

Impacts of an Employee Volunteering Program on Employee Attitudes

(Referred Paper at 2008 The Australian Sociological Association - TASA)

Introduction

The importance of volunteering in the community has been highlighted as an indicator of community cohesion or social capital by Putnam (2000). Many of the indicators of social cohesion are in decline, but volunteering is bucking the trend.

In recent years a new form of volunteering has emerged - employee volunteering. This volunteering is typically part of corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs. Corporations facilitate volunteering by offering employees paid days off to spend time volunteering. Corporations incur considerable costs in donated time and administration to facilitate programs. It is assumed this volunteering improves the social capital of the corporation (Preston, 2004).

Few companies appear to measure the impacts of employee volunteering, and where evaluations are undertaken, few are about Australian companies. Evaluation of these programs appears to be rare. It seems employee volunteering is viewed as inherently 'good', with assessment of the expenditure and time invested not warranted.

The study reported in this paper is similar to one undertaken in Holland by Gilder and colleagues with ABN-AMRO (Gilder et al 2005). That study explored staff responses to the availability of, and participation in, corporate volunteering programs in terms of staff satisfaction and retention.

The current study was undertaken with Shell Australia (Shell). Its core purpose was to establish empirical evidence of the impact of Shell's corporate volunteering program for staff. A total of 485 staff responded to the survey, which was conducted online.

Results were analysed by four groups: non volunteers, community only volunteers, Shell only volunteers, and community and Shell volunteers.

Volunteers were generally more positive toward work colleagues than were non volunteers. Those who volunteered both through Shell and the community were significantly more likely than the other three groups to strongly agree they put more into their work than is expected.

This report consists of four main sections: Literature Review, Survey Methodology, Survey Results and Discussion.

Literature Review

Importance of volunteering in society

The importance of volunteering in the community has been highlighted by the political scientist Robert Putnam (2000) as a central measure of social capital. He sees social networks and volunteering as strongly linked because 'social networks provide the channels through which we recruit one another for good deeds and social networks foster norms of reciprocity that encourage attention to others' welfare'.

Putnam describes bonding social networks as exclusive and characterised by the similarity and shared values of its members, and bridging social networks as inclusive and as better for linkage to external assets and for information dissemination.

Evidence from Australia shows that, as in the United States, voluntary work is growing. In 1995 24% of the population volunteered compared to an estimated 34% in 2007 - a 10% increase over an 11-year period (ABS 1995, 2007)

Volunteering is highest amongst professionals (46%), advanced clerical, sales and services workers (45%), and managers and administrators (42%). The lowest level of participation is amongst intermediate production and transport workers (22%) and labourers and related workers (24%).

Corporate volunteering

As part a broad push for CSR (Grayson, 2001), corporate volunteering emerged in the mid nineties and was flourishing by the mid 2000s. It allows staff paid leave to volunteer. The impact of this volunteering is largely unexplored in the literature.

Ball (2003) cites a Cranfield School of Management report saying CSR programs are intuitively appealing but companies need to check the programs are producing results. There is very little published information of an empirical nature about the impacts (either internal or external) of CSR programs (Evans and Saxton, 2005; Loza, 2005; Peterson, 2003; Gilder et al, 2005; Carvello, 2007).

The topic areas most discussed are the internal impacts for the corporation.

The Corporate Citizenship Company (1995) report a survey of *employers* who saw the key benefits as being improving morale and motivation of employees (71% agreed), offering training opportunities for employees (65% agreed), providing an ideal form of team building (63% agreed), helping to enhance internal communications (40%), and attracting and keeping quality employees (33%).

The Corporate Citizenship Company (1995) reviewed a number of studies from different corporations. Ultimately the authors conclude there is anecdotal evidence to support the benefits of corporate volunteering programs, and some, but inconclusive, empirical evidence.

Peterson (2003) explored impacts for volunteers from across multiple organisations. Pfizer undertook an evaluation of its Global Health Fellows international volunteering program showing most participants believed the impacts had been positive and their motivation and pride for and loyalty to their company had increased (Vian, 2007).

Gilder et al (2005) looked at the demographic characteristics of corporate volunteers as compared to general population volunteers, and the impact on employees as a result of volunteering. They found volunteers had a different demographic profile to community volunteers and non volunteers.

This current study used the Gilder et al (2005) study as its base, as it provides a sound approach to the topic. The study was conducted for the Shell Company of Australia to assess its employee volunteering program.

Survey Methodology

A quantitative online survey was emailed to all staff (1,936) at Shell. 10 days after the first email a reminder was sent, and the survey closed two weeks after. A total of 485 surveys were completed – a response rate of 25%.

