Submittable

The Future of CSR Software: A Buyer's Guide

BY LAURA STEELE

Content Marketing Writer & Editor at Submittable

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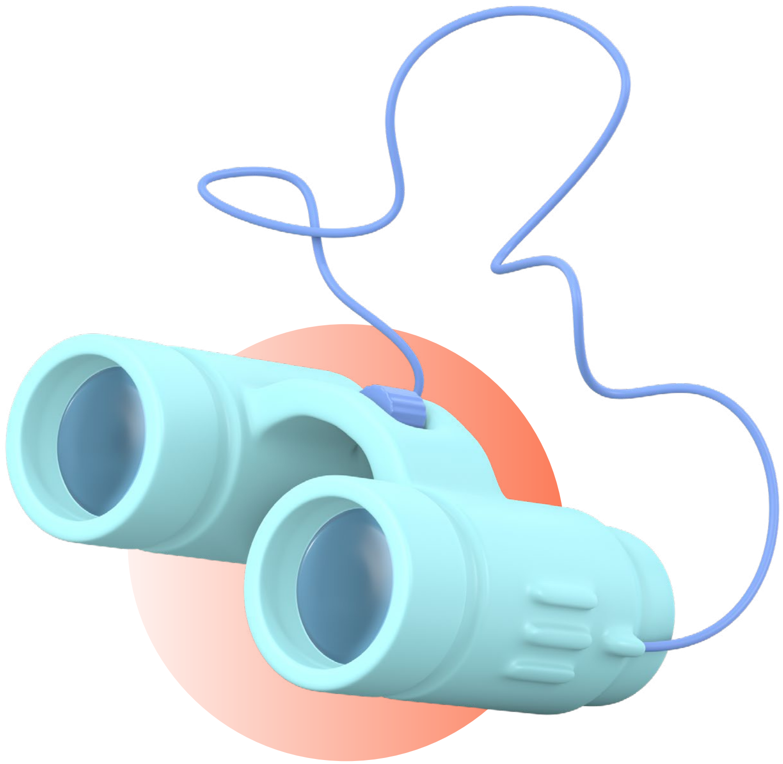


An introduction to the moment

Corporate social responsibility is no longer optional. The pressure for companies to be good stewards of their communities comes from every direction. Employees are advocating for it, consumers are focused on it, and investors are prioritizing it. To be competitive as a brand and as an employer, company leaders must embrace CSR by incorporating social impact—the effect a business has on people and the planet—into their business strategy.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) evolved from the concept of corporate citizenship, or the idea that businesses have an innate responsibility to prioritize community wellbeing alongside their bottom line. However, many leaders have gotten used to treating CSR as a side project rather than a business necessity. That won't fly anymore. These days, leaders must connect CSR efforts to their business strategy and company mission while being responsive to community needs. In short, leaders must plan, launch, and resource CSR programs the same as any other business initiative.

The good news is: a strategic approach to CSR is good for every facet of your business. A recent report from the Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship found that companies that integrate corporate citizenship with their business strategy reported higher success across more than a dozen business objectives, including reducing employee turnover, attracting new investors, and reducing operational costs.

Like many other company initiatives, social impact programs work best when employees are on board from the start. In reality, **employee empowerment is key to an effective, impactful, and long-lasting CSR program.**

It's one thing to know that employee engagement is important, but it's another thing entirely to actually achieve it. The key is technology. Specifically, a full-suite CSR software that makes it easy for everyone to do their part—the people running the programs and employees looking to get involved, as well as any community partners you work with.

THE SOCIAL IMPACT REVOLUTION

Three trends shaping the future of CSR

Corporate social responsibility **is never static**. It's a continually evolving concept affected by both internal and external factors such as community needs, business realities, market fluctuations, government regulation, global events, and employee feedback. Here are three forces shaping **the future of CSR and corporate purpose**.

1 Stakeholder Capitalism

2 Employee Advocacy

3 Community Partnerships

1. Stakeholder capitalism

The past few years have been a reckoning. The COVID-19 pandemic and renewed calls for racial justice reminded us all how interconnected we are. The most dynamic corporate leaders used this opportunity to shift the paradigm for how their team makes business decisions using **stakeholder capitalism**.

Stakeholder capitalism is the idea that corporations should serve the interests of all stakeholders, including their employees and their local community, not just those who have a financial stake in the company. Though the idea of stakeholder capitalism isn't new, there has been a tidal shift as more and more businesses reorient their strategy to incorporate this holistic world view. Profit isn't the only measure of success anymore.

In a recent open letter, **Blackrock CEO Larry Fink called on corporate leaders** to adopt a stakeholder approach. "It is through effective stakeholder capitalism that capital is efficiently allocated, companies achieve durable profitability, and value is created and sustained over the long-term," he says.

It turns out, what's good for the environment and the community is also good for businesses' long-term success. And so leaders are working to incorporate this understanding of interdependence into their company practices. These efforts touch every part of the business and reshape how decisions are made at every level.

In practice, embracing stakeholder capitalism is multifaceted. It can take shape as strategic supply chain management, sustainability goals, employee engagement efforts, **community investment programs**, ESG commitments, or DEI initiatives. The key to implementing stakeholder capitalism is to find the ways your business can naturally be a force for good, and then fold that vision into your core mission.

