

# Community & Corporate Perspectives on Corporate Volunteer Programs

A Win-Win Approach  
to Community Betterment

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ISBN# 1-55401-095-0

The Canadian Centre for Philanthropy's Knowledge Development Centre is funded through the Community Partnership Program of the Department of Canadian Heritage as part of the Canada Volunteerism Initiative. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Canadian Heritage.

The logo for Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a stylized serif font with a small crown above the letter 'a'.

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## Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy for its support of this research. We also wish to express our gratitude to all those in the community organizations and companies across the country who gave so generously of their time to share their thoughts about and experiences with corporate volunteer programs. We give special thanks to: Heather Gillis-Dunn, Public Affairs Associate at Ford, for her help in connecting us with community organizations that participated in the Ford corporate volunteer program; Adele Lafrance and Jenny Deslauriers for their assistance in conducting interviews and coding interview transcripts; Daryl Mason for his help in conducting interviews; Susan Alisat for her efficient and flawless work transcribing interviews; and Natasha Berkeley and Yan Gu for their assistance in report editing. Finally, we thank Elizabeth Ridley for her helpful and perceptive comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this report.

## Introduction

Results from the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating indicate that 27% of employed volunteers were given approval from their employers to modify their work hours so that they could volunteer in the community. One significant way in which employers support their employees' volunteer activities is through corporate volunteer programs (CVPs), such as the one operated by the Ford Motor Company of Canada. The Ford program allows salaried employees up to 16 hours per year on company time to volunteer with registered charitable organizations. Qualifying projects must involve teams of at least five employees. Volunteer activities must be completed during regular business hours and must encompass four-hour, one-day, or two-day off-site tasks or projects.

Interviews with employees who participated in the Ford CVP indicated that they received many benefits, such as increased energy for work and reduced stress levels (Pancer, Baetz & Rog, 2002.) But employees are only one of the key stakeholder groups in corporate volunteer programs. Therefore, in this research, we focused on two other

The purpose of this research was to examine corporate volunteer programs (CVPs) from the perspective of two of the key stakeholders — community organizations and corporations. We attempt to identify the potential benefits that community organizations and corporations can derive from participating in a CVP, and some of the key factors that can facilitate or inhibit the development of a successful CVP.

stakeholder groups that are crucial to the development of successful corporate volunteer programs — the community organizations that involve these volunteers, and the corporations that run CVPs. We conducted interviews with individuals from both of these stakeholder groups to try to identify the factors that facilitate or inhibit the successful implementation of a CVP.

# The Community Agency Perspective

## Methodology

We identified 21 community agencies from across Canada who had previously participated in Ford Motor Company of Canada's corporate volunteer program. These agencies were contacted by phone by one of our research assistants. In total, 14 agencies completed an interview, while three declined to participate (one agency was no longer in operation and staff in two other agencies had not previously worked with Ford employees). Four agencies failed to respond to our request or could not fit the interview into their schedule. Of the 14 completed interviews, the first three were conducted in person while the rest were completed over the phone. We interviewed the person from each agency who had worked most closely with the volunteers from Ford's CVP. In larger agencies, this was often the coordinator of volunteer resources, while in smaller agencies it was typically a program manager or staff person.

Interviews focused on the agency's experience with the Ford CVP, the benefits and challenges they associated with their participation in the program, and their perceptions of Ford's program and the company itself as a result of their participation. All interviews were recorded with participants' permission, and later transcribed. We conducted a qualitative analysis of the transcripts, which initially involved the development of a coding manual that outlined the major themes that arose (e.g., the benefits of participating in the CVP), along with descriptions and examples to ensure a clear distinction of themes from one another. These themes form the basis of this report.

## The Agencies Involved

Ford employees volunteered with a wide variety of community agencies. The 14 agencies that we interviewed provide a wide range of services, ranging from vocational rehabilitation for individuals with serious mental illness, to food banks, clothing exchanges and housing shelters, to caring for animals, working with the blind, and operating camps and other programs for underprivileged children. Much of the work that Ford employees did with these agencies involved general manual labour. They sorted food at food banks, walked animals from animal shelters, helped build homes for families needing shelter, did painting, building repair, landscaping and gardening at agency homes and camps, and helped with special events such as fundraisers and holiday celebrations for agency clients. Some of these activities involved interacting directly with agency clients; however, the nature of the CVP (i.e., the requirement to work in teams for half-day or longer work periods) made it difficult at times for Ford volunteers to undergo the training and screening required to work directly with clients.

