

Corporate Peer Discussions: Supporting Employees Self-Organizing and Volunteering During COVID-19

Summary of Key Themes and Best Practices on Corporate Response

Virtual convenings held on April 14 and April 16, 2020

Convening Organizations: ACCP, CECP, COF, and POL

Association of Corporate Citizenship Professionals (ACCP), Council on Foundations (COF), Chief Executives for Corporate Purpose (CECP), and Points of Light (POL), which collectively represent more than 400 of the most socially and environmentally responsible global companies, are joining forces to support leaders of corporate purpose and to advocate for the field by convening dialogue on relevant solutions and to share best practices. While some companies are still assessing their response, we have already seen hundreds of corporations respond to the COVID-19 crisis with courage and determination. Their leadership sets an example for the sector to follow. In the sessions on Funding Educational Access During COVID-19, 74 member companies participated.

Key Themes and Best Practices

Continuing Support for Nonprofit Partners

- As much as 60% of a nonprofit's workforce disappears when in-person volunteerism isn't possible. While nonprofits are pivoting to virtual opportunities to fill the void, in many cases they have to hire workers.
- Companies are supporting nonprofits by providing operating funds if they had to cancel volunteer events.
- Before the COVID crisis, many companies already provided grants to organizations where their employees volunteer through Dollars for Doers programs or direct funding partnerships, to support the mission and cover the costs (such as supplies, meals, and staff to oversee) of having volunteers participate in an event.

Canceling In-Person Volunteer Events

- The COVID-19 crisis came in a season when many companies had large volunteer events planned, and those in-person events have all had to be canceled; many companies are pivoting to virtual opportunities.
- Because the safety of employees is top priority, at this point in the COVID-19 crisis, companies are limiting any in-person engagements except for blood drives and leaving it to personal choice if an employee decides to volunteer in person. To support companies, Points of Light has provided [Considerations for In-Person Corporate Volunteering During Covid-19: Guidance for Companies](#).

Careful Communications

- Companies are using this time as an opportunity to reinforce the company's values, often with messages from the CEO or other senior leadership to set a tone from the top.
- Companies are paring down their communications to the essential, providing information about how to stay safe and work in a virtual environment, as well as how to give back and take care of themselves.

Employee Fundraising and Matching Grants

- Companies are supporting employees' donations to nonprofits addressing COVID-19 by increasing and/or providing an additional corporate match (\$500 per employee or up to a 200% match were often cited) for COVID-19 response nonprofits for a designated amount of time, such as through May or June 2020.
- Companies are also increasing the matching gifts caps and lowering the minimum donation to participate.

- Some companies designate eligible nonprofit organizations, while others have made it open for employee choice. COVID-19 nonprofits can be highlighted through regional or company-wide fundraising campaigns.
- One company seeded employees Benevity accounts with \$50 for employees to donate.
- Companies have also lowered the threshold for Dollars for Doers grants (i.e. one company shifted its policy from \$250 donation for 10 hours of service to a \$25 donation for every hour served).
- One company started a “Donate your Commute” program (another is called #FareItForward) where employee contributions typically spent on transportation to work go towards COVID-19 relief funds.

Virtual Volunteer Opportunities

- As the COVID-19 crisis persists, companies with significant ongoing CSR programs in areas like financial literacy are setting up virtually for the medium term, assessing how to deliver the same concepts online.
- Companies are reaching out to their partners to see how they can pivot to identify and structure opportunities virtually. The sgENGAGE Podcast featured: [Tips for Virtual Volunteerism Programs](#)
- April is National Volunteer Month, and a time of year when many companies ramp up their service events. Employees have a passion to respond to the crisis by using their innovation and passion for good; some are asking for virtual opportunities and others are self-mobilizing, such as using 3D printers to make masks. The mental and emotional benefits of volunteerism are powerful in this time of social distancing.
- It is also Earth Day, which lends itself to big hands-on volunteer events which are now canceled. Providing kid-friendly projects are especially popular with so many families with children home from school.
- Virtual volunteerism can provide safe opportunities to volunteer in areas such as capacity building, financial capability work, thanking donors, fundraising, digital transformation, tech infrastructure, mobile resources, visiting with elderly virtually, etc. IT workers can help nonprofits and educators adjust to virtual learning.
- While virtual volunteerism isn’t new, it is a dynamic area that is developing rapidly. Local volunteer opportunities have been well-received as a meaningful opportunity to make an impact. To that end, corporate volunteer teams across regions are sharing knowledge and best practices with each other.