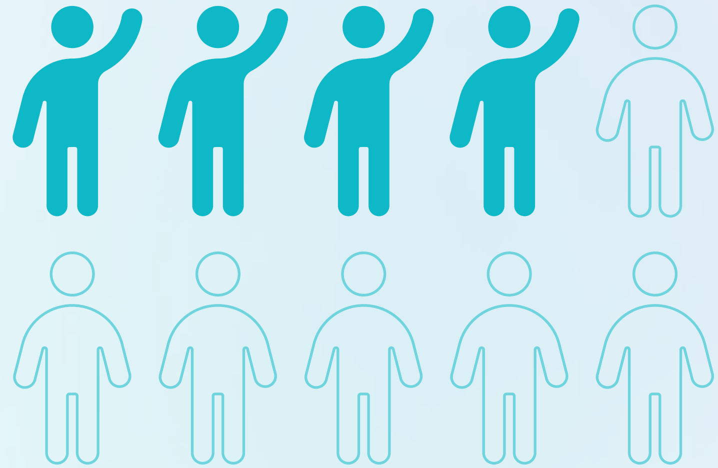
2. Employee advocacy

Over the past couple of years there have been a whole lot of stories of **corporate leaders making pledges** around social impact. As heartening as it is to see, this isn't the whole story. A big part of what has motivated companies to take real tangible action is the upward pressure from employees. Across industries, employees are taking a grassroots approach and using their voices to call for change both internally and externally.

According to a **recent report**, four in ten employees in the US have "spoken up to support or criticize their employer's actions over a controversial issue." Empowered by a new understanding of social media and public transparency, employees at all levels understand that they can be effective advocates for change.

For many corporate leaders, this internal pressure is not necessarily new, but it's stronger, more consistent, and more public than it's been in the past. Rather than shielding themselves from it, leaders must embrace and support employee advocacy. In fact, to give employees a formal channel to express their opinions, many companies are creating dedicated spaces for employees to connect with one another and organize their advocacy efforts.

Employee resource groups (ERGs) are often a big part of the effort to amplify employee voices. ERGs are voluntary, employee-led groups that bring together employees who share a common identity or interest. As of 2021, **40% of companies have ERGs**, a 9% increase from the previous year. Through ERGs, companies can start to provide the infrastructure and support for these employee-led communities.



4/10 EMPLOYEES

"have spoken up to support or criticize their employer's actions over a controversial issue."

SOURCE: WEBER SHANDWICK

The benefits of ERGs go both ways. ERGs give employees a venue to connect with other like-minded colleagues and organize their advocacy efforts. And employers get access to the insights and feedback from a group of engaged, forward-thinking employees.

To build effective CSR programs, corporate leaders must harness the power of employee activism. Democratization is key. Jen Carter, global head of technology and volunteering at **Google.org**, explains **her team's approach**:

"We try to partner really closely with employees, and especially with ERGs. A philosophy that we use with the nonprofits that we work with is that we build *with*, not *for*. And I would say the same thing about our CSR programs overall, and the way that we try to engage with ERGs and other employee groups."

When it comes to setting CSR priorities, employees need a clear, strong voice in the process. Technology plays a big role here. It's the connective tissue. With good CSR software, employees will feel empowered to get involved and put their values into action.

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JEN CARTER

Global Head of Technology and
Volunteering at Google.org

3. Community partnerships

Many social impact leaders are starting to understand the power of strong community partnerships. Rather than taking a transactional approach to CSR by writing a check and moving on, businesses are forming long-term relationships with community organizations.

Many CSR leaders have worked to shift away from old dynamics in which funders had all the power and dictated expectations to the grantees. Now expectations and communication move both ways. Nonprofits are empowered to ask for what they need, and CSR teams work to be responsive.

At the heart of an effective corporate-nonprofit partnership is trust. Often before corporate partners show up, nonprofits are out in communities doing essential work. They have deep insight into what the community needs. Any CSR efforts must recognize this. Business leaders need to trust the nonprofit's priorities and processes rather than trying to impose their own.

Strong community partnerships help corporations be more responsive to crises. For instance, when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, businesses with strong community partnerships were able to mobilize quickly to deliver aid to those in need. On the other hand, businesses that hadn't built relationships didn't have a direct line to understand what communities needed and found themselves trying to do that relationship building in the midst of a disaster, when nonprofit staff were overloaded and exhausted.

> “At the heart of an effective corporate-nonprofit partnership is trust.

Embracing strong partnerships often means providing sustained support. Rather than pivoting to a new cause each year, some businesses choose to commit to multiple years of **unrestricted funding**. This kind of support gives nonprofits the ability to plan for the long term. They can launch programs knowing that they have ongoing funding to keep them alive. Plus, sustained funding means nonprofits can do work with a longer change horizon. Often, the most transformative work takes time to show results. If a nonprofit has to secure new funding every year, they will feel pressure to show immediate returns on investments and miss opportunities to make long-term change.

During the **Impact Studio Conference**, Patricia Toothman, social impact manager at Splunk, explained that she and her team build a pipeline of organizations tackling big problems. They offer multi-year funding, and one of the questions they ask over and over is “How can we expand that partnership and do more?” Support should go beyond the check. Businesses can mobilize in many ways to sustain a nonprofit—through **volunteering efforts**, in-kind donations, employee giving campaigns, networking, and more.

The Catch-22 for today's CSR professionals

CSR is having a big moment right now. For many companies, CSR is quickly becoming an essential pillar of business strategy. That's great. But the problem is that too often, budget and headcount don't match the intention.

Expectations for CSR programs are high. A **report from the Association of Corporate Citizen Professionals (ACCP)** found that 80% of CSR professionals say their leadership has increased demand on CSR teams to expand programming and show results. But in that same report only 25% of CSR professionals believe they have sufficient budget and 20% believe they have sufficient staff.

The problem is that corporate leaders often take a "prove it first" approach to CSR. They know social impact is important, but before properly resourcing their CSR teams, they want those teams to prove their effectiveness.

