Volunteering Promotes Company, Employee and Community Health

By Karen O’Hara

Employees who voluntarily participate in community projects are generally healthier, happier and have better morale than non-volunteers. Rather than feel victimized by negativity and helplessness, studies show volunteers tend to view the world with a more positive outlook.

Richard Davidson, Ph.D., a neuroscientist who founded the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, says outlook on life is one of the four essential components of well-being.

“Well-being is fundamentally no different than learning to play the cello. If one practices the skills of well-being, one will get better at it,” Davidson said. “Based on our research, well-being has four constituents that have each received serious scientific attention—outlook, resilience, paying attention and generosity.

“Each of these four is rooted in neural circuits, and each of these neural circuits exhibits plasticity, so we know that if we exercise these circuits, they will strengthen. Practicing these four skills can provide the substrate for enduring change, which can help promote higher levels of well-being in our lives.”

Many countries are now experiencing the benefits to be gained when individuals are provided the necessary means to undertake voluntary action in their own communities.

―Ad de Raad, former Executive Coordinator, United Nations Volunteers Program
For example, at a conference on *Mindfulness & Well-Being at Work*, Davidson referred to data showing that adults who engage in generous and altruistic behavior activate well-being circuits in the brain in a way that is more enduring than their response to other positive incentives such as winning a game or earning a prize.

**The Workplace Connection**

In their role as corporate citizens, many companies support employee volunteerism in order to give something back to their customers and the communities in which they operate. In turn, they benefit from improved workforce health and measurable impacts on the bottom line. Related advantages include:

- a positive halo effect on brand and market visibility
- enhanced ability to attract qualified job applicants who care about altruism
- increased opportunities for employees to acquire skills or use their expertise while volunteering

Volunteerism is also connected to attitudes and engagement at work.

“People Leave Managers, Not Companies” is a chapter in the book, *The Type B Manager: Leading Successfully in a Type A World*. The author, Victor Lipman, says “vast numbers of employees are disengaged,” meaning they are “not emotionally committed to the organizations they work for, and therefore in all likelihood not highly motivated and fully productive.”

People quit jobs for all kinds of reasons. However, according to Lipman, when it comes to engagement and retention, the manager-employee relationship has a particularly influential role. The nature of the boss-employee relationship ranks number one on about.com’s top-10 list of reasons why people quit their jobs. The remaining reasons, including overall corporate culture, feeling bored and lacking in autonomy, are inter-related.

According to Sarah Ford, marketing manager at America’s Charities: “Instituting an employee volunteer and skills-giving program can help your organization address all of these reasons.” *America’s Charities* is an organization dedicated to connecting employers with non-profit groups to help engage employees in giving.

The following are some of the ways Ford said employees can be encouraged to become givers, in turn providing a sense of engagement, boosting self-esteem, and promoting mental and physical health:

1. Organize weekend outings in which frontline workers and managers collaborate on a community project.
2. Demonstrate social responsibility. This may involve a combination of volunteer projects, workplace giving programs and matching-gift opportunities to offer employees a sense of purpose and help them feel more connected.
3. Create venues in which employees can use their professional skills, such as providing low-income families and seniors free legal or financial advice, or performing home repairs.

**The Business Case**

Company-sponsored volunteer programs tend to be more successful when they match employee interests with business goals and community or non-profit group needs. To assess the value of such programs, companies typically track metrics such as...
In a recent article, Ford of American’s Charities presents a business case for employee volunteer and skills-giving programs that links volunteerism with improved retention rates and potential associated savings of $1,000 to $6,000 per employee. Return-on-investment calculations involve factors such as average turnover rates, service disruption and recruitment costs.