## Benefits to Agencies

All of the individuals we interviewed reported very positive experiences with the Ford employees who volunteered at their facilities. Staff reported a wide variety of benefits from participating in the Ford CVP. The following are some of the key benefits that respondents described.

### **Access to skilled, motivated, reliable volunteers.**

Foremost among the benefits mentioned by respondents was that participating in the program gave them access to highly skilled, motivated, and reliable volunteers.

*“These are very qualified people who come from Ford — they have a lot of gifts to offer.”*

*“By using Ford volunteers we kind of know that we’re getting a reliable day’s worth of work and that’s certainly to our advantage.”*

### **Greater capacity to complete tasks.**

One benefit of having access to skilled, reliable volunteers was that agencies were able to accomplish things that might otherwise not have been done, or would have to have been assigned to paid staff.

*“We’re able to get work done that we would not otherwise schedule to do because it would just be virtually impossible for us to get to.”*

*“This impacts us financially because we’re not paying individuals either by contract or as staff to do these jobs, so it enables us to redirect the savings to our kids.”*

### **Better services for agency clients.**

CVP volunteers enhanced the agencies’ capacity to provide more and better services to their clients.

*“It’s definitely helped in terms of the amount of animal outings that have occurred [at an animal shelter].”*

*“Having people from Ford come out helps to ensure that the kids have a really positive experience, from the look of the grounds to the nature of the programs and the concept of the programs that we deliver to the kids when they come out here.”*

### **Bonds between corporate employees and the staff and clients of agencies.**

Agency staff and clients benefited from the bonds that often formed as a result of the involvement of corporate volunteers.

*“They [the corporate volunteers] really develop a relationship with our people. They remembered some*

*of our clients’ names, they’d walk in the door and [the clients would] be ready there waiting for them and anticipating their arrival.”*

### **Increased volunteer referrals.**

The relationship that employees formed with the agencies they volunteered with through Ford’s CVP sometimes resulted in an increased volunteer pool. Some employees returned to volunteer, often on their own initiative. Some also referred their family and friends who were looking for volunteer opportunities.

*“There’s been a couple of them who have come back and initiated volunteering on their own outside of the Ford program.”*

*“I’ve had parents coming to me afterwards to say my daughter is in high school, she needs to complete her 40 hours. That’s been a really neat way to be connected with the parent as well as the rest of the family in volunteering.”*

### **Increased service referrals.**

As corporate employees came to know the community agencies with which they volunteered, they sometimes acted as referral sources, directing family, friends, and neighbours to the appropriate agency’s services.

*“The corporate volunteers have even told people who they know are looking for a specific type of animal that we have that animal, and it’s generated adoption [from the animal shelter].”*

### **Increased level of donations to agencies.**

In addition to providing their labour, corporate employees sometimes made donations to the agencies they volunteered for as part of the CVP.

*“They are coming out of it with a good feeling, and some will leave us cheques at the end and say I want to donate to this drive.”*

### **Enhanced public awareness of agencies.**

Respondents talked about how their relationship with Ford helped increase awareness of their agency, not only among Ford employees who participated in the CVP, but also among the general public.

*“I think it [the CVP] helps them become more aware of us, what we’re doing, what it’s like for us in a nonprofit environment, and what a special atmosphere we provide for our clients.”*

*“It gives us status because Ford’s a big company, and if Ford is working with us, then volunteers and other people look at that and say wow, [the agency] must be important.”*

### **Model for other corporations to follow.**

A number of the agency personnel we interviewed talked about how the Ford CVP was a model that they hoped other corporations would follow. They sometimes spoke of the Ford CVP when attempting to attract volunteers from other companies.