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SOURCE: ASSOCIATION OF CORPORATE CITIZEN PROFESSIONALS

Angela Parker, CEO and co-founder of Realized Worth, sums up the **current state of the sector**:

"Practitioners are being asked to do so much. To go above and beyond what's reasonable now that the job is more important. And they're being looked at by senior leaders with a degree of respect, finally, that has not been received in the past. But they're also being told, make a significant, measurable, transformative difference. And do it soon without budget until you prove that you've done it. And without additional headcount until you show me that it's worth it. And people are exhausted."

ANGELA PARKER

CEO and co-founder of Realized Worth

Technology can alleviate this friction. CSR professionals need intuitive software that helps them mobilize employees all across their company to get involved. When employees are empowered, CSR programs become self-sustaining. And the practitioners responsible for those programs can shift from daily logistics management to long-term strategic planning and relationship building.

Evaluating software for this moment

The suite of CSR software your team chooses needs to support all your programs from one place: giving and matching, volunteering, and community investment or grantmaking. That's a lot to handle, so the details are important. Your primary evaluation criteria should be whether or not the features make it easy for everyone to get involved and whether the software is intuitive enough for anyone on the team to use.

7 features to look for in:

community investment software ▸

employee volunteering software ▸

corporate giving software ▸

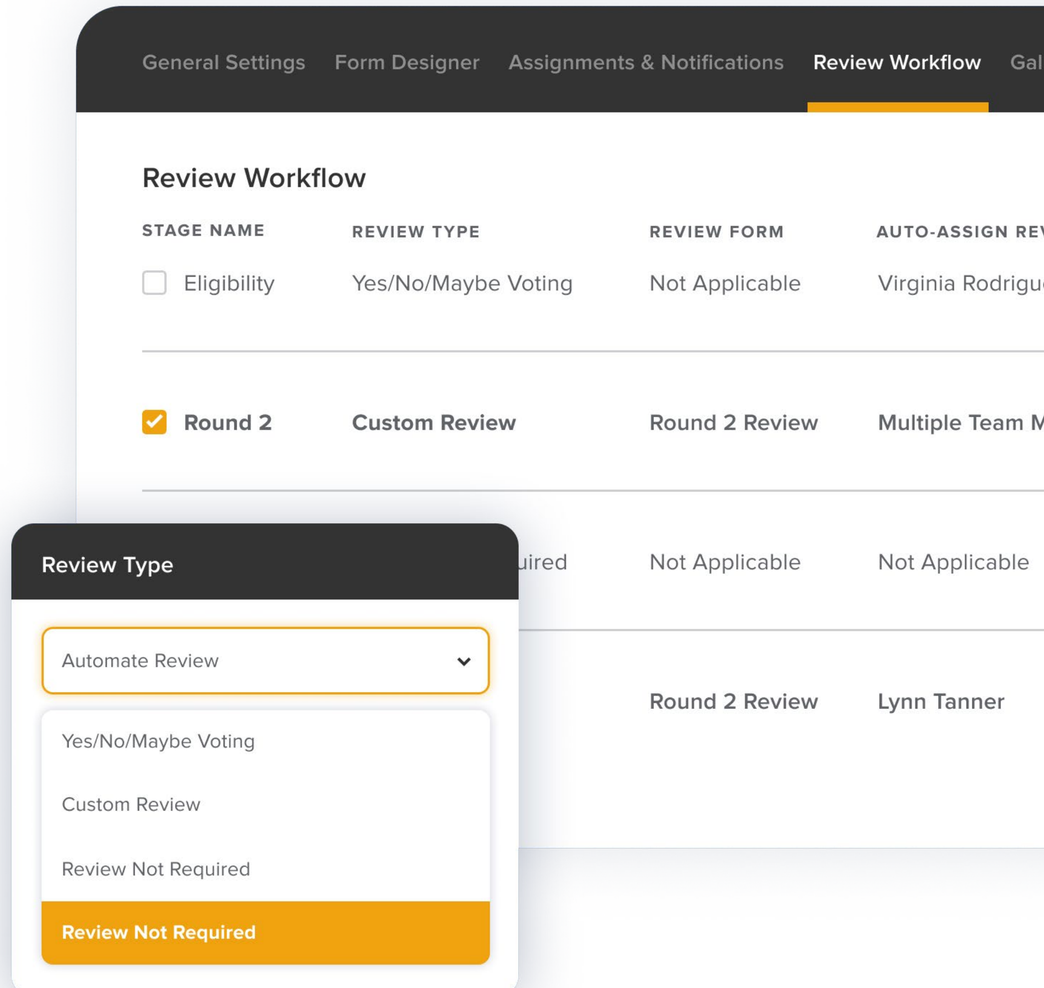
7 features to look for in community investment software

1 Workflow automations

Look for software that has workflow automations that allow you to **automate tasks such as scanning documents or images and extracting and verifying information**. This can keep your team from getting bogged down with the busywork of manually opening, viewing, and cross checking each document. In the end, it takes a whole lot of pressure off your team and frees you up to do more strategic work.

2 Built-in fraud prevention

Prioritize [built-in fraud prevention] with tools like **personalized knowledge-based authentication quizzes**, which require applicants to answer a few short questions about their personal and private history, or **identity verification tools** that match selfies taken in real time to government-issued IDs. Features like these help you ensure that the money you send out reaches your intended recipients without creating extra work for applicants.



3 In-app communication

Find a solution with in-app communication which allows **your team to communicate with each other and with applicants all in one place**. Having in-app communication means nothing ever gets lost in an inbox or slips through the cracks if people change roles. This feature links conversations directly to applications, ensures everyone has the access they need, and gives you one clear place to communicate and request additional information.

4 Collaborative review

Real-time collaboration and unique permission levels for reviewers are both must-have features for a modern CSR program. These features allow you to include outside stakeholders—such as subject matter experts or community members—in the review process without duplicating work or exposing sensitive information. By enabling seamless collaboration, you streamline the whole review process. Plus, it sets you up to take a participatory approach by including outside voices in your decision making.

