ORGANIZATIONAL OUTCOMES OF CORPORATE VOLUNTEERING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY [1]

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Abstract

Purpose*:* The aim of this paper is to identify benefits of corporate volunteer programs gained on employee behaviors' side. Specifically, the following research question is posed: *what benefits of corporate volunteer projects can be observed by employees participating in them?*

Methodology/approach*:* The paper is based on a qualitative study conducted in the form of semi-structured in-depth individual interviews with employees participating in volunteer programs.

Findings*:* The study shows that corporate volunteering leads to positive effects on employees, including increased work meaningfulness, competence development and strengthened interpersonal relationships at work. Simultaneously, the study suggests that work meaningfulness plays a focal role in the overall process.

Implications*:* Results of the study deliver practical implications for companies implementing corporate volunteering. Volunteer programs should be organized in a way giving employees full autonomy in crafting their projects. The programs should also support and intensify employee interactions and favor volunteer actions requiring a wide range of skills.

Originality/value: The study contributes to theory development in the field of both corporate social responsibility and organizational behavior. Specifically, it gives an insight on how responsible business practices may strengthen employees' sense of meaningfulness of work and subsequently improve their competences and mutual relations.

Keywords: corporate volunteering, work meaningfulness, competence development, positive relationships at work

Paper type: Research paper

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1. Introduction

Together with alarming levels of key global indicators published by the United Nations (UNSD, n.d.https://unstats.un.org), there is growing need for everyone's contribution to sustainable development. The most common view considers sustainable development as taking integrated actions in economic, environmental and social dimensions in order to meet the present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Elkington, 1997; Hopewood et al., 2005; Alhaddi, 2015). To achieve this, changes in all spheres of human behavior are required, including individual, social and organizational ones. Nevertheless, it is argued that accomplishment of sustainable development goals depends, first of all, on the extent to which businesses embed initiatives supporting these goals into their strategies, routines and organizational cultures (March, 2003; Zoogah 2012; Laszlo et al., 2012; Glavas, 2012). As a result, businesses of all kinds experience increasing pressure to act out of a sense of obligation to the society and environment in their role of responsible corporate citizen (Logsdon and Wood, 2002; de Gilder et al. 2005; Muthuri et al., 2009; Zoogah, 2012).

There are various ways and channels that companies can use in order to show their care and compassion to beneficiaries outside the organization's boundaries (Glavas and Kelly, 2014). Among them, corporate volunteering is being increasingly adopted (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2019; Do Paço and Cláudia Nave, 2013; Mirvis, 2012).

Volunteering is about giving time and skills for a specific beneficiary (Rodell, 2013). In general, it takes two forms: conventional and corporate volunteering (Do Paço et al., 2013). Conventional volunteering is associated with individual activities carried out in non-profit organizations, such as hospitals, schools, sport clubs, or religious organizations (Do Paço et al., 2013). Corporate volunteering, also referred to as employee volunteering, is a collective action of employees being supported and encouraged by their companies through formal and informal policies and programs (Do Paço et al. 2013; Gratton and Ghoshal, 2003; Muthuri et al., 2009).

Corporate volunteering receives growing attention in management studies. It is due to at least two main reasons. Firstly, studies on corporate volunteering respond to the call for focusing on micro-foundations of corporate social responsibility (Chaudhary and Akhouri, 2019; Glaves and Kelly, 2014; Lavine, 2012), shifting attention on CSR from the institutional to the individual, namely employee, level. Secondly, corporate volunteering serves as an interesting subject of analysis on how corporate social performance may affect organizational outcomes. It is argued that it improves external relations (Mirvis, 2012; Booth et al., 2009; Greening and Turban, 2000), strengthens employee identification and organizational commitment (Haski-Leventhal, 2019; Bartel, 2001; Grant et al.,

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2008) and reinforces work-related competences (Haski-Leventhal, 2019; Booth et al., 2009; Belle, 2013; Devereux, 2008). Still though there is the need for stronger empirical evidence for the effects of volunteering on employees and companies themselves.

The aim of this paper is to identify benefits that organizations gain from volunteer programs on employee behaviors' side. Specifically, the following research question is posed: *what benefits of corporate volunteer projects can be observed by employees participating in them?* The empirical data for analyses has been derived from a qualitative study conducted in five companies.

The paper is built as follows: first the literature on corporate volunteering is examined with particular emphasis put on how corporate volunteering influences employee-volunteers' performance. Then research methodology and results are presented, followed by discussion and implications of the study.

