



# Employee Engagement: Volunteerism



May 2012

## INTRODUCTION

Charities @ Work engaged Dr. Linda Gornitsky of LBG Associates to conduct two focus groups to discuss various aspects of employee engagement. This paper covers the findings of the focus group about volunteerism, which was held during the Charities @ Work conference in New York in April 2012.

### About Charities @ Work:

Charities@Work is an alliance of four nonprofit federations that serves as the cooperative voice for more than 2000 international, national, and local charities. Our mission is to provide employers with an efficient way to enhance their employee engagement programs and initiatives and to respond to growing employee interest through a wider range of giving options. The Charities@Work Alliance founders are: America's Charities, Community Health Charities, EarthShare and Global Impact. Visit [www.charitiesatwork.org](http://www.charitiesatwork.org) to learn more.

### About LBG Associates:

LBG Associates, founded in 1993 by Dr. Linda Gornitsky, is a woman-owned consulting firm that specializes in the design, implementation, and management of corporate citizenship programs and initiatives. Our goal is to help companies develop strategic national and international corporate citizenship programs that generate positive, measurable benefits for the corporate bottom-line, as well as the community as a whole. LBG Associates provides advice, training, research and implementation in a personal, cost-effective, and timely manner. Our solutions are creative and innovative and drive social change. Visit [www.lbg-associates.com](http://www.lbg-associates.com) for more information or call Dr. Gornitsky at 203-325-3154.

## HOW COMPANIES ENGAGE EMPLOYEES THROUGH VOLUNTEERISM

When it comes to volunteerism, the terminology used varies by company and even within companies. The seven participants agreed that the word “engagement” is usually connected with HR (although one or two did admit that they use the terms volunteerism and engagement interchangeably), whereas “involvement” denotes volunteerism.

The traditional ways that companies in the focus group engage employees include:

- Board service
- Volunteerism
- Attending check presentations
- Ribbon cutting ceremonies
- Week of service
- Employee volunteer councils

Some companies are using more innovative tactics to engage employees. For example:

- Empowering associates to propose their own volunteer activities
- Providing funds for team activities, in which half is a pure donation for the charity and the other half is used for supplies
- Arranging video contests in which associates share why they are passionate about a particular charity and employees vote for the best videos and the winners’ charities get a donation from the company
- Allowing each location, during the company’s month of service, to select a charity that it wants to champion and to provide services/funding to that organization

In addition, some companies are organizing project for their associates who cannot take time off from work. These projects are usually of short duration that employees can do on their own time or during the work day, such as:

- Providing employees kits that they can make at home. The completed kits are then donated to appropriate charities such as a local youth organization, women’s shelter or nursing home
- Providing associates with kits that they can complete in a conference room during lunch hour
- Painting a mural on-site that is then donated to a local school
- Micro-volunteerism in which employees can complete a project in a very short timeframe such as designing a logo for a charity

The companies noted that although they do not consciously provide events that are targeted to specific demographics, the associates tend to segment themselves based on their demographics or particular interests. Knitters and quilters will gravitate toward handiwork projects, such as creating items for homeless shelters, for example. A company's affinity groups, too, will choose projects related to their missions. A women's network will volunteer with the Girl Scouts, while a veterans group will choose to volunteer with veterans' organizations.

### ***Metrics***

All the participants measured their programs at some level. Many set targets for certain programs, such as a 3% increase in employee participation during the month of service. Most were fairly proficient at collecting output data, but not outcome data. A few were beginning to survey their employees after each event to not only get quantitative data but also qualitative data, such as how their associates felt about the project. Some companies also surveyed their executives on their board experience.

It was very heartening to learn that none of the participants had difficulty working with HR on engaging employees. Most viewed HR as a partner and some even said that their companies were trying to include volunteerism as part of an associate's performance evaluation. It appears that HR is beginning to appreciate that a good volunteer program can help it meet its engagement goals of recruitment, retention and team building.

## **KEYS TO SUCCESS**

Some of the best practices that companies were using to keep employees engaged include:

- Enabling them to make decisions about where and when they volunteer
- Providing adequate funding. Many companies give grants of varying sizes depending on how many associates may be involved in an activity, whether the organization is strategic, and other factors
- Providing volunteers with online organizational tools or physical "kits" of supplies so it is easy for them to carry out an event
- Leadership buy-in
- Offering short, one-time experiences that can be completed in a day or less in which associates see the immediate result of their efforts
- Using volunteer events as on-boarding for new hires
- Offering e-mentoring or micro-volunteering opportunities

## CHALLENGES

The composition of the workforce can pose a huge challenge. For example, if there are a lot of part-time, hourly or union employees, special arrangements may be necessary to involve them, or they may not be eligible for an event, which creates issues of exclusivity.

Engaging field personnel can also pose a problem especially if many do not work in an office environment. This is also true in companies that allow employees to telecommute or have virtual offices.

Technology is very important for communicating and tracking employee activities, but it is often very difficult to gain the attention of the IT team. Participants complained that they are often the “lowest on the IT totem pole.”

Although there is wide recognition that volunteerism is a good way to encourage team-building, now many companies are using it primarily for that purpose and nonprofits are finding it increasingly difficult to provide projects with a team-building element.

The final challenge is money. Most of the companies said they do not have a dedicated budget or the budget they do have has remained flat and is inadequate to support the events that the company and employees want. Having to “do more with less” appears to be a perennial challenge for staff responsible for involving associates in volunteerism.