5 Two-way integrations

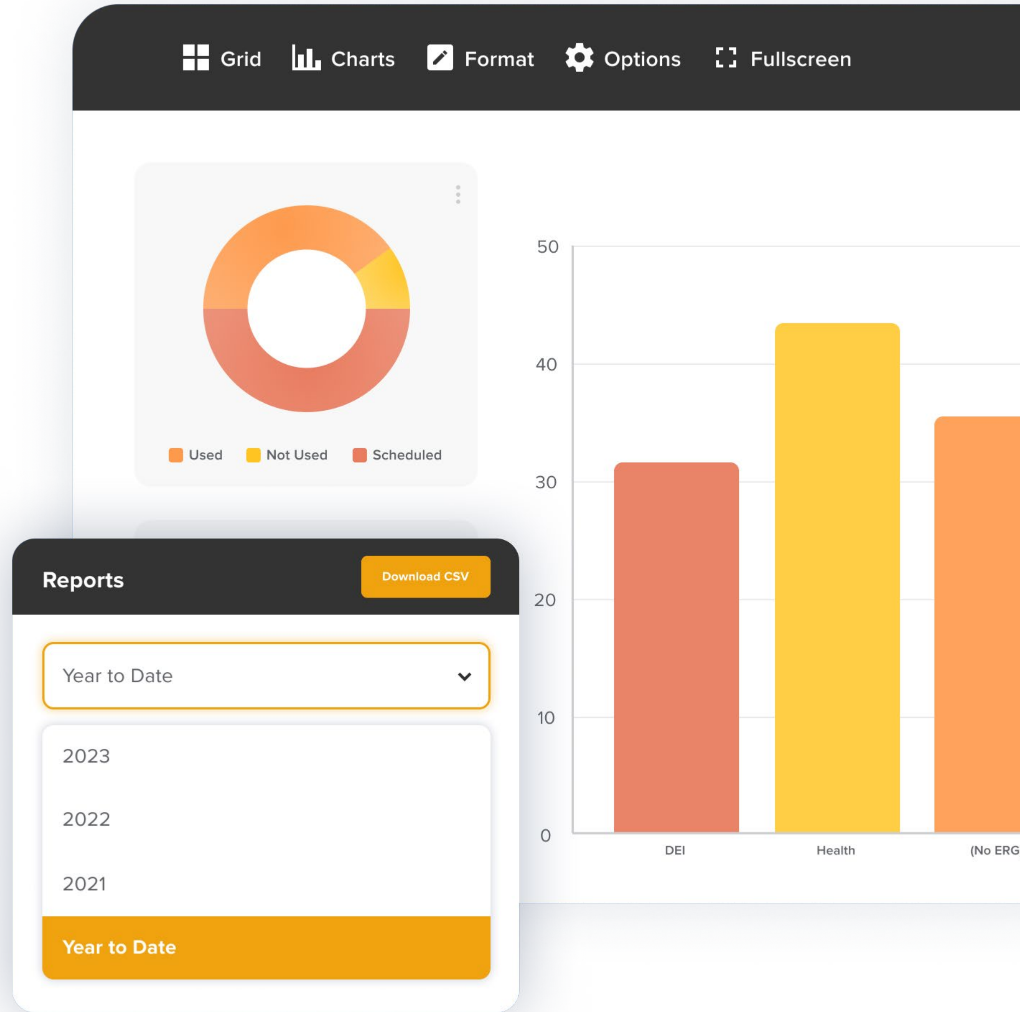
A robust two-way API integration that allows you to **share and access data across different software and databases** can go a long way to eliminating data silos. When data is siloed across different platforms or systems, it can be difficult to leverage insights effectively. A two-way API allows funders to bring data from public databases or other sources into their grant management software and leverage it as they make funding decisions. For instance, the **Demographics by Candid** initiative aims to provide funders with information they need about nonprofit staff demographics.

6 Funds tracking and distribution

Choose a software with funds tracking and electronic **funds distribution**. These features ensure that your team never gets wires crossed about budget and prevents grantees from waiting too long for funding to be delivered. Funds tracking provides a single source of truth in terms of your budget with easy-to-interpret visualizations and a breakdown of how much of your budget has been awarded and delivered. Electronic payments get money in the hands of the people who need it much faster, as no one has to spend time generating and sending paper checks.

7 Impact reporting

Impact reporting that includes **both quantitative and qualitative data** is a baseline feature that good CSR software should always include. Capturing the expansive impact of a community investment program can be challenging. With robust impact reporting, your team can tell the whole story of your program's impact with context and nuance. You can easily create data visualizations right in the platform and export them to share with internal and external stakeholders.