*“It’s an excellent program, and one of the things I do a lot of is speaking engagements and presentations. We talk directly about Ford and how much we benefit from the program, so we try and impress upon other companies that this is a win-win situation. If you’re a corporation, this is good business — you should be doing this.”*

## **Challenges for Agencies**

Although almost all of the individuals we interviewed described positive experiences with the Ford CVP, several also mentioned challenges that they faced in implementing the CVP in their organization. These challenges included the following.

### **Need for specialized training.**

All volunteers need at least some instruction and training. For some volunteer positions, particularly

those that involve working directly with clients, extensive training may be required. The short-term nature of the volunteer placements provided by Ford’s CVP meant that there was only minimal time available for training, which sometimes restricted the kinds of activities that the Ford volunteers could perform.

*“I guess my main concern was finding something that they could step into and do that wouldn’t require a large amount of training and yet would be something that they felt good about doing, because a lot of our programs require a fair amount of training.”*

### **Short-term nature of volunteer placements.**

Participants in the Ford CVP typically volunteered one or two half-day or day-long intervals at a particular community agency. This posed some limits on the kinds of tasks they could be assigned.

*“The more time that I can get someone to commit to, the more all organizations and individuals involved benefit. When you’re trying to rush somebody in and out, they’re only seeing a piece. I think if they could repeat at least once, it would probably be more beneficial on a personal level to the volunteer, but also to the organization.”*

### **Sporadic nature of volunteer placements.**

Ford CVP volunteer placements also tended to be sporadic. A team of Ford employees would arrange a volunteer session, and would volunteer with an agency for a half-day or a day. That same team might never return to that agency again, or could be replaced by a different team. This sometimes made it challenging for agencies to plan volunteer activities for the teams from Ford.

*“From two to four, or four to five, or whatever the case may be, okay, that’s the Ford time slot, and if I know that people are coming from Ford who are interested in cat socialization, for example, I will be fitting into that time slot. When it’s sporadic, it’s much more difficult to program.”*



### **Difficulty providing meaningful volunteer experiences.**

Another challenge mentioned by agency personnel had to do with their desire to provide a quality experience to volunteers from the CVP. Even for agencies that were accustomed to coordinating large numbers of volunteers, this was sometimes difficult to accomplish.

*“There has to be some way of making it a valuable experience for the employees who are giving their time, for the employers who are allowing people to do this on their time, and also to maximize the benefit for the agencies. That’s the challenge. If you send twelve Ford Motor Company people out to an agency and the agency is not prepared to give them a meaningful experience and some work that is valuable, there’s twelve people that go back and say well, what is that about in the voluntary sector, here we were ready to do something and they don’t even need us.”*

### **Lack of information about employees’ skills and interests.**

The agencies that participated in Ford’s CVP often did not have much information concerning the skills of the individuals who would be joining them as

volunteers. This made it difficult to determine how to prepare the volunteers for the assignment, and to know what kinds of volunteer assignments to give them.

*“I don’t work directly with any of the employees until they arrive. I have no idea who’s coming. I don’t know whether it’s men, women, or what area of Ford they work for. All I know is that they’ve expressed an interest in this particular volunteer opportunity.”*

### **Coordinating volunteer placements from a distance.**

The main coordinator of Ford’s CVP was located in Ford’s Oakville, Ontario offices. At times, she was the one who would coordinate volunteer placements for Ford employees who worked in other communities. This sometimes posed difficulties in liaising with agencies that were far from her home community.

*“It’s hard to coordinate agencies from outside the community and get the schedule right. It’s a lot better for us to do that locally than it is for somebody in Oakville calling around to agencies and saying ‘please take these people.’”*

## Suggested Improvements

The agency interviewees offered a number of suggestions for improving CVPs. For the most part, their suggestions centred around ways to make better use of volunteers' skills and experience and make volunteer placements more predictable.

### Determine what skills corporate volunteers have to offer.

A few respondents suggested surveying potential corporate volunteers to ascertain what specialized skills they might be able to provide during their volunteer placements. This would allow agencies to make better use of their corporate volunteers, and to provide them with more interesting assignments.

