VAL HAMMOND
Research Competition

CAN PARTICIPANTS OF AN EMPLOYEE VOLUNTEERING PROGRAMME BE CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE WHEN THEY RETURN TO THEIR ORGANISATION?

Sue Gammons
Abstract

An increasing number of corporate organisations are establishing employee volunteering programmes (EVPs), as companies recognise that their employees’ skills can be used to help address global and local societal issues when partnering with a non-profit organisation. Additionally, there is evidence that these programmes provide employees with opportunities to develop their skills, particularly those required for leadership roles in today’s complex and interconnected world, and gain new perspectives on the role of business in society. This study goes beyond previous research by exploring the potential for corporate volunteers to influence change in their organisation once they return from a full-time, immersive volunteering assignment, through use of these skills and new perspectives. Participants in GSK’s PULSE Volunteer Partnership returned to their organisation with enhanced leadership capability and new perspectives. This research found that whilst every volunteer’s re-entry experience was unique, each went through a significant transition in the first few months back. Support from their line managers was critical at this stage. Reflection on an experience is essential for learning and this study found that all participants had reflected on their experience to varying degrees. The importance of building reflective practices into the design of EVPs, to ensure they are developmental experiences, is re-emphasised. Evidence from this study indicates that when returned volunteers use their fresh perspectives they can influence business decisions towards ones that are more sensitive to the needs of customers and other stakeholders worldwide and can support the organisation in being more socially responsible.
Volunteering programmes in corporate organisations

In the last 10 years, employee volunteering programmes (EVPs) have become a well-established employee engagement initiative in corporate organisations, driven by companies who want to make a difference to global and local problems (Allen et al, 2011). Employee volunteering is defined as

“... any effort by any employer to encourage and support volunteering in the community by its employees.” (Allen et al, 2011)

Whilst mostly studied from the perspective of companies, research has shown that there is value for all involved in EVPs, including employees, the company, non-profit partners and the community they serve. When appropriately designed, there can be ‘shared value’, in which companies increase their profitability whilst concurrently addressing the social needs of the communities in which they operate (Porter and Kramer, 2011).

EVPs make a positive contribution to companies’ social responsibility strategies (Muthuri et al, 2009), corporate reputation (Plewa et al, 2014), and attraction and retention of talented staff (Jones et al, 2014), as well as enhancing employee satisfaction and engagement (Brookner et al, 2014; McCallum et al, 2013; Bingham et al, 2013; Veleva et al, 2012; Brenner, 2010; Jones, 2010; Peloza & Hassay, 2006; de Gilder et al, 2005).

Volunteering offers employees opportunities to develop skills that enhance their personal effectiveness and leadership capability. Enhanced communication skills, teamwork, project management, adaptability and emotional intelligence (City of London, 2010; Peterson, 2004; Bell, 2007; Bartsch, 2012) are commonly reported. Employees return to their organisations with expanded awareness of themselves and others, with new perspectives on the role of business in society (Mirvis et al, 2014; Flaherty & Osick, 2014; Pleiss et al, 2011; Bart et al, 2009, Mirvis, 2008).

As the need to be an effective leader in a global context becomes increasingly important, there is growing interest in international programmes, in which employees complete their volunteering assignments overseas. Such programmes have been shown to aid the development of global leadership skills, including cultural intelligence and an understanding of emerging markets (Flaherty and Osicki, 2014; Bhasin et al, 2013; Pleiss et al, 2011; Mirvis, 2008). In his observations of executives from three large corporations who participated in an international volunteering programme, Mirvis (2008) termed these ‘consciousness-raising experiences’, since they have

“... the potential to lift heads out-of-the-sand and counter inattention to or manufactured imagery about the role of business in social injustice ...” (Mirvis, 2008: p175)

He explained that whilst we can learn about such situations through texts, documentary films or conversations,

“... the experience of being there physically and seeing first-hand adds texture to this knowledge and yields memories that increase mindfulness about the larger world.” (Mirvis, 2008: p175)

One such programme is GSK’s PULSE Volunteer Partnership, which deploys around 100 employees per year from across the globe to use their professional skills as they work with a non-profit organisation (NGO) to address healthcare challenges. They work for 3-6 months full-time on a specific project, either in their home country or overseas, with many spending time in developing countries.

