

Employee volunteering (EV) has been widely promoted, even though little rigorous research has been carried out into its impact on stakeholders. This article examines EV in the light of the findings of an impact evaluation commissioned by Barclays Bank. It begins by noting how the recent increase in EV has been driven by pressure from consumers, government and the voluntary sector. The impacts of the Barclays EV programme are then analysed: the volunteers themselves derive personal satisfaction from their involvement, and their self-confidence is increased; the employer benefits from an improved image in the eyes of its employees, as well as from the development of the volunteers' leadership and teamworking skills; and voluntary organisations benefit from a new source of person power (although they say they would like to make more use of the volunteers' professional skills). The article also examines some of the challenges facing EV programmes.

Beyond banking: Lessons from an impact evaluation of employee volunteering at Barclays Bank

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One of the fastest-growing areas of voluntary activity in recent years, employee volunteering has been fêted by many within government, business and the voluntary sector. However, considerable scepticism persists in certain sections of the voluntary and community sector as well as within the middle management of even

those companies with the largest volunteering programmes.

This is partly due to the fact that, although a number of methods exist for benchmarking corporate community involvement (CCI) and a plethora of publications proclaim the business benefits of operating an

employee volunteering programme, there has been little rigorous research into the impacts of employee volunteering on all stakeholder groups, particularly the organisations who receive volunteers, and into the attitudes of staff towards volunteer schemes.

The research presented here aims to contribute to the debate around the benefits – and drawbacks – of employee volunteering. This article presents findings from an impact evaluation of employee volunteering commissioned by Barclays Bank and from a review of recent literature on the topic.

Methodology

The research was carried out between May and July 2004 and consisted of four quantitative questionnaires and three qualitative case studies. The questionnaires were distributed to different Barclays stakeholder groups: 2000 employee volunteers, 800 managers, 800 staff not volunteering through Barclays and 500 organisations that had received volunteers from Barclays. In total, 1106 completed returns were received, giving an average response rate across all four questionnaires of 28 per cent.

The case studies were designed to add depth to the survey data and were conducted in three parts of England.

Each study comprised a focus group interview with employee volunteers and a focus group of managerial staff. The employees were drawn from different parts of the business and different grades of staff. In addition, twelve one-to-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of organisations that had involved Barclays volunteers.

Employee volunteering – what is it?

The term ‘employee volunteering’ refers to employees volunteering in their communities supported in some way by their employer. The types of support offered vary considerably, but may include: giving staff time off work to volunteer; acting as a broker to find volunteering opportunities for staff; organising team volunteering events; or seconding a member of staff to a voluntary organisation. Time off work policies also vary: they may include informally allowing staff to leave early to volunteer, operating a flexi-time policy for volunteering, or granting a certain number of hours or days per year for volunteering (which may or may not be matched by the volunteer’s own time). Barclays, for example, offers a minimum of two days for volunteering per year.

Employee volunteering schemes are not confined to the private sector – a number of voluntary

sector organisations organise team-building volunteering days as well as offering their staff time off for their own personal volunteering. Volunteering England, for instance, has a six days per year matched time policy. The public sector has followed suit, particularly in large central government departments.

Growth in employee volunteering

There has been sustained growth in employee volunteering in the UK over the past decade. In 1997 three per cent of respondents to the National Survey of Volunteering had volunteered as a result of their employer's encouragement (Davis Smith, 1998). The 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey (HOCS) indicated that in the previous 12 months 18 per cent of employees (excluding self-employed people) had worked for employers that supported schemes for volunteering, and seven per cent of employees had volunteered through these schemes (Attwood et al, 2003). This suggests there has been a four per cent increase in employees getting involved in volunteering with the support of their employees.¹ Business in the Community (BiTC) found that three quarters (74) of the FTSE 100 companies operate some form of employee volunteering programme (BiTC, 2002).

