



CMA Management

The Corporate Volunteer

In an age of corporate philanthropy and social responsibility, organizations are finding new ways to give, in their communities and overseas, by supporting longer-term volunteer opportunities for their employees. While it creates challenges for business, some consider the payback worth the trouble - By Marjo Johne



For three weeks last summer, Mike Gregson travelled to the suburbs and rural villages around Blantyre, Malawi, spreading the word about HIV/AIDS prevention. Gregson, a Toronto-based sales representative for Abbott Laboratories Limited in Saint-Laurent, Que., had signed on, along with three other Abbott employees, for volunteer field work in one of southern Africa's poorest regions.

All four employees had used their vacation days for the trip, but Abbott covered 60% of the cost of their air fare, meals and accommodations, to a total of about \$2,600 per person.

“The company basically sponsored us and took care of all the logistics,” says Gregson. “All in all, it cost us about \$1,900 each to go there, so it was quite a deal.”

In an age of corporate philanthropy and social responsibility, Abbott is among the growing group of companies that are going beyond just handing a cheque to charity and donating another type of capital — human capital, to be precise — by sending their employees to do volunteer field work abroad.

Employees in the field

Most companies already endorse the idea of volunteerism — a 2005 Conference Board of Canada survey of corporate social responsibility found almost 90% of employers encouraged their staff to help out in the community. But some, like Abbott, are going one step further by arranging and financing volunteer trips to places like Malawi, Burkina Faso, Sri Lanka and Bolivia.

“Companies are realizing that it’s not enough to write a cheque anymore,” says Lynne O’Connor, a senior consultant with LMC International Inc., a management consulting firm in Toronto. “People love to get involved, it’s more satisfying and meaningful for them, and companies are beginning to understand that.”

And just how many companies are getting their employees to pitch in — and accommodating the time away from work this requires? There are no statistics tracking volunteer field work undertaken by corporate employ-

ees, but anecdotal evidence suggests there's growing interest in this type of corporate philanthropy. Wallace Beaton, a spokesperson for World University Service of Canada — an Ottawa organization that spearheads development projects in poor countries — points to the rising number of companies and employees signing up for Leave for Change, a volunteer program that targets corporate employees.

The program, launched less than a year ago by the World University Service and the Montreal-based anti-poverty group Centre d'étude et de coopération internationale, has so far attracted more than 11 employees from a growing list of organizations that include Abbott, the City of Montreal, Samson Bélair/Deloitte & Touche (Deloitte's Quebec arm), and Sahara Communications.

More companies are in the line-up for upcoming trips, says Beaton; Leave for Change should have no problem meeting its target of 30 volunteers by the end of its first year.

"There's a lot of interest (from companies)," says Beaton. "As soon as we mention what we're doing, the companies we're talking to immediately want to know how they can get their employees involved."

Job satisfaction

So what's driving this interest? Beaton cites the obvious — image-conscious companies that want to be perceived as "responsible social partners."

Indeed, a survey last April by Ipsos Canada suggests corporate social responsibility is front and centre on companies' radars, with close to 80% asserting they had made an "explicit commitment" to corporate social responsibility. More than 70% said their companies had developed formalized policies for activities pertaining to good corporate citizenship.

It would seem that corporate Canada is justified in its efforts; the Ipsos survey also found almost 70% of the Canadian population is paying close attention to issues related to corporate social responsibility.

Faced with increased public awareness about corporate social responsibility, and worried at the same time about the tightening labour market, companies today see good corporate citizenship as something that just makes good business sense — good for sales and good for attracting and retaining employees.

Sending employees on a once-in-a-lifetime volunteer experience in an exotic locale takes this idea a few steps further, says Beaton.

"I think most companies that truly value their human resources recognize that employee retention and satisfaction go beyond the issue of salary and benefits," he says. "More particularly with younger employees coming into these organizations who are looking for more out of their jobs than perhaps what their predecessors were looking for."

Expanded skill sets

O'Connor says these volunteer assignments are also a good way of giving a boost to tenured employees who may be feeling stuck in a groove. Pulling them out of their comfort zone and into a challenging volunteer field assignment could work wonders in renewing their enthusiasm for the job back home.