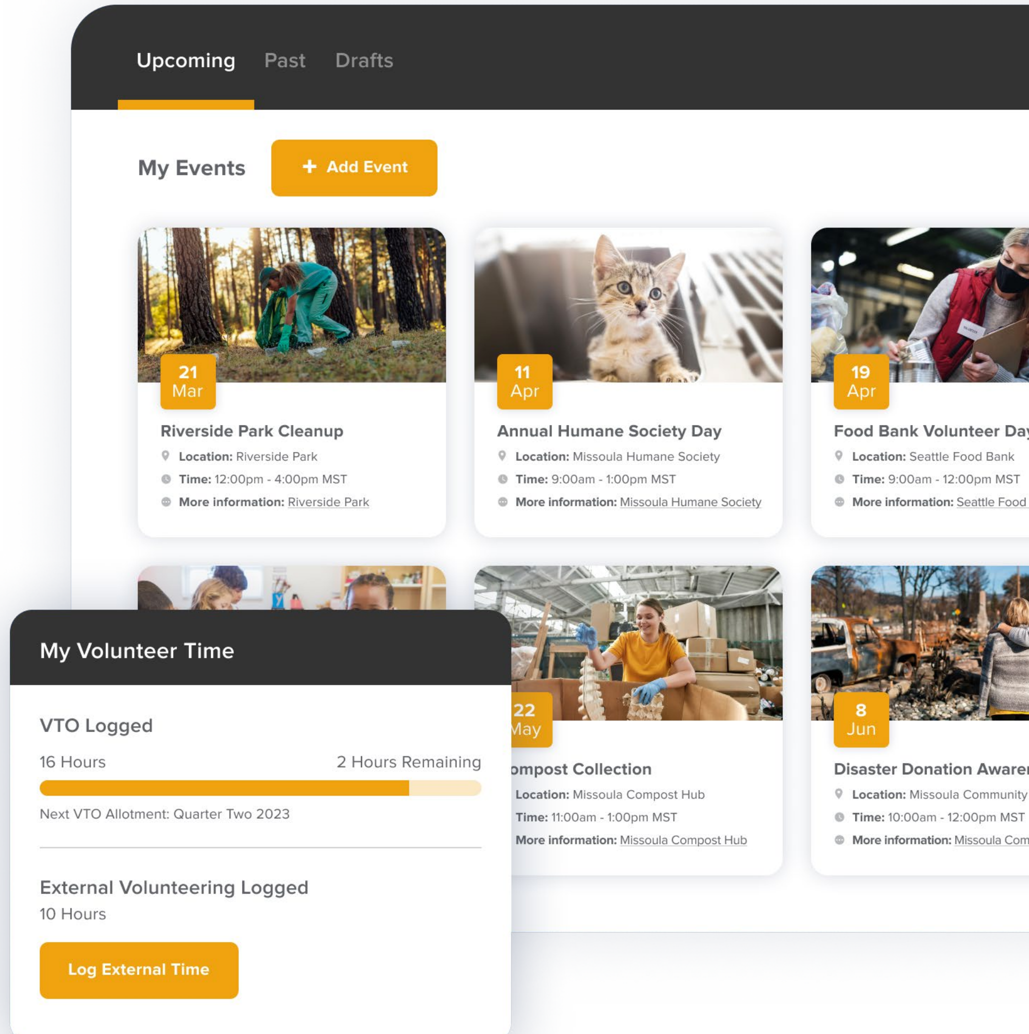
7 features to look for in employee volunteering software

1 Simple sign-up

Look for software that features **simple sign-up for volunteering**. Most employees want to volunteer, but too often the process to get involved is convoluted or complex. When that's the case, many people give up. With simple **sign-up, employees can sign up for volunteer opportunities with just a few clicks**. This means a whole lot more people will get involved and stay involved.

2 Personal dashboard

Your CSR software needs to provide each employee **a personal dashboard where they can view and sign up for opportunities, log external volunteering hours, and see their contributions over time**. Without this, volunteering can feel impersonal and employees will be disconnected from the impact they make. A personal dashboard provides everyone with their own personal impact report so each employee gets a clear picture of how they are contributing to company-wide efforts.