Reasons for growth

This growth in employee volunteering is part of a move away from a traditional philanthropic model of corporate giving (predominant in the 1980s and before) and towards a partnership model. Austin proposes a three-stage continuum to describe the changing relationship between business and the community (Austin, 2000; see also Meijs and Van der Voort, 2004). Arguing that the twenty-first century will be the 'age of alliances', Austin suggests that collaborations between business and non-profit organisations pass through a series of stages:

- *Philanthropic* – a stage characterised by donor and recipient relations, where financial donations from a company to a non-profit may be significant but not critical to either partner.
- *Transactional* – a market relationship where the partners agree on a mutually beneficial exchange, such as a cause-related marketing campaign or an employee volunteering programme.
- *Integrative* – where the partners integrate missions, people and activities on joint ventures that are central to both organisations.

This growth in the importance of cross-sector collaborations and the accompanying increase in employee volunteering are fuelled by macro-

level political, social and economic changes as well as by changes in consumer behaviour. With the decline in the importance of the public sector as a direct deliverer of services, the voluntary sector and increasingly the private sector are being urged by government to assume a greater role in solving society's problems (Austin, 2000). In recent years government rhetoric has explicitly linked the rights of businesses with their responsibilities as active corporate citizens. In 2003, for example, David Blunkett, speaking to the CBI said:

Corporate and individual responsibility go alongside government responsibility (HM Treasury, 2003).

The Prime Minister's corporate challenge, issued by Tony Blair in 2003, aims to increase corporate support for employee volunteering, corporate support for, and promotion of, Payroll Giving schemes, and corporate charitable activity (HM Treasury, 2003).

There is growing pressure from consumers, government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for companies to demonstrate corporate social responsibility. Indeed, increasing awareness among consumers of companies' social and environmental reputations can influence their purchasing choices, giving business an incentive to

generate positive publicity through community involvement. Of course, there are many aspects to responsible business practice, but assisting employees to volunteer in their local communities is a visible action that can deliver real benefits for all parties.

Although the buzzword 'partnerships' is often used in publicity for employee volunteering, few relationships between large firms and the voluntary and community sector can in fact be described in this way. The relationships between Barclays and its non-profit partners at a local level can be characterised as philanthropic or transactional. Most UK (and even US) firms have not yet reached the integrative stage, which Austin calls the 'collaboration frontier' (Austin, 2000). Indeed, there are a number of problems associated with closely aligning company strategy with the needs of a voluntary organisation; these will be discussed below.

Employee volunteering at Barclays: getting involved and staying involved

Barclays has seen a growth in employee volunteering over the past three years that outstrips the more gradual increase over the UK as a whole. The number of people involved more than doubled between 2001 and 2003, rising to 12,270 UK staff in 2003. One of Barclays biggest successes has been in engaging

people new to volunteering: one in five (21 per cent) employee volunteers had never volunteered before and just under half (47 per cent) were not regularly taking part in volunteering.

The Home Office Citizenship Survey (Attwood et al, 2001) found that people's participation in schemes for volunteering and giving was strongly associated with participation in other voluntary and community activities. Although the direction of this relationship is hard to establish, the research on Barclays found that, for a third of volunteers (34 per cent) participation in employee volunteering leads to them taking up community activities outside work time. This desire to become more involved in their communities rises with the frequency of staff participation in volunteering: more than half (52 per cent) of those who had volunteered more than four times with Barclays had become more involved, compared to fewer than a quarter (23 per cent) of those who had volunteered only once.

Although research among non-volunteers at Barclays found that some schemes were better known than others, the findings indicate that the energetic promotion of employee volunteering schemes has had remarkable success in engaging staff members and in encouraging them to remain involved.

Impacts on volunteers

Barclays staff derived much personal satisfaction from being able to take part in employee volunteering.

Volunteers noted an increase in self-esteem and confidence that came from having a chance to use their skills for the direct benefit of other people and on useful projects rather than 'on just making money for the bank', as one volunteer put it. As a result of volunteering, 68 per cent said they were more aware of the problems facing people in the community, while 67 per cent felt their understanding of social issues had increased.

Volunteers also benefited from being able to exercise their existing work skills and develop new ones: 52 per cent reported improved communication skills and a similar percentage had increased their leadership abilities. The impacts were the greater the more often an employee volunteered. For example, more than half (56 per cent) of those who had volunteered four times or more reported that their decision-making skills had increased, compared with 37 per cent of those who had volunteered only once or twice.