Ford cites a number of studies including:

- A PwC report on corporate responsibility and employee engagement that suggests the most committed employees put in 57 percent more effort on the job and are 87 percent less likely to resign than employees who consider themselves disengaged.
- A 2010-11 Gallup study that found organizations with an average of 9.3 engaged employees for every actively disengaged employee experienced 147 percent higher earnings per share (EPS) when compared with their competition. Those with an average of 2.6 engaged employees for every actively disengaged employee experienced 2 percent lower EPS. Gallup estimates that actively disengaged employees cost the U.S. $450 to $550 billion a year in lost productivity.

In the introduction to a Your Brain at Work webinar, the Center for Healthy Minds reports that distractions and low well-being levels account for an estimated $650 billion in annual losses in the U.S.

Independent Sector, a network supporting collaboration among non-profit organizations, foundations and corporations, estimates an hour of volunteer time is worth $23.07 per hour. The value of volunteer time is based on hourly earnings among all production and non-supervisory workers on private non-farm payrolls, as reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Independent Sector indexes this figure to determine state-specific values and increases it by 12 percent to account for fringe benefits.

In 2010, Points of Light, an international organization dedicated to volunteer service, found that companies with top-ranked volunteer programs invested an average of $179 per employee per year, ranging as low as $18 and as high as $800. For a company with 50 employees, Ford estimates it would cost a total of $900 to $8,950 a year to implement an employee volunteer program—much less than it costs to replace a disengaged employee who quits.

In addition, she notes, Financial Accounting Standards Board rules allow the value of volunteer services to be used on certain financial statements when an individual voluntarily performs a specialized skill for a non-profit group. The calculation depends on whether the organization would

1. Participate in a charity walk, fun run or race.
2. Coach a youth sports league.
3. Sign up as a dog walker or adoption volunteer at a local animal shelter.
4. Take travel to the next level with a volunteer vacation.
5. Join a work crew to help build affordable housing; water, sanitation or irrigation systems; community gardens, playgrounds or hiking trails.
6. Help out at a local food bank.
7. Visit nursing homes or be a companion to an elderly person.
8. Mentor a foster child or support programs for at-risk youths.
9. Join a childhood reading or adult literacy project.
10. Create pathways for volunteering at work—start a walking club, plan a community project, connect with local non-profit organizations.
have purchased the services if they had not been donated.

“More than ever, charities are better positioned and interested in partnering with companies and engaging with corporate employees,” Ford said. “However, as a survey respondent stated in America’s Charities 2014 Snapshot Report: Rising Tide of Expectations, ‘Companies shouldn’t look at their work with non-profits as transactional events but rather as building a relationship with a trusted go-to partner that is working to achieve mutual goals.’”

Attributes of Successful Programs

There is not a one-size-fits-all model for corporate volunteer programs. They may reside in company-affiliated foundations, human resource departments, the general counsel’s office or the C-suite. Some large companies have paid staff, while smaller organizations with resource constraints may use employee-volunteers to manage their programs.

Excellent employee volunteer programs seem to share certain attributes, with leadership commitment a consistent driver. Other common success factors include:

1. Staff dedicated to organizing and developing volunteer opportunities and relationships with non-profit and other receptive organizations.
2. Alignment with the company’s business goals.
3. Projects selected on the basis of demonstrated need and causes employees feel passionate about.
4. Volunteers deployed to maximize use of their professional skills.
5. Materials, tools and infrastructure (e.g., marketing, meeting rooms) available in the company are repurposed for volunteer projects.
6. Technology is leveraged for outreach, signups, tracking volunteer hours and reporting.
7. Volunteers are recognized at company events and via intranet forums.
8. Valid formulas are used to estimate return on investment in volunteerism.

Win-Win on Return to Work

In some cases, non-profit organizations in need of help and employers with challenging return-to-work environments collaborate to place injured workers with temporary physical restrictions in safe jobs that would normally be filled by volunteers. These arrangements typically allow employees to continue to be paid for work during their recovery, with the added motivation of supporting a worthy cause.

