
The social case for corporate volunteering

KENN ALLEN

There no longer is any place for business to hide.

This was the judgment of Thomas Friedman (2000) in *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, an examination of the growing tension between the forces of globalisation and the yearning for community. He was arguing that globalisation of business has been paralleled by globalisation of expectations about how businesses will behave. No longer can business escape scrutiny by moving its operations to obscure locations in developing countries.

Growing demands for corporate social responsibility are being driven by consumer concern, by anti-globalisation sentiment, by the increasingly visible bad behaviour of business. Once the realm of a few activists, the demands are now coming from people of influence, including some in the business community itself. Stakeholders of all sizes and shapes are beginning to make demands on business and are monitoring the response. And all is being done in the transparency of the internet. There is no place to hide.

Inevitably, any sensible corporate response to these demands will include greater corporate involvement in the community and that will mean more interest in corporate volunteering – activities that encourage and support volunteering by employees in the community and/or through which companies make institutional commitment of their human as well as financial resources to address community problems. In the former case, workers volunteer their time and energy, either on their own or under company sponsorship. In the latter, they are ‘volunteered’ by the company and serve the community as part of their job.

No matter how it is done, an increased interest in corporate volunteering has implications for NGOs/NPOs¹. It is to those organisations that business will turn to provide the opportunities for their employees to volunteer, and most often, the management resources to engage them in productive ways. Companies will have expectations of the experience their employees will have as volunteers together with the benefits that should accrue both to employees and to the company itself.

Corporate volunteering is not new. In many countries, businesses of all sizes traditionally have played leadership roles in their communities. The idea of corporate volunteering as a definable phenomenon emerged in the United States in the late 1970s. Over the past 25 years, it has spread slowly but surely throughout the world, practiced both by multinational corporations and indigenous businesses. The business case or rationale for this work is well established and widely accepted.

But there has been no corresponding social case, no rationale developed from the NGO/NPO perspective. The purpose of this article is to:

- suggest the core elements of that case,
- to raise some of the costs involved for NGOs/NPOs, and
- to propose some next steps that might be taken to continue the discussion.

THE BUSINESS CASE

The business case for corporate volunteering is straightforward and appropriately business-like: it is

good for the community; good for those who volunteer; good for the company itself. This rationale was initially formulated in the United States in 1986 in a modified Delphi process involving corporate staff responsible for community involvement activities and was first published in *A New Competitive Edge: Volunteers from the Workplace* (Allen, Vizza and Keller, 1986).

Its articulation was part of the first great wave of attention to corporate volunteering that began in the late 1970s. The question it answered was, "Why? Why should companies that exist to produce things, deliver services and make a profit also invest in promoting and supporting the volunteer engagement of their employees in the community?"

It also was an attempt to rationalize the already obvious tension between 'philanthropy' and 'self-interest'. Thus, it gives something to everyone. Businesses get credit for what they are contributing to the community and for the opportunities for fulfilment and personal development they are offering their workers while there also is acceptance that businesses can fairly expect a 'return on investment' from this commitment.

Because the business case tells us a great deal about the expectations of business and, thus, informs the social case, it is appropriate to look briefly at each of its elements.

It is good for the community. Corporate volunteering, it is asserted, brings new volunteer resources to the community. It is a source of new time, talent, and energy for NGOs/NPOs. Most important, it brings people who are skilled and who know how to work productively. Usually not stated but assumed, it may bring money or other corporate resources as well in support of employees' work.

It is good for those who volunteer. There is no longer debate about the value of volunteering to volunteers – new social connections and support, new knowledge and skills, psychological fulfilment, etc. These same benefits accrue to volunteers who come to it through their workplace. In addition, businesses often cite the opportunity it offers their workers to develop skills that enhance their worth in the workplace and to practice leadership skills in ways they could not within the company.

It is good for the company itself. Three benefits are most often cited: a more loyal, more productive workforce; a positive public image; and, addition of a new resource to help meet strategic business goals, most often in human resource development and management, public relations and public affairs, and marketing.

This business case has been generally accepted world-wide. It is reflected in some way in virtually every article, every speech and every piece of resource material about corporate volunteering. It is largely based on anecdotal observation, perception, and intuitive good sense. Despite periodic demands from business for tools to use in proving it, in whole or part, the lack of investment in development of such products underscores the acceptability and durability of the basic proposition: good for the community, for the workers, for the company.

THE SOCIAL CASE

The strength of the business case also is reflected in its broad acceptance by the volunteer community. But, how could it be otherwise? Consider that, first, the most likely business case is factually correct, at least in broad terms. Volunteering is 'good for' the key actors named in ways that are both intuitive and obvious. If one is an advocate for volunteering, how can there not be acceptance? Second, it is to the benefit of NGOs/NPOs to accept and put to work on their own behalf a rationale that has been broadly accepted by business. Most organisations welcome corporate support. If this rationale helps persuade companies to offer that support then its acceptance comes easily.

Acceptance of the business case, however, is not the same as articulation of the social case. The latter requires a perspective unique to NGOs/NPOs. As they are mission-driven organisations, a key part of that perspective is what might be called the 'bottom line test'. That is, does corporate volunteering (or any other offered resource) help to achieve the organisation's mission? Does it help address current priorities? Is it worth the cost; is the return on investment sufficient to justify the investment?