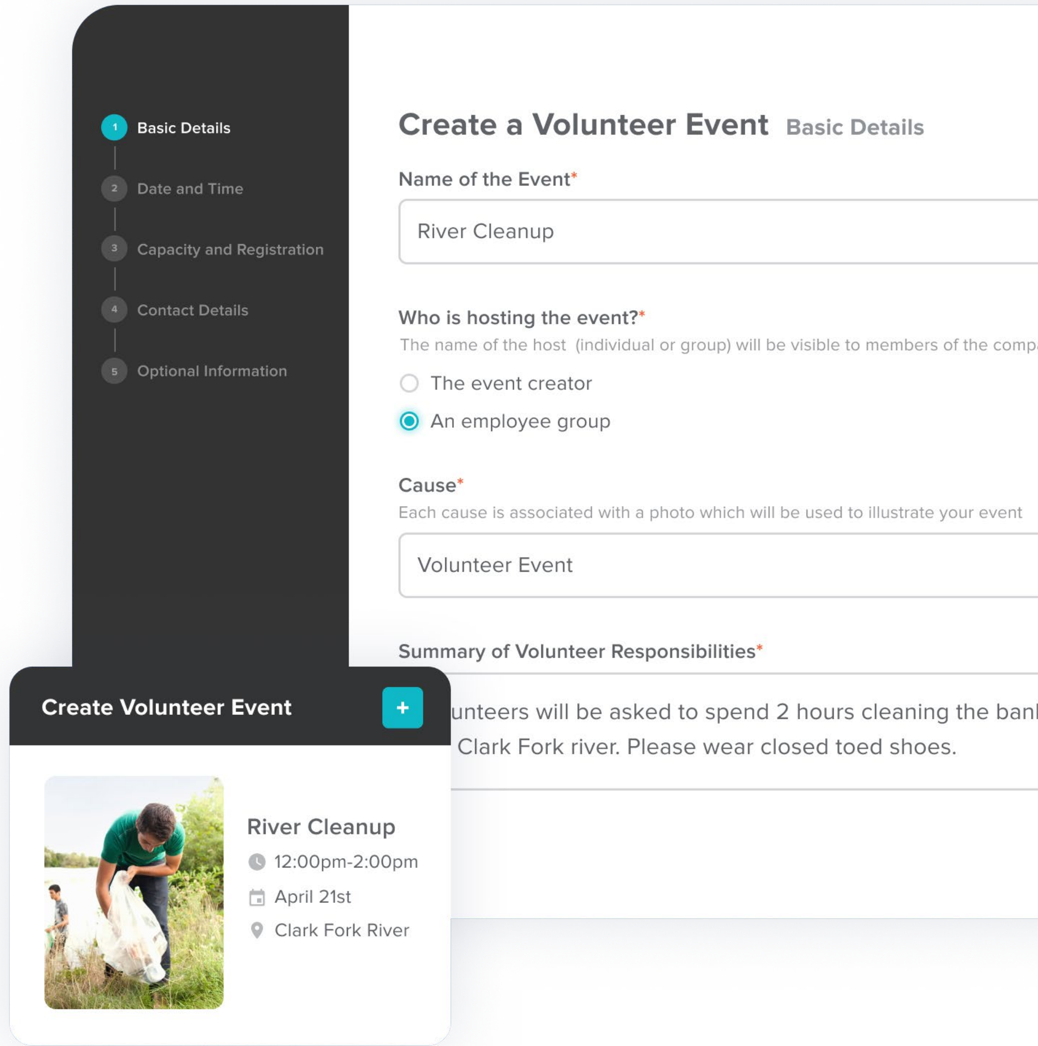


3 ERG alignment

Seek out software that promotes **ERG alignment and input**. If employee volunteering is disconnected from the employee resource groups, you'll miss a big opportunity to harness the power of employee-led communities. With ERG alignment, you have a natural bridge between your volunteering program and your ERGs, which inspires employees to get more involved in both.

4 Event creation privileges

It's vital that your CSR software includes **custom event creation privileges**. Asking your CSR or HR team to create every volunteer opportunity for your company puts a lot of work on them. Plus, it creates a top-down dynamic in which employees feel like company leadership dictates what causes they can give back to. With event creation privileges you can empower all employees to create volunteer opportunities. This approach allows you to **leverage existing relationships employees have with nonprofits and tap into grassroots enthusiasm**.



5 Participant visibility

Give your employees **participant visibility**, so they can **see who has signed up for a volunteer event**. Often, first-time volunteers have trouble getting started. With participant visibility, you can leverage the social aspect of volunteering to help inspire more people to get involved. Whether employees pack boxes, form strategy, or work directly with community members, the built-in collaboration of volunteering is a big part of the appeal.

6 In-app surveys

Get feedback from employees **using in-app surveys**. A really important measure of your volunteer program is whether employees find the volunteer experience meaningful and worthwhile, and how their expectations align with reality. But it can be hard to get employees to take that extra step to provide feedback. With in-app surveys, you have this feedback loop right within the platform, centralizing the processes for employees and increasing the likelihood they'll take the time to share their thoughts.

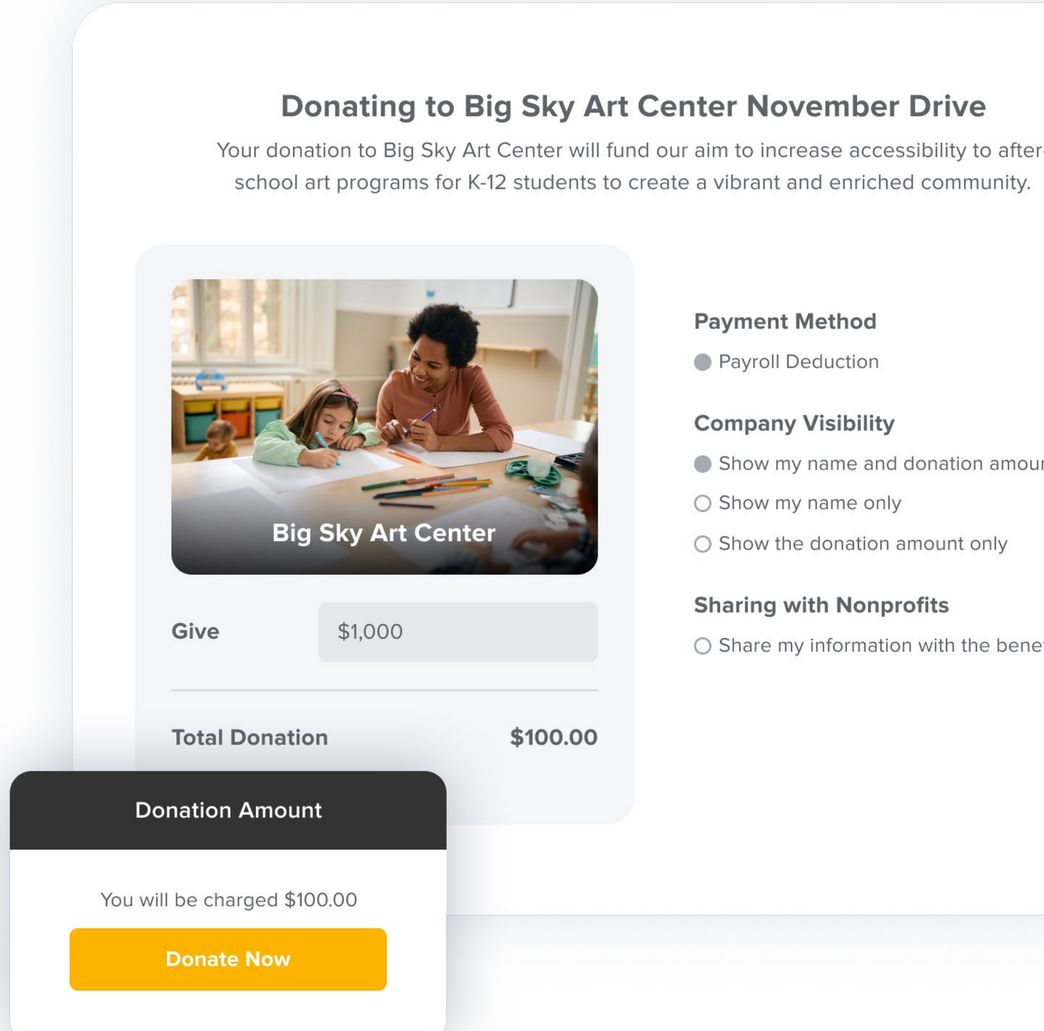
7 Automated waitlists

Good CSR software will **automate the waitlist process**. Without automated waitlists, if a volunteer has to cancel, the project might be left shorthanded, or someone on your team is sent scrambling to fill the spot. With this automation, employees can opt into a waitlist so that they can be automatically notified if a slot becomes available. Plus, a waitlist gives you the ability to gauge overall interest in an opportunity. If you consistently see long waitlists for specific events, you'll know it's worth adding more similar opportunities.

