Submittable

How to Measure the Impact of Employee Volunteering

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Balancing expectation with reality

Working in corporate social responsibility can feel like standing between two worlds—one foot in the corporate sphere and one foot in the philanthropic.

To be successful, CSR professionals must get accustomed to balancing these two often opposing sensibilities. Nothing challenges that balance more than impact measurement. It's here that program leaders often find themselves wedged between the expectations of corporate leaders and the realities of social impact work.

Where corporate frameworks are built around quarterly returns on investment and prioritization of the bottom line, social impact tends to focus on long-term transformation and relationship building. It can feel difficult to figure out where and how they intersect.

The good news is that CSR professionals are in the position to choose the best from both worlds. Impact measurement should leverage the corporate sector's drive to quantify impact while embracing an understanding of the complexity and nuance of social impact work.

When it comes to **employee volunteering**, it's essential to get a full picture of the **impact the programs have on your employees**, your brand, and the community. Without that, you'll struggle to articulate the value of your program, get employees involved, secure budget, identify effective solutions, and evolve for the future.

To get that clear picture, you need to define the effects you want to have and find ways to gauge whether you're achieving those goals. It takes work. And it requires you to reach beyond the straightforward participation metrics many people get hung up on. Those numbers are important, but there's a whole lot more to the story.

Program health vs. program impact: An important distinction

The health of a volunteer program and its impact are not the same thing. The health of a volunteer program is a measure of whether the right structures are in place to support change, while the impact of your program is the real-world change that's actually created. They are connected, but one doesn't equal the other. It's important to monitor both.

The health of a program is the stability and efficacy of your volunteer program. In essence, do people know about your program? Are they **showing up to volunteer**? Does your program have the technical, structural, and human support to run effectively? Your goal is for your volunteer program to be **self-sustaining**.

The impact of your program is the effect your program has on employees, community members, and your company. It's how your program is making a difference in the world. This goes beyond whether your program is running well and gets at the meaningful outcomes born out of this work.

To get a clear understanding of how your program is creating real-world impact, track both its health and its impact. Tracking both allows you to see how the conditions you create within your program connect to positive outcomes for your company and the community.

Track the health of your program

Monitoring the health of your program is the foundation of effective impact measurement. It provides clarity about what keeps your program alive and running. Without that, it's impossible to dig into the more complex questions around impact.

Tracking your program's health is an ongoing process. Consistency is key. You need to continually engage with employees to get their feedback about what's working and what isn't.

To keep you finger on the pulse, use these questions to guide you:

- **Do all employees know about volunteer opportunities?** If people don't know about your program, they can't get involved. Better, clearer communication can help. Use channels that employees normally use to communicate and encourage managers to share information about volunteering during their regular team meetings.

- **Does the program align with employee values?** If employees don't care about the volunteer causes, they likely won't be inspired to participate. To find out what issues employees care most about, ask. Consider sending out a survey or questionnaire.

- **Does the program align with company values?** If the program is at odds with company values, it can undercut the mission. Clarify company values and use them to lay the foundation for your program.

- **Does the program tap into existing relationships and habits?** Leveraging established connections and workflows can help strengthen the program and avoid duplicate work. Identify your operational strengths as a company and look to lean on them in your volunteering program.

- **Are employees showing up to participate?** It's hard to make much of an impact if people aren't showing up to volunteer. Find ways to motivate people to get involved. Do what you can to help new volunteers take the first step.

- **Are people returning after they've participated once?** If employees are volunteering once and then not returning, something about the experience isn't resonating with them. Seek feedback from volunteers to see if they would do it again and why or why not.

- **How do people feel about the program—both before and after?** Getting a sense of how people perceive the program tells you if expectations are matching reality and might dictate whether they want to participate. Check in with employees to shed light on what they think of the effort and if they have suggestions for **making the experience more meaningful**.

- **Who is participating—specific teams or levels?** You want everyone across the company to feel invited into the volunteering program. If only certain teams or employees at a certain level are participating, that indicates more effort is needed to include everyone. Make sure managers allow employees to take time to volunteer. Also, ensure you're providing opportunities for a wide range of abilities.

Define the impact you want to have

To measure your program's impact, think about it across four categories: employees, company, community, and nonprofits. Within each of these categories, you need clear goals about what you want to achieve.

Impact on employees

Volunteering can have a profound effect on employees both personally and professionally. On a basic human level, it feels good to give back. People actually have a positive **biological response** to volunteering. And this "helper's high" is not fleeting. In fact it can alter how people feel about themselves over the long term. One **Harvard report** found that "higher levels of volunteer work were associated with higher levels of overall life satisfaction."