For example, Mizanul, a Site Procurement Lead at GSK Bangladesh, worked with Save the Children to improve the distribution and supply of medical products to health centres in a remote region in Kenya. Peter from GSK Nigeria used his operational excellence expertise to support Direct Relief in the US to improve its logistics and warehousing operations, so that they can more efficiently ship medical supplies in response to a humanitarian disaster. This included shipping medical supplies to West African countries affected by Ebola. Paul, a Clinical Development Director in the US used his skills in clinical study design and management to help Malaria Consortium implement a study to evaluate the effectiveness of Seasonal Malaria Chemoprevention, a new anti-malarial intervention, in northern Nigeria.

As with other EVPs, the PULSE programme has been shown to provide employees with meaningful volunteering experiences that not only help NGOs, but also develop employee’s skills, increase their engagement and build their knowledge in areas that are important for the organisation – a win-win-win (Caligiuri et al, 2013).
Volunteering programmes as experiential learning opportunities

Adult learning theory supports the proposition that EVPs can lead to development of company employees. Immersed in new and often challenging work environments, corporate volunteers are offered a powerful opportunity for experiential learning, “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984: p38).

Kolb’s (1984) theory of experiential learning tells us that learning is an on-going process, where concepts are derived from and continuously modified through experience. His four-stage learning cycle comprises 1) having a concrete experience (doing something); 2) reflective observation of that experience; 3) the formation of abstract concepts and generalizations (conclusions); 4) active experimentation to test the hypotheses, leading to new concrete experiences.

Companies are increasingly putting experiential learning at the heart of their people development strategy (McCauley & McCall, 2014), following the 70:20:10 principles of leadership development, which considers that 70% of what leaders learn results from challenging, ‘on-the-job’ experiences, 20% is learnt through relationships such as coaching or mentoring and only 10% through more formal coursework and training (MacCall et al, 1988).

Whilst a challenging assignment is at the heart of an employee volunteering experience and can therefore serve as a catalyst for learning, simply taking part does not guarantee that people will learn from the experience. An active process of knowledge creation is required to convert this experience into knowledge that leads them to doing something differently. Heron (1992) proposed four stages of knowing. ‘Experiential knowing’, gained as we directly encounter the world around us, is converted into ‘presentational knowing’ as we make sense of our experience and find ways to express this, e.g. through language, music, images. Further processing of our experiential and presentational knowing gives rise to ‘propositional knowing’, expressed as statements or theories. ‘Practical knowing’ involves bringing the other three forms of knowing together so that we know how to do something and become competent.

The ability to learn from experience is a key component in identifying leadership potential (Spreitzer et al, 1997). This ‘learning agility’ requires a mind-set and collection of practices, one of which is reflection (Mitchinson and Morris, 2012). Highly reflective individuals are more effective at responding to complexity, implementing change, and managing teams and interpersonal relationships, compared to less reflective individuals (Mitchinson and Morris, 2012).

Research on the potential for employee volunteers to influence organisational change

There is an expectation, increasingly accepted by businesses worldwide, that corporations take an active role in addressing the most pressing environmental, social and economic problems facing our society (European Commission, 2011; United Nations Global Compact, 2014). This requires businesses to adopt socially responsible business practices. We have seen above that EVPs may have a role to play in supporting organisations with this challenge, since they help employees to gain broader perspectives on the world. Although entirely feasible, no published studies have reported whether or not corporate volunteers actually adopt any behaviour change or make different business decisions on their return to their organisation.

Motivated by my own experience of participating in the GSK PULSE Volunteer Partnership when it was first launched in 2009, I recently conducted a study into the potential role of corporate employees in affecting change in organisations when they returned from volunteering assignments. The study explored participants’ experiences of returning to the organisation (their ‘re-entry’), how they reflected on and learnt from their volunteering experiences, and subsequently applied what they had learnt to influence change at a team or organisational level.