And they'll often come back with a new set of skills, says O'Connor.

"These assignments may reveal untapped leadership skills, project management skills, negotiation or survival skills," she says. "What a great opportunity for personal and professional development."

Kristin Mains, communications manager at Cisco Systems Inc., a global Internet networking company based in San Jose, California, says she's certainly picking up new skills in her year-long volunteer post in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

After Hurricane Katrina destroyed entire communities last year in Mississippi and Louisiana, Cisco announced it would invest US\$40 million in a program — which it called the 21st Century Schools program, or 21S for short — that would help affected schools rebuild, but this time with advanced Internet technology.

Cisco also created volunteer positions that would see 10 employees appointed as “21S fellows” and who would move to Mississippi or Louisiana, where they would stay for a year to help the schools integrate the new technology into their teaching programs. The volunteers would be paid their usual salary during this time.

Mains' job as a volunteer is to look after communications for the 21S program. In her new role, she's learning to make video documentaries, something she hasn't done before.

“This a great opportunity for me to leverage my skills in a new environment and to learn new skills at the same time,” she says.

A team effort

While both the company and the employees who volunteer gain something from the field assignment, O'Connor offers a caveat: this type of corporate citizenship could stir up negative feelings in the office, so employers need to make sure everyone buys into the philanthropic cause.

The problem, she says, is that not everyone gets the chance to go for volunteer field work away from home.

Some employees, such as those with small children, are simply not able to up and go for weeks at a time—while others just aren't interested in signing up. And there's also the fact that the number of volunteer postings are limited, so applicants often have to go through a rigorous selection process that looks at relevant skills and experience as well as an employee's performance history.

Another potential sticking point: the co-workers who are left behind will likely have to cover the manpower gap resulting from the volunteer's absence. Yet they won't get the hero's welcome that the volunteer employee will enjoy coming back from the trip.

O'Connor says the onus is on the employer to make sure everyone gets credit for the volunteer work of a few people in the office. Managers have to explicitly acknowledge the contributions of those who were left behind to hold the fort while the volunteers were away.

“People need to be able to say ‘I contributed too because while you were away, I took care of the account, I managed things in your absence,’” she says. “How the company parcels out the credit is critical.”

Bill Fowler, executive director of Cisco's 21S program, agrees. During the year that the 21S volunteers are away, their co-workers at the office are pitching in to ensure all the work gets done.

“Basically, the (volunteers') positions are held for them by the people in their department,” says Fowler. “So that group is really carrying the cost in terms of the volunteers' salary and benefits.”

Fowler says everyone at Cisco — from the lowest-ranking employee to top-level managers — recognizes that the

work of 21S volunteers is a load that is shared by the entire team.

“We make sure this is communicated all the way to the senior executives so they’re aware not only of the fellow but also of the team left behind who is providing support,” says Fowler.

Staying connected

One way to make the employees back home feel like they’re actively contributing to the volunteer effort, says

Mains, is to communicate and consult with them during the assignment.

Mains says that’s also a good way of staying connected with the office; employees who leave for volunteer work often report feeling dislocated when they come back to work. After experiencing a very different — and often very harsh — reality that many in the office would not be able to identify with, they may feel a bit removed when they return. Main says reaching back constantly to the “home team” helps her stay rooted to the California office even though she’s miles away in Baton Rouge.

“You could easily become detached when you’re out volunteering in the field,” she says. “But sharing stories with the team back home and reaching back on a regular basis will help you avoid feeling like you’re out of step with what’s happening in the office.”

When the heroes do finally return home, they often come back transformed — and eager to continue what they started in the field. This then gives the people who were left behind a chance to get directly involved in philanthropic work.

Gregson at Abbott says several of his co-workers have organized local fundraisers, with the proceeds going to a charitable organization in Malawi.

Since his return, he has given one presentation about his experience and is scheduled to do another one at the company’s annual national meeting later this year.

“After I gave my presentation, I couldn’t count on both hands and feet the number of people who have come up to me and said they want to go next year,” says Gregson. “I’m hoping to go next year too — now that I have the advantage of knowing the ins and outs of this assignment, I think I can help other volunteers who are going in for the first time.”

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