7516, Thexis Verlag, St.Gallen, Vol. 37, Iss. 4, pp. 32-38

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/276097>

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Maximizing Participation in Corporate Volunteering

Companies increasingly use corporate volunteering programs to bring purpose to their employees' work lives and offer attractive job products. Still, challenging questions remain concerning the right design and effective communication of these programs. This article provides answers to these questions to maximize employee participation in corporate volunteering.

Michael Verbücheln, M.Sc., Prof. Dr. Laura Marie Edinger-Schons

In recent years, the experience of purpose and meaning at work has become increasingly important for employees. Opinion polls report that 9 out of 10 employees say that they would accept a pay cut for a more meaningful job (Achor, Reece, Kellerman, & Robichaux, 2018) and millennials report a five times higher likelihood of staying at a company if they feel purpose at work (PWC, 2016). Since job meaningfulness is associated with several benefits for both companies (e.g., higher employee engagement; May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004) and their employees (e.g., increased job satisfaction; Jaramillo, Mulki, & Boles, 2013), it seems fruitful to investigate strategies which companies can use to actively manage the job products which they market to their internal customers, i.e., their employees.

Companies often answer the call for purpose by introducing corporate volunteering programs, with more than 90% of the Fortune 500 companies offering some sort of corporate volunteering program (Boccalandro, 2009; Deloitte, 2017). Corporate volunteering (CV) programs describe practices and policies created by companies to coordinate and encourage employees to donate their time in support of a charitable cause (Grant, 2012; Henning & Jones, 2013; Rodell, 2013; Rodell, Sabey, & Rogers, 2019). The rapidly growing trend of CV can be traced back to the manifold positive effects of CV on various levels and for different stakeholders. Often described as a win-win-win scenario, numerous studies found that CV offers benefits for the companies (e.g., lower turnover; Jones, 2010), the volunteering employees (e.g., enhanced job-related skills; Peterson, 2004), and the partnering non-profit organizations (NPOs) (e.g., positive capacity development; Caligiuri, Mencin, & Jiang, 2013).

In order to realize such positive effects and bring meaning to employees' jobs, companies need to design their CV programs to maximize employee participation. However, little is known about the effectiveness of the currently observable varying designs of CV programs and the means of communicating them. Companies can, for instance, offer a CV program in which employees apply their professional skills—so-called “skills-based volunteering” (e.g., marketing experts supporting a NPO in developing a new marketing campaign)—or more “traditional” CV programs in which no specific skills are utilized, like painting a kindergarten (Cook & Burchell, 2018). Further, CV programs can differ in terms of the level of autonomy that employees have to co-create the volunteering experience (e.g., employees could be granted the possibility to choose and conduct their own social projects). Thus, the way the CV programs are designed and communicated will likely influence employees' intention

to participate and, eventually, determine the positive effects that employees as well as companies may reap. Hence, it seems to be worthwhile to investigate how companies can design and communicate their CV programs (e.g., in terms of utilization of professional skills or autonomy) to optimize employees' reactions.

How Do Employees Form Their Decision to Participate in CV?

Research and business practice have so far mostly discussed the design of CV programs in terms of the utilization of professional skills and company support (Basil, Runte, Basil, & Usher, 2011; Booth, Park, & Glomb, 2009; McCallum, Schmid, & Price, 2013; Letts & Holly, 2017). In recent years, skills-based volunteering, in which employees apply their professional skills in order to support a non-profit or charitable organization, has been on the rise since it has gained a reputation for, e.g., enhancing leadership qualities (Letts & Holly, 2017). Given the vast variety of CV programs, a continuum can be mapped ranging from prototypically skills-based to purely traditional volunteering (see figure 1).

In order to better understand how the design and the communication of a CV program influences employees' willingness to participate, it is important to understand how employees form their decision to engage in CV in the first place. Prior research indicates that individuals constantly try to create meaning of the experiences they make

