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## **BUSINESS SUPPORT FOR EMPLOYEE VOLUNTEERS IN CANADA: RESULTS OF A NATIONAL SURVEY**

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### **A. INTRODUCTION**

Late in 2005, Imagine Canada<sup>1</sup> and the University of Lethbridge<sup>2</sup> commissioned Pollara Inc.<sup>3</sup> to conduct a nation-wide survey in order to examine the level and quality of business support for employee volunteers in Canada. The results of the survey, entitled *Business Support for Employee Volunteers in Canada: Results of a National Survey* (the “Report”), were released in 2006 and the key findings are highlighted in this *Charity Law Bulletin* (“Bulletin”). All told, 990 companies and dozens of employee volunteers participated in the survey (the “survey”), in focus groups and in detailed interviews, which culminated in “the first comprehensive portrait of business support for employee volunteers in Canada.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Imagine Canada, online: <http://www.imaginecanada.ca/>.

<sup>2</sup> University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada, online: <http://www.uleth.ca/>.

<sup>3</sup> Pollara Inc., Strategic Public Opinion and Market Research, online: <http://www.pollara.ca/>.

<sup>4</sup> Imagine Canada’s Knowledge Development Centre. *Business Support for Employee Volunteers in Canada: Results of a National Survey*, (Toronto, 2006) at 1. The Report is available online on the Knowledge Development Centre’s website at: <http://www.kdc-cdc.ca/display.aspx?pid=36&cid=54>. The Report notes that “Imagine Canada’s Knowledge Development Centre is funded through the Community Participation Directorate of the Department of Canadian Heritage as part of the Canada Volunteerism Initiative.”

The authors of the Report noted that they used “the terms business, company, and corporation interchangeably to refer to for-profit businesses. Volunteering was defined for the survey respondents as unpaid work for a charity or nonprofit organization.”<sup>5</sup>

Noting that while Canada has one of the world’s “largest and most vibrant charitable and nonprofit sectors in the world,”<sup>6</sup> the voluntary sector nevertheless faces ongoing and significant difficulties in recruiting and retaining volunteers. In that regard, the Report provides a valuable resource tool for companies, charitable and nonprofit organizations and the government representatives who are interested in the current state of corporate volunteering and what they can do to enhance it.

## B. KEY FINDINGS

The key findings contained in the Report were divided into six sections, each of which is summarized separately below:

- ◆ Previous research in employee volunteering
- ◆ The survey
- ◆ Support for employee volunteering
- ◆ Corporate volunteer programs
- ◆ Benefits and challenges of employee volunteering
- ◆ Company size and region

### 1. Previous research on employee volunteering

Studies generally reveal that for-profit companies have been feeling increasingly compelled to demonstrate, particularly to consumers, that they are socially responsible.<sup>7</sup> This may help to explain the recent steady rise throughout Canada and the United States in corporate support for employee volunteering. It acts “as a tool for companies to highlight their social responsibility and to build value in the communities in which they do business.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, a 2002 U.S. study conducted by the Points of

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, citing Hall, M. H., Barr C. W., Easwaramoorthy, M., Sokolowski, S. W., and Salamon, L. M. (2005). *The Canadian nonprofit and voluntary sector in comparative perspective*. Toronto: Imagine Canada.

<sup>7</sup> *Supra* note 4 at 3, citing Abratt, R. and Sacks, D. (1988). The marketing challenge: Towards being profitable and socially responsible. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 7, 497-508; and Mahoney, R. (1996). Taking the initiative on stakeholder rights. *Business and Society Review*, 97, 21-26.

<sup>8</sup> *Supra* note 4 at 3, citing Burnes K. and Gonyea, J. G. (2005). *Expanding the boundaries of corporate volunteerism: Retirees as a valuable resource*. Chestnut Hill, MA and Alexandria, VA: Center for Corporate Citizenship at Boston College and Volunteers of America.

Light Foundation revealed a dramatic increase over the course of less than a decade when it found “that the proportion of member organizations that incorporated volunteering into their overall business plans increased from 19% in 1991 to 78% in 1999.”<sup>9</sup>

The findings of approximately ten different research projects demonstrated numerous reasons why companies implemented corporate volunteer programs. For example, companies believed that such programs would:

- ◆ improve relations with the surrounding community;
- ◆ improve the people skills in their staff;
- ◆ create higher levels of employee self-esteem; and
- ◆ boost employee morale and productivity.<sup>10</sup>

A recent Canadian research project showed compelling benefits for companies which implemented corporate volunteer programs, including:

- ◆ enhanced, closer, and more trusting working relationships;
- ◆ higher morale and greater job satisfaction;
- ◆ increased pride and positive feelings about the company;
- ◆ improved corporate image and reputation;
- ◆ enhanced corporate visibility in the community; and
- ◆ increased sales.