Because of its focus on understanding the lived experience of people and how they make sense of their world, I chose Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as the research methodology (Smith et al, 2009). As is appropriate in this type of qualitative research (Patton, 1990), a small number of information-rich participants were selected to provide a detailed account of their perspectives. Semi-structured, individual, in-depth conversations were held with five PULSE volunteers. Each had returned to GSK 6-7 months earlier, so their experiences were still fresh, whilst having had sufficient time to reflect and integrate any learning. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Thorough review of the transcripts using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach led to identification of some recurring patterns or ‘themes’ relevant to the question of whether these corporate employees can influence change in their organisation when they return from a volunteering assignment.
What participants learn from volunteering experiences

Participants highly appreciated the opportunity to spend time working with a non-profit organisation, referring to it as “an incredibly valuable thing to go through” and “something really profound”. Their volunteering experience had undoubtedly provided them with an opportunity for learning and they described “coming back a different person” and considered that “it takes you so far out of your norm ... the learning is pretty stark.” One participant considered he was “always learning and being challenged to grow in new ways” during his assignment.

They had developed a range of skills and behaviours they as a result of their volunteering assignment, and the following were commonly described.

All had increased their self-awareness and were able to describe new knowledge of how they were in the world, including their habitual patterns of behaviour, their underlying assumptions and beliefs. For example, one participant explained how he had become aware of his tendency previously to focus on tasks that he enjoyed or knew he could do and to leave those that he found more difficult. When faced on his assignment with just one difficult task, he had no choice but to do it. Coming back to the organisation, he was focussing on doing fewer more difficult tasks, since he recognised this would help him progress with his career, “I was always very interested in getting on but before I was doing it by doing more, faster. Now I realise that it’s by doing fewer things, which are more difficult, rather than just ticking the box.”

Increased self-confidence was another common theme, including greater awareness of and confidence in their skills. One explained how through having the opportunity to push himself and operate in a very different environment he came away with “a huge amount of confidence that the skills [I] have are so much broadly applicable”. This newfound confidence manifested in different ways. “I'm more relaxed. ... small issues that come through in daily work don’t make me go crazy.” Others were speaking out more, asking questions, and for some this led to them challenging the status quo, “normally I wouldn’t have brought that up because the team had largely made their decision”.

The importance of building relationships was brought into sharper focus for many, leading to them taking more time to connect with people, “I make sure I'm very in the present moment with that person I'm speaking with.” They talked of the need for collaboration and consultation and described how they had adopted more collaborative ways of working with their teams. In so doing they were mindful of the need to be more inclusive when making business decisions and were endeavouring to “appreciate different points of view, different ways of doing things even if they are not the way you would choose to do them”.

Participants expressed more gratitude for what they had, particularly related to the resources commonly available in a corporate organisation based in the western world, which led to thinking about “how to do more with less.” After spending time in developing countries, they had new perspectives on the issues that commonly bother us in the western world, “thank goodness for first world issues ... they are really, in the grand scheme of things, not that important.”

Participants returned with a wider view of the world and new awareness of the realities in other countries, “the norm for people there is very, very different to our norm.” For one participant, this new awareness made her look at things differently and re-evaluate her opinions, “we sit here in our safe environments and we pass judgement on “How can that happen, why can’t they change it?”

They developed greater cultural awareness and appreciated the depth of cultural influences in society. This led to increased competency in working with people from different countries and cultures, realising that “the approach that we would take here ... is not necessarily going to translate directly to some of the Asian cultures, in terms of how they learn and how they work.”
Influencing change within the organisation

With these new perspectives and mindsets, returned volunteers were finding new ways of operating, which, I believe, have the potential to affect change in organisations.