To corroborate the volunteers' responses, we asked managers how they felt their employees' skills had developed after volunteering.

Managers saw the greatest impacts in terms of increased communication and leadership skills: 61 per cent reported that staff communication skills had improved, while 56 per cent felt that staff leadership skills had. A number of managers cited examples of relatively inexperienced members of staff taking on leadership roles for community projects and being able to build on this success back in the workplace.

Impacts on the bank

Recent research has suggested that knowledge of, and involvement in, community schemes can increase an employee's willingness to speak highly of their employer (MORI for The Corporate Citizenship Company, 2003). Moreover, 88 per cent of British employees believe it is important that the organisation they work for should be committed to living its values – even though only 45 per cent believe their own employer does (Business in the Community, 2003). The Barclays research found that involvement in the community programmes has a positive impact on an employee's perception of Barclays.

Volunteers were more likely than non-volunteers to recommend Barclays as an employer (67 per cent of volunteers compared to 58 per cent of non-volunteers). This pride in Barclays increased with the

frequency of employees' involvement in volunteering: 78 per cent of staff who had volunteered four times or more said that they talked to family and friends about Barclays' support for the community, compared to only 64 per cent of those who had volunteered only once. It is difficult to determine causation, however, and it may be that regular volunteers are more positive in general about their work at Barclays. Still, these findings do suggest that participating in the community programme makes volunteers view their work at Barclays in a more positive way.

Participation in employee volunteering is a good way for employees to get to know their colleagues, thus strengthening teamworking and building links across teams. Fifty-eight per cent of managers felt that their staff worked together better after volunteering. Sixty-eight per cent of volunteers felt that their understanding of colleagues had increased as a result of employee volunteering, while 61 per cent reported that their teamworking abilities had. As one volunteer described it:

A good team-bonding exercise, especially for newer members of the team. It assisted greatly with communication within the team.

Moreover, nearly half (49 per cent) of

managers saw employee volunteering as 'very effective as a team building exercise', while a further 39 per cent rated it as 'quite effective'.

Impacts on the community

To be successful, an employee volunteering programme should generate benefits not only for the company providing the volunteers and the organisation that receives them, but also for society at large. But although employee volunteering is often described as a 'win-win' situation for both business and the community, this is often more of an assumption than a statement grounded in research findings.

The overwhelming majority of organisations responding to the survey were pleased with the volunteering projects that involved Barclays staff. Organisations valued the enthusiasm and hard work of the Barclays staff and their role in making projects or activities financially possible. On the whole, those receiving volunteers for team challenges appreciated having a large number of extra volunteers to complete projects or to do work that would otherwise not be done. One third (33 per cent) 'agreed strongly' that receiving volunteers from Barclays was important to their organisation (and a further 41 per cent 'agreed' with this statement). In order to explore further the

organisations' interest in working with Barclays, we asked whether receiving funding from Barclays was more important than receiving volunteers. Only 27 per cent of organisations agreed that it was, while just under a quarter (24 per cent) strongly disagreed.

Barclays staff potentially have a lot to offer in terms of their specific skills in business, finance, IT and marketing. However, 80 per cent of the volunteer work done for community organisations consists of painting, decorating and building. Receiving these volunteers from Barclays was important to the organisations, but many reported difficulties in sustaining the relationship with the volunteers.

Organisations identified a number of ways in which a partnership with a large financial institution such as Barclays might help them, perhaps implying a wish on the part of some organisations to move towards a more integrative partnership model. For example, schools and organisations working with young people saw opportunities for mentoring, work experience or workplace visits. Other charities wanted to use the expertise of Barclays staff in specific areas such as helping with accounts, setting up IT systems etc. This finding is echoed in research commissioned by CAF, which found that 71 per cent of

community leaders thought that one of the most important ways in which companies can contribute is through sharing professional skills (CAF, 2004).

Challenges facing employee volunteering

Using the research presented here, we attempt to shed more light on some of the challenges facing employee volunteering in the UK and elsewhere.