*"Of course we don't know the extent of their resources, how many skills they can bring to us. We really do need to get a better idea of the skills and knowledge that the employees can bring forward to our organizations and what they have to offer."*

*"Why would we waste a table full of engineers by getting them to sort cans of beans? Why don't we have some team of engineers design a freezer ring for our warehouse? Or design a logistics plan?"*

### Host a "volunteer expo."

A "volunteer expo" in which various community agencies visited the corporation to describe the kinds of volunteer opportunities they had available would help ensure that employees had a clear expectation of what volunteering for a particular agency would entail.

*"I wonder if something like that would be a possibility, that once a year corporate volunteers would have the opportunity to meet with the various charitable groups."*

### Gather feedback from both employee volunteers and community agencies.

Gathering regular feedback from both employee volunteers and agency personnel that work with them would help ensure a positive experience for both the corporate volunteers and the agencies.

*"I certainly think getting feedback from them as to what they thought of the experience would probably improve the program because then I would know, well, they hated doing that, so I'm not going to have them do that, or they liked that aspect.."*

### Have volunteers commit to a specific number of hours at predictable times.

A number of respondents stated that their "dream" CVP would involve corporate volunteers who commit themselves to an established number of hours at regular, predictable intervals.

*"If we could schedule their involvement annually and know that it's on these dates then we could better organize ourselves and, likewise, they would be able to better organize themselves."*

### Plan volunteer events.

Another suggestion for improvement involved allocating more resources to the planning of volunteer events. This would allow for better use of specialized employee skills.

*"It would be helpful to have an opportunity to explain a little bit about how our organization works and where our greatest volunteer needs are, rather than coming at it from, you know, "can you use volunteers?" and me saying, "well, I think this would be the best place." If I sit down with these people, how might Ford, or any corporate volunteer fit into this organization?"*

# The Corporate Perspective

## Methodology

Our goal for the second part of this research project was to interview companies across Canada to determine how and to what degree corporations supported employee volunteerism, the resources necessary to develop and implement corporate volunteer programs, the benefits that were derived from supporting employee volunteering, and the challenges these companies faced in developing and implementing such programs. We were also interested in the reasons why some companies chose not to establish CVPs, and the factors they considered in making this choice.

We began by generating a list of 193 companies from a variety of sources, including:

- a database created by Ethicscan that included 80 companies, half of which were involved in volunteering and half which were not;
- the [www.volunteer.ca](http://www.volunteer.ca) Web site, which listed 12 companies that had a corporate volunteer program;
- the 2003 “Best 50 Corporate Citizens” and 2002 “Best 50 Corporate Citizens” lists from *Corporate Knights* magazine (2002, 2003);
- Canada’s “50 Best Managed Companies,” as listed by the *Financial Post* in 2002; and
- “The 50 Best Companies to Work for in Canada,” as listed by the *Globe and Mail* in 2003.

In total, individuals from 34 companies across Canada were interviewed between June 3 and August 1, 2003. Interviews were conducted by one of the research investigators or one of four trained research

assistants. Forty-two corporations declined to participate in the study. The remaining 117 companies that we contacted did not respond to our request to participate, had to cancel a scheduled interview and it was not possible to reschedule at a convenient time, or indicated interest but could not fit the interview into their schedule.

Companies interviewed represented a variety of business sectors, including financial services, utilities, insurance, and pharmaceutical. In the smaller companies, the interviewees tended to be the president of the company, while in larger organizations, they were typically managers or employees who were responsible for the company’s corporate philanthropy and/or volunteer program, often within a public relations or communications department. With the exception of the first couple of interviews, all interviews were conducted over the phone and typically lasted from 30 to 90 minutes.

## Corporate Volunteer Programs and Activities

Approximately half of the companies we interviewed had formal volunteer programs. The most common types of programs were ones that gave employees paid time off (up to a certain number of hours per year) to volunteer, or that gave grants or donations to agencies in which employees volunteered their time outside of work (these are often referred to as “dollars for doers” programs). Almost all the companies we interviewed, even those who claimed to have no formal volunteer program, supported the volunteer activities of their employees in some manner. For example, they:

- gave employees time off to work on special community events such as “Days of Caring” in

which employees would go out in teams to help a community agency for a day, or “fun-runs” to raise funds for community agencies;

- provided recognition, such as “volunteer of the year” awards to employees who did exemplary community work;
- maintained links with local volunteer centres, and informed employees about community volunteer opportunities;
- had employee committees that would organize employees’ volunteer events and activities;
- sponsored specific community agencies or programs and provided employees with resources to help those agencies; and,
- formed partnerships with local community organizations, such as schools or Junior Achievement (an entrepreneurship program for young people), and encouraged their employees to volunteer with those organizations.