ReEmployAbility, a company that uses a national network of non-profit partners to provide transitional work assignments, said “win-win” job-matching models such as the one it uses comply with state and federal employment regulations.
Rebecca Shafer, an attorney and workers’ compensation specialist with Amaxx Risk Solutions, a workers’ compensation resource center, has found off-site transitional duty assignments help reduce workers’ compensation costs by lowering indemnity payments, minimizing impacts on experience modification ratings and allowing occupational medicine professionals to monitor employees’ progress during recovery. An employer also may be able to claim the salary paid during the transitional work assignment as a deductible charitable donation.

In a 2013 blog, Shafer told employers: “Through the off-site program, you will substantially increase the odds that the injured employee will return to work for you.” She recommends the following to obtain optimal results:

• Select organizations where positions can be adapted to meet employees’ work restrictions.
• Establish a definite start and anticipated end date.
• Clearly state the assignment is temporary.
• Communicate goals to the employee, the non-profit organization, claims adjustor and nurse case manager (if assigned).
• Allow job duties at a non-profit organization to be expanded as the worker recovers and a physician or other medical professional adjusts restrictions.

Most employees with temporary physical restrictions can return to work with a few simple modifications to their work environment, schedule or duties, according to the federal Office of Disability Employment Policy.

Good Feelings Grounded in Science

To validate the health benefits of volunteering, Tracy Hoover, chief executive officer of Points of Light, defers to scientific evidence:

1. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and observational studies show the “joy of giving” has an anatomical basis in the brain. Refer to Inner Working of the Magnanimous Mind, National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke.
2. In a study on adult well-being, researchers found that happiness derived from leading a life full of purpose and meaning seems to protect health at the cellular level, while happiness derived from pleasure or self-gratification does not. Refer to A functional genomic perspective on human well-being, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, Vol. 11, No. 33, August 2013.
3. Helping others appears to reduce stress and, in turn, reduce the association between stress and mortality. Refer to Giving to others and the association between stress and mortality, Am J Public Health, Sept. 2013.
4. A similar study shows that people who volunteer may live longer than those who don’t, as long as their primary reasons for volunteering are altruistic and help fulfill a need for social connection and are not overtly self-serving. Refer to Motives for Volunteering are Associated with Mortality Risk in Older Adults, Health Psychology, Vol. 31, No. 1.
5. Multiple studies show that loneliness, or lack of social connection, is harmful to health. Genes that are affected by social connection are linked to immune response, inflammation and recovery from illness. People who gain a sense of connectedness from volunteering tend to be more resilient to disease, less anxious and depressed, and have higher self-esteem. Refer to Connect to Thrive Infographic, Emma Seppala, Ph.D., Center for Compassion and Altruism Research & Education, Sanford University.

“No wonder 62 million volunteers gave at least an hour a week of their time to others last year in this country,” Hoover said. “They know what’s good for them—and now we have scientific proof.”

“Employers should think creatively and work with employees to identify what they need to resume working quickly and productively,” federal officials said.
The prospect of nodding off while driving is scary.

In a recent development, a study has found that commercial truck drivers with obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) who failed to comply with recommended treatment had a rate of serious, preventable crashes five times higher than drivers without OSA. Meanwhile, the crash rate of drivers with sleep apnea who were fully or partially adherent with treatment was statistically similar to a control group.

The study involved 1,613 truck drivers with OSA and an equal number of drivers without OSA who were matched by job experience and tenure. Drivers who were diagnosed with sleep apnea were prescribed positive airway pressure (PAP) therapy and given an auto-adjusting machine that could be used at home or in their sleeper berth while on the road. Researchers downloaded data from the machine’s internal memory chip.

What is OSA?

Sleep apnea is a respiratory disorder. Many people associate it with snoring, gasping and lapses in breathing while asleep. It causes excessive daytime sleepiness and affects attention, memory, vigilance and response. Many people don’t realize they have sleep apnea and are undiagnosed. The American Academy of Sleep Medicine estimates OSA afflicts at least 25 million adults in the U.S.