7 features to look for in corporate giving software

1 Automatic payroll deductions

Employees are more likely to engage with a giving program if your CSR software can **automatically deduct their donations from payroll**. Payroll deductions allow them to opt in once. They pick the nonprofits, and choose the amount and duration of their donations. Then they can easily make adjustments whenever they want to increase or scale back their contributions.



2 Company matching

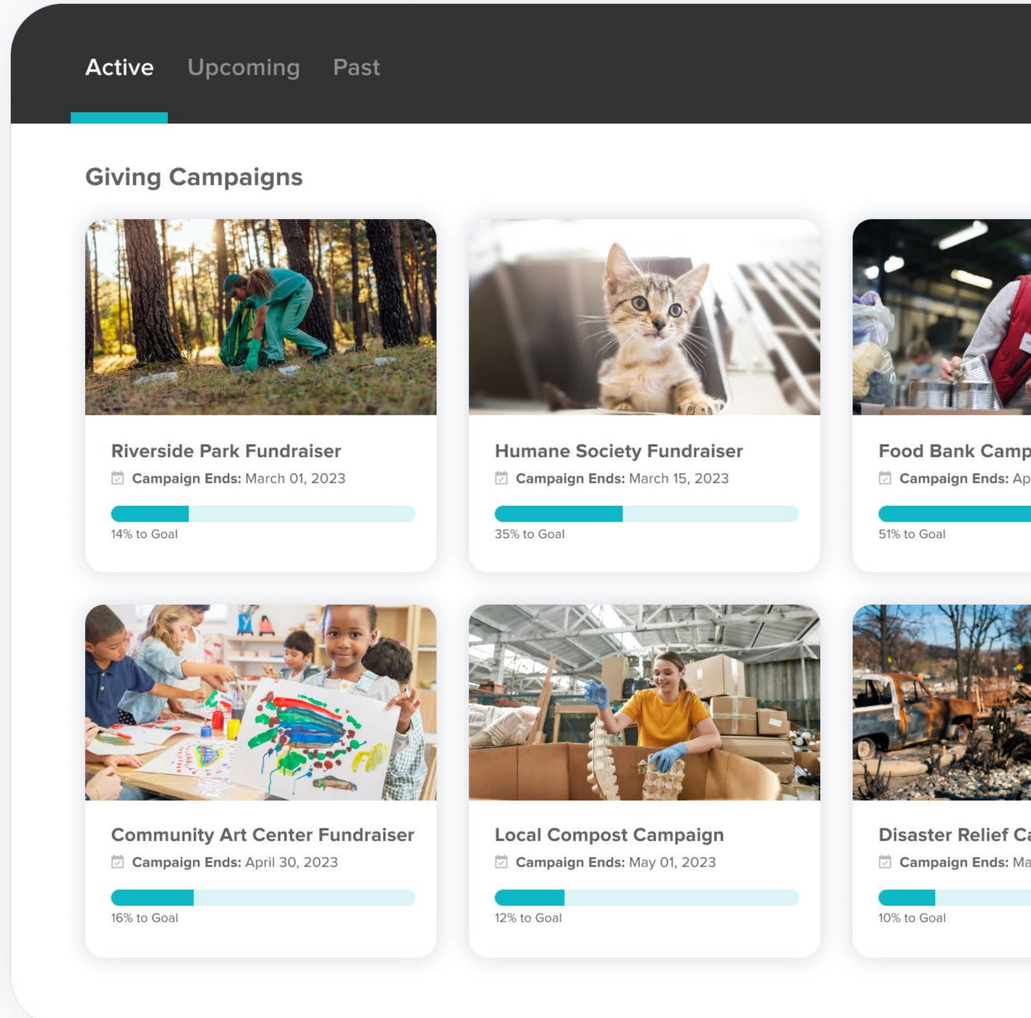
Matching donations can be a nightmare for your finance department, so look for features that **streamline company matching**. Your CSR, finance, or HR team shouldn't have to spend time manually reviewing each donation match. Instead, it should be automatic. When companies match (or double) donations, **employees have the autonomy to give to the causes they care most about**, and in doing so they have a hand in directing company resources. It's empowering and inspiring, and often motivates who haven't given before to get involved.

3 Individual donation hub

You need to provide **individual donation hubs for your employees**, where they can **track their individual impact over time and join team or company giving campaigns**. Without an individual hub, employees will struggle to connect their personal impact to bigger efforts. Having this feature gives employees a distinct destination that they can return to whenever they want to check in on their giving.

4 Database of vetted nonprofits

Be sure that the software you choose provides a **database of vetted nonprofits**. Without a resource like this, your team might be stuck manually checking the nonprofit status of organizations. With a database built into the software, you help employees **identify trusted nonprofits that align with their values** and you save your team a whole lot of work.



