



## The Benefits of Volunteering

With the cost of providing health care and other employee benefits rising, small businesses often find it difficult to compete with larger companies in attracting and retaining the most talented workers. Compared with other types of benefits, an employee volunteer program is relatively affordable, easy to administer, and can go a long way toward improving employee morale, building employee skills, and boosting your company's standing in the community.

Regardless of the size of the organization they work for, employees tend to appreciate the chance to engage in charitable activities with the support of their employer. Fortunately, there are many different ways to structure volunteer programs so that they meet the needs of employers, workers, and nonprofits alike.

When thinking about where to focus your efforts, there are three basic considerations that should be taken into account: the needs of the community, the skills and interests of employees likely to donate their time, and the resources of your organization. Before implementing a program, meet with a group of your employees to discuss what charities they would like to support, and what forms of volunteering are most practical given your employees' work and family responsibilities.

In some cases, a team of employees may take paid time off from work to volunteer for a charity.

Volunteering as a group can promote team-building and encourage employees to get to know each other outside of the usual work environment. In other cases, employees may agree to take on occasional pro bono work for a nonprofit and incorporate the assignments into their normal workload. Selected appropriately, these pro bono assignments can challenge employees to broaden their skills. Full-time employees who normally have little extra time to volunteer in the community may especially appreciate the chance to perform work that stretches them, both personally and professionally.

As well as providing employees with the good feelings that come with giving back to the community, volunteering can offer great networking opportunities, and enhance your company's image among potential customers and business contacts. You may also wish to encourage employees to recruit family members and friends to participate in volunteer projects, thus broadening the effort and enabling them to spend much-needed quality time with people they care about.

For an employee volunteer program to succeed, it is, of course, essential to have policies in place that clearly outline how employees are permitted to use their time when contributing to charity. These guidelines should include information about the types of organizations and activities employees may engage in with company support, and how employees will be

compensated for the time they spend volunteering. Some companies provide workers with additional paid time off when volunteering, while others ask employees to use vacation, sick, or personal days to volunteer. Employees are typically also asked to submit requests to take time off for volunteering well in advance, so that coverage can be scheduled for these absences.

If you are uncertain whether your employees would be interested in volunteering, consider testing the waters by taking a day off as a company to participate in a volunteer activity. For example, instead of inviting employees to eat lunch at a restaurant, ask them to spend an afternoon planting trees or cleaning a beach in conjunction with a local environmental group, followed by a picnic. If the outing is well received, more ambitious volunteer programs could be developed.