

New study links skill development to characteristics of employees and nature of the volunteering experience

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Volunteer employees from Biogen work with middle school students from Boston at the company's labs in Cambridge as part of an apprenticeship with Citizen Schools. Credit: Citizen Schools

Corporate volunteering programs are widely credited by business leaders and volunteers for giving participants valuable work-related skills that improve their job performance. A new study suggests there is truth to these claims, but that the extent to which each skill is developed is linked

to the personal characteristics of the volunteer and the nature of the volunteering experience.

The forthcoming article in *Frontiers in Psychology* relied on quantitative survey data collected from 74 employees from Google, Cisco Systems, Fidelity and Cognizant Technology Solutions before and after completing a 10-week service experience and working as teachers with Citizen Schools – a national non-profit that partners with middle schools to extend the learning day in an effort to bridge the opportunity gap for low-income students.

In the article, "Widely Assumed but Thinly Tested: Do Employee Volunteers' Self-Reported Skill Improvements Reflect the Nature of Their Volunteering Experiences?" one-third to one-half of the employee volunteers reported skill improvements in each of 10 key areas including leadership, mentorship, motivating others, project management, providing feedback, public speaking, teamwork and time management. Participants who had more opportunities to use and practice a given skill while volunteering had significantly greater improvement in that skill. And, according to researchers, skill improvements were predicted by statistically significant interactions between the volunteers' self-efficacy and the number of preparation courses they completed.

"As it turns out people with more confidence in their ability to improve their skills gained even more from the pre-volunteer prep courses," says study author David A. Jones, professor in the Grossman School of Business at the University of Vermont. "That could be because people with high self-efficacy engage in goal setting and task planning during the prep courses. Then they use work-related skills to execute during their service experience while their less confident counterparts might be more nervous or apprehensive about trying new skills."

Programs must be meaningful, challenging and

supported

While Jones is confident that some of the employee volunteers in his study improved their work-related skills, he cautions that this won't necessarily occur through any corporate volunteering program. "Three important conditions were present in this volunteering experience through Citizen Schools—the volunteers were engaged in meaningful work, and they performed tasks outside their comfort zone in a socially supportive environment. Many other settings in which employees volunteer do not include all three, or even any, of these conditions. Some are largely limited to one-day events where employees pick up garbage or raise money for a cause they didn't chose to support."

Volunteers worked with students for 90 minutes each week on selected topics such as financial planning, mentoring or career opportunities often in STEM-related fields, which lead to student presentations of major projects at the end of the apprenticeship.

"Some of the volunteers are IT folks who code most of the day and are used to talking with like-minded people," says Jones. "All of a sudden they are teaching and mentoring middle school students in an after-hours program in what may be a challenged neighborhood – talk about being pushed beyond your comfort zone. But they know what they're doing matters, and if they have any trouble or fall down, one of the other volunteers or a staff member from Citizen Schools who is always present will pick them up. That's an atmosphere that fosters skill development."

Many study participants said the volunteer experience was more difficult than they anticipated, but that the results exceeded their expectations. "Getting up and talking to a group of middle schoolers is challenging in ways you wouldn't expect," said one participant. "You really have to be on your game and engaging – it's not just about what I'm teaching, it's how I'm teaching these students. My public speaking skills improve each

time I volunteer with Citizen Schools, and these skills I use daily at Google. It's made me a more effective communicator."

Clearly, this Googler believes there is value in volunteering, and Jones agrees. "While more research is needed to better understand how to best promote employee skill development through volunteering, it seems clear that corporate [volunteering](#) programs can lead to a win-win-win for employers, employees and the communities they serve."

More information: David A. Jones. Widely Assumed but Thinly Tested: Do Employee Volunteers' Self-Reported Skill Improvements Reflect the Nature of Their Volunteering Experiences?, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00495](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00495)

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