



ChangeMakers @ Work

A Corporate Citizenship Webinar Series

October 2021

THE 10 BEST EMPLOYEE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES FOR 2022

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Overview

As companies move into the new year, it is a time to reflect on the past, evaluate programming and priorities, and move forward with new approaches to employee engagement that create benefit for pandemic-affected communities, internal stakeholders, and the broader sector. Vast shifts brought on by COVID-19 in the private and non-profit sector, require companies to take a fresh approach to employee community engagement practices so that activities create real value for communities, the business and employee well-being.

Volunteer Canada has developed a top ten list of employee engagement practices derived from their extensive work with the [Corporate Community Engagement Council](#), their [Employer Members](#), and companies in their [consulting practice](#) – as well the organization’s research and work with community organizations. Unique insights into successes and best practices have also been informed by curating community engagement events for companies and through ESG industry research.

Examples used to illustrate the “10 Best Employee Engagement Practices” come from the companies of Volunteer Canada’s Corporate Community Engagement Council (CCEC).

A New Reality: Non-Profit Organizations in 2021

The pandemic has compelled non-profits to reduce their budgets and to re-prioritize their programs to respond to changing needs. As well, in some non-profits, volunteer managers have been cut or deployed to other organizational needs. As a result, many organizations have a much smaller need for volunteers and/or capacity to oversee volunteers.

To authentically support non-profits and other causes, companies must align with current needs. Because of the limited number of volunteer opportunities – particularly for groups of volunteers which was the mainstay of many company

pre-COVID programs – companies may need to initiate some activations for the foreseeable future to meet employee requests for giving back opportunities. Great examples include: a volunteer food drive, blood drive or program to help individual employees shrink their environmental footprint.

Volunteer Canada has assembled the 10 best practices for companies to meaningfully engage employees AND make a positive community impact within the current non-profit landscape.

Top 10 Practices for Companies

1. Define and celebrate acts of kindness in your “what counts” mix.

CIBC defines a volunteer as a “genuinely caring person who gives their time to help remove barriers for others, enabling them to get closer to receiving the support they need.” This definition allows for a wide range of volunteering activities including unpaid help to schools, religious organizations, sports, or community associations and can also include friends, neighbours, acquaintances, colleagues, and relatives living outside the household.

Keeping the approach broad puts the focus on the act of serving, deepening the relationship the individual has with their communities. This sets up the opportunity for employees to focus on what is most meaningful to them personally vs. debating what “counts” as volunteering.

2. Give employees choice.

[Volunteer Canada’s research](#) has shown that companies receive the benefits of higher employee engagement, retention, and discretionary effort when they give employees choice in how to participate within overall CSR goals.

For example, Sun Life has made flexibility and choice the heart of their ‘You Give We Give’ employee engagement program. Employees have three categories of participation: they can donate to the charity of their choice, volunteer time to an important cause, or use funds to participate in a charitable walk/ride/run event. Sun Life will match up to \$1,250 each year, per employee, to the charities of their choice. They can dedicate their match to one category – such as a financial donation – or a mix and match across all three.

3. Spark with Idea Starters.

Employees have varying levels of interest in volunteering and very few may have the experience to spearhead their own community activity. Therefore, providing a variety of specific opportunities to sign up for, or clear idea starters to illustrate easy ways to make a difference from home, is essential. Idea starters should be wide ranging with low barriers, such as a book drive, doing an errand for a neighbour, or watching a video on inclusion challenges faced by new immigrants.

4. Bring Back that Team Feeling.

According to Points of Light, [one of the biggest motivators for employee volunteering](#) is the ability to involve friends and family. With outdoor activities limited in colder months and many employees working remotely for the foreseeable future, companies must get creative with opportunities. Examples include virtual team kick-offs and closing celebrations for activities done individually to support a cause, or team fundraising competitions.

Symcor elevated their employee’s team spirit as they participated in a peer-to-peer fundraiser to collectively “walk across Canada” through total kms walked individually. They promoted their animal-named teams, created fun comics to introduce pop-up challenges, and shared and celebrated their progress with colleagues.

5. Welcome Family.

With employees both working from home and homeschooling their children, including family is the only way some employees can voluntarily take part initiatives. Cenovus Energy encourages their employees to involve family members by matching their hours with donated dollars, up to \$1000 a year total for the whole family.

