

## Donations worth more than money

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Employee volunteering has long been a channel for corporate philanthropy, with companies allowing staff to take time off work to do everything from mentoring in schools to renovating community centres. However, as companies become both more strategic and global in their donation of staff time, many are sending staff on secondments or sabbaticals for several months at a time to work for charities and non-governmental organisations in developing countries.

For the target organisations, the benefits are many. The time and expertise of the participants – particularly those from consulting firms – is often far more valuable than a simple cash donation. Moreover, while cash merely allows organisations to continue what they are doing, skilled consultants can make changes that will help them to operate more efficiently, thereby giving the donation a more lasting impact.

“Employees spend several months immersed in these programmes and they can really make a difference,” says Charles Moore, executive director of the New York-based Committee Encouraging Corporate Philanthropy. “And that’s often much more effective than sending cash or products – because you’re sending the brains into it.”

Take Accenture Development Partnerships, a charitable organisation set up by Accenture to provide consulting services to charities, NGOs and other non-profit groups in developing countries. It sends only its top-performing executives to work on projects for up to six months.

The service is not free. However, because Accenture makes no profits on the participating consultants, who agree to work for half their salary while on the scheme, the fees are affordable for non-profit organisations. “If you take off the margin and the overheads and half the main cost of a consulting business, which is the people, then you’re left with an amount that is a fraction of what we normally charge,” says Gib Bullock, ADP’s director.

The projects that ADP participants work on include technical challenges that harness the IT skills and knowledge of Accenture consultants, such as revamping an organisation’s child sponsorship system and processes. In Kenya, ADP executives have been helping the African Medical & Research Foundation establish computer-based training for nurses.

Working with Phones for Health Partnership, ADP consultants are helping to equip health workers in Africa with mobile phones that can track the spread of diseases such as malaria and HIV/Aids, thereby providing better information to governments on where drugs are needed.

“We can help with deep IT skills but we also do a lot to help organisations and large NGOs work on change management and building their organisational strength,” says Mr Bullock. “That’s improving the effectiveness of the organisations to help them do what they do better.”

Another well-established corporate initiative is the Global Health Fellows programme run at Pfizer, the pharmaceuticals company. It sends selected staff on assignments of up to six months, working with NGOs and multilateral organisations tackling diseases such as HIV/Aids, tuberculosis and malaria in developing countries in Africa, Asia, eastern Europe and Latin America.

As well as working on immediate medical and health problems, Pfizer specialists also train their local counterparts.

Not all schemes involve overseas postings. As part of its Leadership Fellows programme, US technology group Cisco is sponsoring employees who live in Louisiana and Mississippi to work on a 21st Century Schools initiative that is rebuilding and improving educational institutions in areas that were affected by Hurricane Katrina.

The Community Sabbatical Programme at Rhode Island-based Citizens Financial Group sends staff to

work full time for three-month periods at non-profit social services agencies. On returning to the company, employees receive the same salary and responsibilities they had before they left. Since 1994, more than 90 have participated in the scheme.

Through a volunteer leave scheme at Wells Fargo, the US bank, participants also regain their full salary and benefits after up to four months away from their jobs working with non-profits. Partner organisations include Under One Roof, which raises funds to combat HIV/Aids, the International Rescue Committee, which provides humanitarian aid and emergency relief to refugees, and the Audubon Centre of the North Woods, a wildlife rehabilitation facility in Minnesota.

“Companies want to use their core competencies to invest in their communities,” says Mr Moore. “And the most successful companies in community investment and corporate philanthropy are those who become part of the solution.”

However, as well as being part of the solution to tough social and environmental problems, what makes these programmes so compelling is the fact that the benefit is three-way. In addition to the services delivered to the charities and NGOs, companies gain insights into new markets and unfamiliar economic environments in which they would otherwise find it hard to establish a presence.

“Our colleagues bring to the table a set of skills and expertise, but what they bring back is a deeper understanding of the local environment that we may not always have, as well as a real sense of what happens on the ground in poorly resourced areas,” says Robert Mallett, Pfizer’s senior vice-president of worldwide alliance development, philanthropy and corporate responsibility.

“Trying to replicate the trust and relationships of an NGO with local communities is not something a company can easily do,” says Adrian Hodges, managing director of the International Business Leaders Forum, a UK-based membership organisation that works with business, governments and civil society.

At the same time, companies are starting to see these intensive sabbaticals as powerful leadership development programmes. Participants gain experience of environments that are culturally and economically very different from those they are used to working in. “Increasingly, companies are recognising the business development and the human development opportunities in volunteering and development assignments for staff,” says Mr Hodges. “That means they have to be a bit more structured than they were in the past.”

Often, it is the most promising employees who want to participate in the projects. Accenture’s feasibility study for ADP demonstrated a strong correlation between levels of interest in the programme and its highest performing executives.

Perhaps the most compelling argument for companies engaging in this type of corporate philanthropy relates to the recruiting of business students and young executives. With a new generation of workers that is concerned about the social and environmental responsibility of its employers, running these types of volunteer programmes can give companies a competitive edge in the talent market.

“Our proposition as Accenture is to say to people who are interested in Goldman Sachs or Accenture, or maybe the World Bank, World Vision or going into an NGO, that at our organisation you can have a bit of everything,” says Mr Bullock. “You can have a challenging career as a consultant and the benefits that go with that. But you can also have an integrated career option that’s gone from being an ad hoc voluntary initiative to being a leadership development programme.”

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