



# Corporate social responsibility and employee volunteerism: What do the best companies do?



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**Abstract** Employee volunteerism as a practice of corporate social responsibility aids corporations by strengthening employee satisfaction and retention internally and by strengthening corporate reputations and connections with stakeholders externally. Of particular interest are the specific practices and procedures used by companies to encourage and support volunteer activities of their employees. We reviewed publicly available documents of *Fortune's* 100 Best Companies to Work For ranking to gain insight into how these *best* companies practice employee volunteerism and whether they link employee volunteerism to their corporate social responsibility strategy. We propose a connection of the position and importance of employee volunteerism in the corporate practices of social responsibility. Our findings suggest that many highly regarded companies specifically link employee volunteerism to their corporate social responsibility strategy. These companies also utilize similar practices to encourage and support employee volunteerism. We highlight the practices that managers could consider to support their corporate social responsibility efforts and offer several suggestions for future consideration.

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## 1. Volunteerism: inside and outside the organization

Volunteerism by the employees of corporations is an important factor in the process of attracting and retaining employees as well as a strategic component of corporate reputation and performance. Many companies, including 90% of Fortune 500 companies, have employee volunteer programs that support and/or subsidize employee volunteer activities and community outreach on company time

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(Points of Light, 2006; Rodell, 2013). Volunteerism is an opportunity for firms to address the demands of stakeholders, contribute to the concerns and interests of the community, provide opportunities for employee engagement, and encourage senior organizational leaders to imbed socially responsible behavior within core businesses (Clarke & Butcher, 2006).

Employers' support for employee volunteerism is both noteworthy and compelling, and it gives rise to additional questions. Wilson (2000) identified the lack of attention paid to the contextual effects of volunteering, to include the impact of community, organizational, and regional characteristics on the decision that an individual employee makes to volunteer. It is also necessary to consider the relevant dynamics between the actions and attitudes of the employee who advocates for policies that facilitate employer-sponsored volunteerism and the attitudes and reactions of the internal and external audience. Research has clearly called for more attention to be paid to the business context and the broader environment in which employer sponsored activities are occurring (Van der Voort, Glac, & Meijs, 2009) along with the many facets of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Janssen, Sen, & Bhattacharya, 2015). We contend that the range of potential benefit from employee volunteerism has not been fully explored and that the specific links between employee volunteerism and a firm's corporate social responsibility strategy have not been studied.

Employee volunteerism is often linked to CSR; however, we believe volunteerism should be considered a distinct and unique component of CSR that can provide the opportunity to link the macro (external) efforts of a corporation to strengthen corporate reputation and create community-based support with the micro (internal) benefits of employee engagement and satisfaction in a multi-level approach (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). Taken together, these elements represent a well-balanced public sphere wherein employees are able to actively support public concerns while simultaneously improving their reputation and outreach of the company (Andrews, 1987).

The compelling questions that we ask are how corporations deploy the concept of employee volunteerism and if they intentionally include it as part of their CSR strategy. We explore the employee volunteerism practices of highly regarded firms and examine the relationship between the explicit company association of employee volunteerism with CSR and how the companies convey those practices to stakeholders. We review the volunteerism literature related to our questions, explore the internal and external benefits companies reap by

encouraging employee volunteerism, and explain our methodology and results. We conclude with outlining several opportunities for organizations interested in starting or improving their employee volunteer programs (EVPs).

## 2. What do we know about employee volunteerism?

### 2.1. Definition of employee volunteerism

We define employee volunteerism in a manner consistent with McGlone, Spain, and McGlone (2011): the deliberate and active giving of one's time, energy, skills, or talents to a charitable organization without receiving payment in return. Employer-supported volunteerism, in particular, is defined as the active support, through a variety of means, for employees volunteering with charitable organizations. We have not deemed monetary or material charitable contributions as acts of volunteerism. This is consistent with the three key components of individual or private volunteerism laid out by Rodell (2013):

- It is an active giving of time and/or skills rather than more passive support through monetary donations (Musick & Wilson, 2008);
- It is a planned activity as opposed to a reactive act of helping (Clary & Snyder, 1999);
- It occurs in the context of a volunteer or charitable organization (Musick & Wilson, 2008).

