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Corporate volunteering: what is in it for knowledge creation?

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Introduction

Knowledge creation in its various forms is mentioned by different sources as an outcome of corporate volunteering. In today's economy, where knowledge is one of the main assets of successful business and where social involvement is an inevitable condition, we should not overlook the possibility of engaging in corporate volunteering as a way to develop and improve human capital. Organizations, however, are still learning how to adapt these programs to find the best balance for all stakeholders. Nevertheless, the question "how can corporate volunteering initiatives make strategic contributions to an organization?" remains unanswered. Therefore, in practice, the perceived strategic value of corporate volunteering, such as knowledge creation, is far greater than the real input in maximizing this value and making it sustainable (Allen *et al.*, 2011).

This paper is based on a qualitative case study which explores corporate volunteering from the knowledge creation perspective. It is focused on investigating what knowledge is being created through corporate volunteering and how these knowledge-creation processes could be managed to maximize this outcome.

Methodology

The study was conducted in a Dutch organization in the knowledge sector. During this project, volunteers worked together to design and build a three-day Sunday program on publishing for children from underprivileged families. In this program, children had an opportunity to participate in the process of putting together a journal issue: from gathering information to text editing and, finally, publishing the journal. We conducted 26 semi-structured interviews with volunteers involved in this project, the data from which we then inductively analyzed using a case study research strategy (Yin, 1994). Specifically, we explored the data to identify codes and categories and drew on the Nonaka's (1994) dynamic theory of knowledge creation to make sense of these emerging codes and categories. We ended up identifying two main broad themes, i.e. "developing in different directions" and "project conditions and individual means" around which we structured our findings that could be used by project managers to cultivate and improve the knowledge-creation processes through corporate volunteering.

Findings

Corporate volunteering projects differ from research and development or innovation-oriented projects, as their purpose is societal contribution rather than

knowledge generation. For this reason, it is important to elaborate on knowledge-related outcomes of these projects.

Developing in different directions

Our findings showed that knowledge created through corporate volunteering could be divided into two types: intrinsic (or tacit) and extrinsic (or explicit) knowledge, on which we will further elaborate in the following paragraphs.

Intrinsic knowledge. Volunteers learned about themselves and their careers, which resulted in a more efficient human resource allocation. Moreover, volunteers expanded their connection circle across different departments, which had an impact on improving internal knowledge sharing channels. Informal communication and collaboration helped to build a stronger bond with colleagues and the organization, making volunteers more positive about their organization. This is particularly important given that such values might have an effect on job performance (Becker *et al.*, 1996). Finally, the positive feelings experienced by volunteers had an influence on the volunteers' decisions to become involved in volunteering in the future.

Extrinsic knowledge. Volunteers obtained more knowledge about the organization (i.e. how the organization works), people (i.e. about different departments and functions) and the organizational processes (i.e. information about opportunities for participation in organizational activities).

Project conditions and individual means

As personal means can vary within every corporate volunteering project, project design and support should be considered and modeled to facilitate the knowledge-creation process in it. We now elaborate on these project-related aspects in more detail.

Time frame and place. The management of the project time frame might help in determining the volunteer's commitment and engagement: the longer volunteers participate in a project, the more they are involved in it and the more learning opportunities they have. However, when volunteering activities are organized as long-lasting programs, it might result in frustrations and the loss of energy of volunteers. Next to choosing an appropriate time frame, it is important to determine whether teams will work in their usual environment or not. In the latter case, we believe volunteers would have more opportunities to enrich their work-related experiences, as we found volunteers who worked on the project in a different environment reported a changed perception toward their work and their colleagues.

Skills variation. Corporate volunteering can enable volunteers to use and develop broader types of skills. When various skills are applied, it can result in greater learning and developmental experiences for individuals (Grant, 2012). Project managers should design corporate volunteering programs in a way that would require volunteers to apply various skills and get out of their comfort zone. This would facilitate volunteers' skill building, which could then make the program a good substitute for some costly training campaigns.

Interdepartmental design. Project managers should consider interdepartmental aspects of the corporate volunteering program, as it enables volunteers to create connections different from those happening in their everyday working routine. For example, we found that volunteers who participated in the designing of the corporate volunteering program positively experienced having connections with employees from other departments; in addition, volunteers also believed these connections to be beneficial for them. According to Grant (2012), socially enriched projects not only create connections but also help with overall development and knowledge. In the project

design stage, project managers should also focus attention on social diversity and richness of volunteer teams to enhance the creation of new connections facilitating knowledge creation. Depending on the aim of the corporate volunteering project, it might also serve as a team-building or internal connectivity-fostering project. Our results showed that volunteers who saw their immediate colleagues being involved in volunteering in the same project reported to have a different, “warmer” perception about their colleagues.

Informal atmosphere. Project managers should consider the importance of creating an informal atmosphere when organizing the volunteering project. The presence of a psychologically safe environment stimulates creativity and exploration (Choo *et al.*, 2007). When there is an informal atmosphere, it does not only encourage people to share their knowledge but it also attracts more volunteers to join in. Such a project might serve as a job-enriching opportunity: to be informal in what is normally a formal work environment. This could be achieved by managing the amount of pressure and workload volunteers have as well as by investing in establishing good interpersonal relations with them.

Provision of support to volunteers. Not all managers provide support for the volunteering activity. This might discourage volunteers from further involvement or even cause disappointment with the organization. It is important that volunteers feel that their work is appreciated and acknowledged. This would motivate them to engage in knowledge sharing behavior within the organization.

Conclusion

As our research shows, corporate volunteering projects can be strategically managed to facilitate knowledge creation for the organization. Specifically, project managers should consider the optimization of the following design features: time frame and space, skill variety, interdepartmental design, informal atmosphere and provision of support to volunteers. Unfortunately, nowadays, the corporate sector tends to emphasize the perceived strategic value of corporate volunteering rather than to actually try to maximize its value and make it sustainable. As there is no one particular model that works for everyone, each corporate volunteering project needs to be designed in response to the specific needs of the business. A suggested practical implication would then be to make an effort to facilitate the development of such projects.

Keywords:

Development,
Knowledge creation,
Learning,
Corporate volunteering

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