Not only does volunteering make employees feel more fulfilled, it gives them a venue to develop skills and strengthen connections. It's a safe space to take on new challenges and try on leadership roles. **One study** found that 40–45% of the employee volunteers reported improvement in leadership, mentorship, motivating others, project management, and public speaking and presenting. Plus, volunteering can improve cross-team communication, as employees who don't often work together get the chance to collaborate.

Impact on the company

A volunteer program is an important component in building a strong brand and company culture. As part of a broader **CSR strategy**, volunteering helps your company become a trusted brand both for customers and potential employees. People want to support businesses that see themselves as active members of the community. In fact, a **recent report** found that 77% of consumers support brands who share their values.

Internally, volunteering helps you build a company culture that centers empathy and accountability. You're showing employees that you're willing to invest in making the world a better place. This commitment will help you recruit and retain employees. In fact, employees who volunteer are **32% less likely to churn**.

Impact on the community

The whole point of volunteer work is to dedicate one of your company's best resources—your people—to help solve problems within the community. The hours your team puts into volunteering can directly improve the lives of community members.

There's a huge range of possibilities here, depending on where you focus your efforts. Direct service work—whether it's cooking meals, providing mentorship, improving a public space, or something else—increases access to services and improves quality of life for real people. Plus, as employees get involved, some will naturally become advocates who use their voices to raise awareness about community needs.

Impact on nonprofits

Lending the power of your team to a nonprofit increases their organization's capacity and improves their ability to be more effective over the long term. Volunteers can take on the day-to-day duties that pull the nonprofit staff away from deeper, more strategic work.

A projection from United Way estimated that if each company with the largest revenue headquartered in (or with a major office in) each state implemented one day of volunteer time off, it would add 75 million volunteer hours—that's 9 million days—to the nonprofit capacity. That capacity not only saves nonprofits money in payroll, but gives their employees the bandwidth to do things like take educational courses, build relationships with community partners, and form coalitions with other nonprofits. Plus, a partnership with your company can give the nonprofit more exposure and name recognition within the local community.

75 million
VOLUNTEER HOURS ADDED

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Democratize for a deeper impact

You don't want to chase too many goals at one time. Decide what matters most to your team. And then be deliberate about investing in the structures that support your priorities.

Start by **democratizing your volunteer program**. Rather than seeing the program as a top-down initiative, look to empower employees to lead the way. Give them the power to choose how and when they participate.

Some of your employees likely already volunteer on their own time. Rather than asking them to pivot away from that work, you can empower them to deepen that commitment. Choose a **suite of CSR software** that lets employees create volunteer opportunities themselves. This approach lets you leverage existing relationships employees have with nonprofits. Plus, it means your employees become natural champions of the volunteer program. They can drum up interest and directly invite colleagues, relieving some pressure off the program managers.

Steps to measure the impact of your volunteer program

Measuring the impact of your volunteer program is important in terms of understanding its value. Start by incorporating plans for measurement from the beginning. Clarify what you hope to achieve and then tie your measurement strategy directly to those goals.

1. Use resources and data that already exists

No matter what impact you're aiming for, odds are you don't have to start from scratch. You can rely on the reporting structures that already exist within your company such as employee and customer surveys, retention metrics, net promoter scores, and other HR resources. These will give you a starting point to understand how your program affects employees, company culture, and the brand as a whole.

The internal resources are important, but they don't tell the whole story. Also look for impact reports from the nonprofit organizations you partner with to understand the outcomes your program supports. Beyond that, community indicators and public data provide some important context and insights into broader trends in the community.

Starting with what already exists saves you from duplicating work. It gives you some historical data points to compare against as your program grows and evolves. And it gives you a useful framework to collect additional data you need.

2. Ask people directly

People are at the center of volunteer work. Getting their direct feedback provides essential insight into how your program moves the needle on the individual level. Plus it sheds light on how those individual experiences connect to broader trends you use to track engagement and impact.

Here are the people you should make an effort to connect with.

Employees

Ask employees how volunteering impacts their outlook and experiences. Check in with them about how they feel about the program as a whole as well as their individual experiences participating.

Tips:
- Piggyback on existing employee surveys rather than creating a new one.
- Do quick pulse checks before and after volunteering.
- Ask everyone what they think of the volunteer program, not just employees who participate.

Nonprofit staff

Make an effort to connect with staff members of the nonprofit to learn how having volunteer support has helped them fulfill their mission. They can also share how they see your program making a difference in the community.

Tips:
- Prioritize formal check-ins as well as informal conversations.
- Ask what the nonprofit staff does with the time saved.
- Have a designated point of contact at your company so nonprofit staff members know who to reach out to.

Community members

Reach out to community members to get their perspective on how the work your volunteers do impacts their life. Depending on your program structure, you might need to lean on the nonprofit to facilitate this communication.