Benefits for communities include:

- ◆ enhanced sense of community;
- ◆ improved environment;
- ◆ enhanced life for community members;
- ◆ increased financial and other aid to community organizations; and
- ◆ increased level of community volunteering.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Supra* note 4 at 5.

<sup>10</sup> *Supra* note 4 at 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Supra* note 4 at 3 citing Pancer, S. M., Rog, E., and Baetz, M. C. (2002). *Corporate volunteer programs: Benefits for employees, corporations, and the community*. Toronto: Canadian Centre for Philanthropy.

## 2. The survey

After studying the results of an array of American research, the authors of the Report realized that a comparable Canadian study needed to be done in order to examine the present status of corporate support for employee volunteering and how that related to the promotion of “good corporate citizenship.”

In an effort to fill this gap in information, Imagine Canada and the University of Lethbridge commissioned Pollara Inc. to survey a random sampling of Canadian businesses. Some of the more important aspects of the survey are as follows:

- ◆ A total of 990 interviews were conducted between mid-November and mid-December of 2005, largely with the persons in charge of the company’s employee volunteer program;
- ◆ The three levels of business size were classified as: (1) small (less than 100 employees); (2) medium (100 to 499 employees); and (3) large (500 or more employees);
- ◆ All of the major industries were represented in the survey, with the retail sector having the largest representation; and
- ◆ All regions of Canada were represented, with Ontario having the largest sampling at 45%.

## 3. Support for employee volunteering

Companies were asked whether they actively encouraged, or at least accommodated, employee volunteering during the work day and/or outside working hours. Some of the resulting statistics are as follows:

- ◆ 71% of companies accommodated or encouraged employee volunteering during the work day and/or on employees’ own time;
- ◆ 49% of companies were most likely to encourage employees to volunteer on their own time;
- ◆ 35% of companies accommodated employee volunteering during working hours;
- ◆ 18% of companies actively encouraged employee volunteering during the work day;
- ◆ 3% of companies had a written policy on employee volunteering.<sup>12</sup>

As many people say that they would generally be more apt to volunteer if they had more time, companies are in a position to make a valuable contribution to the voluntary sector by permitting

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<sup>12</sup> *Supra* note 4 at 9.

employees to adjust their work schedule in order to volunteer, or by providing time off with or without pay. In that regard, survey results revealed that:

- ◆ 78% of companies which supported employee volunteering permitted employees to adjust their work schedules;
- ◆ 71% allowed employees to take time off work without pay in order to volunteer; and
- ◆ 29% permitted employees to take time off with pay in order to volunteer.<sup>13</sup>

There are numerous other ways in which businesses can support their employees who want to volunteer. Among those companies which supported employee volunteering:

- ◆ 70% allowed employees access to company facilities and/or equipment;
- ◆ 35% recognized the contributions of employee volunteers;
- ◆ 31% made available to employees information about volunteer opportunities;
- ◆ 20% offered education on the importance of volunteering; and
- ◆ 18% tracked records on the skills and experience of employee volunteers.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to supporting employee volunteering, companies can provide many other forms of support to charitable and nonprofit organizations. Among those companies that were surveyed:

- ◆ 79% made donations or grants to charitable and nonprofit organizations;
- ◆ 74% made donations of services, goods and facilities; and
- ◆ 58% which made donations linked those donations to the volunteer activities of their employees.<sup>15</sup>

The survey revealed that 58% of companies operating in Canada target certain causes with their corporate volunteer projects for reasons including “their broader community investment strategy; the interests of key stakeholders including employees; the nature of their business; their business objectives; or their company vision.”<sup>16</sup> Those surveyed targeted:

- ◆ Health (not hospitals) – 16%
- ◆ Social services – 13%
- ◆ Sports and recreation – 12%

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<sup>13</sup> *Supra* note 4 at 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Supra* note 4 at 11.

<sup>15</sup> *Supra* note 4 at 12.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

- ◆ Hospitals – 7%
- ◆ Education and research – 6%
- ◆ Religion – 4%
- ◆ Grant-making, fundraising and voluntarism promotion – 3%
- ◆ Business and professional associations and unions – 2%
- ◆ International – 2%
- ◆ Environment – 2%
- ◆ Development and housing – 1%
- ◆ Arts and culture – 1%
- ◆ Other – 19%<sup>17</sup>

4. Corporate volunteer programs

Among those surveyed, 14% of companies operated a formal corporate volunteer program with their own company resources. Among that group:

- ◆ 92% allowed employees to adjust their work schedules in order to volunteer;
- ◆ 89% permitted access to the company facilities and equipment;
- ◆ 82% supported employees in volunteering outside of business hours;
- ◆ 75% gave time off without pay;
- ◆ 52% gave time off with pay;
- ◆ 44% accommodated employees who volunteered during working hours; and
- ◆ 38% encouraged employees who volunteered during the work day.<sup>18</sup>

Among the companies which had corporate volunteer programs, 53% of employees volunteered on an individual basis, 18% as a group and 27% did both individual and group volunteering. Group volunteering was considered by many as a means of strengthening employee work teams and of raising the company's community profile.<sup>19</sup>

5. Benefits and challenges of employee volunteering

Companies declared a variety of benefits by supporting employee volunteering:

- ◆ Improves corporate public image – 33%

<sup>17</sup> *Supra* note 4 at 13.