Top down versus bottom up

How much freedom to give employees in choosing their volunteering is a crucial question facing many businesses, particularly those setting up new programmes. Meijs and Van der Voort describe this choice between employee-led and employer-led corporate volunteering as a 'fundamental one since it affects the achievement of societal goals, private goals of employees and business goals of companies' (Meijs and Van der Voort, 2004).

Some commentators urge companies to gain competitive advantage by aligning corporate philanthropy with company strategy. As Mark Kramer (2004) argues:

The more tightly corporate philanthropy is linked to the strategy and expertise of the core business, the more effective it will be in creating both social and corporate value.

However, doing this may reduce employees' commitment to volunteering and thereby reduce the beneficial impacts on teamwork and skills development. One of the themes to emerge strongly in this research was the importance Barclays volunteers placed on being able to choose their own causes to support and organisations to volunteer with. This sense of ownership was important to volunteers, who spoke of their pride in being able to lever the financial and human resources of Barclays to help a charity, school or organisation they cared deeply about. Others said that their choice of volunteering was linked to wanting to support a colleague's chosen cause. One volunteer interviewed described her reaction to a management decision on volunteering thus:

[My manager] said we would be taking part in this community event and we would raise money for – and he even told us the charity, he actually told us! That was an absolute nightmare . . . I hated every minute of it.

This may well be a lesson for companies whose commitment to employee volunteering extends no further than a top-down choice of 'charity of the year'.

Of course, companies do need to have some strategically focused giving,

and a pyramid-shaped model of CCI may reflect the current best practice of many companies – with a broad base of more or less uncoordinated employee activities, including team challenges, fundraising and sponsored events, and an upper section of strategic ‘partnership’ working with (most likely) national or even international organisations.

Challenging definitions of volunteering

Employee volunteering presents a challenge to traditional definitions of volunteering, in a number of respects. Firstly, if companies are giving staff paid time off work to volunteer, then this compromises one of the fundamentals of volunteering, that it should be unpaid. Secondly, if we assume that volunteering should be freely chosen, then corporate team challenges that require, or strongly encourage, staff to volunteer may be seen as challenging the free will aspect of volunteering – especially if such challenges take place in an employee’s own time. This situation is referred to by Meijs and Van der Voort (2004) as ‘a real nightmare’, echoing the Barclays staff member above.

The inclusion of volunteering in the personal development plans (PDP) of employees also emerged as a contentious issue in the Barclays research. Staff were divided on the benefits of mentioning

volunteering: some felt that it signalled management support for their activities, while others argued that volunteering should remain an essentially private, personal affair, unregulated by the company. As one volunteer put it:

If your line manager came and asked you to do it, is that really volunteering?

There are, however, a number of reasons why inclusion in a PDP might be appropriate. Not only does it show the strategic importance of volunteering to the company, but also allows the skills and experience gained from volunteering – often in company time – to be recognised alongside other aspects of personal development. Indeed, a number of firms are now moving towards assessing skills gained through volunteering in the same way as those developed on more traditional training programmes. Furthermore, some companies now offer their employee volunteers the chance to have their volunteering externally accredited (see, for example, BiTC, 2004). This may be part of a pragmatic acceptance of a company’s responsibility to develop employees’ skills in ways that cater for different ways of learning.

Access

Giving all staff equal access to

employee volunteering is one of the biggest challenges facing companies, particularly those with a network of small branches or stores. At present, UK employees who have the highest levels of education, are from the upper socio-economic groups and have a larger household income are more likely than others to have access to employee volunteering schemes. Furthermore, access to schemes varies according to a company's fields of operation. For example, in 2001 31 per cent of employees who work in the field of finance had access to schemes, compared to 13 per cent in wholesale and retail and 16 per cent in manufacturing (Hardy, 2004).

Our research found that not all Barclays staff have the same opportunity to become involved in employee volunteering as others; in particular, those working in the network of branches had fewer opportunities. Also, part-timers and contract staff were sometimes excluded. This was partly because information about opportunities did not reach all staff and partly because of business needs and the small number of staff in some branches.

