



How to Elevate Employee Engagement
and Community Impact Through

Workplace Volunteer Programs

Best Practices from the Field

Embedding Social Purpose in Your Business and Empowering Employees to be Change Agents

When Gary Levante arrived at [Berkshire Bank](#) ten years ago, he inherited an employee volunteering program that wasn't built for its far-flung work force.

Like most banks, Berkshire had employees scattered across a number of markets in several states. Yet its volunteering program was centrally managed through Berkshire's corporate office, which selected the projects and managed logistics.

Not surprisingly, only about 30 percent of Berkshire's employees took part – and the company knew it was missing opportunities to engage its employees and make an impact in the communities it served.

So Levante, now Berkshire's senior vice president of corporate responsibility and culture and America's Charities board director, was charged with creating a new strategy – one that involved taking its employee volunteering program out of the home office and into the field.

Today, employees in each of Berkshire's markets serve on regional volunteer councils, which work to identify worthwhile volunteer opportunities with local nonprofits and organize their peers who are interested in taking part.

The results have been nothing short of remarkable.

For each of the past four years, Levante says the program has achieved 100 percent employee participation, while helping to nurture a new generation of emerging corporate leaders who serve on the councils. Even better, the program is having a much more significant impact on nonprofits in each of the company's markets.

"We've been able to embed social purpose throughout our business, using it as a tactic to support talent development goals," Levante says. "And the strategy has been brought to life by local employees. It really centers on empowering employees to be change agents in their communities."

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Senior Vice President of Corporate
Responsibility and Culture,
Berkshire Bank



Why Employee Volunteering Matters

Before revamping its program, Berkshire was like many other companies. It understood the importance of employee volunteering and had [established a program](#). But it didn't have the right strategy or structure in place to maximize its value.

As a result, it was missing a big opportunity.

And that opportunity is real. World-class volunteering programs are a differentiator for companies interested in standing out to top talent and establishing their social responsibility and impact credentials. When managed well, employee volunteering programs can help companies:

- Recruit and retain top talent
- Improve employee satisfaction, morale, and health
- Develop the next generation of corporate leaders
- Enhance brand value
- Build stronger community relationships
- Make a lasting impact on those in need

According to America's Charities' [Snapshot Employee Donor Research](#), volunteering is the second-most important component of employee engagement programs and is the number one motivation for workplace donors – even surpassing matching gift programs.

Offering a workplace volunteer program in and of itself will not serve as a magic elixir for improving employee satisfaction and burnishing the brand. "Thoughtful planning and execution is essential to having a powerful impact on corporate culture and helping socially minded companies make a major difference in their communities. The types of opportunities and incentives offered to employees, the frequency and duration in which opportunities are offered, and the technology and communications used to facilitate, track, and promote those opportunities all contribute to an employee volunteer program's ultimate success and impact," said Jim Starr, president and CEO of America's Charities.

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Jim Starr
President and CEO,
America's Charities

Building a New Employee Volunteerism Program?

[Click here to download our free guide for tips on what to consider before you get started.](#)

What Employees Say:

Top Five Motivations for Workplace Donors



Source: America's Charities Snapshot Employee Donor Research (www.charities.org/trends)



Where It Goes Wrong

Alberto Alvarez, corporate partnerships manager at the nonprofit [KaBOOM!](#), works closely with companies that want to get their employees involved in volunteering programs to help his organization build playgrounds.

KaBOOM!'s model relies heavily on volunteers. Over the past two decades, more than 1.5 million volunteers have helped build 17,000 playgrounds in low-income communities across America. Often, companies play a leading role in providing volunteers and financial support for these projects.

KaBOOM!, like many nonprofits, is careful about its corporate partners. And it can easily spot when a company's volunteering program needs work.

Alvarez says successful volunteer programs and partnerships between companies and nonprofits are the result of diligent and purposeful interaction. These relationships are built upon trust and transparency. In order for a [volunteer effort to have impact](#), it must be organized and executed in a way that [accomplishes "success" as defined by your company – and the nonprofit](#) you partner with – from the onset.

