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# How to create a good employee volunteering program, with lessons from Cisco and Salesforce

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Workplace wellness is a major topic for both corporate managers and employees these days, as workers struggle with [mental health](#), [burnout](#), and [disengagement](#). In an effort to combat these problems companies have invested in various benefits and [strategies](#) designed to improve wellbeing.

But it's unclear if those programs actually move the needle when it comes to employee contentment. Offerings like relaxation courses, career coaching, and time management classes have [no positive effect](#) on well being, according to one [study](#) published earlier this year.

But employee [volunteering](#) programs seem to be an exception to that rule—they show positive impacts on worker retention, wellbeing, and engagement, according to that same study. Volunteering is the only employee benefit that improves wellbeing by eliciting a sense of purpose, success, recovery, and social resourcefulness. And workers around the world who participated in workplace volunteering and purpose programs were 52% less likely to leave their companies, according to a 2022 [talent retention study](#) from [Benevity](#), a donation, volunteer, and grant management platform.

That might be why more and more [businesses](#) are beginning to view volunteering as a smart way to connect with their workers. About 94% of companies that currently have employee engagement programs—benefits that strengthen employee and company connection—offer volunteering, up from 87% from last year, according to Benevity’s 2024 [State of Corporate Volunteering report](#). And the companies that [do offer volunteering](#) programs have experienced robust program and participation growth. The number of active workplace volunteers jumped from nearly 900,000 in 2022 to around 1.4 million in 2023.

“Employee volunteerism does have all of these benefits, and companies are investing a lot of time and energy into developing high quality programs that facilitate one,” Saara Kaudeyr, corporate research manager of Chief Executives for Corporate Purpose (CECP), a business counsel and network that helps companies with their purpose initiatives, told *Fortune*.



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For companies looking to start or build up their employee volunteering initiatives, workplace experts and companies with successful programs like [Cisco](#) and [Salesforce](#) tell *Fortune* that there are a few key elements to consider, including ensuring accessibility, offering an array of options, and positioning leaders as philanthropic role models.

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“Anything that has a lot of intention, a lot of planning, and ideally, if you’re building any kind of volunteer program, make sure you’re centering it in the needs of the community that it is that you’re serving,” says Kaudeyr.

## Make the programs easy to access

When creating a volunteering program, it’s best for employers to think about what works best for their workers

Most people still do workplace volunteering in person, whether that’s at a food pantry, animal shelter, book drive, or a school. But virtual volunteering is also a key part of a robust program, according to Relina Bulchandani, executive vice president of [Salesforce](#), a cloud-based software company. She’s intimately involved in creating the company’s volunteering programs, which have a 75% employee participation rate.

“In a new world of working, it has to be easy, frictionless, and kind of intentional in nature,” she tells *Fortune*.

About 86% of companies with more than \$2 billion in revenue surveyed by CECP offered online volunteering opportunities for domestic employees in 2022, a 6% increase from 2021. Online volunteering can include offering to teach a class, assisting with writing and editing, or lending computer graphics expertise.

Experts say adjustable timing around volunteering opportunities for employees is also key, and companies should think about offering flexible scheduling for employees looking to give back, including time off, or opportunities to offer their professional skills pro bono.

Companies can also go above and beyond by inviting volunteering opportunities into the office building itself. Salesforce, which has a 75% participation rate in its volunteering program that serves around 70,000 workers, tells *Fortune* part of its success relies in large part on holding volunteering events in the office so that employees can give back without having to travel.

“We do a lot of our off-site on-site in our office spaces, as opposed to doing it in a third space,” says Bulchandani. Employees are “often coming in for other things, even though there’s a lot of



purpose driven coming in for volunteering as well.”

## Offer a variety of options

Companies should look to deepen the impact of their volunteering offerings by offering a wide array of options for workers. That can either be through a partnership with an established philanthropic organization, or giving employees the freedom to forge their own path.

Kelly Petrich is the director of global community impact at Cisco, a company of around 75,000 with a [volunteer participation rate](#) of around 85%. She told *Fortune* that while being flexible around volunteering time is part of their success, so is offering them “a lot of different ways that people can give back so that they can find the thing that maybe drives their own personal purpose.” Cisco’s volunteering [opportunities](#) include everything from urban farming, and library assistance to theater programming.

Recognizing volunteer acts of kindness is another way for companies to deepen social impact. These are employee-led acts untethered to a single organization—like bringing groceries to a neighbor in need, or picking up trash at the beach. This is especially popular with Gen Z and millennial workers, who are newer to the workforce and have less experience with traditional programs, according to Sona Khosla, chief impact officer of Benevity.

“Volunteer acts of kindness really act as this entry point,” she told *Fortune*. “And what I love about it too is it’s inclusive. You don’t need a lot of time, you don’t need to be going to some specific location to do it, like you can be doing it as a part of your daily life.”

## Rally leaders as volunteering role models

Business executives often lead by example, and they can be the catalyst when it comes to getting everyone else on the org chart to pitch in and volunteer.

Petrich believes Cisco’s focus on bosses as volunteering role models has encouraged company-wide participation and made their program a success.

“I think leaders at Cisco are incredible role models in serving the community, from our CEO all the way down,” she says. “Leaders are engaged, they’re volunteering, they’re talking about it, they’re sharing it with their teams, and then they’re doing it together,”

Khosla adds that championship is really important—having an executive who is passionate about philanthropy be the face of their local office’s volunteering culture drives employee

participation. Without that representation, workers may not be as inclined to invest their time and energy into a cause their higher-ups aren't enthusiastically supporting.

"Unless people see their managers really actively engaging and championing it, they may think 'This doesn't apply to me,'" she says.

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