## Benefits to Corporations

Companies that had corporate volunteer programs reported that they derived many benefits from the program. Several respondents described the CVP as a “win-win” situation that benefited everyone involved. The following are some of the key benefits that respondents mentioned.

### **Happier and more satisfied employees.**

Many respondents indicated that their company’s CVP had a profound impact on employees’ satisfaction with their jobs, and even their physical and emotional well-being.

*“Employees that contribute to improving the quality of life in the communities are generally happier people. They get involved and are generally happier and healthier people.”*

### **Increased opportunities for employee development and skill enhancement.**

Another benefit mentioned by a number of respondents concerned the opportunities that volunteering provided for employees to develop as individuals, and to acquire skills that might be useful both on and off the job.

*“It creates development opportunities for people, and it creates an enriched work environment through shared experience. Enhanced skill sets can’t help but translate back into the work function.”*

*“In terms of the company, I think it builds good corporate leaders. It’s a perfect way to develop your public speaking or your ability to work in teams or anything like that.”*

### **Enhanced company loyalty and retention.**

One of the most frequently mentioned benefits related to the CVP’s impact on employee loyalty and satisfaction. Several respondents felt that participating in CVPs made employees more loyal and committed to the company, and increased employee retention.

*“The CVP provides incredible retention opportunities from an HR perspective because your employees feel very empowered and supported and they feel like they’ve had the respect of their company, so it certainly retains great talents.”*

*“I think there’s great pride. I hear this all the time from employees, that they’re really proud to work for a company that supports the community and their efforts in the community.”*

### **A more positive work environment.**

A number of respondents noted that by supporting employees’ volunteer activities, corporations also seemed to produce more positive work environments.

*“It’s certainly enhancing and contributing to an extremely positive, satisfactory, happy work place. We*

know that some of the work we do helps people feel satisfied because they get to give back to the community, so it's definitely contributing to a great work place."

### **Higher levels of team spirit and cohesion among employees.**

Working together on volunteer projects can produce a feeling of cohesion and togetherness among employees, especially in those programs that required employees to volunteer in groups.

*"Real estate is a very competitive cut-throat business. Everybody wants to be number one in their office or their community or in Canada, and so this is one way we can build a lot of team spirit by pulling together on a common issue that they're all working towards. We use volunteering as a bit of a team-building effort."*

*"I think there's a benefit in them participating as a group. Part of it is for them to get to know each other out of the workplace and across departments or across parts of the business. We have used volunteering as a team-building activity."*

### **Increased productivity.**

Along with greater company loyalty, a more positive work environment, and greater cohesion among employees, volunteering can also lead to greater productivity.

*"One of the benefits is that we have a more fully engaged work force. They're going to feel good about themselves, and it has been proven that a happy employee is a more productive employee."*

### **Enhanced visibility and exposure for the company.**

The active and visible participation of employees can bring visibility and positive exposure to the company involved.

*"This program really is doing something that paid marketing and paid advertising would never do for us as a company."*

*"Employees out in the community doing good work — you can't ask for a better ambassador for your company."*

### **Improved relations with clients, enhanced customer loyalty, and increased sales.**

Several respondents suggested that their employees' community involvement through the company's CVP ultimately led to better relationships with clients and customers, greater customer loyalty, and even increased sales of their products and services.