Conversely, if companies are merely hosting a program to generate good PR or because it checks a box on its list of employee benefits, Alvarez said they are not likely to be good partners.

The same is true of companies that go too far in attempting to micromanage or control a project.

"Our best partners are those who understand that the project doesn't belong to them and that it isn't something where they are trying to control the process," Alvarez said. "We want true partners – companies that are willing to support worthwhile community projects."

Often, companies that have difficulty working with nonprofit partners have an equally difficult time getting buy-in from their own employees.

When that happens, they are likely to see low participation rates or end up with programs in which employees feel like they are going through the motions rather than doing something meaningful.

"It's important that a volunteering opportunity is very authentic and meaningful to the employee," says Debi Alexander, director of development for America's Charities' nonprofit member [PHILLIPS Programs for Children and Families](#) in Virginia. "That leaves the volunteer with a strong sense of meaning."

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Corporate Partnerships Manager,
KaBOOM!



What Employees Say:

Top Five Detractions from a Volunteer Experience

- 1** PRESSURE FROM EMPLOYER OR COLLEAGUES
- 2** NO AVAILABILITY TO VOLUNTEER DURING WORK HOURS
- 3** PROJECT ISN'T CLEARLY DEFINED
- 4** LIMITED INFORMATION ABOUT THE NONPROFIT
- 5** NO TECHNOLOGY PLATFORM THAT MAKES IT EASY TO REGISTER, PARTICIPATE, & TRACK VOLUNTEER HOURS

Source: America's Charities Snapshot Employee Donor Research (www.charities.org/trends)

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Director of Development,
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TROUBLESHOOTING YOUR PROGRAM:

How do you know if your company's employee volunteering program is falling short?

If you notice that your program is experiencing one or more of the conditions below, it might be time for a new strategy:

- Declining rates of employee participation.
- Poor or declining scores on employee satisfaction surveys.
- Nonprofit partners are declining to invite your company to participate in multiple engagements.
- Employees have little or no say in identifying and planning volunteering projects.
- Projects don't align with your employees' skills.
- Projects don't fully align with your corporate values.



7 Seven Steps to Take Your Program to the Next Level

If your company's employee volunteering program needs a reboot, you have a number of options.

But rather than simply making small tactical changes, it's important to first revisit your overall strategy to determine which tactics are most important to achieving your ultimate goals. Here are seven steps to consider as you build and carry out that strategy.



1. Identify Your Corporate Purpose

The first step in building an effective strategy is to articulate your company's core values and purpose.

Beyond making money, what does your company strive to achieve and what type of culture are you trying to establish both internally and externally?

If you haven't identified your corporate purpose, now is the time to lead some discussions among your leaders and your board to develop one.

"You have to connect your volunteerism to your core purpose as a company," Levante says. "You need to have an end goal – and that planning stage is critically important."



2. Establish Ownership

Identify which people in your company are responsible for ensuring your employee volunteering program aligns with your corporate purpose – and for making sure every level of your company is behind the effort.

For some companies, ownership might mean designating an executive leader – or an entire department – to oversee its volunteerism efforts. For others, it might involve creating an employee council or committee that takes ownership of the program.

In Berkshire's example, the program was falling short because the program's ownership was centralized in its main office rather than being in the hands of employees who were working and living in the communities it served.

It's not enough, however, to merely identify the right owner or owners. The owner must also be empowered to make decisions and be accountable for achieving results.

More importantly, that owner must have [buy-in from senior executives](#) who set the corporate agenda and middle managers who control work schedules and day-to-day activities. Without such support, employees might feel unnecessary pressure to either participate in – or sit out – volunteering activities.





3. Communicate Clearly and Regularly

For your volunteering program to achieve its full impact, it's also important to make sure you [have a plan for communicating](#) both internally and externally.