Complexity theory informs us that all parts of a complex system, such as a multi-national corporate organisation, are connected and interdependent (Waldrop, 1992). Change in one part of the system impacts other levels of the system and therefore when an individual changes, this impacts those they are connected to. Originally informed by Lewin (1951), Gestalt field theory similarly considers that a person cannot be seen in isolation, but is part of a field, a complex web of interacting and influencing connections together forming a unified whole (Perls, 1978: p55).

“Given the interactive nature of the unified field, changes in individuals ... can result in increments of change throughout their relationship systems and in society generally, like ripples extending outwards.” (Parlett, 1997: p32)

It therefore follows that by doing something different themselves, returned volunteers can influence their team and/or the wider organisation to think and act differently. I highlight just three examples below.

**Personal effectiveness** – with increased self-confidence, participants were “more confident in speaking up and asking questions”, which in some cases led to challenging the status quo. Voicing a different perspective might lead to a different business decision, as well as modelling to their team that doing so is acceptable. Page (2008) explains that diverse perspectives enable teams to find new and better solutions and to be more productive.

Participants demonstrated enhanced **leadership capability** through more collaborative ways of working with their teams, e.g. introduction of new meetings to share experiences, seek feedback and facilitate involvement of others when developing strategic plans. One person had introduced monthly calls with key contacts around the world, “to keep them abreast of what’s going on, give them time to get some feedback, and share best practice, and work a little bit more as a community.” These more collaborative styles of leadership enable the diverse opinions of people from around the world to be heard more readily, thereby enhancing problem solving and decision-making (Page, 2008).

In a multi-national organisation, **global leadership**, the ability to lead in a global context, becomes increasingly important as people progress in their careers (Mendenhall et al, 2008). Cultural intelligence and a global mind-set are commonly recognised as two essential qualities of an effective global leader (e.g. Cabrera & Unruh, 2013; Sharkey et al, 2012; Mendenhall et al, 2008).

For example, one participant described using his new knowledge of the infrastructure and culture in Africa to consider the use of medicines in this region. This enabled him to have more productive business discussions with African stakeholders, “I felt so much more prepared to have those discussions and understand the contextual realities ... at a visceral level, not just ... an intellectual level.”

Greater understanding of the developing world context enables different perspectives to be considered, leading to business decisions that are more sensitive to the needs of patients, customers and other stakeholders in these countries.

The above anecdotes provide clear evidence that returned volunteers had learnt from their experience and were trying out new behaviours back in the workplace. These approaches have the potential to influence business decisions and therefore affect change within the organisation.

For companies to maximise the benefits gained through volunteering programmes, we need to understand what supports returning volunteers to learn from their experience, such that they are able to apply that learning and be catalysts for change.
It is worth noting that whilst each of the volunteers interviewed had a unique experience of returning to the organisation, the first six months back were a time of significant transition for all, and the impact of this on the learning process should not be underestimated. Bridges (1995) describes transition as a psychological process that people go through as they come to terms with a new situation. Psychologically adapting to being back from a volunteering assignment takes longer to move through than the change (the physical return) itself. Transition requires completion of three stages:

1. **Ending**
   - Letting go of the way things were

2. **The neutral zone**
   - People have let go of the past, but are still adapting to the new situation

3. **New beginnings**
   - People have acceptance, high energy and renewed commitment to the new situation

Participants had a sense of loss and described missing aspects of their assignment, consistent with the ending stage of transition, e.g. they missed the “challenge that on a daily basis really makes you feel like you’re making a difference.” When the focus is on returning to the organisation, it is likely that both participants and management overlook the importance of the ending and the significance of associated losses after such a profound experience.

Participants described experiencing a “reverse culture shock” and an “emotional roller coaster”, in which one participant felt “really excited immediately after you got back and then feeling sort of down and bipolar”. This is consistent with the neutral zone stage, during which feelings of confusion, impatience or demotivation are commonplace. Critical psychological processing occurs here, as old habits are replaced with ones better suited to the new situation.

