

Companies gain when employees substitute volunteering for regular work

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Employees who leave the office to volunteer in the community may actually boost the company's bottom line by performing better on the job, a new University of Florida study finds.

Rather than siphoning off work hours or adding distraction, workers given permission to engage in public service worked harder, applied themselves on the job and supported their employers in the workplace and in the community, said Jessica Rodell, who did the research for her doctoral dissertation in management at UF.

"We have this idea that if [employees](#) volunteer, it distracts them from their work," said Rodell, who begins this fall as a management professor at the University of Georgia. "They take longer lunches, leave work early for fundraising events or in the case of the proverbial parent soccer coach spend much of their time on the phone coordinating kids' games."

Despite the growing popularity of volunteerism in the United States and in corporations, there was little research on how this service affects productivity, Rodell said. Most studies look at how volunteering boosts a person's self-esteem rather than the company's economic growth, she said.

"We found that employees who volunteered felt more connected to their companies and were more likely to work harder on tasks," she said. "They spoke positively about their employer in public and were less likely to daydream, cyber loaf or take extra time off work."

More than a quarter of Americans — about 27 percent — donate time to a [nonprofit organization](#), and up to 35 percent of U.S. companies have some kind of formal volunteer program, Rodell said. These have included Disney’s “Give a Day Get a Disney Day,” which awarded a free one-day ticket to a Disney theme park for eight hours spent volunteering, and Starbucks’ offer of a free cup of coffee for each five hours of volunteering, she said.

In the UF study, employees performed better at their jobs if their company had a formal volunteer program in place, even if they didn’t take advantage of it, Rodell said.

“If I was running one of those programs at a company and nobody used it, I would start to think that maybe we shouldn’t have it anymore,” she said. “But it seems to be a signal to employees that there is good in the company, and they respond by being better employees.”

Perhaps seeing that an employer cares about the community makes workers believe it will also show compassion toward employees, inspiring them to work harder, she said.

Rodell used the Junior League and United Way in Volusia County to recruit participants, who volunteered for a variety of causes, including Meals on Wheels, Big Brothers Big Sisters, the Humane Society, Habitat for Humanity and one-time charity events such as Relay for Life.

A total of 125 participants, who were also employed, filled out surveys and provided names of two co-workers and one person from their volunteer organization, who also filled out surveys. To determine productivity, Rodell asked whether employees put more effort into job tasks and performed their duties in a more efficient manner. She also examined citizenship behaviors, such as volunteering to serve on committees and showing increased loyalty to the company by praising it

to family and friends. And she looked at counterproductive behaviors, such as whether employees took long lunches and spent work time surfing the Internet.

Rodell said she found that volunteering invariably affected job performance positively as a result of employees identifying more closely with their employers. This was measured by how much participants agreed with such statements as “my employer’s successes are my own successes” or “when someone criticizes my employer, it feels like a personal insult,” she said.

“I thought that being involved in other activities might distract employees and cut down on the time and energy they had for their regular jobs, but we found no evidence of that,” she said. “Employees felt a stronger bond with their company because they believed it shared their ideals in caring about the community, and they were more likely to be better employees because of it.”

The results bode well for charities and nonprofit organizations, which in some communities are finding it more difficult to recruit volunteers in hard times, Rodell said.

“With so many people focused on keeping their jobs in this economy, they may not be able to devote as much time to extracurricular activities like volunteering,” she said.

University of Pennsylvania [management](#) professor Adam Grant said “Rodell’s research takes a critical step toward understanding how involvement in corporate volunteering influences employees’ behaviors on the job. Corporate volunteering can help employees develop skills, build connections with co-workers and experience gratitude and pride toward their employers for facilitating their efforts to contribute to a meaningful cause.”

Provided by University of Florida

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