### 2.2. Internal benefits of employee volunteerism: Motivation, skill development, and satisfaction

Understanding the motivations and attitudes behind volunteerism is integral to sustaining an organizational culture conducive to CSR engagement. At the employee level, motivations found for volunteering include altruism, meaningfulness, organizational citizenship, role variety, relational and social task characteristics, networking, and personal reasons. One motive, altruism, was noted as significant by more than 50% of the participants in a study conducted by Pajo and Lee (2011). Similarly, Pelozo and Hassay (2006) found that volunteerism is motivated by one or more of three main desires: to help one's employer, to help others, and to help oneself.

The attitudes and motivations toward CSR are especially evident in the Millennial Generation,

defined as the population born between 1980 and 2000 (McGlone et al., 2011). The Cone 2006 Millennial Case Study revealed that 61% of Millennials feel personally responsible for making a difference in the world, and the majority (79%) want to work for a company that cares about how it contributes to society. In fact, 69% of Millennials would refuse to work for a company that is not socially responsible (Cone, 2008). The very act of corporations communicating how CSR is linked to an organization's strategic plan impacts its ability to attract and keep members of the Millennial Generation as employees. McGlone et al. (2011) found students are more likely to want to work for a company after hearing its top executives discuss how the firm integrated CSR into its strategic plan compared to their desire to do so before the presentation of this information. Pelozo, Hudson, and Hassay (2009) found that employees' egoistic and organizational citizenship behavior motives, as well as their attitudes toward volunteerism, were all positively related to employees' attitudes toward participation in volunteer activities.

The impact of acquiring skills through volunteerism activities has been shown to spill over into the employee's perception of his or her organizational job. Booth, Park, and Glomb (2009) determined that volunteer hours predict employee perceptions of skill acquisition, and such perceptions are positively related to perceptions of job success and employer recognition. In fact, an employee who reports the acquisition of a skill increases the likelihood of that report being recognized by the employer by 12%, and it also increases the likelihood of the employee feeling successful on the job by 43% (Booth et al., 2009). In addition, for every additional 100 volunteer hours, they found that the number of reported skills acquired increased by 17%.

Depleted task, social, and knowledge characteristics of jobs are a reality in many organizations, but volunteer project characteristics can compensate for these depleted job characteristics. Employee volunteer activities can be approached as a substitute for enriched jobs (Grant, 2012). Firms also reap the benefit of the new skills acquired by volunteers during volunteering opportunities. Research shows that employees' hours of volunteering are positively related to an increase in skills acquired from those experiences (Booth et al., 2009), which employees can then reinvest in their regular work role. Other benefits of organizational volunteerism for the firm include increased efficiencies and morale/team building (Pelozo & Hassay, 2006). In short, employees' positive feelings (such as those related to recognition, success in the job, job enrichment, efficiency, and morale building) directly impact

their satisfaction with the job and their organization.

### 2.3. External benefits of employee volunteerism: Reputation, profitability, and stakeholder engagement

Employer-supported volunteerism programs benefit not only the employee, but the corporation as well. Exploring the benefits of corporate-sponsored volunteerism to the firm by looking at the link between volunteerism and the firm's reputation, profitability, and stakeholder engagement, proves essential to understanding the complete impact of volunteerism. Godfrey and Hatch (2007) argue that corporate investments in community involvement provide the impetus for firms building long-term loyalty, legitimacy, trust, or brand equity that, in turn, reinforce other strategic objectives of the firm.

Ameer and Othman (2012) found that companies, in certain activity sectors, that place emphasis on sustainability practices have higher financial performance measured by return on assets, profit before taxation, and cash flows compared to those without such commitments. Analyzing data from 2006–2010, Ameer and Othman (2012) found that the sales and revenue growth of the Global 100 Most Sustainable Corporations in the World ([www.global100.org](http://www.global100.org)) was higher than control companies in the industrial sector. In the consumer discretionary and telecommunications sectors, the return on assets were higher for the Global 100 compared to control companies. The profit before taxes of the Global 100 sustainable was higher than the profit of control companies in the energy, health care, and materials sectors. Finally, the cash flow from operations was higher for the Global 100 in the materials sector compared to control companies (Ameer & Othman, 2012).

