

Skills-based volunteering

Angela Schlenkhoff-Hus explains that business talent matters to charities.

TEN SECOND SUMMARY

- 1 Charities have skills gaps to be filled.
- 2 Volunteers can help to improve performance.
- 3 Opportunities to develop new skills.

Across the different sectors in the UK, employee volunteering – where employees volunteer during their worktime, supported by their employer – has become increasingly important over the past decade. The private sector has long recognised the business and staff development benefits of such schemes, as well as the community benefits. The charity sector is also seeing the benefits of interacting more closely with the private sector – even more so in the current financial and political climate. The sector realised that, to remain sustainable and successful in a fiercely competitive funding environment, it must become more innovative and efficient. Yet many charities currently have significant skill gaps that prevent them from making good progress in these areas.

In all of this, the public sector is lagging behind. At a management level, the benefits of employee volunteering for public sector staff and the community are understood. However, in the context of severe funding cuts within the sector, it can prove difficult to find a budget for employee volunteering projects. In this political and economic context, skills-based employee volunteering is seen as the winner. It is here that many employers will focus their attention when it comes to designing and reviewing employee volunteering programmes.

Skills-based volunteering

At Volunteering Matters, we generally define skills-based volunteering as “volunteers using their professional and/or people skills to benefit individuals and organisations”. Charities are looking for specific professional skills that volunteers can offer – such as accountancy, IT, HR – as well as “soft” skills, such as in presentation and communication. These skills can be applied either for the benefit of the organisation itself or for its service users directly.

For businesses, defining skills-based volunteering can be a complex exercise because it needs to cater for a diverse workforce with different skills sets and grades, while also fitting within often globally defined business and corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies. However, with the right business and contractual framework in place, employers are usually quick to recognise the benefits of lending their staff’s skills to charitable organisations.

Our role as a national brokerage service is to figure out what solutions employee volunteering can offer to address the challenges that the charity sector is facing, and how charities can best harness the skills of employee volunteers.

Case study: Talent Matters

On 5 September 2016, Volunteering Matters launched its “Talent Matters” programme in response to an increasing number of requests from community organisations for capacity-building opportunities bespoke to their organisation. It’s a skills-based volunteering programme that helps talented individual volunteers share their professional skills with charities and community organisations through a structured and supported process.

Talent Matters has been trialled and tested over the past few years with very positive results for both the charities and the volunteers.

One example is the “Measuring the Good” programme. Volunteering Matters and the Coalition for Efficiency developed this volunteer programme which is designed to help charities improve their impact measurement and reporting. The programme offers a step-by-step, structured framework for a skilled volunteer to support a charity in its impact measurement. They do this by acting as an independent facilitator and applying their management expertise.

Most of the time, what the charity needs is a critical friend, somebody who is neutral rather than a funder or consultant, with whom they can be open and honest. They also need somebody who can help them explore solutions to challenges that are very specific to their organisation. Some charity professionals have used their limited resources to attend conferences and workshops in different capacity building areas. Although these may feel beneficial at the time, it is often difficult for charity leaders to translate their new found knowledge and find the time to adapt it to their particular context. By successfully completing a Talent Matters match, the charity is able to build confidence and at the end of the process the expertise and ownership rests within the charity. Understanding common business tools and approaches can be helpful for charity professionals but, importantly, they are the experts in their fields and have clearly identified the challenges to overcome.

The Talent Matters approach takes this into account and matches them with a suitably skilled volunteer (also an expert in their field) to help them reach the next stages in their organisation’s development.



Dr Angela Schlenkhoff-Hus is deputy head of Employee Volunteering at Volunteering Matters. She has a keen interest in skills-based employee volunteering and heads up the skills-based volunteering working group within the department. This continuously develops new ways of using the skills of employees for the benefit of communities. Angela has been working in partnership with Coalition for Efficiency on the Measuring the Good programme since 2013. One of her other special interests is impact measurement of volunteering and social action projects. Angela can be contacted by email at: Angela.Schlenkhoff-Hus@volunteeringmatters.org.uk. Visit: <https://volunteeringmatters.org.uk/>



Over to you

Readers might wonder what all of this has to do with them and how they could possibly help a charity tackle its challenges. Or maybe they already have first-hand experience of how skills and knowledge can benefit a charitable organisation. The specific analytical and management skills that an individual can offer are hugely valuable to charities and community organisations.

Since 2013, 100% of our volunteers have felt that their objectives were met. These included benefiting a charity through their professional skills, applying their knowledge in a new environment, and enhancing or developing their abilities. 89% of volunteers felt that the skills they had developed through Measuring the Good would help them in their professional life.

Those joining a skills-based volunteering programme might expect to be matched to an organisation that runs most of its services on a shoe string. However, it is also amazing how much can be achieved with so little. Participants will soon find that their skills and experience are like gold dust for the organisation, that they are transferrable to a completely different sector, and that they will feel stretched and challenged in their thinking and approach. This will result in an increased knowledge of the vibrant charity sector, the honing of existing skills in a new environment, and the potential to develop new skills and understanding, for example of charity governance. The agency will take care of facilitating the relationship with the charity so that participants can get on with the important work.

Whatever professional skills are available, there will be several charities in need of that knowledge and expertise. Ideally, participants will have facilitation skills and a few years of management experience under their belt. Further, they should be able to commit to working with a charity leadership team over the course of two to four months and to spend about 20 hours during that time either in or preparing for meetings with them.

Throughout the process participants will be supported by a volunteer manager, the cost of which is covered by the employer. We also find that it is particularly suitable for employees of small- and medium-sized enterprises who want to give something back to the community, but do not have the capacity to allow for 10 to 15 of their employees to be out on a team volunteering day at the same time. There is also the option of buddying up with a colleague to support the same charity.

Conclusion

If this has whetted appetites and readers would like to find out more, please get in touch. We'd be more than happy to answer any questions and to start the volunteer journey. I will close with the words of one of the volunteers on the Measuring the Good programme:

"The most important thing the project has given me is the confidence to use my skills in different situations. I'm very proud to have been part of this project, thank you for selecting me."