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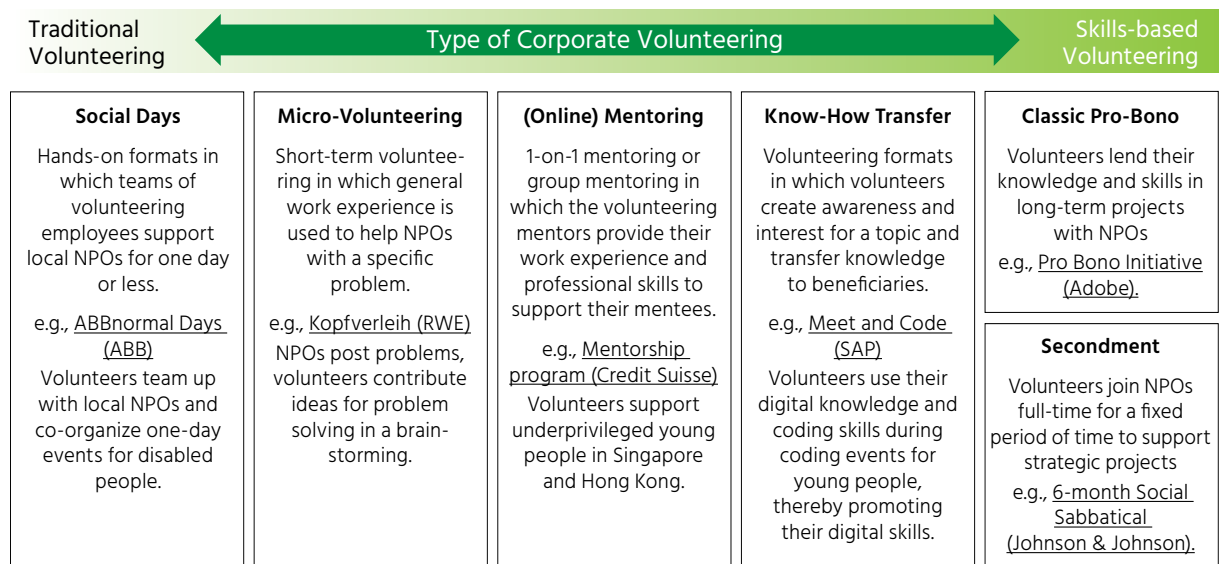
and the actions they take by scanning and interpreting cues in their environment – a process called sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010; Weick, 1995). In this process, employees evaluate the potential future impact of their actions (Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1993).

Transferred to the context of CV, this means that employees use the available information about the CV program to evaluate the potential positive outcomes of participating in such a program. More specifically, when forming their decision to participate in a CV program, employees consider the potential impact of their volunteering activity (Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1993). When comparing traditional and skills-based volunteering programs, an increasing number of practitioners and researchers highlights that by utilizing specific professional skills, skills-based volunteers may make a stronger contribution to the supported non-profit and charitable organizations than traditional volunteers (e.g., America’s Charities, 2015; Letts & Holly, 2017). The perception of a stronger contribution to a social cause due to the application of professional skills (Cook & Burchell, 2018) may serve as an important cue in the sensemaking process and thus leads to a higher intention to participate in skills-

based volunteering formats as compared to traditional volunteering programs. Thus, skills-based volunteering is likely to lead to a higher intention to participate.

Another aspect that may influence the decision to participate in a CV program is the level of autonomy which volunteering employees are granted by their employer (Roddell, Breitsohl, Schröder, & Keating, 2016). Autonomy, i.e., the ability to self-organize experience and behavior, is crucial for understanding how one’s behavior is linked to a certain outcome (Deci & Ryan, 2000; deCharms, 1968; Ryan & Connell, 1989). In the CV context, autonomy can be realized via two different routes: First, employees can be actively involved in the design process of the volunteering program (e.g., by suggesting volunteering activities or helping to form partnerships with NPOs) (van Schie, Guentert, & Wehner, 2011). Second, volunteering employees can actively co-create the volunteering activity (e.g., by deciding on how the specific activities are carried out). When engaging in sensemaking, employees’ perceptions of their volunteering autonomy may become an important factor affecting their evaluations of how their individual actions contribute to the overall impact of the volunteering program. Further, when forming their intention to participate,

Fig. 1: Range of Corporate Volunteering Formats Sorted by the Utilization of Professional Skills



Source: Authors’ illustration based on Dreesbach-Bundy & Scheck, 2018; Raffaelli & Glynn, 2014.

such a perception of autonomy and the resulting sensemaking processes may represent an important driving factor. In summary, high levels of employees' perceived volunteering autonomy might positively affect their intention to participate in a CV program.

Empirical Studies: Effective Design and Communication of CV Programs

Methodology

In order to gain a deeper understanding of how differently designed CV programs influence employees' intention to participate, a 2x3 between-subjects scenario experiment was distributed via email to a cross-sectional panel of German-speaking individuals recruited via a German online consumer panel. The experimental treatments included the type of program (i.e., skills-based versus traditional) and the level of volunteering autonomy (i.e., low, high, and control, with the control group not receiving any information on the degree of autonomy). Each participant was randomly assigned to one of the six treatment groups and read the description of a fictitious volunteering program including a description of the type of program (i.e., either skills-based or traditional) and the degree of volunteering autonomy (i.e., low, high, or control). Participants were asked to imagine that their own employer would introduce this program and they would have the possibility to participate. After reading the treatment texts, respondents were asked to state their intention to participate and answer several questions about their perception of the program as well as their demographics (i.e., age, gender, education).