Employer-supported volunteering programs, when implemented successfully, have been shown to enhance a company's legitimacy with both the wider public and its own employees (Liu & Ko, 2011). When companies were asked what they believed to be the top two goals of corporate-sponsored volunteerism, to "improve relations with the surrounding community" and to "help maintain a healthy community" were cited (Basil, Runte, Easwaramoorthy, & Barr, 2009). In short, a comparative advantage exists for firms that engage in ameliorating social problems over governments and nonprofits due to the intense marketplace competition existing in the private sector and the unique competencies developed as a result of operating within that environment (Hess, Rogovsky, & Dunfee, 2002).

## 2.4. CSR strategy

Early research on CSR suggested that CSR activities were typically considered organizational extras, akin to such things as the pet projects or philanthropies of founders or influential senior managers, that were not in any real way related to core organizational activities (Freeman, 1984). More recently, researchers have found inherent links between CSR activities and corporate goals such as enhancing corporate reputation (Ditlev-Simonsen, 2014), national competitiveness (Boulouta & Pitelis, 2014), and consumer perception of companies and/or products (Sohn, Han, & Lee, 2012). In fact, Chin, Hambrick, and Trevino (2103) report that the dynamic has now shifted radically to the point where organizational leaders are expected to be involved in and responsible for determining the CSR strategy for their firms.

Our review of the literature suggests that organizations do provide employee opportunities for volunteerism and consider the practices of sufficient importance to publicize them in various ways. This article explores two questions about employee volunteerism:

1. What are the strategies and tactical activities corporations use to support volunteer activities?
2. Are these employee volunteerism activities specifically linked to and considered an explicit part of the companies' CSR strategy?

Our approach to answering these questions was to examine publicly available information about *Fortune's* 100 Best Companies to Work For to gain insight into how highly regarded companies support employee volunteerism and link it to their CSR efforts.

## 3. Types of corporate support for employee volunteerism

Our first research question asks "What do the 'Best Companies to Work For' do to support employee volunteerism?" The literature on employee volunteerism reviewed above suggests that companies support or encourage employee volunteerism to respond to the needs of current employees, to attract highly qualified potential employees, and to respond to their communities. After considering a number of existing data sources, including the *Fortune 100*, Glassdoor, the Civic 50, and other published rankings, we selected the *Fortune* (2013) published ranking of the 100 Best Companies

to Work For (hereafter, the 100 Best or Best Companies). This ranking was done by Great Places to Work based upon corporate applications and surveys of company employees using a trust index that measures the quality of relationships in the workplace and a cultural audit questionnaire that addresses the employee-management relationship. We believe that companies seeking to have engaged, happy, and trusting employees would be more likely to include employee volunteerism as a practice and, thus, would be the appropriate places to learn more about the best practices of such organizations.

Our review of the 100 Best found that, while all of the companies included some elements of employee volunteerism in their public disclosures, the types and levels of emphasis varied across the companies. One consistent theme was that all of the companies included employee volunteerism as part of reporting or discussions of corporate social responsibility.

We found six primary themes or areas through which companies discussed and encouraged employee volunteerism as part of their corporate social responsibility efforts: time allowances, community involvement, day of service events, skills-based volunteering or pro bono service provisions, non-profit board services, and focused philanthropic areas. In Table 1, we list examples of companies that provided publicly available evidence of their participation in each area.

In Table 2, we provide examples of company-specific information about the company community involvement statements. Additional examples for all the categories are available from the authors.

## 4. Do companies connect CSR and employee volunteerism?

We were also interested in whether or not the companies specifically acknowledged the connection between employee volunteerism and corporate social responsibility in publicly available information. For each company, we reviewed the company website, annual report (if available electronically), and corporate social responsibility (or sustainability) report (if available) for indications of employee volunteerism practices.

We found that nearly all of the Best Companies (97%) explicitly encourage and value employee volunteerism as evidenced by having a clear community emphasis statement stressing that the employees' service in and support of their local communities were important corporate goals and part of their corporate social responsibility. In addition, 91% of

Table 1. Summary of companies' volunteer efforts

Company	Rank in list*	Time allowances	Community involvement	Day of service event	Skills-based & pro-bono services	Non-profit board service	Focused philanthropy
Google	1	X		X	X		X
SAS	2	X		X	X	X	X
CHG Healthcare Services	3		X	X			
The Boston Consulting Group	4				X		X
Wegmans Food Markets	5						X
NetApp	6	X	X			X	
Hilcorp	7		X	X			
Edward Jones	8		X			X	
Ultimate Software	9	X	X				
Camden Property Trust	10		X				X
Accenture	91	X	X		X		
Hasbro	92	X	X				X
Goldman Sachs Group	93	X	X		X		X
Starbucks	94	X	X				
Mars	95	X	X		X		X
Mattel	96	X		X			X
Aéropostale	97	X		X			X
FedEx	98	X	X	X			X
Grainger	99		X				X
CH2M HILL	100	X	X	X	X		X