<sup>18</sup> *Supra* note 4 at 15.

<sup>19</sup> *Supra* note 4 at 19.

- ◆ Improves employee morale – 21%
- ◆ Improves relations with surrounding community – 17%
- ◆ Helps maintain a healthy community – 8%
- ◆ Improves employees' skills – 4%
- ◆ Increases teamwork among employees – 3%
- ◆ Improves employees' job performance – 3%
- ◆ Helps attract new employees – 2%
- ◆ Improves understanding of customers – 2%
- ◆ Improves employee retention – 1%
- ◆ Other – 16%<sup>20</sup>

Yet, companies also voiced numerous challenges in their support for employee volunteers:

- ◆ Difficulty covering regular workload – 23%
- ◆ Costs – 3%
- ◆ Lack of support from employees – 2%
- ◆ Difficulty measuring benefits – 1%
- ◆ Managing relationships with voluntary organizations – 1%
- ◆ Lack of support from management – 1%
- ◆ Other – 13%<sup>21</sup>

#### 6. Company size and region

There were few differences in survey results with respect to the region of Canada in which the company operated. Large businesses (with 500 or more employees) were more likely than small (less than 100 employees) or medium-sized businesses (100 to 499 employees) to accommodate or encourage employee volunteering during working hours or on employees' own time. Large companies were also more likely "to be actively engaged in recognizing and facilitating employee volunteer activities"<sup>22</sup> and to target particular kinds of nonprofit organizations and causes with their corporate volunteer activities.

<sup>20</sup> *Supra* note 4 at 21.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Supra* note 4 at 23.

### C. AUTHORS' CONCLUSIONS

The authors of the Report were of the opinion that corporate volunteer programs make a clear and positive impact on companies, their employees, charitable and nonprofit organizations and the surrounding community, but that such formal programs are still in the early stages of development.<sup>23</sup> In order to enhance the value of corporate volunteer initiatives in Canada, the authors made the following recommendations:

Businesses should:

- ♦ initiate volunteer programs themselves rather than merely reacting to requests from employees;
- ♦ develop written policies on employee volunteering;
- ♦ recognize the contributions of employee volunteers;
- ♦ encourage, or at least try to accommodate, employee volunteering during working hours; and
- ♦ consider supporting organizations or causes that are less popular with the corporate sector (*e.g.*, development and housing).

Nonprofit organizations should:

- ♦ collaborate with businesses to provide meaningful opportunities for employee volunteers;
- ♦ recognize the less obvious supports provided by businesses to employee volunteers (*e.g.*, adjustments to work hours or access to company facilities or equipment);
- ♦ develop strategies to accommodate volunteers who are only available during non-working hours;
- ♦ partner with large businesses if they need many volunteers and/or support a cause that is popular with the corporate sector (*e.g.*, health); and
- ♦ approach small businesses for support if they need only a few volunteers and/or support a cause that is less popular with the corporate sector (*e.g.*, environment).

Governments should:

- ♦ promote programs that educate Canadians about the value of volunteers and the importance of nonprofit organizations to Canadian communities;
- ♦ support forums that promote and coordinate greater collaboration between businesses and nonprofit organizations;
- ♦ continue to provide funding for nonprofit organizations to develop volunteer management programs (*e.g.*, through the Canada Volunteer Initiative);

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<sup>23</sup> *Supra* note 4 at 25.



- ◆ fund research on the contributions of both businesses and nonprofit organizations to Canadian communities; and
- ◆ consider providing tax benefits for companies that support employee volunteering.”<sup>24</sup>

**D. CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

The results of the national survey, *Business Support for Employee Volunteers in Canada*, reveals valuable information relating to reasons why corporate volunteering has been steadily increasing throughout North America, particularly over the past decade. As for-profit companies seek to enhance their reputations in the community and among consumers, some have demonstrated social responsibility by initiating a formal employee volunteer program. The Report highlights the many benefits which result from employees lending a hand in their communities, such as improved corporate image and reputation, improved people skills for the staff members involved, and enhanced lives in the community. The Report also mentions a few concerns which companies reported, such as difficulty in employees covering their regular workload if they volunteered during the work day. Nevertheless, the results of the survey clearly demonstrate the decisive impact which corporate volunteer programs have on companies, employees, community organizations and the wider community. A joint effort among companies, the voluntary sector and the government to enhance business support for employee volunteering would make a vital difference in Canada’s charitable and not-for-profit sector.

<sup>24</sup> *Supra* note 4 at 27 – 28.