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Canada Volunteerism Initiative

# Corporate Volunteer Programs

Maximizing Employee Motivation and  
Minimizing Barriers to Program Participation

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# Corporate Volunteer Programs: MAXIMIZING EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION AND MINIMIZING BARRIERS TO PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

## Introduction

Companies today face increasing pressure to act in a socially responsible manner. Many companies have embraced this challenge, seeing it as a means of gaining a competitive advantage while demonstrating their community values to customers, suppliers, and employees. One of the ways in which corporations have demonstrated their sense of social responsibility is through corporate volunteer programs (CVPs).

Research shows that CVPs can result in a multitude of benefits, not only for the community, but also for employees and for the companies themselves (Pancer, Baetz, & Rog, 2002). These benefits have led a growing number of companies to establish formal volunteer programs. But for these programs to be successful, employees must be willing to participate. A recent Volunteer Canada survey of companies with formal volunteer programs found that only about 5% to 30% of employees participated in these program (Hatton, 2000). Given these rather low participation rates, it would be useful for companies to understand the factors that

This report is intended to provide guidance to companies that wish to motivate employees to participate in a corporate volunteer program. It offers recommendations based on a detailed study of one of the largest corporate volunteer programs in Canada — the corporate volunteer program run by the Ford Motor Company of Canada — and on interviews with over 100 Ford employees.

influence employees to take part in a CVP. Our analysis of the information we obtained from our interviews with participants and non-participants in Ford Canada's CVP led us to identify six major factors that influence employees' interest in participating in CVPs. The recommendations we offer here are based on these six factors.

## Ford Motor Company's Corporate Volunteer Program

The Ford Motor Company of Canada announced its corporate volunteer program in February of 2000. This program allows salaried employees to volunteer in community organizations on company time for up to 16 hours per year. The program is completely voluntary. Employees are not evaluated on their participation; however, managers and employees often highlight their volunteer experiences and contributions in performance reviews.

To qualify for support by Ford employees, organizations must be registered charities. Qualifying projects must involve teams of at least five employees. Volunteer activities must be completed during regular business hours and must consist of four-hour, one-day, or two-day off-site tasks or projects.

Volunteer opportunities, including all the details that potential volunteers need (e.g., the organization, the type of work, and the location) are listed on a Web site on the company's intranet. Employees register for the projects that interest them. Occasionally, employees find their own volunteer opportunities and make their own arrangements for volunteering.

## Study Methodology

The information presented in this report is based on interviews conducted between August, 2001 and January, 2002 with two groups of Ford employees: those who had taken part in Ford's corporate volunteer program, and those who were eligible but had not participated in the program.<sup>1</sup> We asked employees about their personal reasons for participating or choosing not to participate in the program, their reactions to their volunteer experiences, and any barriers they perceived to volunteering through the program.

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<sup>1</sup> We interviewed a total of 105 employees — 59 employees (40 men and 19 women) who had participated in the program, and 46 employees (31 men and 15 women) who had not participated.

## Major Factors that Affect the Decision to Participate in the Ford CVP

Analysis of the interview responses led us to identify six major factors that influenced employees' decisions to participate in the Ford CVP. These six factors were:

- employees' personal values, attitudes, and objectives;
- the nature of the program;
- the kinds of volunteer opportunities available;
- company support for participation;
- personal support for volunteering; and,
- degree of satisfaction with volunteer experiences.

In this report, we examine each of these factors in greater detail and present recommendations for motivating employee participation based on the information gathered in the interviews.

## Employees' Personal Values, Attitudes, and Objectives

Whether or not an employee participates in a CVP depends, to a large extent, on that employee's personal values, attitudes, and objectives. Employees who value volunteering believe that individuals should "give back" to the community, and are concerned about the welfare of the disadvantaged in the community, are more likely to participate in the program. These kinds of positive values and attitudes were mentioned by several employees who participated in the Ford CVP:

*"It's our time to give back to the community. We want the community to know that they have supported us in the purchase of our vehicles and it's our responsibility to give back something and just to say thank you."*

*"You just can't help but notice that everything isn't funded, and there's a big need."*

On the other hand, employees who do not value volunteering, have a negative attitude towards volunteering or towards some of the organizations associated with the CVP, or do not feel a connection with the community, are less likely to participate. This was illustrated in some of the comments made by individuals who chose not to participate in Ford's CVP:

*"I did not really feel that the agencies that they had listed were worth my time."*

*"If I had a choice of where I was going to volunteer, I would do it in Brampton because that's where I've lived for the last 40 years. I feel that I owe it to where I live, not necessarily where I work."*

Although it may be difficult to change employees' fundamental values and attitudes, a CVP can build on employees' positive attitudes towards helping the disadvantaged, connecting the company with the community, and meeting community needs.