\* Per *Fortune's* 100 Best Companies to Work For ([Fortune, 2013](#)).

the companies viewed volunteerism as an obligation to the local community. Eighty-nine companies specified focus areas for employee volunteerism, though only 53 of these companies' focus areas were related to their industry. The initial six themes we identified were consistently applied across the full set of the Best Companies.

## 5. CSR and the importance of employee volunteerism

Our studies provide evidence that employee volunteerism plays an inherent role in the CSR strategy of a majority of the Best Companies, though the specific practices used to support employee volunteerism vary. [Figure 1](#) provides a framework of the contributions of volunteerism to a firm's CSR strategy developed from our studies. The theoretic components related to the internal and external benefits of volunteerism and their impact on firms'

CSR strategies and the support practices used to achieve these benefits are consistent with the practices of the companies we studied.

Of particular interest in the themes that we explored was the fact that only a company's efforts to link CSR with employee volunteerism was significantly correlated with a company's rank in the 100 Best list ( $r = .24, p < .05$ ). This correlation indicates that a company's efforts to make this association increased with its numerical rank in the list; that is, companies lower on the list had made greater efforts. Specifically, we found that the companies in the latter part of the listing (51–100) placed greater emphasis on company time for volunteering, focused philanthropy, focus on local organization(s), and employee volunteerism as an obligation to the local community than those in the top 50 companies.

After thinking about why more practices were associated with the link between CSR and employee volunteerism in the companies in the bottom half of

**Table 2. Examples of companies' volunteer efforts related to community involvement statements**

Company	Community Involvement Statements*
NetApp	"We are committed to being outstanding global corporate citizens by contributing time, talent, products, services and money to non-profit organizations and schools in the vicinity of major global NetApp employee population centers."
Edward Jones	"We believe strongly in giving back to the communities in which we do business."
Accenture	"With our core values at its heart, corporate citizenship is an ongoing journey for Accenture and we take thoughtful actions to bring positive change, for today and for the future. From <b>Skills to Succeed</b> to the environment, Accenture and our people do things the Accenture Way, creating long-term value for the communities where we live and work and, ultimately, increasing competitiveness for both business and the world as a whole."
Ultimate Software	"As individuals and as corporate citizens, the people of Ultimate Software also work to make a difference in our community. We firmly believe in doing the right thing and making a difference, starting locally. That's evidenced by our contributions of time and money to charitable organizations. . ."
Hasbro	"The mission behind our employee volunteer program is to <b>'Make our Community Smile.'</b> "
Goldman Sachs Group	"Our people and our capital are helping women, small business owners and the betterment of communities and the environment where we work and live."
Starbucks	"Every Starbucks store is a part of a community, and we're committed to strengthening neighborhoods wherever we do business. We believe in the power of the coffeehouse to bring people together. Our stores allow Starbucks partners (employees) and customers to connect and tap into shared passions to be catalysts for change. Throughout the year, our partners (employees) and customers dedicate their time and energy to create positive change in their local neighborhoods."
Grainger	"Grainger is committed to building safe and productive communities and environments—especially where our team members and customers live and work."