*"There's a loyalty built, and once people see all the great things that you do in your community then ... when a [rival company] comes in [to the community], they say, 'we've been loyal to [company] for years, and why would we change?'"*

*"It is good business to be perceived as somebody who's very involved in the community. We have a lot of clients who are also established in this community and who are also involved with volunteerism, so, it's not only good PR, it's also good for the relationships with our clients."*

## **Challenges and Obstacles**

While those companies that had implemented CVPs reported many benefits of the program, they also faced several challenges and obstacles in implementing the program. Some of these challenges deterred other companies from establishing a CVP of their own, or caused them to delay the adoption of a CVP.

### **Limited amount of time available.**

Several respondents stated that the major obstacle in implementing a CVP in their company was the lack of time employees could devote to volunteering, given

their heavy workloads. Companies were reluctant to ask more of employees who already had a lot to do.

*“I’m not sure how many of our folks here have that much spare time and quite frankly, the time that they do have, I encourage them to spend with their families.”*

*“Time is always a big concern, because you try and juggle your work life, your family life, your sanity, and find time for yourself. So where do you find time to volunteer?”*

### **Limited staff resources.**

A number of companies, especially smaller companies with fewer staff, indicated that they did not have the staff resources to be able to spare people for volunteer assignments.

*“One of the challenges is resources. In our whole community investment portfolio for the company, there’s just two people and we’re an international company.”*

Coupled with limited time and staff resources was the pressure that many companies felt to get their work done in a competitive environment.

*“We’re a small firm, so to have people off or to have a whole bunch of people off at the same time is a challenge for us because we still have to run a business.”*

### **The costs of participating.**

Another obstacle mentioned by some respondents was the financial costs of implementing a program. Costs are incurred in allowing staff paid time off to volunteer, or in providing grants to agencies for which employees volunteer.

*“It’s a logistical nightmare to try to figure out how you give someone time off to volunteer and cover that shift or that time without it costing too much.”*

*“The issue for us in [implementing a CVP] is the affordability. If it costs me five thousand dollars, I might*

*be able to afford it; if it costs me fifty thousand dollars, that would be a big sum for us. To make a meaningful impact, to actually encourage them to get actively involved in the community, could be an onerous expense for us.”*

### **Poor economic conditions in some industries.**

Difficult economic and business conditions can compound the pressures to get work done and can limit a corporation’s ability to invest in a CVP.

*“About 70 percent of our workers are laid off right now, so I don’t think the time is right [to start a CVP]. Under other circumstances, I think there would be good support.”*

### **The nature of the company’s work.**

For some companies, the nature of the work that employees did made it difficult for them to make commitments to volunteering.

*“I guess our biggest challenge is the fact that 25% of our work force work is at temporary work sites. We have a lot of field staff and they are away from home for extended periods of time. So, that makes it difficult for them to regularly volunteer.”*

### **The company’s organizational structure.**

Some of the larger companies in our study had complex organizational structures, often with fairly autonomous branches or subsidiaries. This made it difficult to establish company-wide policies and programs with regard to volunteering.

*“This has traditionally been a very decentralized company where each business unit operated on their own. Being corporate office, we don’t want to appear to be pushing programs onto business units. We want them to be part of the program and part of the development of it. That takes time and involves developing relationships and making sure that everyone’s happy.”*

### **Union and collective agreement issues.**

Several of the companies we interviewed operated in a unionized, or partly unionized environment. To succeed in such workplaces, a CVP has to be jointly implemented with the union.

*“Probably 70 percent of our employees are unionized and collective agreements are in place. Any volunteer time, if it’s happening during regular work hours, is an issue.”*

### **Time to plan and administer the program.**

A number of respondents mentioned that the time required to administer and coordinate all the different aspects of a CVP was a challenge. Finding someone who would champion the program within the company was also a challenge for some companies.

*“Following through, making sure that the follow through is there, that the measurements are there, that the reporting is there, that they’re treating our people well, that they’re living up to what they said they would do, there’s an immense amount of time that it takes to follow up with that kind of thing.”*

*“I’m the person that’s heading it up. I have a team of volunteers that works with me, but very much on an ad hoc basis. If I wasn’t here, I would have concerns as to what would happen to the program.”*

### **Selling the program to employees and managers.**

A number of respondents discussed the challenge involved in justifying the program, and “selling” it to company employees and managers.