### Recommendation:

Create positive attitudes towards volunteering.

- When informing employees about the corporate volunteer program, outline how it can benefit the employee, the community, and the company. Testimonials from participating employees and community organizations can be very effective in communicating what the program has accomplished and what employees and organizations have gained from the experience.
- Appeal to different interests and degrees of commitment by allowing employees to choose whether or not they will participate in the program, how much time they will commit, and what kinds of activities they will engage in. Employees will have a more positive attitude if participation is truly voluntary.

## The Nature of the Program

Another key factor in employees' decisions to participate in the Ford CVP was the nature of the program. Most employees liked the fact that they could take time off work to volunteer. Most also appreciated the opportunity the program offered for them to get to know their co-workers and to bond with their work group by volunteering as a team. The more attractive the program is to employees, the more likely they are to participate. This was illustrated in the comments made by several participants in the Ford program:

*"They allow us to volunteer during work hours, so that frees up my time. I go out and do a good thing, so that's my main impetus. It doesn't cut into my social time or my home time."*

*"I think it's a great team building thing. That's what really got me into it. I mean, your whole department is going out, managers and above. It's just a good day to be out of the work environment because we work hard here and you don't always get to know the people you work with. So it's a good opportunity."*

Certain aspects of the Ford CVP, however, did not appeal to some of the employees, and tended to deter them from participating. For example, some employees did not like the team requirement of the CVP:

*"I did not participate in the program because I didn't really like the concept of having to do everything in a team format. For me, volunteering is a very individual thing. I do it because I want to do it and I try to help those agencies where I think they need help the most."*

### Recommendation:

**Make the program as appealing as possible.**

- Time off work is a major motivating factor for many employees. Consider offering employees release time for volunteering.
- If your program is structured to encourage employees to perform volunteer activities as a team, retain an element of choice. Give employees some flexibility about the amount of time they spend in individual or team projects. Rather than requiring a specific number of employees per team, allow employees to create their own teams. The size of the team will likely depend on the type of volunteer activity, size of work group, employee preferences, and the level of co-worker interest in the particular volunteer activity.

## The Kinds of Volunteer Opportunities Available

The kinds of volunteer opportunities offered to employees through the CVP are critical in motivating participation in the program. When employees can choose from volunteer opportunities they find interesting, worthwhile, or fun, they are much more likely to take part in the program. Allow employees to have some input into the kinds of volunteer activities they perform or the community organizations where they can volunteer. The importance of offering a wide range of opportunities was evident from several of the interviews with Ford CVP participants:

*"I think the projects available are very interesting. There are things that I never would have thought of doing. I never would have thought about participating in Habitat for Humanity. It wasn't something I knew even existed in Canada. That was great; it's really opened my eyes to what else is out there, which is nice."*

*"I like the fact that we can do something different each time if we want. Through my own volunteering outside of Ford I tend to dedicate myself to one thing, so I like the opportunity to have variety."*

Not surprisingly, employees who do not find the list of volunteer opportunities appealing are less likely to participate in the program. Some Ford employees mentioned that, if they had been allowed to choose the organization with which they could volunteer, it might have made a difference in their decision about the CVP:

*"I don't know about spending the day with a senior citizen or an underprivileged child. That's kind of boring and I don't really want to do that."*

*"Ford will not sponsor what I want to do because it's not on their list. I didn't want to give up what I was doing. I enjoy it and I think it's very productive when I see the results. I'm not prepared to change what I'm doing for their program."*

### Recommendation:

Provide interesting and meaningful volunteer opportunities.

- Survey employees about the types of volunteer activities they would like to do and the community organizations they are interested in supporting.
- Provide a broad range of volunteer opportunities that capture a variety of interests and correspond with employee preferences and goals. These should vary in terms of location, type of work required, and type of community organization.
- Encourage employees to bring forward their own ideas for volunteer projects that are personally meaningful to them or agencies whose causes they are committed to and, whenever possible, include these projects and agencies among the options for participation through the CVP.