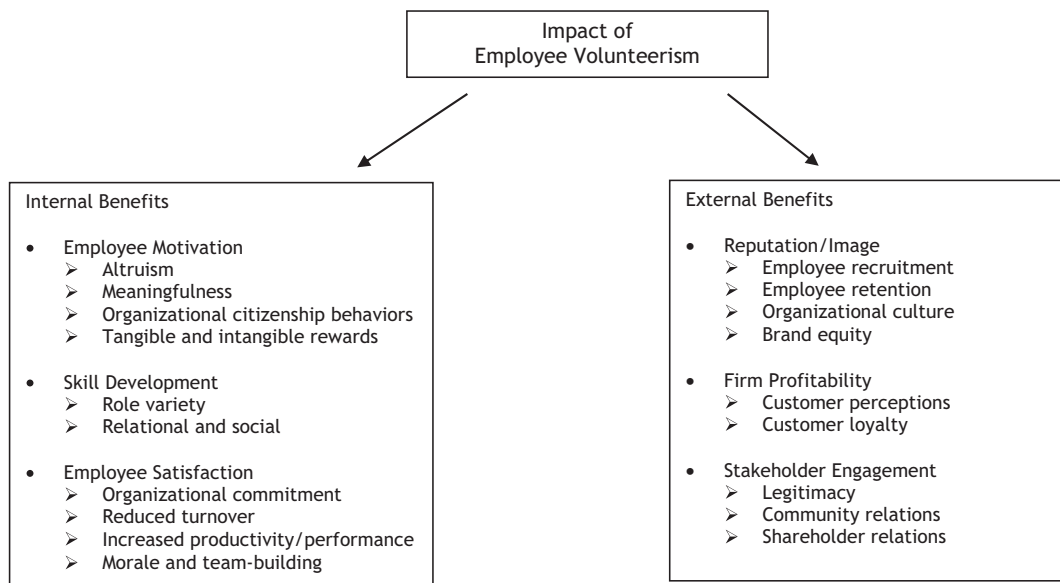
\* Day of Service information obtained from company websites.

the list as compared to those in the top half, we speculate that these companies may still be working to develop their public image and reputation as CSR champions, while fewer practices are required for companies in the top half due to their established

reputations and brand images already connected to CSR.

Paradoxically, we found that only 30% of the Best Companies practice intra-organizational volunteerism (i.e., philanthropic initiatives that are planned

**Figure 1. Framework of the contributions of volunteerism to a firm's CSR strategy.**



or endorsed by the employer) through their day of service events, as these events often receive lots of media attention and are good ways to build a company's reputation for CSR as well as for being a *good neighbor* in the local community. However, it is possible that many companies get more return on investment by encouraging employees to volunteer throughout the year in many different environments rather than to focus volunteer efforts on one particular day each year.

Another counterintuitive finding was that only one of the 13 nonprofit companies in the top 100 listing specifically linked employee volunteerism to their corporate social responsibility strategy. This may be because some or much of their work is done by unpaid volunteers, and an emphasis on employee volunteerism would create confusion in discussions. Alternatively, these organizations may consider volunteerism as an assumption that does not require discussion or disclosure.

## 6. Starting or improving employee volunteer programs

There are several excellent organizations that provide resources to help another organization begin or improve an EVP. Two of these are the Points of Light Corporate Institute and the Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship (BC-CCC) (Boccandro, 2009). We summarize their recommendations and provide evidence from our study, as our review of the 100 Best indicates that these practices are being applied consistently across successful organizations.

### 6.1. Starting an EVP

The first step in starting an effective EVP is to assess employees' volunteer interests, specific needs within the local community, and the organization's goals and strategic priorities. As part of this study, we looked at whether or not the company was aligned with its industry, as well as with charitable organizations at the local and national level. We found evidence that the vast majority of companies on *Fortune's* list exhibited alignment in one of these areas. Another mechanism which an organization can employ to determine alignment could include conducting surveys of employees and community members and reviewing company strategic documents. This would ultimately ensure a concerted effort that would integrate the organization's core competencies, culture, and values; the interests and skills of the employees; and the needs within the surrounding community. Selecting activities that foster maximum employee engagement and

broad-based enthusiasm in volunteer activities is an important benefit of any EVP and contributes toward increased morale, productivity, retention, and skills (Points of Light Corporate Institute, 2014). We found this to be particularly true in service organizations, such as accounting and consulting firms, where the volunteer programs encouraged skills-based volunteering such as pro bono hours and board service.

The second step in starting an EVP is to secure the internal support of top management for the program so that employee involvement is encouraged at all levels by company leadership. Highly visible and enthusiastic participation by members of the top management team in volunteer activities is especially valuable for new programs. We saw indications of the importance of top management support as many of the companies we researched provided evidence of employee volunteerism in their annual reports. Clear indicators of this support were the level of detail in the annual report describing the various measurements of volunteerism and the chief executives thanking employees for their volunteer efforts. Similarly, promoting strategic and collaborative partnerships with government, private actors, and non-profit organizations helps ensure external support for the program. Finally, a dedicated managerial position to not only champion the program and activities at all levels of the organization but to also ensure the appropriate level of organization, information distribution, and timely follow-up may benefit a company's EVP.

