

PRO BONO SERVICE: THE BUSINESS CASE

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Highlights from a new
research study conducted by
LBG Associates

As the effects of the recession linger, many companies are continuing to rely on their employee volunteering programs as cost-effective ways to make an impact in their communities. Now, new research commissioned by Capital One in partnership with the Taproot Foundation and conducted by philanthropic consultancy LBG Associates (www.lbg-associates.com) reveals a solid business case for pro bono service—presenting evidence of the benefits that pro bono service programs bring to companies, their employees, and nonprofit organizations.

Employees, managers, and senior executives responding to the research survey agree that allowing employees to participate in pro bono service produces a range of benefits for all concerned. The results show, for example, that employees believe participating in pro bono service heightens their visibility and enhances their communication skills; managers see improvement in their employees' leadership and presentation skills; and senior executives perceive overall program benefits related to corporate brand-building, community relations, and employee development and retention.

"In some cases, the three survey segments report somewhat different perceptions of the benefits of the pro bono service program," says Dr. Linda Gornitsky, President and Founder of LBG Associates. "But there is a very strong consensus among the groups that a pro bono ser-

Pro bono service involves allowing employees to use their professional skills, such as marketing, finance, writing, human resources, IT, etc., to help a nonprofit.

vice program is good for employee development and helps advance the company's community involvement goals, all the while bringing much-needed capacity to nonprofit organizations."

A more detailed review of the research highlights follows.

Reasons for Participation

Employee volunteers were asked to provide their reasons for participating in pro bono service, while their managers were asked to give their reasons for allowing the employee's participation.

The top three reasons given by both survey groups were:

- ◆ To serve the community;
- ◆ Personal satisfaction; and
- ◆ To help support the company's image and reputation in the community.

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Research Methodology

This research was commissioned by Capital One in partnership with the Taproot Foundation. It was conducted by LBG Associates from January through September of 2009. Participating companies were Capital One, Genworth Financial, Gap Inc., Booz Allen Hamilton, SAP, and Accenture. Within each participating company, three audiences were identified—employees, managers, and senior executives. For the research, two methodologies—phone interviews and online surveys—were used. The surveys were emailed to a group of employees at each company who had participated in a pro bono service project. A total of 43 employees completed the online survey. Of these, 19 were interviewed. Similarly, 20 managers completed the survey and 15 were interviewed. Finally, 11 executives participated in one-on-one interviews. ❖

Skills Enhanced as a Result of Pro Bono Service	Employees	Managers
Communication	61%	20%
Networking	58%	40%
Problem-solving	56%	40%
Leadership	49%	75%
Team-building	41%	55%

Pro Bono Service Improved Job Skills

The majority of the employees surveyed said pro bono service participation allowed them to enhance their communication skills. The second-highest percentage said it helped improve their networking.

The managers had a somewhat different impression of how the pro bono service experience had enhanced employees' skills. They saw more of an improvement in leadership and team-building abilities. (See the table above.)

Despite the diverging opinions on precisely which skills employees improved after participating, there is no doubt that the pro bono service experience **resulted in job-related benefits for the employees and their managers**—which ultimately benefit the company as well.

Job-related Benefits of Participation

When asked to cite the job-related benefits of pro bono service participation, the largest group of employees (76%) said that pro bono service gave them expanded visibility within the company. The largest portion of the managers (70%) believed pro bono service improved em-

Pro Bono Service Is Good for Employee Relations:
The majority of employees and managers said that pro bono service made the employee feel better about working at the company.

ployees' happiness on the job or job satisfaction. (See the table below.)

It is important to note that more than half of both groups said the experience made employees feel better about working at the company—another indication that these programs can result in business benefits such as improved employee morale or retention.

Why It's Important Companies Have a Pro Bono Service Program

When asked to rate (on a 1-3 scale) the reasons it is important for companies to have a
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Job-related Benefits of Engaging in Pro Bono Service	Employees	Managers
Expanded visibility within the company	76%	55%
Improved or expanded social relationships in the company	66%	40%
Improved happiness on the job, or job satisfaction	61%	70%
Employee feels better about working at the company	54%	55%

Top-rated Reasons for Having a Pro Bono Service Program (rated on a 1-3 scale)	Employees' Average Rating	Managers' Average Rating
To improve the health and well being of the community	2.77	2.80
To enhance the company's image and reputation in the community	2.74	2.75
To create new community relationships	2.63	2.55
To enhance the company's image and reputation among employees	2.35	2.60
To build employee morale	2.31	2.35
To build customer loyalty and goodwill	2.26	2.20
To promote teamwork to accomplish jobs	2.07	2.05

pro bono service program, the top four reasons for both employees and managers were the following (see the table above):

- ◆ To improve the health and well being of the community;
- ◆ To enhance the company's image and reputation in the community;
- ◆ To create new community relationships;
- ◆ To enhance the company's image and reputation among employees.

Agreement on Major Beliefs

Regarding attitudes and beliefs related to pro bono service, most or all of the employees and managers agreed with the following statements:

- ◆ Getting employees more involved in the community is a way to build culture and values within the firm.
- ◆ The pro bono service program is a win-

win-win, benefiting employees, the company, and the community.