*“I would like to see more of our employees participating. We have a predominantly male work force that’s probably between 25 and 35 [years of age], and I think that demographic is not prone to volunteering. If you speak to anybody they’d say that that’s kind of a tough age group to get.”*

*“It’s a harder sell for middle management, because middle management want your employees to work. That will be the hardest group of people I think to convince that your employees can be out an hour a week or an hour a month to do volunteer work.”*

### **Informing employees about the program.**

Informing employees about your CVP program can be especially difficult in large companies that are spread out geographically.

*“Because we’re a company that is province-wide it’s more difficult for us to get our message out there. In head office we’ve got about 500 to 600 people and because we’re in one central location it’s easier. But the guys who are putting up wires and who are working in our power generating plants, it’s harder to get to them, and those are the people who make a difference in their community.”*

### **The need to give employees a say in volunteer activities.**

Some respondents saw the need to solicit employee input and ownership of the program, while at the same time moving the program forward as a company initiative, to be a major challenge in running a CVP.

*“Saying we want employees to get involved in this is not the same as the employees saying that they have an interest in getting involved in things.”*

### **Finding meaningful volunteer opportunities.**

The difficulty in motivating employees to participate in the CVP was seen as stemming, in part, from their discomfort with some tasks that they would be performing as volunteers. Finding interesting and meaningful volunteer opportunities is a key challenge.

*“It’s physically and mentally quite demanding. You’ve got to be able to face a section of humanity that you wouldn’t normally bump into, and some people don’t feel very comfortable with that.”*

*“You volunteer and you want it to be meaningful, but you get there and you stuff envelopes, and you go back the next week and you stuff more envelopes or you do some filing.”*

### **Adjusting to the culture and expectations of community agencies.**

Some respondents discussed the difficulties inherent in working with community agencies that had very different expectations and ways of operating than did the corporations that were supplying volunteers.

*“I feel sometimes like lack of adequate planning time is given — a kind of a “fly by the seat of their pants” relationship which works against what we’re all trying to achieve, rather than for it.”*

*“Making them understand and having them actually deliver on what we need them to do is a challenge. We have definite expectations of what we need from them.”*

### **Lack of good models, support, and information.**

Some respondents indicated that one of their major challenges was the lack of information, models to emulate, and support about CVPs.

*“It’s kind of difficult to get started [establishing a CVP] when you don’t have very many companies that you can map yourself after. You don’t know even who to contact or who to call to kind of get an idea of what they’re doing and what works.”*



## Suggested Improvements

Respondents offered several suggestions about how to deal with some of the challenges they described, and pointed to best practices that could be used to mount a successful corporate volunteer program.

### Get employees and senior managers to “buy in.”

Several respondents suggested that getting both employees and senior managers of the company to “buy in to” the program was a key factor in developing a successful CVP.

*“Get the buy-in to the concept of doing it from all the employees, not just from management or the owners. Because if you do that, you get a much bigger and more robust group that wants to do things.”*

*“First and foremost get the support from your senior leadership because, really and truly, they’re the ones people follow. Also get them actively engaged. Encourage them to demonstrate that support by coming and volunteering themselves.”*

### Find out what interests employees.

A number of respondents suggested that finding out what employees are interested in, either by surveys or more informally, will garner support for the program.

*“I think it would be good for a company that’s just starting out to find out what the employees really want and then target it from there because then they’d be much more apt to participate.”*

*“I think the biggest piece is some dialogue inside the company before you start to try and identify what kinds of initiatives employees want to support.”*

### Make it fun.

One way of getting the support of corporate volunteers is to make the process enjoyable.

*“We provide banners and t-shirts and sandwiches and pop on the bus and we sing as we walk and things like that.”*

### Involve employees in planning and managing the program.

Another way of bringing employees on board, according to some of our respondents, is to actively involve employees in planning and managing the CVP.

*“It’s probably a good idea to involve some employees. If a company has kind of a social club, or a United Way team, or an employee team that’s already in place, you could use them as kind of sounding boards or involve participants in developing the process.”*

### Have a local team manage the CVP.

Companies with branches or subsidiaries in different locations might consider implementing a team at each location to coordinate local CVP activities.