Curated lists of virtual volunteer opportunities

- Many companies provide paid time off for volunteerism and are pivoting to engage their employees for impact in virtual volunteerism, which can take many forms, ranging from sewing masks or no-sew blankets for hospitals, to online mentoring of students or chats with isolated seniors, to virtual career chats to providing IT support to educators struggling with the move to online learning (see list below).
- One company sent hundreds of tee-shirts from canceled events to employees sewing masks at home.
- Many companies are providing employees with lists of curated virtual volunteer opportunities, drawing from resources such as Points of Light’s list of [resources for virtual volunteer opportunities](#).
- One company is helping its employees by creating a toolkit updated weekly for its virtual volunteer opportunities with an explanation, direct link, and chart to see if it’s one-time, uses a unique skill.
- For opportunities that require background checks, companies have partnered with [Sterling Volunteers](#).
- Other virtual volunteer databases: Points of Light’s [All For Good](#), [GenerationOn](#), and [VolunteerMatch](#)
- Specific virtual volunteering opportunities include:
 - [7Cups.com](#) – be a volunteer listener in this emotional support app.
 - [BeMyEyes.com](#) – an app that connects blind and low-vision people with sighted volunteers and company representatives for visual assistance through a live video call.
 - [Bookshare](#) – eBooks for people with reading barriers. Volunteers scan and proofread, describe images, and provide support for Bookshare® teachers and families.
 - [Career Village](#): provide personalized career advice
 - [Create the Good](#): initiative by AARP
 - [Crisis Textline](#) – crisis counseling
 - [Girls with Impact](#) – online entrepreneurship program with mentor opportunity

- [Hire Heroes](#): supporting employment of the military community
- [MissingMaps.org](#) - an open, collaborative project in which you can help to map areas where humanitarian organizations are trying to meet the needs of vulnerable people.
- [Map Swipe](#): **putting communities on the map**
- [Mercy Corps](#): business mentorship
- [Project Hope](#) – building capacity in health care.
- [Science Buddies](#): sharing a love of Science
- [Technovation](#): using technology for change
- [TalkingPoints](#): family engagement for underserved and multilingual families
- [Translators without Borders](#): translating texts for a variety of social purposes
- [Trevor Project](#): crisis intervention services for LGBTQ Youth
- [TutorMate](#) pairs corporate volunteers with thousands of young people learning to read.

Flexible Definitions of Volunteerism

- Some companies are using social media campaigns like “#LocalLight” (from Points of Light), “#CreateChangefromHome” or “#1000ActsofKindness” or “#COVIDkindness” to capture kind acts, such as shopping for a neighbor or reading a story over facetime, and sharing those uplifting stories internally.
- Many employees, working from home and seeing immediate needs in their community, have a desire to help neighbors, family, or their local community; in response, some companies are removing the 501c3 requirement for service time so that employees could use their Volunteer Time Off (VTO) time flexibly.
- Employees can even volunteer within the company with developing COVID relief programs. For example, at one company, corporate responsibility and foundation employees stepped up to serve as call center representatives to help employees navigate changes in benefits and apply for relief funds. At the end of this summary, you will find a sample addendum to a volunteer policy to provide a more flexible definition.
- Tracking volunteer hours will remain important for YOY comparisons, and software platforms like WeSpire, Cybergrants, YourCause, Benevity and others are starting to track these more flexible volunteer actions within their platforms by adding COVID-19 tags and categories for non-traditional volunteering.
- Companies are also focusing more on tracking metrics like employee satisfaction, engagement, and pride.

Skills Based and Pro Bono Service

- This is a time when the skills and expertise of employees can be of great service to the community.
- Amid the COVID-19 crisis, nonprofits are in need of help with financial forecasting, crisis communications, risk management, cash flow analysis, navigating the CARES Act, and other areas where companies have expertise. For some nonprofits, this can also be a time to tackle some back-burner projects, harnessing the enthusiasm of corporate employees who, working virtually, have a desire to share their expertise.
- Many companies indicated they were deploying pro bono legal resources in their COVID-19 response.
- One company has created “Impact Day” projects in areas like business chemistry, leadership development, financial readiness, that can be adapted virtual sessions with nonprofits. Another created a skills-based webinar series to share employee expertise with their communities.
- Companies are deploying their expertise pro bono to improve legacy IT systems for local governments.
- IT departments have set up virtual helpdesks to help nonprofits transition to virtual offerings and move events online (as companies are also doing) or assist educators with the transition to remote learning.
- Data companies are using their dashboards to help track virus information and make available to the public. Others are helping policy makers to make the best decisions based on reliable data.
- Several companies cited working with Taproot to develop skills-based opportunities with nonprofits.