What follows, then, is an attempt to articulate a social case for corporate volunteering that addresses that test. Unfortunately, it does not fit into the easy, definitive declarative style of the business case. At best,

it might look something like this: “Potentially, it is good for our organisation, it can be good for the community as a whole, and it is usually good for the volunteers and the companies from which they come.”

Use of the qualifiers is a critical reflection of the potential downsides of engagement with corporations and their volunteers, as discussed later. The important benefits of corporate volunteering come not from the fact that it exists, but from the way in which it is done. Thus, they remain as potentials, realised only under certain circumstances.

There are five components to our proposed social case:

1. *Corporate volunteering brings new human resources to NGOs/NPOs.* This is consistent with the “good for the community” assertion of the business case. Corporations can become important, sustained sources of volunteers generally and skilled volunteers particularly, people who know how to work effectively and who can bring needed professional or technical capacity to organisations. At worst, corporate volunteering may be a source of ‘people power’ that adds value through activities that, while they may only indirectly contribute to achieving the mission, remain important to do. Examples might include one-off projects and fund-raising or public awareness events.
2. *Corporate volunteers can help build the capacity of the organisation’s core staff.* This is particularly true when they bring needed technical or professional expertise. Examples abound:
 - companies that ‘adopt’ schools and help teachers and administrators learn and use new technologies;
 - volunteers who install and train staff in using new computer, communications, or accounting systems;
 - volunteers who build an organisation’s management capacity through training programs or mentoring.

Such contributions can have long-term benefits by leaving behind new capacity.

3. *The engagement of corporate volunteers may open the way to other resources from the company.* Precious few are the organisations that have not hoped that when corporate volunteers arrive, money won’t

be far behind – or, perhaps, in-kind services, equipment, or products. At the very least the presence of corporate volunteers can be seen as a tacit endorsement of the organisation by the company.

In many cases, those hopes do come true. Many companies have come to believe that it makes sense to invest more in organisations that their employees have chosen to support through their volunteer efforts. This might be done through matching gift programs tied to the volunteer commitment or through outright donations. Increasingly, both NGOs/NPOs and businesses are looking for ‘partnerships’ that will be mutually beneficial. It is assumed that these intensified relationships will bring additional resources into play.

4. *The engagement of corporate volunteers creates an opportunity to educate them about the issues on which the organization is working.* The effective engagement of volunteers, engagement that maximizes their value to the organisation, includes results-focused work, education, opportunities for learning through reflection, and opportunities for additional actions that take the organisation’s message to the community.

An organisation that is effective in the engagement of volunteers takes advantage of their presence to educate them not only about the specific work of the organisation but also about why the work is needed in the first place. The potential value of volunteers extends far beyond the formal work that they do within the organisation. They can become educated, motivated ambassadors to the rest of the community, not only for the organisation but also for the ‘cause’ on which the organisation is working. That value is magnified when, as in the case of corporate volunteers, they have a natural constituency that they can influence, other people or an institution capable of institutional action.

One of the great advantages of recruiting volunteers from business is that one has access to a group of people who have some important shared values, with whom it is possible to communicate through established and legitimised systems, and who may command support from their institution. These same characteristics increase the potential impact of the

ambassadorial roles the volunteers play when they return to the workplace.

5. *The engagement of corporate volunteers increases the possibility of influencing corporate behaviour* – Corporate volunteering is important but insufficient for corporate social responsibility. Companies that are ‘good citizens’ contribute in many ways to their communities. Companies that are ‘responsible citizens’ participate in ways that can lead to changes in the way the community operates.

Clearly, participation of this sort can grow from the kind of involvement that begins with corporate volunteering. Involvement leads to education; education to understanding; understanding to a new kind of action, one that results in changed conditions of life, not just the amelioration of the effects of current conditions.

This is both the most important dimension of the social case for corporate volunteering and the most tenuous. The sequence that leads from involvement to action for change is neither spontaneous nor assured. It is a potential benefit but one that will happen only through conscious efforts. Leadership for those efforts most often will come from NGOs/NPOs but also may come from corporate volunteers or from others in companies. Indeed, the most productive action by NGOs/NPOs may be to seek out and move to action those within companies who both understand and place value on this potential benefit.

AT WHAT COST?

The unavailability of a ‘free lunch’ is well-established. Everything carries a price tag, albeit one often expressed in obscure or nearly invisible currencies. As a result, life for both people and organisations becomes a series of trade-offs built around the question ‘is it worth it?’

In the case of corporate volunteering, the potential costs for NGOs/NPOs may be found in the unintended consequences of a relationship with a larger, more complex organisation that operates in a framework of different values framework and that has its own needs, expectations, and desired benefits. Here are three specific costs that could lead an organisation to decide that corporate volunteers may not be worth it after all.