Cross-tabulations were used for analysis. The results are analysed by the nature of the volunteering, categorised into four groups:

- No volunteering at all – neither through Shell nor in the community
- Community volunteering – volunteered in the community but not with Shell
- Shell Volunteering – volunteered through Shell but not in the community
- Both – volunteered through Shell and the community

Analysis was undertaken on two key sets of attributes:

Set One: *Volunteering Attributes:* Relating to how people feel about volunteering

Set Two: *Work Attributes:* Relating to how people feel about their work

Within each set of attributes correlations were reviewed and decisions about how to treat that set made.

Set One attributes were divided into two groups on the basis of judgement relating to the notions of bonding and bridging social capital as discussed by Putnam (2000). The attributes which were assigned as ‘bridging’ were ones the researcher believed described attitudes which were bridging to the external community, that is outside Shell. The bonding attributes were ones which the researcher believed would be bonding between staff, or internally in some way.

Survey Results

Overall, the community volunteering rate of Shell staff (58%) is considerably higher than the national average of 34%.

Table 1: Relationship of Community volunteering to Shell volunteering

		Volunteer in the community		Total n=485
		Yes %	No %	
Volunteer via Shell	Yes	21	10	31
	No	37	32	69
	Total	58	42	100

Chi-squared = $p < .05$

Thirty one percent of Shell respondents indicated they volunteered through work, although Shell estimates approximately 10% of its staff have volunteered. Those who have participated in volunteering may have felt more inclined to complete the questionnaire.

There are 10% of employees who are ‘new’ volunteers as they did not volunteer in the community but have now volunteered via Shell.

Just under a third (32%) undertake no volunteering either via Shell or in the community. Twenty-one percent of Shell staff volunteer through both work and the community. A reasonably high percentage (37%) volunteer in the community but not through Shell.

Attitudes to the volunteering program

There are significant differences in attitudes about volunteering depending on whether an employee volunteers at all, and on the type of volunteering (ie, either as a community volunteer or as a Shell volunteer). Agreement with the following statements is significantly higher if the employee has volunteered through Shell. The attributes attributed as bridging did for the most part relate more strongly to volunteering through Shell. The exception is “The chance to develop contacts with other people and organisations is an important advantage of doing volunteer work” - people who have volunteered via Shell only, do not agree as often. This is arguably the most bridging of attributes.

Table 2: Bridging capital statements

	Agree very strongly/Strongly	Agree/Neither	Disagree
It's very good to offer staff this sort of opportunity			
Do not volunteer at all	52	43	5
Volunteer in the community only	54	44	2
Volunteer via Shell only	87	13	0
Both: Volunteer via Shell and in the community	81	18	1
It's a great way to get people who might not otherwise to volunteer some time			
Do not volunteer at all	50	44	5
Volunteer in the community only	51	46	3
Volunteer via Shell only	77	21	2
Both: Volunteer via Shell and in the community	72	26	2
It encourages staff to think beyond Shell			
Do not volunteer at all	45	48	7
Volunteer in the community only	51	45	4
Volunteer via Shell only	60	36	4
Both: Volunteer via Shell and in the community	69	27	4
Allows me to make a contribution to the community			
Do not volunteer at all	58	38	5
Volunteer in the community only	61	39	1
Volunteer via Shell only	83	17	0
Both: Volunteer via Shell and in the community	86	14	0
Continued/.....			

The chance to develop contacts with other people and organisations is an important advantage of doing volunteer work			
Do not volunteer at all	39	45	15
Volunteer in the community only	46	46	8
Volunteer via Shell only	38	49	13
Both: Volunteer via Shell and in the community	60	33	8

Chi-squared = $p < .05$

The attributes assigned as having ‘bonding’ qualities showed quite different patterns of response by volunteering type. On two of the three attributes, those who volunteered at all (either through the community or Shell) agreed more strongly than those who did not volunteer.

Table 3: Bonding attributes

	Agree Very Strongly/Strongly	Agree/Neither	Disagree
These programs allow staff to learn new skills			
Do not volunteer at all	35	56	10
Volunteer in the community only	43	50	7
Volunteer via Shell only	45	45	11
Both: Volunteer via Shell and in the community	57	38	6
It is very good for team building			
Do not volunteer at all	34	50	16
Volunteer in the community only	44	45	11
Volunteer via Shell only	57	34	9
Both: Volunteer via Shell and in the community	56	39	5
I feel encouraged to participate in employee volunteering			
Do not volunteer at all	9	44	46
Volunteer in the community only	11	42	47
Volunteer via Shell only	32	40	28
Both: Volunteer via Shell and in the community	34	39	27

Chi-squared = $p < .05$

Attitudes to Work

A total of five factors were tested and two were seen to have significant variation depending on the volunteer profile of the employees. These attributes were 'I willingly put more into my job than is expected' (Chi squared = $p < .000$) and 'I like the people I work with at Shell' (Chi squared $p = < .005$).

Any volunteering activity whether through the community alone (50%) or Shell alone (55%) increases the agreement with the statement 'I willingly put more into my job than is expected' but those who have volunteered through work and through the community are by far the most likely to agree (72%).

