

CORPORATE VOLUNTEERING: TRENDS, BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES. CURRENT SITUATION IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

Corporate volunteering supports and encourages employees' involvement in community. The paper provides a better understanding of how volunteering can be used in business practices and summarizes the key benefits and challenges of corporate volunteering. Furthermore, the paper offers a broader perspective to the current corporate volunteering practice in Romania highlighting that although it shows an upward trend, it is not as prevalent as in other countries in the world.

Keywords: corporate volunteering, Romania

1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary society is facing many difficulties with regards to social problems solving (Begum and Moinuddin, 2010; Burlacu, 2011, Becerra Alonso et al., 2016). In this context, the volunteer activities promoted by the three sectors (nonprofit, public and business) have recorded significant participation growth (Basil et al., 2009; Paço and Nave, 2013). Moreover, increasingly more companies undertake voluntary work as part of their corporate social responsibility policy (Etzioni, 1999) in order to support nonprofit organizations' causes or to answer some of the society problems (Allen, 2003; Paço and Nave, 2013).

Any effort made by business organizations (we can also include public institutions and nongovernmental organizations) for stimulating and urging employees and/or former employees (currently retired) to perform voluntary work in community as part of corporate social responsibility projects, is called corporate volunteering (Kotler and Lee, 2005; Păceșilă, 2016). In general, corporate volunteering is regarded socially as the purest and beneficial form of corporate involvement (Iamandi and Filip, 2014).

Corporate Volunteering has various name in literature such as employer supported volunteering/workplace volunteering, community volunteering or employee volunteering, as well as employee community involvement. It facilitates collaboration between business and nongovernmental

sector and helps the profit sector to integrate social and environmental issues in the business structure and to interact with stakeholders (Procopie, 2012; VSA and RCS, 2014).

Many companies consider that volunteering is an integral part of the overall business plan because it contributes to achieving and maintaining a high level of employee participation. It could also bring certain benefits for companies, employees and communities in which they live and work. Moreover, corporate volunteering enables companies to show their commitment to the community and thus to their customers who are community members (VOLUM, 2016). Corporate volunteers undertake various activities, depending on their skills and talents, while companies allow them to work as volunteers during the program and offer them additional material or logistical assistance (CVE, 2011).

Corporate volunteering is usually found in large corporations and companies (Băbuțău, 2014). However, the small and medium-sized companies also involve their employees in such activities. In all cases the company is the one who will bear the expenses on voluntary actions. Nevertheless, not all companies are interested in volunteering, and each company has a different policy on volunteer programs (VOLUM, 2016).

Practicing corporate volunteering, as part of corporate social responsibility, transforms companies into organizations with a positive impact in society (Muthuri et al., 2009; Gligor-Cimpoieru and Munteanu, 2014). The employers provide information in the field and allow the employees to dedicate their working time to volunteer programs.

Taking into account the type of the program, employer supported volunteering takes the following forms (Federația VOLUM, 2014a):

1. Activities organized entirely by the company.
2. Activities organized by the company in partnership with a nonprofit organization
3. Activities organized by nonprofit entities without company involvement

In the first two cases the companies develop social responsibility activities alone or in partnership, and employees engage in volunteer activities during their working time. However, the company establishes the period and the field of volunteers' engagement.

The society expects NGOs carry out projects in order to address social needs that the state cannot satisfy, but their resources are limited. That is why, the economic actors should develop partnerships with them in order to provide the nonprofit sector with the resources needed for projects (Borțun et al., 2011).

In the third case, companies give employees days off or time off in order to involve in volunteering activities in nonprofit organizations chosen by them. Moreover, the employees can choose the field as

well as the period of volunteering, provided that they prove those hours were dedicated to volunteering. However, it is recommended that employees involve in volunteer programs consistent with the strategic directions of social responsibility established by the company. Each company should decide freely on this aspect.

Corporate volunteering raises some questions. Taking into account that the employer provides paid time to employees to participate in such activities, the question is whether this situation can be regarded as volunteering activity. The answer is positive because the organization contributes to community development by offering paid time off, and the employee involves on its own initiative. That is why the literature uses the words employee involvement in community or employer supported volunteering instead of corporate volunteering.

Any corporate volunteer program should take into account the employees' desire to take part or not. The social responsibility activities carried out with employees' compulsory involvement cannot be considered volunteering activities, but team building or leisure and relaxation activities.

Any employee has the right to engage in the company's volunteer programs depending on the places available. Before the involvement, he should have enough information about the beneficiaries and responsibilities assumed. Moreover, even if the action is carried out by the company or in partnership with an NGO, the employee is entitled to occupational safety training in accordance with his duties.

At the end of the volunteering activity, the company should focus on two aspects:

- Recognizing the employees' contribution (internal gala ceremonies, letters of gratitude from the general manager, etc.), in order to enhance the desire to be involved in the future;
- Evaluating and monitoring the results of volunteering, in other words measuring the impact of activities carried out by nongovernmental organizations, beneficiaries and employees.