1. The company may have significant expectations or demands but is unwilling to provide the funding required for the organisation to meet them. A prime emerging example may be in the growing corporate expectation that volunteering will be a learning, team-building, and leadership development experience for workers. Indeed, there will be little debate that these may be achievable results. But is it the job of the NGO/NPO receiving the volunteers to ensure that these results are realized? Should the organisation invest its resources in ensuring these outcomes for business or should it reasonably expect that businesses will pay for this service, just as they would were they to establish their own training or leadership development programs or outsource the task to consultants?
2. Organisations may be diverted from activities that are mission-driven and that address current priorities as they seek to keep their business partners/benefactors happy. Virtually every NGO/NPO knows of a case where an organisation has ‘invented’ a project for a company in the hope that it will lead to a stronger relationship or more support. As one wag once put it, “Our walls have more paint than plaster on them because of the number of times companies have needed a ‘community project’ at the last minute.”
While such examples can be discussed with wry humour, they reflect a very real danger – that the organisation’s real work will be overtaken by the agendas and expectations of those who have come to help, but to help on their own terms. This is not to say that all of the expectations that businesses may have are inappropriate. Indeed, for many organisations, a corporate demand for ‘results’ and for serious ways to measure them may be exactly what is required. A corporate expectation that its volunteers will be well-managed and will be given useful work to do, work that ‘makes a difference’, is neither inappropriate nor harmful. But, organisations must understand what they may be getting into when they begin to work with business, must assess both benefits and costs, and must regularly review both to ensure appropriate balance.
3. Organisations may find themselves co-opted or exploited by businesses that support them. It is hard to bite the hand that feeds you. But for some

organisations, by the very nature of their work, it is essential to remain sufficiently independent to be able to demand a higher level of social responsibility from business than only the direct contribution of either volunteers or dollars.

One global leader in a 'sin industry' is reputed to expect that, in return for their support, the NGOs/NPOs they support will appear in the company's image advertising, thus appearing to be accepting of products that cause demonstrable harm. In another case, a senior manager in a chemical company complains to a newspaper reporter that employee volunteer efforts are not fully appreciated by the residents of a community that the company has systematically polluted for decades and is now being forced by government mandate to clean up. As corporate scandals have spread, among those adversely affected have been community organisations that had close ties with the companies and their executives and have been faced with the difficult decision of when to 'jump ship' and desert their now tainted corporate friends.

Are these cases extreme? Of course they are but they make the critical point. Inevitably, there will be NGOs/NPOs whose reputations and images will be affected by the actions and misdeeds of those with whom they partner or draw support. This possibility is not reason enough to avoid such relationships. But they do underscore the need for thoughtful deliberation in advance.

"Is it worth it?" The answer in any specific case is less important than the fact that the question is asked, seriously considered, and answered.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER ACTION

Businesses represent a sufficiently important potential resource that NGOs/NPOs inevitably turn to them for support. In turn, particularly in difficult economic times, businesses are as likely to put forward their human resources as their financial resources. Thus, the volunteer community needs to be prepared to engage effectively with issues related to corporate volunteering. Here are a few initial suggestions for further action:

1. Pay attention to the issue. Put the idea of the social case on the agenda for discussions within the volunteer community. Debate the positives

and negatives of corporate volunteering from an NGO/NPO perspective. Identify situations that have been problematic and analyse them.

2. Identify 'best practices' in corporate volunteering as seen and executed by NGOs/NPOs. What does a situation that gives maximum mutual benefit look like? How is it developed and maintained? What constitutes excellence in engagement of corporate volunteers and in the development of corporate partnerships?
3. Develop and practice the skills required to work effectively with business. These go beyond management of skilled volunteers into the realm of effective communication and negotiation skills and even into measurement and evaluation.
4. Find ways to lessen the 'cultural gap' between the volunteer community and business. It is both real and natural that it should exist. It is a function of two different but equally valid ways of working. Bridging it will require conscious efforts from both sides.
5. Give more attention to the dynamics of partnership. Research on effective partnerships between NGOs/NPOs and business is still in its infancy. Leaders in the volunteer community can contribute through reflection on and reporting of their own experiences. They may also open their corporate partnerships to third-party observation and analysis.

These kinds of actions are unlikely to happen spontaneously. To make them real will require leadership and focused attention. Most likely that is only going to happen if this topic moves higher on the agenda for those national and local organisations that exist to promote and support volunteering, the 'volunteer centres', or from the few international organisations with a similarly broad remit. But it also can come from academics, from consultants who broker partnerships, and even from businesses that have an expanded view of the contribution they can make to the field.

But however it happens, it is most important that the volunteer community no longer accept the 'business case' without having developed its own 'social case' for corporate volunteering.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

A special note of thanks to Liz Burns, World President, International Association for Volunteering

(IAVE) who first suggested this topic and who generously contributed her thinking during its development.

REFERENCES

- Allen, K Vizza, C and Keller S, 1986, *A New Competitive Edge: Volunteers from the Workplace*, Volunteer – The National Center, Arlington, Virginia
- Friedman, T 2000, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Anchor Books, New York

ENDNOTE

- 1 NGO: non government organisation. NPO: non profit organisation

Kenn Allen is founder and president of the Civil Society Consulting Group LLC, a global firm committed to 'helping leaders in NGOs, business, and government unleash the power of people to change the world.'