2. Corporate volunteering

Corporate volunteering refers to formal and informal policies or programs through which organizations encourage employees to use their time and competencies for collective actions taken outside the organization, which are beneficial for the society and environment (Do Paço et al., 2013; Muthuri et al., 2009; Gratton and Ghoshal, 2003). The proactive nature of volunteering distinguishes it from passive forms of corporate social performance, e.g. monetary donations (Wilson, 2000).

Employees are motivated to participate in corporate volunteer projects for several reasons. First of all, companies can use a variety of incentives in order to encourage volunteering activities. They include flextime, time off, reimbursements, donations, use of facilities, corporate transportation, and other tangible goods (Booth et al., 2009). On the other hand, volunteers are driven by prosocial motivation that comes from a desire to benefit other people (Grant 2008). Specifically, Muhuri et al. (2009) suggest individual needs for doing good, cooperating with others, trusting and networking. Morrow-Howell et al. (2003) argue for material, social and altruistic motivation of volunteers. Motivation for corporate volunteering is explained also with self-determination theory (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2019; Deci and Ryan, 2000), specifically by meeting this way basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. In a similar vein, there are arguments for the sense of meaningfulness obtained from this kind of activity as the common reason for doing volunteering work (Rodell, 2013).

3. Effects of corporate volunteering

Corporate volunteering enables companies to contribute to a fairer, healthier and more balanced society while boosting the relationship between their employees and the community they are embedded in (Do Paço and Nave, 2013). Although

less analyzed from organizational development perspective (Cummings and

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Worley, 2009; Laszlo et al., 2012), it is argued that corporate volunteering may lead to several positive effects, such as increased employee performance (Jones, 2010; Backhaus et al. 2002), organizational citizenship behaviors (Lin et al., 2010), work engagement (Glavas and Piderit, 2009), organizational commitment (Greening and Turban, 2000; Carmeli et al., 2007), and strengthened interpersonal relationships (Glavas and Piderit, 2009).

Volunteering is capable of strengthening employee commitment and identification with the company which is particularly explained in reference to the aforementioned effect of work meaningfulness (Haski-Leventhal, 2019; Bartel, 2001; Grant et al., 2008). Meaningfulness is defined as the value of work purpose and is accompanied by individual feelings of being worth, useful and valuable through accomplishing one's work (May, 2004; Kahn, 1990). The sense of meaningful purpose is derived both from working for a company committed to the greater good and from individual active involvement in volunteer programs (Chaudhary and Akhouri, 2019; Lavine, 2012; Spreitzer et al., 2005).

Some studies suggest that corporate volunteering may support development of employee competences (Haski-Leventhal, 2019; Booth et al., 2009; Belle, 2013; Devereux, 2008). Importantly, volunteer activities may play such a role in enhancing job-related competences, such as teamwork, leadership, interpersonal communication (Do Paço et al., 2013) because corporate volunteering offers an opportunity to do something different from daily duties, and to learn and practice new skills (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2019; Mirvis, 2012; Sundeen and Raskoff, 1994). Additionally, other competences are generated that contribute to personal development of volunteers; they include emotional competences as well as awareness of the need for corporate social responsibility (Bartsch, 2012). Through volunteer work, employees continuously develop their knowledge and skills by bridging diverse spheres of their personal resources.

Corporate volunteering generates the ground for enhancing employees' sense of work meaningfulness, also through providing them an opportunity for networking and relatedness (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2019; Gratton and Ghoshal, 2003). Employees are able to increase their social resources and expand the boundaries of their interpersonal relationships due to an increased number of activities and interactions that they are engaged in while volunteering.

The effects of corporate volunteering particularly on employees has remained rather scattered in the literature. That is why there is the need for verifying the catalog of organizational benefits gained from CSR activities, including employee attitudes and behaviors (Hur et al., 2016). Moreover, there is the need for empirical evidence in this regard, supported by robust and rigorous research methodology (Glavas, 2012). Taking this into account, the following research question has been proposed: *what benefits of corporate volunteer projects can be observed by employees participating in them?*

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4. Method

The empirical study was qualitative in its nature and took the form of semi-structured in-depth individual interviews with employees participating in volunteer programs. The study was conducted in May-June 2018. Respondents represented companies selected among those listed in a ranking published by the Responsible Business Forum (Responsible Business Forum). In 2017 there were 62 firms listed in the ranking. Based on their websites, 18 companies implementing corporate volunteering were selected for the analyses. In each company the interview was conducted with coordinators of volunteer programs. Following these interviews, the acceptance of conducting interviews with employee-volunteers was received in five companies. Table 1 presents brief characteristics of the companies and the number of employees interviewed in each. Because some companies' policies demand the concealment of their identity, all company names have been anonymized.