Internally, you want to make sure you're regularly spotlighting employee volunteers, promoting volunteering opportunities, and demonstrating your impact. This will not only help achieve greater buy-in for your volunteering program but help reinforce your corporate purpose and reinforce – or even establish – your culture.

Externally, your company has an opportunity to leverage its marketing channels and media outreach efforts to spotlight your employee volunteers, nonprofit partners, and your corporate values.



4. Incentivize and Recognize Your Volunteers

Show your employees that your organization values volunteering – and their participation – by developing incentives and finding ways to recognize their efforts.

Nearly two-thirds of all employees who participate in volunteering programs say [paid-time off is a key incentive for volunteering](#) – so if your company doesn't currently offer this incentive, it should consider adding it.

Recognition is also important – both to show employees you value their time and to reinforce its importance to those who aren't currently participating. Consider honoring employees who hit key benchmarks for volunteer hours or volunteer project participation.



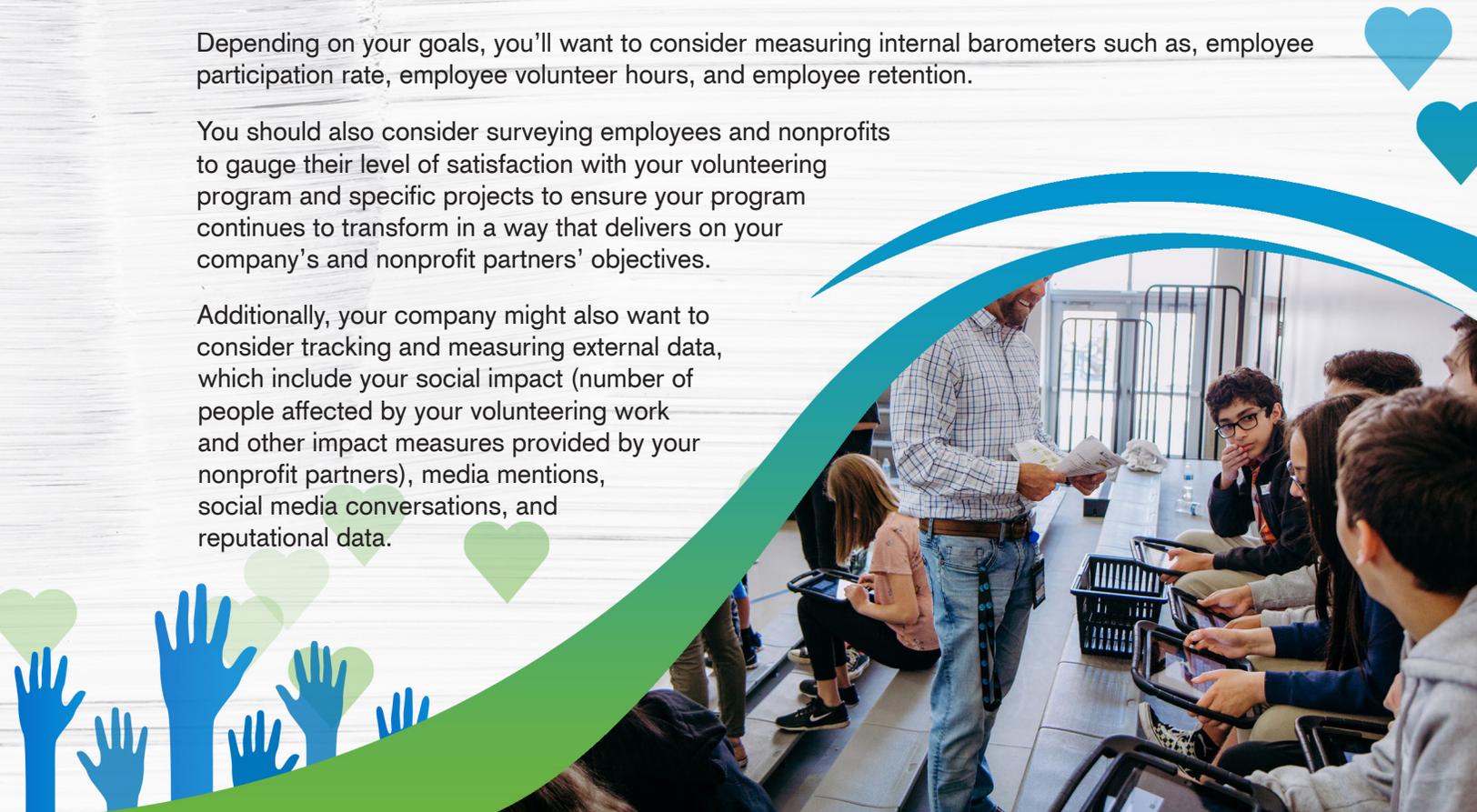
5. Measure Your Results

[Establish clear metrics](#) to track how your employee volunteering efforts align with your corporate values and goals.

Depending on your goals, you'll want to consider measuring internal barometers such as, employee participation rate, employee volunteer hours, and employee retention.

You should also consider surveying employees and nonprofits to gauge their level of satisfaction with your volunteering program and specific projects to ensure your program continues to transform in a way that delivers on your company's and nonprofit partners' objectives.

Additionally, your company might also want to consider tracking and measuring external data, which include your social impact (number of people affected by your volunteering work and other impact measures provided by your nonprofit partners), media mentions, social media conversations, and reputational data.





6. Work with Trusted Nonprofits and Keep a Dialogue Going to Ensure True Collaboration