6. Move Away from Done-in-a-day.

Pre-COVID, many company-organized activities could be completed by employees within one workday. Now, without a physical location for a run or sorting clothing donations, creative virtual and remote activities can be spread out over many days and weeks, allowing for greater impact, flexibility, and participation.

7. Sharpen your Communications.

Prior to COVID, employee community engagement teams had a big toolbox of in-person tactics to market their programs internally: desk drops, tables in the foyer or cafeteria, posters, space on the electric sign or in the elevators, pizza lunches, cupcakes for kick-offs, and so much more.

As many Canadian employees are still working remotely, promoting volunteer programs needs to be more creative than ever. Perform an audit of internal communication tools to create a strategy that includes blog posts, intranet features, Yammer, social media, etc. Recharge your approach using storytelling, videos, and influencers, putting a focus on the impact of getting involved.

8. Get People Managers Onboard.

Employees will often look to their direct managers to influence and motivate their actions. A CSR team can build the best employee volunteer program with fantastic benefits, but without the support of managers, employees can be discouraged from participating. While senior leaders need to be champions, middle managers must be given the tools and encouragement to be evangelists for your program to their direct reports – including communicating the solid case for why involvement is integral to the company’s overall success and modelling participation.

9. Learning is as Important as Doing (sometimes more so).

Authentically communicating the impact and context of systematic social and environmental issues is best practice to support a strong culture of giving. [75% of working American millennials surveyed said they would volunteer more often if they had a better understanding of the impact they were making, no matter how small.](#)

Involving employees’ lived experience and inviting the appropriate employee resource groups also deepens understanding and connection. For example, Home Depot’s Community Investment department partners with HR to regularly offer presentations featuring persons with lived experience as a way explore DE&I challenges.

10. Bake in Opportunity for Reflection.

Reflection ignites critical thought, which is necessary for creating a lasting impact. Leaders can invite critical thought by asking simple questions of participants like: “What did you experience here today? How is it different than what you thought? What did you learn about yourself from this experience?” Participation in conversations may be lively or based

in quiet reflection. The goal is to grow a personal relationship with giving - a crucial component in creating a culture where employees are examining the social and environmental impact of their actions.

These ten strategies, many of which will be relevant even when the health & safety constraints related to COVID abate, will make your employee community engagement program more compelling to colleagues and more impactful in the community.

Interview with Sarah Bevan, Managing Director, President and CEO, UBS Bank Canada

The UBS Bank Canada team participated in a “Accessibility in Action” virtual volunteering event organized by Volunteer Canada. Diversity, equity, and inclusion is a UBS business imperative, so the activity was values-aligned.

Using the Learn/Act/Reflect model, the activity involved:

- An hour session listening and learning from a person with lived experience.
- Rating the accessibility of community spaces using an app supplied by Volunteer Canada. The licensed version of the app tracked team progress.
- An hour reflection session for sharing what they experienced and learned.

The instructions were clear and comprehensive, and the team was provided with daily creative ideas to inspire and motivate. During reflection, the team noted how rewarding the experience was due to their meaningful contribution and how their perspective had been altered throughout the learning and volunteering portion.

Sarah, was it a challenge to take the employees away from their daily work?

Employees are given two days for volunteering as part of their benefits but taking an entire half day is a challenge. The two-hour long “Listen” and “Reflect” sessions didn’t take up much time, and the flexibility to do the activity when it worked for the individual employees was perfect as it was performed at times of their choice, mainly after work hours. Moving away from “done in a day” was beneficial.

Did the activity have any impact on company’s approach to accessibility?

The activity occurred during an AODA policy review and was helpful to emphasize the importance of accessibility. The Volunteer Canada-guided activity brought the policy review “alive” and gave additional learning insights.

What didn’t work?

This year UBS Bank Canada is in their 70th anniversary in Canada and is attempting to connect various projects to a 70 theme. They overcommunicated to try and get 70% participation, which they didn’t hit. Participation numbers were in line with last year despite being virtual and during COVID, so it was still considered a success. Ultimately, they hope to grow participation. Many companies share with Volunteer Canada that it is challenging to get high participation numbers this year.

Should employee volunteerism stay virtual post-pandemic?

COVID has taught us that flexibility is key so UBS Canada will continue to offer both virtual and in person opportunities. Navigating busy days makes participation much more accessible for employees who travel or those with families, etc. Activities like this one fostered a team feeling, even though the volunteering was done independently.