“Painful though it often is, the neutral zone is the individual’s and the organization’s best chance for creativity, renewal, and development.” (Bridges, 1995: p6)

Some participants rapidly sought out new challenges, perhaps to avoid the discomfort of this neutral zone phase. In so doing, one may question if they allowed sufficient time to reflect on their experience. Helping participants to realise that uncertainty is a normal part of re-entry might help make it more bearable.

Whilst some showed signs of embracing new beginnings, “it’s just so refreshing and motivating to be back”, they were simultaneously grappling with earlier stages, as Bridges explains is often the case.

Understanding these stages of transition is important so that managers can appreciate what returning volunteers go through during re-entry and provide them with adequate support as they re-adjust to the corporate setting and take time to learn from their experience.
Line manager support at re-entry

“The neutral zone is a lonely place. People feel isolated, especially if they don’t understand what is happening to them.” (Bridges, 1995: p40)

Returning to the organisation where few people have undergone such an experience can be challenging. Some struggled to describe such a meaningful experience to those who hadn’t experienced something similar, “unless people have been there, it’s very difficult for them to understand and you can’t really convey some of this stuff.”

Being alone with their new perspective was challenging, “your perspective is unique and valuable but you’re the only one that has it ... are you essentially ... an island in your own thought processing?”

Bridges (1995) recommends creating support structures for this stage of transition. Line managers are well positioned to provide this support, and this research confirmed that their active engagement is critical for a successful re-entry. Having a manager that was interested in how they had personally and professionally developed, and willing to work with them to determine how this could be leveraged in the next stage of their career made returning volunteers feel empowered.

Some managers were less supportive than the volunteer would have liked. Since people development is a key task of managers and the company had made a considerable investment in placing the employee on the programme, it is curious that managers do not provide this necessary support. From my experience of talking with managers, I believe that they know what they should do to support recently returned volunteers, but not all do this and I propose a possible explanation.

Managers are often torn between the conflicting perspectives and priorities of managers above them and team members below (Oshry, 1999). Their dilemma is deciding which to please or they burnout trying to please both. Although they know they should support their returning team member, they lack time to do so as they prioritise the demands of their managers above.

In addition, complexity theory might help us to understand why managers inadvertently resist the needs of their returning volunteers. Complex systems, such as large organisations, are poised at the ‘edge of chaos’ where order (stability) and disorder (chaos) co-exist, a necessary and dynamic state from which they can adapt to the ever-changing environment (Waldrop, 1992). When volunteers return with new perspectives and increased confidence to challenge the status quo, they tend to create more chaos in the system. Since tolerating uncertainty does not come naturally to most people (Oshry, 1999: p221), in a constantly changing organisation, managers may be drawn towards creating stability and resist the volunteers’ new perspectives.

Oshry (1999) explains that organisations must support and enable middle managers to use their unique perspectives and resources in the service of the system, which requires a more independent state and a step away from being solely responsive to the demands and agendas of others. Paradoxically, engaging with the new perspectives of their returned volunteers might help managers to deal with the demands of more senior managers to do more with less.
Finally, I consider how volunteers had reflected on their experience in order to learn from it. As described above, learning from an experience is an active process of reflection and meaning making (Kolb, 1984; Heron, 1992).

Since all volunteers had gained new knowledge of their habitual behaviours, this indicated that they had all reflected on their experience, however the extent to which they had done so and what supported them varied. Some struggled to articulate what they had learnt, indicating that they were still converting their experiential knowing into presentational knowing (Heron, 1992).

Many said they would have liked more time for reflection and had difficulty finding time in the fast pace of corporate life. The amount of time required to make sense of their experience varied with one needing “two to three months for me to internalise what I’d been through” whilst others were able to articulate their learning much earlier. Those who took time off work before returning found this invaluable time for reflection, whilst others who returned sooner found the transition “really abrupt.”

Telling their story was key, “time to reflect, forcing me ... to gather my thoughts.” Since learning is deepest when it engages most parts of the brain and stories do just that (Zull, 2002), storytelling is an effective way to stimulate reflection and learning.