An effective employee volunteering strategy cannot overlook the other key player in the equation: your nonprofit partners.

Many nonprofits feel so obligated to their corporate partners that they will create opportunities to satisfy requests – even when the outcomes are not truly helpful. [A homeless shelter manager told us](#) corporate volunteers painted the same walls of his shelter seven times. He felt saying ‘no’ to his corporate partners – who are funders and advocates – would risk the relationship.

Engage your nonprofit partners in a conversation at the start and develop expectations together. Let them know you want the volunteer opportunity to be a win-win – meaningful for your employees and their nonprofit. And keep that dialogue going – after a volunteer opportunity concludes, ask both your employees and your partners nonprofits for honest feedback that can help you improve the program as you evolve. Successful volunteer programs and partnerships between a company and nonprofit are the result of diligent and purposeful interaction – a relationship built upon trust and transparency.

While much of your success will depend on your ability to develop the right culture and program, it also hinges on making sure the nonprofits you support align with your corporate and employees’ goals and values. Provide opportunities that resonate with what your employees want to accomplish with their volunteer activities.

Make sure your strategy accounts for vetting nonprofit partners to ensure that they are the right fit for your needs – and that you are [providing them with the support and skills they need](#) to achieve their goals.



7. Ditch Excel and Make it Easy

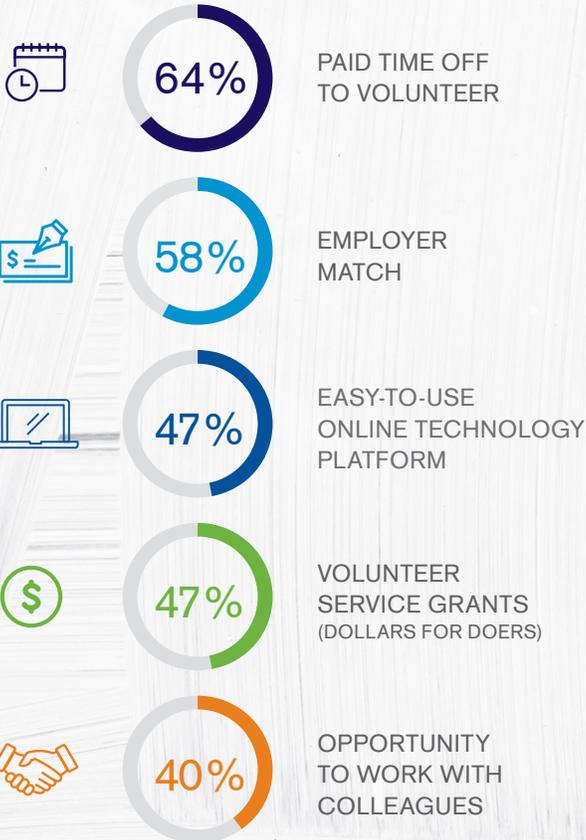
We know how busy you are. Happily, [tools and technology exist](#) that not only help you manage your volunteer program, but take it to the next level. Many companies start in Excel – they’ll create a spreadsheet of opportunities and ask their employees to submit an email or form after completing a volunteer commitment. That type of manual facilitation is certainly inexpensive – but it’s time-intensive and doesn’t help you measure or share your impact story.