Table 1.
Characteristics of companies participating in the study

Company	Sector	No. of respondents
Drink4Fun	Production of beverages	6
Call3Me	Telecommunication	6
DraakBank	Bank	8
LoanAdvanced	Home-credit and digital consumer finance	8
AllConsulting	Consulting	5

In all studied companies, corporate volunteering is organized in a form of the grant program. Each year a call for proposals is announced inviting employees to submit a volunteer project's proposal. The purpose of a project is unrestricted as long as it refers to a social or environmental problem.

The interview scenario included, among others, respondents' perceptions of the company involvement in sustainable development goals, reasons for participating in corporate volunteering, types and goals of projects conducted by employees, and outcomes of the projects.

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and analyses followed a cyclical process (Saldaña, 2015). Firstly, deductive and inductive coding techniques were employed (Miles et al., 2014). Deductive coding was based on researcher-generated codes reflecting issues included in the interview scenario. Inductive in vivo coding was performed based on new codes derived from interviewees' words. Each interview was independently coded by three researchers. After coding, data was classified into categories reflecting specific problems. In the context of this paper's aim, and in the light of the literature review, the following categories related to individual perceptions of volunteering

outcomes were distinguished: work meaningfulness, competence development and positive relationships at work.

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5. Results

5.1. Work meaningfulness

Working for a company which supports the society and environment, and this way contributes to the greater good, gives employees a sense of purpose and meaning of their work. It triggers the feeling of pride and loyalty to the company playing a significant role as good corporate citizen. These feelings are generated by the fact that the company encourages and supports employees to 'do good' through corporate volunteering. As respondents say:

It is cool to identify with the company who promotes those values. I have not changed this job so far, partly because the company supports such actions [i.e. volunteering]. *And this is important for many people. They get involved because they want the company image to be good* [employee of AllConsulting]

There are not so many firms that want to organize something like this. Thanks to the employee volunteering, we have the chance to become cool, good people. People who have a chance to offer something to the others [employee of DraakBank]

Of course, it is very important for me that my firm allows me to do this [i.e. volunteering]. *They give me money, they give me tools and give me people. Perhaps without it, if there was no corporate volunteering, I would change the job* [employee of LoanAdvanced].

The added value of the project is that employees feel proud that they have done something for the local community, and that the company supported it. If volunteering supports the local community where they live every day, they can say: my company has implemented this project [employee of Drink4Fun].

Actions taken within corporate volunteering have great value for employees themselves, strengthening their individual sense of meaning and worth. It is because they can see and feel their personal contribution to solving social and environmental problems. Respondents report as follows:

This is the feeling of doing something sensible. It is helping yourself, in the sense that you just feel good after such actions, where you can help someone but also help yourself. This is a great experience of having good time [employee Call3Me].

For me it was very personal. I wanted to develop myself, my personality. But also, I wanted to change the world. If the company gives me a chance for it, this is amazing support. Things we do for volunteering can help us change perception of ourselves. [employee of Drink4Fun].

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The sense of meaningfulness is stronger if employees have autonomy in crafting their activities:

Here it is certainly important to give people a free hand, and to trust them, because thanks to that they have pleasure and satisfaction, and the effect of their work is what we have expected. [employee of AllConsulting]

Volunteering focuses on natural talents and abilities. It is about creating a space where people can realize their passions and do what makes them happy. Something that is done with real pleasure. People must see value in what they do and feel that it makes sense [employee of Drink4Fun].

5.2. Competence development

Volunteering projects are fully crafted and coordinated by employees. They identify a purpose, beneficiaries, calculate the budget, plan all activities, engage people and tangible resources. On the way, employees have to deal with various unexpected problems, including interpersonal issues. It is a priceless school and employee competence test. Volunteers present it this way:

Once, when I was meeting new people, I was paralyzed, stress was blocking me completely. And then, doing volunteering with all those children, without knowing the people, there was no option, I had to overbear myself. And honestly, I have a feeling that since then I have more ease in social interactions [employee of Drink4Fun].

This is where local leaders reveal themselves [employee of Call3Me].

Volunteering is a challenge. There is something in each project that we come across, some kind of challenge, like: damn it! what to do about it now!? Each time I have to sit and learn what to do and how to push the project forward. Hours spent on Internet with learning, for example, how to renovate furniture. I am becoming a specialist in things I've had no idea about. It is wonderful in volunteering – to find a challenge and learn new things. These attitudes are then priceless in everyday work in a company [employee of AllConsulting].