Those volunteers who engaged in coaching found this a valuable resource to support reflection, as has previously been reported that coaching supports leaders to better understand how they make meaning, leading to change (Berger and Fitzgerald, 2002).

In both storytelling and coaching, meaning is made in relation to others. Although Kolb (1984) proposes that learning involves transactions between a person and their environment, learning theories generally underplay the role of social participation in the learning process. Wenger (1998) recognised the social nature of learning in his description of communities of practice,

“... learning is, in its essence, a fundamentally social phenomenon, reflecting our own deeply social nature as human beings capable of knowing” (Wenger, 1998: p3)

Thinking together and building effective dialogue skills has been advocated by Isaacs (1999) as a way to unlock the potential for creating collective wisdom and communities of action in organisations.

Returned volunteers had a strong sense of connection with each other, “a community of people that understand” and alumni networks could be utilised purposefully to support reflection, dialogue and learning. Participants could support each other to find ways of sharing their new perspectives, leading to greater collective wisdom of benefit to the organisation.

In line with Kolb’s (1984) proposition, their learning was ongoing. Each opportunity to reflect on our talk about their volunteering experience, including our research conversation, led to further evolution in their meaning making, “the way you see this really changes through time. You see it differently four months after you left.”

This research confirms the views of others (Bhasin et al, 2013; Bartsch, 2012; Piess et al, 2011, Bart et al, 2009; Mirvis, 2008; Bell, 2007) that reflective practices must be built into the design of EVPs if these are to be developmental experiences. However, as Mirvis (2008) reminds us, only participants can transform these experiences into life-changing encounters.
The findings confirmed previous research that company-sponsored volunteering programmes provide employees with a valuable experiential learning opportunity, from which they can develop skills and capabilities to be more effective as leaders in today's business world. In particular, participants return with new perspectives, including a wider view of the world, greater cultural awareness and new understanding about the realities of other countries. When used to inform business decisions, these new perspectives can lead to business practices that are more sensitive to the needs of customers, patients and other stakeholders worldwide and can support the company in being more socially responsible.

I believe this is the first study to explore what employees actually do differently as a result of participation in a volunteering programme and the findings indicate that participants can influence change when they return to their organisation, if they are adequately supported to apply their learning.

Simply providing employees with this experiential opportunity does not guarantee that they will learn from the experience, critical reflection on their experience is required to convert their experiential knowing into practical knowing (Heron, 1992), enabling them to do something different. This study confirmed the importance of building reflective practices into the design of volunteering programmes if they are to be developmental experiences. Coaching and storytelling supports reflection, and returning volunteers must be actively encouraged to engage in these. Alumni networks could also be leveraged to support this, leading to enhanced individual and collective learning.

The field of employee volunteering would benefit from more research on what volunteers do differently when they return to their organisation, and how reflective practices can most effectively support them with their learning.

Both participants and managers need to be reminded that returning to work after a volunteering assignment is a significant transition and the three phases of transition need to be worked through as the volunteer settles back into the organisation (Bridges, 1995). This requires patience as they deal with the confusion and uncertainty that accompanies the neutral zone phase.

Finally, this research confirmed the critical role of line managers in supporting the returned volunteer to utilise their newfound capabilities and perspectives. Further inquiry is required to better understand why they don’t always provide adequate support. Organisations need to support managers to tolerate uncertainty (Oshry, 1999), so that they may appreciate the new perspectives of returned volunteers and better use them in the service of the organisation.

In addition, this research contributes more broadly to the body of knowledge on employee volunteering, and I hope can be utilised to encourage organisations with such programmes to consider how their returned volunteers can help their company become more socially responsible, and to persuade more companies to consider starting an employee volunteering programme.
References


The Val Hammond fund cements Roffey Park’s commitment to applied management research through expanding the diversity and reach of thinking aimed at improving the world of work. Val, formerly Roffey Park’s Chair and Chief Executive, is a keen supporter of Roffey Park’s proud tradition as a charitable research institute and is still deeply engaged in Roffey’s research work through her participation in Roffey’s research advisory group.