Look for tools that fully integrate with your existing corporate social responsibility and employee engagement efforts so you’re tying all of your social good efforts together – both in tracking your efforts, and demonstrating to your stakeholders all the good you’re doing in the community. Keep in mind it’s not just about connecting your employees to opportunities – a great volunteer program measures its efforts so you can track growth and success over time.



What Employees Say:

Top Five Factors to Creating a Positive Volunteer Experience



Source: America's Charities Snapshot Employee Donor Research (www.charities.org/trends)

“The community is better off because of the project and the people who do the work get recognition for what they've done. I can't fully express the good that comes from it.”

Ken Garrison
Executive Director,
Heavy Construction
Contractors Association

Ideal Outcomes

When an employer brings all of these elements together in its employee volunteering program, the results can be powerful.

Ken Garrison has seen that power firsthand through his work as executive director of the [Heavy Construction Contractors Association](#).

Garrison's association represents infrastructure contractors and related firms in three counties in Virginia – many of whom are often competing against each other for business.

But each year, the association organizes a program in which member companies nominate emerging leaders within their organizations to oversee and manage a volunteer service project in their community.

To date, the association estimates it has provided more than \$1 million worth of service to community nonprofits – mostly by coordinating pro bono construction projects that would normally be too costly for the nonprofits that need them.

One project involved rebuilding the bus circle and replacing sidewalks for the PHILLIPS School ~ Annandale – an effort that solved an important need for the school and helped the volunteers who participated gather experience managing and carrying out a complex construction job.

At the end of the project, the association held a groundbreaking ceremony, which included speeches from local politicians and drew local media coverage. This brought additional attention to the association – and to the school. And it has helped strengthen relationships in the community.

“The community is better off because of the project and the people who do the work get recognition for what they've done,” Garrison says. “It's hard to fully express the good that comes from it.”

It's a great example of how an employee volunteering program can be much [more than simply a workplace perk](#).

By developing and carrying out a strategy that is aligned with your corporate values and goals, encourages employee ownership, is supported by recognition and strong communications, and enlists the right partners, you have the power to create a volunteering program that makes a massive impact on your community – and your company.





Getting Started

The importance of workplace volunteering is accelerating. As more companies have prioritized corporate volunteering and brought this spirit of innovation to their employee giving programs, [they have seen the results](#): improvements in recruiting and retention, employee satisfaction, leadership and skill development, brand value, innovation, community relationships, employee health, and more.

Employee volunteer programs are a vital part of your corporate social responsibility, employee engagement, and community relations efforts. If done well, your program can play an important role in building nonprofit capacity, engaging employees, serving stakeholders, meeting social impact goals, and ensuring your company's sustainability – not to mention all the positive impact you will have on the community.

America's Charities is proud to serve as the employee volunteering, workplace giving, and charitable funds distribution partner for more than 50 organizations, offering employers a streamlined solution for promoting volunteer programs, tracking and reporting employee volunteer hours, and integrating volunteerism with broader employee giving and social responsibility initiatives.

How can we help you? Contact your America's Charities' team at businessdevelopment@charities.org, call 703.674.5358, or visit www.charities.org/volunteer to share your needs with us and to learn more about our employee volunteer program capabilities.

Acknowledgments

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