Participation in corporate volunteering develops individual awareness of present social and environmental issues. It is of great value also from a company perspective because this way personal competences are enriched having additional impact on employees' attitude to work and co-workers. Volunteer work develops emotional and social intelligence together with prosocial motivation, which are proved to have positive influence on work performance. Giving the voice to the respondents:

It changes volunteers, tremendously! Before that, we've had predictable work and family life. Now, going beyond this predictable world makes us think: "crap! My problems are not comparable to those of people here at all" [employee of Call3Me].

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Our approach is changing, that's for sure, and emotional intelligence is developing. To coordinate it, to overcome all barriers … we have to deal with stress and such a variety of situations that are unusual for us. These people [volunteers] *are the best candidates for HR for promotion* [employee of Drink4Fun].

Volunteer projects certainly taught me a different view of the world [employee of DraakBank].

It seems that the process of volunteers' competence development is supported by meaningfulness, as one of the respondents expressed:

There is such positive energy in everyone, but it doesn't always come out. And this is revealed thanks to volunteering in the company. Together with such a "WOW" effect – I can do it with my company! [employee of LoanAdvanced].

5.3. Positive relationships at work

Corporate volunteering creates in a company a ground for building and strengthening positive relationships at work. This is due to at least two reasons. Firstly, volunteering projects give employees the opportunity to get to know each other better which is fundamental for relationships. Secondly, in most of the cases, volunteering takes a form similar to team-building integration events because actions are conducted outside the company and/or out of the place where the company is located. Better relationships are beneficial for employee performance at work. This is how they explain it:

Thanks to volunteering, I've begun to meet more people, those from the company, even the bosses – I was able to work with the boss from one of the largest departments. You meet wonderful people and now I have completely different relationships. Greater openness, we are more direct to ourselves, now we communicate not only by email or company documents [employee of AllConsulting].

After our last trip [due to volunteer action]*, I will say that we have become more intimate with each other, and naturally, we work better now. Because I want to help this person more. If she or he needs, I don't know, to get something from me, some information, I won't postpone it, I will do it faster* [employee of LoanAdvanced].

Volunteering creates familiarity, then it is obvious that we also feel better at work with these people. You can directly ask for anything because you already know that there are friends, good friends [employee of Drink4Fun].

Also, in this case, the process of relationship building seems to be supported by a sense of meaningfulness derived from volunteering work:

It is such a feeling, a sense of community. The community of people who think the same, who do the same, and you can rely on them. This is so cool these days when material matters are of greater importance than immaterial ones [employee of Call3Me].

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6. Discussion

The study delivers empirical evidence supporting arguments present in CSR literature in regard to organizational outcomes of corporate social performance. Notably, the study shows that corporate volunteering leads to positive effects on employee behaviors, including increased work meaningfulness, competence development and strengthened interpersonal relationships at work. While each of these effects is important and beneficial for the organization, the study suggests that work meaningfulness plays a focal role in the overall process.

The most common view of work meaningfulness considers it as a mediator between job characteristic and employee performance (Oldham and Fried, 2016). Company social performance has been argued by many researchers to be the source of employee sense of purpose and accomplishment (Glavas, 2012; Chaudhary and Akhouri, 2019). Among various consequences of this process, there is enhancement of employee work passion, employees' increased efforts to produce better results, stronger organizational commitment and identification with organization values (Hodson, 2004; Chaudhary and Akhouri, 2019). The study suggests that meaningfulness may mediate also the links between corporate volunteering and employee competence development as well as positive relationships at work.

The aforementioned effects of corporate volunteering may be explained on a basis of Hackman and Oldham's job characteristics model (Hackman and Oldham, 1980). According to it, together with increased skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and job-based feedback, employee motivation and engagement are reinforced. Corporate volunteering, if organized in a way giving all initiative to employees, meets these criteria. It is also in line with job crafting (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001; Wrzesniewski, 2003) which emphasizes the need of employees customizing their work according to their abilities, needs and values (Oldham and Fried 2016; Bakker et al., 2012; Nielsen and Abildgaard, 2012).

Therefore, the study contributes to theory development in the field of both corporate social responsibility and organizational behavior. Specifically, it provides insight into how responsible business practices may strengthen employees' sense of meaningfulness of work and subsequently improve their competences and mutual relations. As the study was of qualitative nature and limited to five companies, the aforementioned process lends itself for quantitative testing in future studies. Apart from implications for future research, the study also delivers practical implications for companies implementing corporate volunteer programs. The programs should be organized in a way giving employees full autonomy in crafting their volunteering projects. Moreover, the grant system should favor projects capable of intensifying employee interactions as well as requiring a wide range of skills.

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Notes

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