The third step is for a company to develop program policies that involve employees at all levels of the organization, as well as metrics that assess the degree to which volunteer initiatives are meeting stated goals. We found evidence of formal company policies supporting employee volunteerism in place at many companies on *Fortune's* list. In addition, the measurement of EVP programs was very evident from the available information on the company websites such as the number of hours employees volunteered and the number of organizations benefiting from employee volunteer efforts.

The fourth step is to ensure that the company takes time to collectively celebrate successes achieved through the EVP. Furthermore, a strong EVP program also includes publicizing the efforts and results of the program, both internally and externally (Points of Light Corporate Institute, 2014).

### 6.2. Improving your existing EVP

The success factors associated with effective EVPs offer important insights into improving an existing

program. One trend we discovered among the companies included on *Fortune's* list was the limited disclosure of how the EVP was assessed. Many companies reported total volunteer hours, number of organizations assisted, or other measures. However, we did not find any specific or consistent means of reporting the impact of an EVP across companies, nor were the measurements tied to the stated goals of the programs. We recommend that companies clearly state the goals of the EVP and frequently report how they achieve these goals.

Another area for improvement centers around the organization and execution of the EVP to ensure it benefits employees with the development of additional skills or levels of responsibility, increases comradery within the organization, and instills a sense of meaningful contribution on behalf of the individuals participating. The program should also benefit the organization in significant ways such as increased community and stakeholder involvement, expansion of the organizational brand, and demonstration of corporate social responsibility. Our recommendation is that the EVP be designed and executed in a way that benefits the organization from the inside with employee motivation and engagement, as well as from the outside with improved reputation and stakeholder engagement.

Although we did not look in depth at companies not on *Fortune's* list, there are non-corporate organizations that also facilitate and continually improve their employee volunteerism efforts. For example, military organizations, although nationally controlled, typically manage community volunteerism at a local or base level. Military members and government civilian employees often support local community causes such as running in races that support wounded soldiers, participating in community disaster relief operations, and facilitating science career days at local schools. Volunteerism is appreciated, respected, and valued in government and military organizations.

### 6.3. Caveats regarding EVPs

While there are numerous benefits of EVPs found in the companies on *Fortune's* list, there are some cautionary factors that need to be taken into account. The initial investment in an EVP requires sufficient political and financial capital to ensure success. Additional considerations include the degree or lack of appropriate skill sets among employees, difficulties in communicating the exact nature of the program, and the limits to and scheduling details of time off for volunteering, as well as the importance of communicating that it is a voluntary activity versus mandatory participation which can

create legal problems regarding the Fair Labor Standards Act (Grensing-Pophal, 2013). Another concern is the corporate liability for injury to employees or others during the volunteer time.

Care should also be taken to ensure that the specific type of employer support offered aligns with the support that employees actually need. For example, women are more likely to volunteer when forms of support ease their time constraints, such as flexible work hours and time off (MacPhail & Bowles, 2009). Employers need to be cognizant that all forms of support are not equal and that resources may be wasted when forms of support are not aligned with employee needs.

Furthermore, some volunteer issues may be politically, socially, or religiously controversial. This may create tension within the organization if volunteers are asked to participate in causes they do not support or with organizations to which they object. Such issues can be mitigated by establishing clear policies about the type of organizations the corporation will support through volunteering. It is also possible that some company volunteers may become overly involved with the entity that is the target of the volunteerism and devote more time than originally allotted. This is a particular problem with pro bono work if the scope of the volunteer work is not carefully defined. Although it is important to be aware of these caveats, the potential benefits that EVPs offer to employees, companies, and communities are not to be understated.

Employee volunteerism is an important part of an organization's CSR efforts. But, in addition to providing a mechanism for socially responsible endeavors, employee volunteerism appears to positively contribute to a company's internal relationship with its employees and its external relationship with a variety of important stakeholders. We found that some of the Best Companies strategically consider their volunteerism programs in interesting ways and may even undersell the value of volunteerism in public documents. It is our hope that future research on employee volunteerism will send a positive message about the value of volunteerism so that the number, size, and types of companies that use employee volunteer programs in their operations expand. Employee volunteerism is what the best companies do and is good for business—inside and out.

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