- ◆ The pro bono service program is about the business supporting and encouraging staff involvement in the community for mutual benefit.
- ◆ Pro bono service programs that use and hone skills are an effective and inexpensive professional-development tool.

Pro Bono Service's Effect on Recruitment and Retention

The majority of both employees—70%—and managers—80%—believed the pro bono service program could enhance recruitment of new employees.

The percentages diverged a bit more regarding the effect of pro bono service on retention: 49% of employees and 60% of managers believed employees are more likely to stay with the company because of the pro bono service program.

Senior Executive Interviews

LBG Associates conducted phone interviews with 11 senior executives from five of the participating companies. They were asked if they felt it was important for their company to have a pro bono service program. They all responded in the affirmative.

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Pro Bono Service Is Good for Recruitment:
The majority of both employees—70%—and managers—80%—believed the pro bono service program could enhance the recruitment of new employees.

They all also felt that the program was a good fit with their company's culture, business goals, and community involvement strategy. Many noted that the program directly reflected the company's values and was a response to demands from employees, clients, and the community.

The value of the program to the **company** according to the executives interviewed includes:

- ◆ Strengthens the brand;
- ◆ Attracts talent;
- ◆ Retains employees;
- ◆ Helps achieve the business goal of being a leading company;
- ◆ Serves as a training ground;
- ◆ Engages employees;
- ◆ Employees and customers feel better about the company;
- ◆ Results in new business;
- ◆ Good staff development tool;
- ◆ Adds to the pride of staff;
- ◆ "Puts a heart on the organization";
- ◆ Builds the company's reputation in the community;
- ◆ Creates strong word of mouth advertising.

The value to the **employee** according to the executives interviewed includes:

- ◆ Reinforces how important corporate citizenship is, versus employees focusing only on client work and billable hours;
- ◆ Provides opportunities to engage in volunteer activities and derive satisfaction from the initiative;
- ◆ Allows employees to practice their skills in a safe environment;
- ◆ Enables them to make a difference using their workplace skills;
- ◆ Helps them learn new skills or enhance current skills;
- ◆ Expands employee perspectives on how they can use their skills;
- ◆ Provides an opportunity to apply skill sets that they don't use at work;
- ◆ Forges new connections with employees in other parts of the company.

The value to the **community** according to the executives interviewed includes:

- ◆ The organization gets to partner with a committed company that understands the benefit of being a good corporate citizen;

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There Are Some Challenges...

Although the research respondents were very enthusiastic about pro bono service, they mentioned a number of challenges that need to be addressed if a formalized pro bono service program is to be as effective as possible. These included:

- ◆ **Ensuring that middle and senior managers support the program and facilitate securing the necessary time and team requirements:**
 - * Some employees reported that it was difficult to recruit other employees, and that they did not have the internal support needed to appropriately staff the project.
- ◆ **Making sure employees know about the program and understand its value to the company.**
- ◆ **Effectively communicating the pro bono service program's alignment with the company's business values and community needs to attain buy-in and increase participation.**
- ◆ **Reassuring participating employees that their jobs are secure:**
 - * Many employees felt their jobs could be in jeopardy if they were seen volunteering during the workday.
- ◆ **Overcoming obstacles created by nonprofit partners:**
 - * A number of employees expressed frustration at some nonprofits' disorganization; inadequate needs assessment; slow decision-making processes; and failure to execute tasks in a timely fashion. ❖

- ◆ Provides access to skills that the organizations don't possess or can't afford to buy;
- ◆ Teaches them skills that help them run their businesses more effectively and efficiently;
- ◆ Helps nonprofits succeed and be more impactful.

Employee Demographics

Forty-three employees completed the LBG Associates survey. The largest group (32%) were those holding Manager titles. (See chart, below left.)

In regard to their departments, 30% were in the IT department; 42% were in Brand/Marketing/Communications; 16% were from HR; and 12% were from the Finance department.

The plurality had been engaged in pro bono service for six to 12 months. (See chart, below right.)

Manager Demographics

Twenty managers completed the online survey. Forty percent (eight people), were from the Brand/Marketing/Communication area; another 40% were from the IT department; and two (10%) each were from Human Resources and Finance.

Conclusions

The pro bono service program is definitely considered a worthwhile endeavor by all three stakeholder groups—executives, managers, and employees. It is a win-win-win for the company, community, and employees.

From a *company* perspective, it has many benefits, including recruiting and retaining employees, enhancing a company's reputation and brand in the community, and attracting new customers.

From a *community* perspective, there is unanimous agreement that pro bono service improves the health and well being of the community, which then impacts the company in return.

For *employees*, there appears to be no doubt in either the employees', their managers', or senior executives' minds that this program can not only help employees develop new skills and strengthen existing ones, but also give them the opportunity to push their creative thinking and expand beyond their comfort zones in a protected environment. ❖

For more information on this study or any of LBG Associates' other research reports, please contact Dr. Gornitsky at 203-325-3164 or by email at lbqassoc@gmail.com.