## Company Support for Participation

Employees are much more likely to take part in a CVP if it is easy for them to do so. A program that identifies volunteer opportunities for participants, makes arrangements for employees to get involved, or organizes activities for employees is more likely to attract higher levels of participation. Offering a degree of flexibility in when participants can volunteer will help to minimize conflicts with work schedules. Finally, employees who feel that their managers and the company support their volunteer efforts will be more motivated to participate. All of this requires a solid and supportive infrastructure for the CVP, as was evident from comments by several participants in the Ford CVP:

*“There is such a big list of organizations that you can get involved with and there are so many different times. They really have tried to make it as flexible as possible.”*

*“I’d say that the company program gave volunteerism more visibility and encouraged me to get involved. The company’s renewed effort and the importance placed on volunteerism and corporate citizenship certainly helped influence me in making my decision to participate.”*

*“The management team we have now has a very earnest and enthusiastic support for community involvement. They tend to be very supportive of what people are doing out there. I like for our employees to be involved in what’s going on in the community. I know it’s a big initiative of the company and, believe it or not, a lot of the people love to do it.”*

The more difficult it is to get involved and the less support employees receive, the less likely they will be to participate in the CVP, as was evident from what some Ford non-participants said:

*“There aren’t many people in our department so when one person leaves, one person is responsible for all the calls. For this reason I find it hard to participate.”*

### Recommendation:

**Make it easy for employees to volunteer and then support their efforts.**

- Provide the resources necessary to operate the program. Make employee participation as easy as possible by assigning someone responsibility for coordinating the program. This person’s duties should include selecting programs, liaising with community agencies, and arranging volunteer activities.
- Clearly communicate to employees that the company fully supports the CVP. For example, include a reference to volunteering in the company’s mission statement.
- Make sure that all managers support the program and ensure that they have the resources they need to carry on their departments’ work while their staff are away on volunteer placements.

*“Anybody’s time away from work has a serious potential impact on the ability to accomplish our mission. It’s not that I’m against volunteer work. I volunteer outside of Ford. But as far as taking job time away, I couldn’t see myself doing it.”*

*“The CVP has been slow coming to Windsor. It is supposed to be Canada-wide and company-wide, yet it isn’t. The reason we were given is because there was not the manpower here to be able to oversee that type of a program. If you’re going to roll it out across different sites, then you should have the background resources. I don’t feel that it’s fair for them to say that anyone throughout Ford can participate and then, all of a sudden, there are no resources to be able to do it.”*

## Personal Support for Volunteering

Support from family, friends, and especially co-workers creates a positive attitude towards volunteering. This kind of support can take several forms. For example, co-workers can assume the duties of a CVP participant who is out of the office on a volunteer assignment. Several participants in Ford's CVP noted how important the support of family, friends, and co-workers was in getting them involved in the program:

*"Within my department, we've got a coordinator who really puts it out there that this is what we're going to do and who organizes big group events. She really motivates us and makes sure we do things."*

*"My father has volunteered for probably 30-plus years in a seniors' home, so certainly he is an influence on me. My aunt is a very well known volunteer in Toronto, so her experience has certainly influenced me. I'd say just about everyone in my family does something."*

*"I think I'm surrounded by people who volunteer. Like I said, it's normal. I have friends who are in charity golf tournaments. Windsor is very well known for that. There is always something going on here — for the United Way, cystic fibrosis, mental health, Christmas for kids. It's non-stop. It's just something that's normal in this city."*

The attitudes of family, friends, and co-workers can also have a negative effect on employees' interest in participating in a CVP. If significant individuals in an employee's life are not supportive of volunteering or of the CVP, that employee will be less likely to participate. This was illustrated in a few interviews with individuals who chose not to participate in the Ford CVP:

### Recommendation:

**Build on personal and co-worker support for volunteering.**

- Encourage employees to support each other's participation in volunteering activities. For example, employees who organize their colleagues to participate in volunteer events can be formally recognized by the company by featuring them in items in the company newsletter or Web site.
- Allow family members to get involved in at least some of the volunteer activities associated with the CVP. For example, employees can be encouraged to bring their spouses and children to fundraising events.

*"It's kind of an attitude that people have. If you take the day to volunteer, it's seen as slacking off and an easy way to get out of work."*

*"It just wasn't something that we did growing up in our family. My dad worked and came home, my mother was a stay-at-home mom."*

## Degree of Satisfaction with Volunteer Experiences

Once employees have had a chance to volunteer through the CVP, the degree to which they feel satisfied with the experience will affect whether they continue in the program. Employees who have had rewarding volunteer experiences are more likely to stay involved. Concrete expressions of appreciation for volunteer contributions help to enhance the feeling that employees have “made a difference” in the lives of those they have helped.