Tactics for Encouraging Participation

- While some companies cite an increased participation rate in March with virtual volunteerism compared to last year, others are experiencing low engagement, perhaps due to other demands on employee time.
- Some companies don't know if employees are volunteering because they haven't logged their hours.
- Leadership can support volunteerism and fundraising efforts in a structured way. CSR teams can provide messages for senior leaders and managers to send to their teams as an effective tactic for engagement.
- Regional champions help coordinate activities and collaborate to share what's working with other regions.

Inclusion through Service

- Companies are finding virtual volunteerism to be an inclusion opportunity with their employees, focusing efforts on reaching out to vulnerable populations that are hardest-hit by the COVID-19 crisis.
- As companies pivot to a virtual culture, HR and CR teams, as well as Employee Resource Groups, can collaborate to create group volunteer experiences for team building, which create connection, improve moods and lowering stress. Be mindful about time zones when scheduling group activities.
- Some companies cited using a few minutes of their team meetings to write cards to thank health care workers or send to elderly or opening a virtual room while for employees to work on a project together.

Board Service

- At this time, companies can connect board members with board leadership experts to provide guidance on how to support nonprofits at a time of crisis and provide training for employees to serve on boards.

Questions and Considerations

- Companies are seeking examples of others that have been successful in creating customized virtual volunteer opportunities that can be used for all employees and reach size and scale across geographies.
- When suggesting volunteer opportunities, companies should understand the intrinsic motivation of their employees— is it to be social? Tied to a cause? Gain a skill for their resume?
- While employees have a desire for volunteerism, companies need to be mindful of if they are really helping. Are they identifying projects of real service to nonprofit partners right now?
- Companies also cited the challenge of harnessing and tracking activity and ad hoc employee-led projects.
- With employees on computers and virtual calls all day, they may not want to be on a device any more than they need to. This can be a challenge for virtual volunteerism.

Looking Ahead

- Companies are taking an inward look at their programs and considering what the new normal will be; they are assessing when and how it will be possible to volunteer in person again. As employees start to want to volunteer in person, how can companies ensure they do so safely? When we return to "normal," what will the comfort level of employees be about going out to new neighborhoods and communities?
- It's likely that even once social distancing recedes, virtual volunteerism will remain robust at companies because its potential has been unlocked. It has opened eyes to the opportunity to leverage skills for the greater good, and to do so virtually on a time frame that works for the individual employee.

COVID-19 Resources from each partnering organization:

- ACCP: [COVID-19 Resources for Corporate Citizenship Professionals](#)
- CECP: COVID-19 Resources [Recap for CEOs](#) and [Recap for CR Leaders](#)
- COF: [COVID-19 Resource Hub](#)
- POL: [COVID-19 Action Plan](#)

Sample COVID-19 Community Service Hours Addendum:

We're taking steps to encourage you to continue to support your community by lifting restrictions on 501(c)3 requirements for volunteer hours. That means that any volunteering in support of your community can go towards your allotted 16 paid hours and unpaid volunteer hours.

Here's what qualifies:

- General "good deeds" for neighbors in need, including running errands, purchasing groceries, and picking up prescriptions for neighbors, seniors, and those who may be high risk that you're connected with.
- Providing lessons to seniors or children over Skype, FaceTime, or any other virtual platform.
 - o Lessons must be free of charge.
 - o Lessons can be provided to those who live with and are caring for an individual that is susceptible to becoming sick.
 - o Lessons can be provided to families with children who are working from home while providing childcare simultaneously as schools are closed.
- Making masks for health care workers, essential employees or others in the community, as long as the masks are donated directly to organizations or individuals.

Please refer to the following examples to support yourself in determining whether or not your activities qualify:

- In normal circumstances, you're a reading volunteer and now with shelter in place orders, you're reading with your neighbor's children over Skype.
- In normal circumstances, you're a Second Harvest Food Bank volunteer and now you're picking up groceries for your elderly uncle.
- In normal circumstances, you're a financial education volunteer and now you're delivering financial education programming virtually to young students while schools are closed.
- In normal circumstances, you're leading a cooking class through the food bank and now you've connected with community members virtually to teach nutrition and cooking from your home kitchen.

Please Note: When volunteering, please practice social distancing and follow CDC guidelines.