*“There needs to be a whole team in place to make it happen — a local team, so if you’re trying to do it in six different places, there needs to be six different teams.”*

### Get labour relations and union representatives involved in program development.

Companies with a unionized, or partly unionized, work force should involve labour relations and union representatives in the development of their CVP.

*“We’re a highly unionized work force and there are very significant issues around that, so you’ve got to make sure that you’ve got your labour relations people and your unions involved in the development of the program.”*

### Encourage participation in the CVP program without making it a requirement of employment.

Ensure that participation in the CVP is voluntary, rather than required. This will help garner support for the program.

*“Encouraging it [participation in the CVP] without requiring it, makes it easy for the employees to participate without it being an expectation of employment.”*

*“You can’t be seen or perceived as forcing employees to do this. Employees have to feel comfortable with it and not feel as if they’re being penalized if they don’t volunteer.”*

### Have a written policy that supports employee volunteerism.

A written policy about volunteerism will help ensure the sustainability of a CVP, according to some respondents.

*“That should be the first part of their employee volunteer program — to make sure there’s an actual written document that says all employees are entitled to, maybe one day a month, to volunteer.”*

### Provide good communication about the program to and from employees.

Active communication about program opportunities and accomplishments can increase the chances of success for a CVP.

*“It’s important to advise the employees here what their money and their time did, and what their volunteer efforts are going towards, and what we’ve already done — maybe something that I could pass out to staff or that we could put in our newsletter saying we sent fifteen kids to asthma summer day camp.”*

### Set aside a budget for the program.

Another suggestion offered with regard to building a successful program was to develop and stick to a budget for the program.

*“They’ve got to set monies aside to print application forms and put together a communications plan. To communicate electronically and in a print form costs. They’ve got to budget for that.”*

*“I think if they want to establish a volunteer program, they have to work within their resources and their budget ... Your volunteer program should be within the scope of the size of the organization and the business that you’re in.”*

### Get feedback.

Track program participation and activities so that you can understand employees’ interests.

*“Keep track of who’s doing what and possibly how many hours. Are they doing a lot of work with animals, or are they doing a lot of work on a poverty issue? This allows us to get a better sense of how to align our corporate community investment strategies.”*

**Start with something small, simple, and meaningful.**

Beginning with a program that is small, simple, and meaningful makes for a more successful program, according to interviewees.

*“I would say start small. Start with something meaningful that your employees are going to get behind.”*

*“Keep it simple. Don’t make it overly bureaucratic. It’s always easier to start small and build for success. It’s easier to grow than to try and pull back on something.”*

**Have the CVP managed by someone who understands the nonprofit sector.**

Some respondents suggested that a knowledge of the nonprofit sector was critical in the management of a company’s CVP.

*“One of my biggest recommendations is to make sure somebody who either knows or comes from or understands the nonprofit sector and its culture really well coordinates the program.”*

**Partner with a community organization.**

One way of ensuring good input from community organizations, and giving a focus to a company’s CVP, is to form a partnership with a specific community agency or program, rather than with a number of different organizations.

*“I think partnering with one organization that wants to build a program would be a good idea.”*

**Consult with community organizations to find out what they need.**

One way to ensure a good working relationship with nonprofit organizations is to consult with them about their needs and ask what kind of program would help meet those needs.

*“At one time there was a fashion for team-building through volunteering, but it wasn’t actually something that charities needed to be. So, make sure that whatever you’re doing meets a real need.”*

*“You have to identify the needs in the community first of all, find out which ones are in alignment with your mission and goals, and go from there.”*

## Conclusion

Our own earlier research on employee perceptions of corporate volunteer programs, along with this research on community agencies' and corporations' perceptions, shows that CVPs can provide significant benefits both to corporations and to the community. As one corporate respondent said:

*“I just think that we all can make a great contribution, and collectively it just improves morale for the organization. The company wins and employees win and the community benefits.”*

There was a considerable amount of convergence in what agency personnel and corporate respondents told us about the benefits of CVPs and the challenges and obstacles associated with them. However, almost everyone we interviewed was convinced that the benefits of CVPs far outweighed the costs and challenges of implementing them.