*“To drive by Habitat for Humanity and see that houses are up and taking shape and that you had something to do with that, it makes you feel like it’s a great cause. You feel good to know that you’ve done something to help.”*

*“Talking to the people who work at Habitat was great, as well as one woman who actually lived in the half of the house we were working on. Speaking with somebody who was actually getting the benefit of the work that we were doing was great. It’s nice to see the appreciation coming straight from the person who is receiving the benefit. She was so pleased to have a home.”*

*“I can still remember, after we’d finished that room, the positive feelings everybody had that they really made a difference in somebody’s life that day.”*

People who have negative experiences volunteering through the CVP will be less likely to continue participating. This was illustrated in an interview with one participant in Ford’s CVP:

*“People started out in two groups. Some were cleaning the park and some were planting trees. The people who collected garbage walked back with empty bags because they couldn’t find any garbage, so they spent a beautiful day walking in the park, which is nice, but there’s not enough value in that. We worked hard putting dirt around those trees. I questioned whether or not it would have gotten done anyway by the people who were driving around and watching us.”*

### Recommendation:

Try to ensure that employees have a positive volunteer experience, and recognize them for their volunteer contributions.

- Employees will be deterred from continuing to volunteer if they feel that there is not a real need for the work to be done, if they do not have enough work to do to keep them busy for the duration of their volunteer activity, or if they do not feel like they are making a valuable contribution to the agency or its clients.
- Gather feedback from employees about their volunteer experiences, and eliminate or change volunteer placements that do not provide meaningful, satisfying opportunities.
- Recognize employees’ volunteer contributions, both within and outside the program. This can be done through letters of appreciation from the company, articles in company publications that highlight employees’ volunteer achievements, or volunteer appreciation events.

## Conclusion

Our analysis has resulted in some key guidelines and recommendations on how to enhance employees' interest in and willingness to participate in corporate volunteer programs:

- Create positive attitudes towards volunteering.
- Make the program as appealing as possible.
- Provide interesting and meaningful volunteer opportunities.
- Make it easy for employees to volunteer, and then support their efforts.
- Build on personal and co-worker support for volunteering.
- Ensure that employees have a positive volunteer experience, and recognize them for their volunteer contributions.

Companies have a wide range of options to choose from when deciding to implement a formal CVP. Some may decide to establish programs similar to Ford's, in which employees are given time off from work in order to volunteer, and others might develop a "dollars for doers" initiative, in which employees' volunteering is supported by company donations to the agencies to which employees give their time.

By following the recommendations brought forward in this manual, companies can build and encourage participation in volunteer programs specific to their organizations. Companies should encourage employees to provide input into the kind of volunteer program offered to them, as this will further enhance their motivation to participate. When a substantial proportion of the employees participate in a company's CVP, then the full benefits to the company, and to the community, can be realized.

## Where to Get More Information

Canadian Centre for Philanthropy  
[www.ccp.ca](http://www.ccp.ca)

The Centre for Corporate Citizenship  
at Boston College  
[www.bc.edu/centers/ccc/index.html](http://www.bc.edu/centers/ccc/index.html)

The Corporate Citizenship Company  
[www.corporate-citizenship.co.uk](http://www.corporate-citizenship.co.uk)

Corporate Volunteerism Council — Twin Cities  
[www.cvctc.org](http://www.cvctc.org)

IMAGINE  
[www.imagine.ca](http://www.imagine.ca)

National Retiree Volunteer Coalition  
[www.nrvc.org](http://www.nrvc.org)

National Survey of Giving,  
Volunteering and Participating  
[www.givingandvolunteering.ca](http://www.givingandvolunteering.ca)

The Points of Light Foundation  
[www.pointsoflight.org](http://www.pointsoflight.org)

Volunteer Calgary  
[www.volunteercalgary.ab.ca](http://www.volunteercalgary.ab.ca)

Volunteer Canada  
[www.volunteer.ca](http://www.volunteer.ca)

The Volunteer Centre of San Francisco  
[www.vcsf.org](http://www.vcsf.org)

Volunteer Vancouver  
[www.volunteervancouver.ca](http://www.volunteervancouver.ca)

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