Barclays managers reported that pressures to meet targets and maintain levels of customer service restricted the opportunities they could give staff to volunteer out of the office. More than half (56 per cent) of

managers agreed that having staff out of the office volunteering could be disruptive. As one team leader said:

I'm passionate about [employee volunteering], but I know that in recent months I've actually had to say no to people who asked to have a day out.

Managers themselves, because they are in control of their own diaries, were better able to take up employee volunteering opportunities in work time. Confirming this, the Home Office Citizenship Survey found that employees in higher management occupations were the most likely to have access to schemes for volunteering and those in routine occupations the least likely (Hardy, 2004). This suggests that the growth in employee volunteering is failing to benefit people in the harder-to-reach groups the government wishes to engage with volunteering.

At Barclays, however, some innovative solutions to these challenges had been found: for example, one desk-bound team had spent odd minutes stuffing envelopes for a local charity, and a local branch had participated in a sponsored cycle ride by having a fixed exercise bike in the branch. Other teams had volunteered together at weekends, but this was generally less popular. In general, more needs to be done

to improve access to employee volunteering for all grades of staff.

Increasing the numbers involved

The research suggested that, although employee volunteering is growing at Barclays, there is still considerable room for expansion. This could be achieved if some of the barriers to involvement were removed. Our survey of staff that had not volunteered with the support of Barclays found that only 9 per cent declared that they definitely did not want to get involved. Forty-two per cent had never thought about volunteering, while 46 per cent of non-volunteers had given it some thought.

Thus there is potentially a large group of interested employees who could be engaged by providing them with a better flow of information about the community programme and time-off policies. When asked, non-volunteers said they wanted paid time off to volunteer, more flexible shift arrangements that would enable them to get involved, and more support from team leaders and managerial staff. A third (33 per cent) of managers also said that they would welcome more information about volunteering and more support, suggesting that it may be a lack of knowledge about the schemes available or the potential benefits for staff that makes some managers

unwilling or unable to give their full support.

Successful relationships with community partners

To establish partnership working between businesses and the community that genuinely adds value to society, the relationships need to be sustainable and continuing. Austin identifies a 'commitment to the partnership' as one of seven essential aspects of strategic collaboration, in which partners need to have a long-term perspective and be prepared to 'ratchet up their personal, institution and resource commitments' over time (Austin, 2000).

In practice, however, many of the relationships currently created as part of the Barclays employee volunteering programme are transitory in nature. Volunteers have a great deal of freedom in their choice of fundraising or volunteering activity, and volunteers from just one branch or one office may work with a large number of different organisations. This flexibility may meet the needs of the volunteers, but can result in a mismatch between the level of commitment volunteers are prepared to offer and that which the organisation would like. Indeed, although 94 per cent of the organisations surveyed said that they would like to develop their relationship with Barclays, it is

probable that for a high proportion of them this wish will be unfulfilled.

The research points to the importance for companies of managing relationships with the organisations that involve their employee volunteers. Communication was identified both by volunteers and by representatives of the community organisations as crucial to the success of an individual volunteering project; both sides need to agree on exactly what work will be done, how long it will take, how much money will be spent etc. However, communication after the project is completed was also important, and organisations expressed some dissatisfaction when contact was not maintained. Having made contact with Barclays, organisations wanted to see both the Community Teams and the individual volunteers continue to take an interest in their work.

Companies with a network of regional community teams, like Barclays, are arguably better placed to manage the relationships with their community partners than firms without such a system. However, the difficulties that Barclays continue to face suggest that this is a problem area likely to increase in prominence as employee volunteering continues to grow.

Conclusions

Striking a balance between the desire

of employee volunteers for variety and choice in volunteering and the desire of community organisations for greater sustainability in relations with the corporate sector is crucial to the development of employee volunteering. Moreover, we need to be clear about whether employers are supporting their staff to volunteer primarily as part of a commitment to improving morale and job satisfaction and developing flexible working or as part of a strategy for the personal development of staff which needs to be evaluated in line with development through formal training or vocational competencies. The research suggests that companies need to make clear the motivations and procedures behind their employee volunteering programmes in order to maximise the benefits for the company, the volunteers and the community and to generate the greatest social value.

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Notes

1 Although the 1997 National Survey asked both current and former employees, the HOCS asked only those currently in employment.