5 Campaign creation privileges

Empower your employees with campaign creation privileges that **allow them to create their own giving campaigns**. When you rely solely on your CSR or HR teams to rally people around a cause, it can feel like a top-down initiative and you might struggle to get people excited. On the other hand, when employees can team up with colleagues, invite coworkers to get involved, and compete across teams, corporate giving becomes a more social, collaborative experience.

6 Collective impact reporting

Seek out software that includes collective impact reporting. Without this, employees won't understand how their individual contributions fit into a larger story. **Collective impact reporting aggregates all individual giving into one company-level impact report**. This reporting gives your team a clear picture of your program's impact and provides the data and narrative you need to communicate that impact to stakeholders both inside and outside of the company.

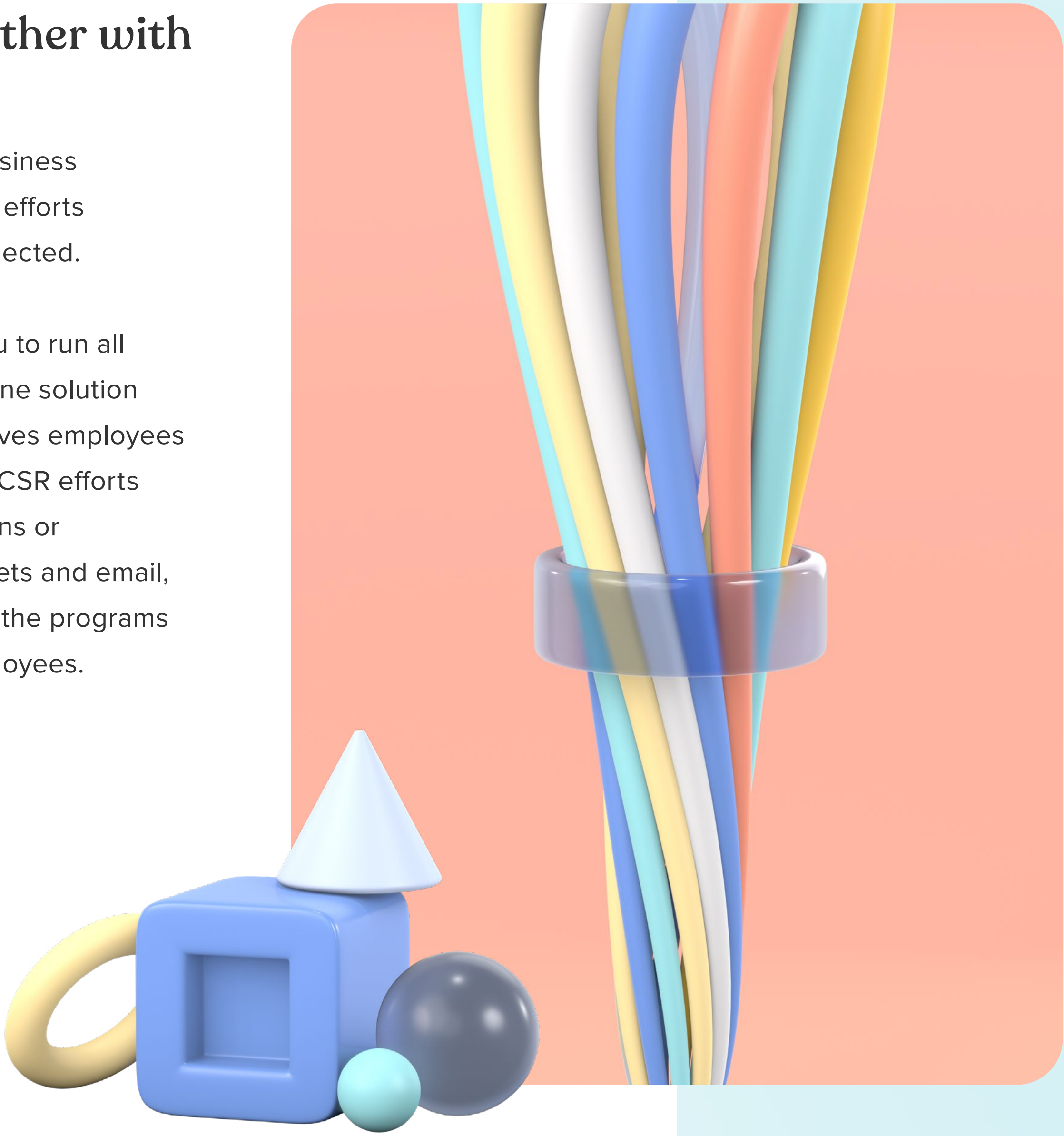
7 Automatically generated tax documentation

Verify that software automatically generates tax documentation. You don't want anyone on your team stuck manually creating and sending documents. With automatically generated tax documentation, employees **get quick and easy access to any tax documents related to charitable donations**.

Tie your CSR efforts together with an all-in-one solution

In the same way you wouldn't want your business initiatives siloed from each other, your CSR efforts are much more effective when they're connected.

The right suite of CSR software enables you to run all your programs from one platform. Having one solution prevents gaps between programs, and it gives employees a single destination to get involved. If your CSR efforts are spread across multiple software solutions or "Frankensteined" together from spreadsheets and email, you create more work for the team running the programs and add complexity to the process for employees.



Step into a new era of CSR

With expectations around corporate social responsibility rising and budgets tightening, you need a suite of software that you can adopt across programs, implement swiftly, and grow alongside. The right solution not only enables you to evolve, but equips you to be a leader in the sector.

With the right technology partner, you will have a strategic ally who understands the totality of your mission and can support you as you look to grow and evolve. Submittable was built to support corporate teams as they launch, manage, measure, and scale their CSR programs. By putting employee empowerment at the heart of product design, Submittable helps you tap into grassroots enthusiasm and stay mission-aligned.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Steele is a Content Marketing Writer & 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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