The online survey was completed by 1,811 participants. 554 responses were excluded since these participants were not employed at the time of survey or values were missing, resulting in a final sample of N=1,257 employees. On average, the respondents were 45 years old (SD = 10.4). 66.1% of the respondents stated to be female, 33.7% male, and 0.2% others. The mean differences between the treatment groups were compared using an analysis of variance (ANOVA).

In addition to the scenario experiment, semi-structured interviews with 28 representatives of 24 large multinational companies were conducted to gain deeper insights into possible organizational factors that might influence the effects of program design and communication on the intention to participate. The practitioners chosen for the interviews were key informants as they were managing the topic of CV in

Management Summary

In recent years, employees' expectations of their jobs have shifted, with especially younger employees asking for more meaning and purpose at work. Corporate volunteering programs have been found to have the potential to provide experiences of meaningfulness and offer a compelling work environment in previous research. As a consequence, companies seek ways to maximize employee participation in such programs. This paper develops and tests a conceptual framework revealing how companies can design their corporate volunteering programs to optimize employees' willingness to participate.

Main Propositions

1. Employees show higher intention to participate in skills-based CV programs than in traditional programs.
2. This is especially the case when these programs have a high match with the company's core competencies.
3. Perceived autonomy of the volunteers increases employees' intention to participate in the CV program.
4. Companies should aim for the right level of autonomy to ensure that programs fit the company's purpose.
5. Employees deeply care about the social impact as well as their personal benefits from volunteering.

their respective organizations (mostly within the Corporate Social Responsibility, Corporate Citizenship, or Human Resources Departments). Thirty large multinational companies were invited to participate in the interview study. All of these companies were publicly listed, headquartered in Germany, and reported some sort of CV activities. Out of these 30, 24 responded to the invitation, resulting in a response rate of 80%. The expert interviews were conducted

via phone, lasted 56 minutes on average, and were transcribed for the analysis. The analysis of the expert interviews started with the open coding of text blocks of the transcriptions into codes representing the general meaning of these text blocks. In a second cycle, patterns were identified and coded into overarching themes (Saldaña, 2013).

Results of the Scenario Experiment

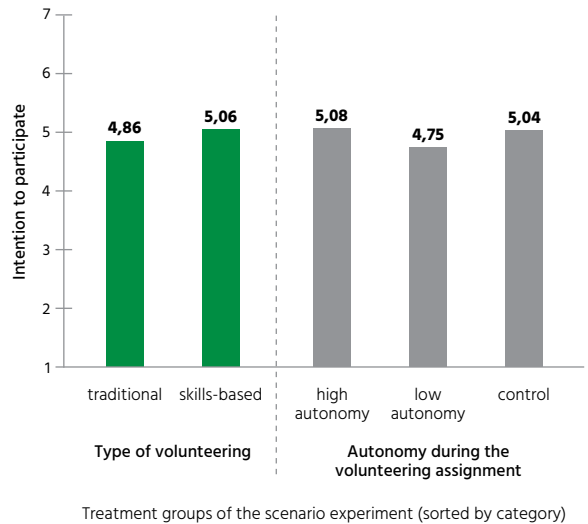
First, the results of the scenario experiment provide support for the assumption that employees' intention to participate in skills-based volunteering programs is higher than for a traditional format (see figure 2). Thus, when communicating such a CV program, it would be beneficial to highlight the potential for applying professional skills.

Second, employees' perceived level of autonomy during the CV program also affects their willingness to join. For CV programs with low levels of autonomy, the intention to participate is significantly lower than for CV formats that provide high levels of autonomy to the volunteering employees (also compared to the control group) (see figure 2).

Insights Derived from the Expert Interviews

Based on the results of the scenario experiment, the expert interviews allow for a more detailed picture of the managerial challenges pertaining to the CV program design and communication and their influence on employees' intention to participate. Table 1 gives an overview of the overarching themes which appeared in the expert interviews.

Fig. 2: Intention to Participate in CV Programs for Different Types of Volunteering and Levels of Autonomy



Note: Means between groups are significantly different. Differences are significant at the $p < .05$ level. Source: Own illustration.