2. THE CHALLENGES OF CORPORATE VOLUNTEERING

Corporate volunteering should face several challenges (Cîmpeanu, 2013; Țara lui Andrei, n.d.):

- limited time regarding employee engagement

In general, the companies involve in volunteer projects because employees show a greater willingness to such activities. However, it is possible that corporate volunteers do not have the same availability as nongovernmental organizations' volunteers. That is why the development of projects should take into account this aspect.

- identification of suitable volunteer programs

The areas where employees can usually volunteer are those where the company has defined its strategic directions of social responsibility. It is obvious that every company has autonomy in this regard (VSA and RCS, 2014), especially since some risks may occur: the activity may have little impact in the community or negative effects. Moreover, as regards the community needs, an improper volunteer program could significantly reduce the company's scarce resources and even ruin its relationship with the community (Volunteering Victoria, 2014).

Although in some cases the employees can choose their own area of involvement, they are not allowed to take part in racist or discriminatory actions, religious and political events or meetings affecting public order, etc.

- identification of NGOs having capacity to receive volunteers

Although the voluntary work is not paid, volunteers' involvement in NGOs' activities requires a lot of expenses (workspace, volunteer coordinator, etc.). Therefore, any volunteer program requires the development of a budget accurately detailing the costs involved (Pro Vobis, 2003). However, some organizations cannot cover the program costs, opting either for its cancellation or for its reevaluation (Păceșilă, 2016).

The implementation of corporate volunteering will lead, inevitably, to changes in the organization's procedures (Sanchez-Hernandez and Miranda, 2011). Moreover, in order to avoid difficulties, the company should establish rules concerning the following issues (VOLUM, 2016):

- the maximum number of a department's employees who can volunteer at the same time without disturbing the company's activities.
- the maximum number of voluntary hours established with the chief consent and notified to Human Resources Department.
- the employees eligible for this type of activity (with employment contract of definite and indefinite period)
- a certain level of employees qualifications in order to be involved in voluntary work (for example, the truants should not be accepted)
- submission of evidence regarding the involvement in volunteering activities.

Any volunteering activity requires assessing and monitoring the results. The benefits of volunteering activities involving employees are difficult to quantify. Therefore, it is important to measure the impact of the activity on the nonprofit organizations, beneficiaries and employees (VSA and RCS, 2014).

3. THE BENEFITS OF CORPORATE VOLUNTEERING

Corporate volunteering has several benefits (Samuel et al., 2013), both for the community and for employers and employees (Walsh, 2005; Sanchez-Hernandez and Gallardo-Vazquez, 2013; Procopie, 2014). Thus, this type of volunteering contributes to meeting certain needs of employees in the business sector:

- improving professional performance;
- generating change;
- meeting new people;
- contributing to society development;
- learning new skills (Allen, 2003; Bartsch, 2012; Paço and Nave, 2013) which could be used in various fields (the transition to other jobs), especially to create and work in team (Volunteering Victoria, 2014).

The person is taken out of the comfort zone, required to work under completely new conditions, build relationships with different people and develop special skills later used in the company (Sgarciu, 2014). Moreover, Allen (2012) finds an increase in employees' self-esteem due to using their skills for useful projects and for other people's benefit.

As regards the community, the contribution of corporate volunteering refers to: reducing poverty, increasing prosperity, strengthening social cohesion, generating trust and solidarity, identifying and solving community problems, enhancing civic-mindedness and interaction in the community, generating similar initiatives among other organizations, etc.

Corporate volunteering has long-term beneficial effects on the company leading to: (Procopie, 2012, Păceșilă, 2015; Păceșilă, 2016):

- developing a better prepared workforce as regards the company's activities

Corporate volunteering allows employees to develop new skills (communication, work in team) which are difficult to acquire through traditional formal training. According to studies, employees' involvement in volunteer programs increases their morale and loyalty to the company. Other advantages refer to acquiring skills in management time, data collection and analysis (Procopie, n.d.; Tuffrey, 1995).

- motivating employee

The employees become more committed to the company and to its values and interact more with each other (Sgarçitu, 2014).

- increasing organization’s visibility in the community

Corporate volunteer programs contribute to improving community perception regarding the company’s activity (Allen, 2003; Mittal et al, 2008; Ilieș, 2011), increasing trust and attracting new investors to its projects.

