

# Volunteering encourages employees to connect with each other, and their jobs

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For years, researchers have known that our physical and mental well-being improves when we freely give our time to help others. And when we do so through company-sponsored programs, performance-related

outcomes like job satisfaction and commitment to work also get a boost.

But there has been little agreement among experts on why this should be the case.

Recently, however, Professors Jeffrey Pfeffer and Sara Singer of the Stanford Graduate School of Business analyzed [survey data](#) from hundreds of businesses in the United Kingdom to tease out the mechanisms through which volunteering improves both employee health and organizational outcomes. (The data was collected through Britain's Healthiest Workplace and includes more than 53,000 employee responses.)

Their research, which appears in the *Journal of Environmental and Occupational Medicine*, suggests that company-sponsored volunteering works its two-pronged magic by boosting social bonding among coworkers and creating a sense of identification between employees and employers.

The findings could help businesses figure out how to build better [volunteer](#) programs and encourage more employees to participate in them. And that would be good for everyone.

## **What prompted this study?**

Sara Singer: We came to this work because we were interested in what employers could do to enhance employee health and the ways in which that benefits employers themselves. We weren't interested in volunteering per se, but volunteering emerged as a promising vehicle for enhancing [employee](#) health with positive benefits to employers.

There had been a lot of work that demonstrated that volunteering has lots of positive benefits, but the question was why? We posited social

bonding with coworkers and identification with employers as two mediating factors.

## **Are you hoping to prompt more employers to sponsor volunteering programs?**

Singer: Employer-sponsored volunteer programs are pretty widespread; it's just that the uptake isn't very high. The challenge is really in creating programs that encourage people to participate. You've got to make opportunities for things that employees want to participate in because they provide meaning and purpose. You have to provide the flexibility that allows them the time to do it. Creating the conditions that allow employees to participate in company-sponsored volunteering programs is key.

What led you to believe that volunteering might improve employees' physical and [mental health](#) by increasing their sense of social connectedness?

Jeffrey Pfeffer: We know from a lot of other research—and we know from what's happened with COVID—that [social isolation](#) is harmful for mental and [physical health](#), and social connection is helpful for physical and mental health.

## **What does it mean for an employee to identify with their employer?**

Singer: The survey uses a scale that talks about feelings of belonging in the organization, recommending one's organization as a place to work, and sharing the values and goals of the organization.

## **Is volunteering the only means of achieving these**

## effects?

Singer: Volunteering is one way to do it, but you can create opportunities for social bonding through work teams. And there are other ways of building identification with businesses, like branding.

Employers shouldn't take away just that they have to have robust volunteer programs, although we hope that they do. They should also take away that they should work on efforts to build coworker ties through creating great teams and [social activities](#) for their employees.

## **But if they do create volunteering opportunities, they need to pay attention to these mechanisms, right?**

Singer: In order to achieve the benefits, they need to find ways of having volunteerism build coworker ties and identification with the company. Otherwise, it won't achieve its purpose.

Pfeffer: If Stanford lets Sara volunteer but that volunteering occurs with Sara doing it on her own, you will not get the advantages of social bonding.

If you want to get the advantages of social bonding, then you want to have volunteer programs where people volunteer as a group or as a team, as opposed to just saying, "Go off and spend some time working on Planned Parenthood," or whatever. That would not get you the same level of benefit as saying, "We are going to organize collective volunteer activities in which we are going to work together"—which of course is going to increase [social bonding](#) as opposed to doing it by yourself.

## **You also point out that the positive impact of volunteering depends on the degree to which**

## employers support it.

Singer: How your individual manager responds when you come back to the office and say that you volunteered can actually make a big difference. And there's a huge range of ways that employers can promote [volunteer work](#), from sponsoring and publicizing the activity to organizing the activity in a way that people feel like they are being encouraged to participate and engage in it.

You also suggest that volunteering might help overcome "digital disadvantage," whereby remote and hybrid workers suffer in terms of pay and career progression because they are less visible. That would seem to be especially important now that the pandemic has accelerated the shift to remote work.

Pfeffer: Absolutely. But again, it depends on how the volunteering opportunities are designed. If you design volunteering to be by Zoom, you're not going to have the same effect as if you design it to be in person.

**More information:** Jeffrey Pfeffer et al, Volunteering Improves Employee Health and Organizational Outcomes Through Bonding With Coworkers and Enhanced Identification With Employers, *Journal of Occupational & Environmental Medicine* (2022). [DOI: 10.1097/jom.0000000000002485](#)

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