In line with the results of the scenario experiment, the expert interviews revealed that CV programs in which employees are able to apply their professional skills are also seen as more attractive by the experts than traditional CV formats. However, many of the experts noted that it appears

Table 1: Expert Interviews: Representative Quotes and Identified Themes

Theme	Exemplary Quote
Utilization of professional skills	"The topic of knowledge transfer was very well received and was a lot of fun for everyone." (Expert 2)
Autonomy	"That happens a lot [co-creation of CV programs]. The employees can propose projects. The managers can suggest projects. There will also be a mixture of projects that we, as an employer, suggest." (Expert 7)
Duration of the program	"This is what we have called "the fastest volunteering in the world". [...] and it appealed to the target audience who always said: "I would love to do something, but I don't know when and I don't know what. I also do not want to have to deal with it for a long time." (Expert 12)
Fit with company	"We are a knowledge company from top to bottom and we have an incredible number of employees who explicitly like to volunteer in that way." (Expert 3)
Team building	"That is why we now have social days as part of our team building activities. It is also, I would say, very well received throughout the company." (Expert 11)
Societal impact	"We are good in marketing, we are good in product development, we are good in sales. So we are trying to develop new programs where we can use these kinds of skills to impact the local communities and our partners." (Expert 13)

Source: Expert interviews conducted by the authors.

to be crucial that these skills-based programs fit with the company's overall business activities and core competences (e.g., an IT company that provides CV activities related to digitalization) in order to increase employees' willingness to participate.

In addition, the expert interviews revealed that not only the utilization of professional skills but also the intended societal impact of the CV program should be highlighted in order to increase employees' intention to participate. By connecting the professional skills with the intended impact, employees can better evaluate the perceived meaning of the volunteering activity and how they can make a difference in society by using their job-related skills. In general, the anecdotal evidence from several of the interviewed experts indicates that CV programs seem to be most effective when companies offer a portfolio of CV opportunities that satisfy the various needs of different employees, of the supported non-profit organizations, and the company's management. For instance, while skills-based volunteering in general seems to be the thing to do, sometimes employees participate in volunteering activities not solely to find meaning in their jobs but just as well because they would like to get to know their colleagues better and have fun. The interviews show that in these cases traditional volunteering formats such as painting a kindergarten may be preferred. In addition, most traditional volunteering formats are less time-consuming than skills-based formats, allow for a higher number of volunteers, and are often used for team-building purposes.

The positive view regarding employees' autonomy resulting from the scenario experiment was fully supported by the statements in the expert interviews. By stressing not only the autonomy of employees during the volunteering assignment but by also providing autonomy through co-creation of the volunteering activities (e.g., when employees can propose a volunteering project) companies may enhance employees' intention to participate in CV programs. Ways to involve employees in the design process reported by the experts included corporate-wide competitions for ideas to support certain social causes or open dialogues via intranet platforms where employees were able to suggest new non-profit partners or engage in discussions on how to improve existing CV formats.

Although, on average, a positive effect of autonomy on the intention to participate can be observed, there might still be some reasons for limiting employees' freedom in CV programs. When CV is used as a tool for employee and

leadership development, it could be helpful to limit employees' involvement in designing the volunteering activity to ensure certain experiences during the CV program. In addition, it may be beneficial to set clear rules for the causes or organizations that may be collaborated with in order to ensure a fit with the overall corporate strategy. Some experts also highlight that in some cases autonomy has to be limited to guarantee a certain positive impact for the partnering non-profit organization.

Besides the utilization of skills and the employees' autonomy and involvement in the volunteering program, the duration of the CV activity also affects the decision to participate. The interviews reveal that employees who have not volunteered before seem to favor short-term volunteering, e.g., social days or micro-volunteering where less time commitment is required. Experts often refer to these CV activities as beginner programs or as formats that aim to spark interest in volunteering.

Conclusion


CV programs have to be thoughtfully designed and communicated so that the participation of employees and the intended positive effects of the CV activities on perceived job meaningfulness and other business outcomes are maximized. Since employees' participation in CV has been shown to be associated with employee retention and employee engagement (Caligiuri et al., 2013; Jaramillo et al., 2013; Jones, 2010; May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004), maximizing employees' participation in CV does not only help to

Lessons Learned

1. Develop CV programs which match with your company's core competencies.
2. Offer employees the possibility to use their professional skills to have a real social impact.
3. Actively involve employees to co-create not only the design of the CV programs but also the volunteering experience itself.
4. Set clear boundary conditions to ensure a fit with the overall corporate purpose.
5. Explain both the social impact as well as employees' personal benefits (e.g., team building).

create meaningfulness in employees' jobs but also provides competitive advantages for the company.

This paper provides seminal empirical evidence for the effects of differently designed CV programs and how they are communicated on employees' intention to participate. The results of both the scenario experiment and the expert interviews indicate that skills-based volunteering formats lead to a higher intention to participate than traditional volunteering programs, especially if they match the company's

core competences. Autonomy during the volunteering assignment and employee involvement in the design of the CV program also increase the participation rate. Thus, the present paper provides practical implications for managers of such programs and paves the way for a more detailed analysis of the relationship of CV program design, communication, and employees' participation in such programs. Future research should, e.g., compare different communication approaches in more detail. 

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