- making efficient investment in the community where the company operates

TABLE 1. THE BENEFITS OF CORPORATE VOLUNTEERING

Business	Employees	Nonprofit organizations	National authorities and community
Staff development: teamwork, ethics, training skills, flexibility, reputation	Access to opportunities that are not aware of	Access to skills required by the business sector	Social cohesion
A way of having greater impact and investing in a healthy community	Facilities in finding the suitable volunteer activity	Access to a new type of volunteers	Participatory activities
	The joy of being involved together with other colleagues	The possibility of future partnerships	NGOs' capacity to develop community projects
		Expansion of services and new projects	

Source: VSA and RCS, 2014

The companies want to invest and operate in stable and healthy communities, with effective education systems (Trequattrini et al, 2015) as well as low poverty and crime. Therefore, their interest across the development of the community is very high. The employee involvement in community enhances social support and increases understanding of the challenges in the community. On the other hand, it could create opportunities for volunteers who do not have a job. Moreover, it could build stronger partnerships between business and nongovernmental sector, with substantial gains for both sides: sponsorships, workspaces, advertising, etc.

Other advantages for the companies with tradition in corporate volunteering refer to: strengthening employees’ relationships, increasing employees’ attachment to the organization, thereby reducing their migration to competition, increasing employees’ efficiency, reducing the hierarchical barriers between senior management and the execution.

4. OVERVIEW OF THE CORPORATE VOLUNTEERING IN ROMANIA

Taking into account the population ageing, corporate volunteering becomes more important. In a few decades, its practice in Romania could provide a mass of pensioners volunteers, still in power, with

satisfactory income, with higher education. This people could provide support to the other elderly people, which, according to predictions, will make up one third of the population in 2050 (Sgarçitu, 2011).

Romania's first corporate volunteer programs were developed by multinational companies that had come up with models used by other countries. The activities carried out by employees were seasonal and more frequent during the holidays. Like almost every important concept quickly assimilated, this type of volunteering was initially imposed more as a trend, than as a result of full awareness of community needs. However, more and more companies have realized over time that these activities could bring an important image capital and began to develop strategies and programs.

Currently, according to studies, corporate volunteering is not as widespread in Romania as in other countries in the world. Furthermore, it is used mainly in urban environment and for local projects (Centras, n.d.). However, corporate social responsibility is on an upward slope in Romania, especially in renowned companies (Imparte.ro, 2012).

This upward trend is due to the involvement of an increasingly number of companies which gradually leads to increasing corporate volunteer initiatives. This category includes large nationwide coverage companies as well as corporations which borrow CSR policies from parent companies or identify volunteering opportunities for their employees and allocate resources for this purpose. In addition, there are also sporadic initiatives among SMEs which are annually involved in one activity (Marcu, 2014).

However, currently, there are few companies supporting volunteering in Romania. According to a study about corporate social responsibility conducted by Centras (n.d.) in five (Bucharest Ilfov, North East, North West, West, Centre) of the eight development regions in Romania, only 10.96% of companies are interested in community volunteer programs. As regards the area of involvement, most of the companies have opted for education, health, environment and employment because of many problems that have been lately reported.

In Romania, the use of this type of volunteering is not very easy because of the existing lacuna in the legal framework. Moreover, the labor legislation is quite rigid in some aspects. In general, NGOs and companies operate in parallel because they do not interact each other or fail to identify a common way of action beneficial to both parties (Federația VOLUM, 2014b).

However, the companies interested in corporate volunteering may contact the nongovernmental organization Pro Vobis. In light of its mission to develop volunteering in Romania as a solution to the society problems, Pro Vobis is aimed at unlocking the potential of companies, responsible actors in the communities where they operates, in order to jointly develop innovative effective corporate volunteer programs (Pro Vobis, 2016).

This organization provides a range of services to companies (Marcu, 2014):

- organization of corporate volunteering activities (during the working program);
- evaluation of the employees' interests and consultancy for developing volunteer programs in accordance with the employees interests and the company's CSR policy;
- training for employees (volunteers, coordinators, CSR experts) on different subjects: development of civic competences, volunteer program management in CSR context, employer supported volunteering;
- non-formal and teambuilding activities through volunteering;
- matching services to organizations or institutions that need volunteers;
- development of customized databases (information or multimedia) on topics of volunteering;
- presentations, seminars and conferences on volunteering topics, knowledge events for companies wishing to engage employees in volunteering and for NGOs developing programs for these needs.

Although in Romania there is not a culture of corporate volunteering and especially of corporate social responsibility, there are a lot of prerequisites for its development: multinational companies with a long tradition in the development of social programs, journalists interested in writing about companies involved in social activities, citizens interested in solving the communities' problems (Dobrea, 2006).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Corporate volunteering has massive potential to build positive business outcomes and to increase employee morale and retention. It also produces positive effects on NGOs and citizens. More and more companies develop their business taking into account its contribution to the environment or society. In this context, promoting volunteering among companies' employees becomes a necessity. It should be seen both as a way to implement corporate social responsibility and as an integral part of the business strategy, especially for increasing the employees' loyalty to the company.

Given the human, material and financial resources involved, corporate volunteering could cover the demand for social services in society. Its success or failure depends on the entities involved (companies, NGOs), but also on employees and citizens. Moreover, legislative framework, economic, social and political context could contribute to raising awareness of the society on the importance of this type of volunteerism.

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