Staff who have volunteered through Shell are more likely to strongly agree they 'like the people they work' with. The response to this attribute is not influenced by other volunteering behaviour – that is, those who only volunteer in the community (47%) are as likely to agree as those who undertake no volunteering at all (50%). So it is not volunteering that makes the difference, but volunteering through Shell.

This is a significant finding and one which directly supports the notion that staff morale is enhanced through corporate volunteering, if one agrees that liking one's work colleagues is a measurement of morale.

Whilst the results in table 3 below did not test as statistically significant, there are some interesting patterns worthy of comment.

Those who have volunteered via Shell strongly agree (40%) 'Shell is much better than most work places' compared to those who have not volunteered via Shell.

An attribute that seemed not to be influenced by the volunteering profile at all was staff looking for another job; this was as likely if they had volunteered in both the community and through Shell (24%) as it was if they had not volunteered at all (23%). This is consistent with the findings of Gilder (2005).

Table 4: Attitudes to work by volunteering status

	Agree very strongly/Strongly	Agree/Neither	Disagree
I willingly put more into my job than is expected*			
Do not volunteer at all	41	48	11
Volunteer in the community only	50	45	5
Volunteer via Shell only	55	43	2
Both: Volunteer via Shell and in the community	72	26	2
I like the people I work with at Shell**			
Do not volunteer at all	50	35	14
Volunteer in the community only	47	41	12
Volunteer via Shell only	68	23	9
Both: Volunteer via Shell and in the community	69	23	8
I often consider looking for another job			
Do not volunteer at all	61	16	23
Volunteer in the community only	54	21	25
Volunteer via Shell only	53	32	15
Both: Volunteer via Shell and in the community	57	19	24
Shell is better than most work places			
Do not volunteer at all	32	35	33
Volunteer in the community only	30	43	27
Volunteer via Shell only	40	36	23
Both: Volunteer via Shell and in the community	40	39	20
I like the work I do at Shell			
Do not volunteer at all	50	41	10
Volunteer in the community only	50	41	9
Volunteer via Shell only	53	34	13
Both: Volunteer via Shell and in the community	59	31	11

* Chi-squared value significant at $p < .01$

**Chi-squared value significant at $p < .05$

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate some of the benefits to employees and Shell of participating in the corporate volunteering opportunity offered by Shell.

The results show some positive impacts in relation to attitudes to the program itself, and to employees' attitudes to their work. Overall the program appears to have positive impacts for staff attitudes and therefore for Shell.

The Shell employee volunteering program encouraged a group of employees to volunteer who did not previously volunteer, thereby increasing the 'supply' of volunteers. These findings are consistent with the Gilder et al (2005) study.

This research has shown some interesting differences between non volunteers, community volunteers and corporate volunteers in their attitudes to bridging capital attributes. Participation in Shell corporate volunteering results in considerably increased agreement with the attributes.

Non volunteers and community only volunteers respond to these bridging capital attributes at similar levels, suggesting these attributes relate more to Shell bridging to the community, than volunteering in itself bridging to the community. That is, if these attributes related to the benefits of volunteering per se, then community only volunteer and non volunteer response levels should differ (which they did not).

The bonding capital attributes do not show such consistent responses across attributes. All who volunteer agree more often with the attribute 'allowing staff to learn new skills' benefit of volunteering, and those who volunteer the most (ie, through the community and through Shell) believe this even more strongly. Similarly 'team building' also appears to be a generic benefit of volunteering but more pronounced through the corporate volunteering experience.

Community volunteering more strongly offers the benefit of 'the chance to develop contacts with other people and organisations is an important advantage of doing volunteer work', which is often reported as a key benefit for corporate volunteering programs (although not necessarily supported with empirical evidence).

This research provides evidence that any volunteering enhances how staff feel about their work place, their work colleagues and how much they are willing to put into their jobs. People who volunteer at work and in the community are most inclined to believe they put more into their work than expected.

The high discrimination between attributes depending on the type of volunteering undertaken (or not volunteering) suggests that studies into the impacts of volunteering need to consider the total volunteering behaviour of respondents. It also demonstrates that some attributes tested are 'volunteering' attributes in general and some more specifically are 'corporate volunteering' attributes.

Ultimately, the question is whether it is participation that causes the attitude or the attitude that causes participation. This research shows that some key demographics and employment profiles do impact on volunteering. Either way, it is evident participation is a positive. Both this study and Gilder et al's (2005) show that encouragement to participate is a key influence in ultimate participation. This suggests that the attitudes may indeed arise as a result of participation, since participation is not entirely voluntary (ie, it is encouraged).

The positive results suggest that managers should facilitate volunteering as there is a benefit to the staff member and ultimately to the organisation.

This study goes some of the way to identifying attributes that specifically relate to corporate volunteering, but further research should be undertaken to clearly distinguish between attributes that relate to volunteering in general, and corporate volunteering specifically.

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