Tips:
- Make it easy for community members to give feedback when it's convenient for them.
- Give people space to share their full experiences as they want to.
- Ask how your company can do more to help.

Opening up these lines of communication allows you to gauge your impact, plus it gives you important feedback to help shape the future of your program. Employees, nonprofit staff, and community members can illuminate the things your program does well, and where you can improve as you evolve.

3. Use a control group

To understand the true impact of your volunteer program, it helps if you have something to compare against. Of course, you don't want to exclude people from volunteering just to create a control group. Luckily, a control group likely naturally exists.

Odds are, not all of your employees will participate in volunteering. Comparing retention and engagement metrics between those who get involved and those who don't can give you a sense of how your volunteer program influences these outcomes. Make sure when you set up your employee surveys, you structure them so that you can parse the data to compare these two groups.

If you're just starting a program or have access to historical data, you can compare company outcomes from before and after your program launch. What trends do you see in the data over time?

Widen your lens to look at outcomes across the community. Compare metrics from before and after your program launch, and track trends over time as your program grows. Keep in mind that your program is part of a larger story. Seek to understand how your impact fits into the community experiences.

QUICK TIPS FOR GETTING FEEDBACK

- Do quick pulse checks before and after volunteering

- Give people space to share their full experiences as they want to

- Prioritize formal check-ins as well as informal conversations

4. Connect your contributions to larger efforts

It's highly unlikely that your volunteer program will single-handedly solve a community problem. That's not the intention. What you want is for your contributions to align with broader efforts to make meaningful, long-term change.

Don't view your program in a vacuum. Instead, seek to understand what's happening in the community. Look at the organizations working to solve the similar or related problems. That could be nonprofits, other businesses, or government agencies. Important questions to ask, include:

- Do your efforts align with theirs?
- Are you duplicating efforts in a way that diminishes your impact?
- What unique strength does your program bring to the table?
- Are there gaps in services or access you can identify?

For instance, if you partner with a food bank to prepare meals for local families, you're playing a part in reducing food insecurity, but you're not going to eradicate it completely. Seek to understand what forces contribute to food insecurity and how others are helping to expand access and improve outcomes. Connect your efforts to this bigger story. Rather than simply counting the pounds of food your team has prepared, you can show how those outputs support real-world outcomes.

The other piece of the puzzle is looking at the context of what the community is dealing with more broadly. Are there bigger forces at play? A community recovering from a natural disaster or experiencing explosive growth will likely show skewed metrics around quality of life and access to services. Be sure to take these into account to understand how your program's impact fits in.

5. Tie activities to outputs and outcomes

When it comes to volunteering, measuring activities can be an appealing way to start because they are easy to measure. In essence, activities are the things a volunteer does—such as building, cleaning, cooking, mentoring. You can think of it as the hours employees put into volunteering. But the whole point of volunteering is not what goes into volunteering, but **what comes out of it**.

First, you want to tie those activities to outputs. What does a volunteer create? It could be tangible things such as a meal, a packed box of school supplies, or a clean space. It could also be something more intangible such as a relationship. Connecting the work your team does to what they actually create with those efforts helps you get a clear picture of how your organization is contributing to change.

To take it a step further, seek to link the outputs to outcomes. What does that meal or box of supplies actually mean? How does it have an impact on real people? Naturally, tracking outcomes takes a bit more effort than tracking activities. But it's worth it. Doing so ensures the activities volunteers do are actually making a meaningful difference. And you are able to tell a more complete story of your impact. Rather than saying your volunteers packed 100 boxes of school supplies, you can point to the real kids in the world who got supplies they might not have gotten. And you can highlight what having those supplies meant on an individual level.

Being able to tell this story is not only good for accurately measuring your impact. You also make a much more compelling case to inspire people to get involved.

Shaping the future of your volunteer program

Measuring the impact of your volunteer program is not a one-time thing. It's meant to be an ongoing effort that helps you grow and evolve your program in the right ways. The insights you glean should influence how you plan the future of your program.

More than ever, businesses of all sizes are taking it upon themselves to be **forces for good in society**. This is great news for everyone—employees who want a deeper sense of purpose, community members seeking to solve complex problems, and business leaders looking to build a positive company culture.

Being intentional about impact measurement ensures that your program is having the effect you want to have. And it gives your team the tools you need to deepen and expand your reach over time.

Volunteering is just one piece of the CSR puzzle. Consider how your program fits in with broader company efforts such as community investment initiatives and giving and matching campaigns. Look for a **full-suite CSR software** that can support your current vision and help you build for the future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Steele is a Content Producer and Editor at Submittable focused mostly on the world of grantmaking and corporate giving. Her work often explores the connection between technology, equity, and social good. She also writes fiction and nonfiction. You can read some of her stories and essays at **laurapricesteele.com**.

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