Risk factors for developing OSA include obesity, male gender, advancing age, family history, large neck circumference and narrow throat. Recommended treatment and therapies for OSA include losing weight, using an oral breathing device such as a nasal dilator, or continuous positive airway pressure, which requires users to wear a mask. Medications typically are not prescribed and surgery is generally not advised unless other treatments have failed.

Medical Exam Requirements

Although commercial truck drivers undergo a mandatory biennial exam to determine their medical fitness to safely operate a vehicle, there are no mandatory standards for OSA screening or diagnosis.

“The results of our study support the establishment of OSA screening standards for all drivers through the commercial driver’s medical exam,” said lead author Stephen V. Burks, professor of economics and management and principal investigator of the Truckers & Turnover Project at the University of Minnesota, Morris.

Speaking of Sleep – There’s a Shortage of It

More than a third of American adults are not getting enough sleep on a regular basis, according to the first study to document estimates of self-reported healthy sleep duration for all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

The American Academy of Sleep Medicine and the Sleep Research Society recommend that adults aged 18 to 60 years sleep at least seven hours a day to promote optimal health and well-being. Sleeping less than seven hours is associated with an increased risk of anxiety and developing chronic conditions such as obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke.

“As a nation we are not getting enough sleep,” said Wayne Giles, M.D., director of the CDC’s Division of Population Health. “Lifestyle changes such as going to bed at the same time each night; rising at the same time each morning; and turning off or removing televisions, computers and mobile devices from the bedroom can help people get the healthy sleep they need.”

Citation: Prevalence of Healthy Sleep Duration Among Adults — United States, 2014, MMWR, Vol. 65(6), Feb. 19, 2016.
“Mandating screening, diagnosis and treatment would reduce large truck and bus accidents, and therefore deaths and injuries among the motoring public,” added Stefanos Kales, associate professor in the Department of Environmental Health at the Harvard Chan School and senior study author. “It’s estimated that up to 20 percent of all large truck crashes are due to drowsy or fatigued driving.”

Notice of Proposed Rulemaking

Publication of the OSA trucker study corresponds with the release of an Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking jointly issued by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) and the Federal Railway Administration (FRA) to solicit public comments on a proposal to specifically address OSA as part of mandatory medical exams. The FRA is also working on a rule that would require certain railroads to establish fatigue management plans.

Under current rules, an individual may be physically qualified to drive a commercial vehicle if he or she has no established medical history or clinical diagnosis of a respiratory dysfunction such as emphysema, asthma, chronic bronchitis or sleep apnea. If a medical examiner detects a respiratory dysfunction that is likely to affect safe operations, the driver may be referred to a specialist for further evaluation and therapy, or the medical examiner may request additional information from the applicant and treating physician about management of the driver’s OSA.

However, regulators say current guidance “is not helpful if the medical examiner does not have sufficient experience or information to suspect the driver may have OSA,” or if a driver neglects to tell the examiner about a sleep apnea diagnosis.

Citation: Non-Adherence with Employer-Mandated Sleep Apnea Treatment and Increased Risk of Serious Truck Crashes; Stephen V. Burks, et al.; Sleep, March 2016.

Not Feeling Sleepy? Watch What You Eat

Foods that provide carbohydrates and trigger production of the amino acid tryptophan have a calming effect on the brain. The body converts tryptophan into the hormones serotonin and melatonin, which have sleep-inducing effects.

In addition, certain minerals are known to be effective natural remedies for insomnia. Calcium promotes the manufacture of melatonin, while magnesium deficiency is linked to insomnia and lack of iron is associated with restless leg syndrome.

To help promote a good night’s sleep, try these foods and combinations:

- Dairy products
- Whole grain cereal with almonds, seeds, cherries, bananas, milk and honey
- Peanut butter on whole grain bread
- Apple and cheese (not hard cheese)
- Yogurt with granola
- Eggs
- Fish high in magnesium
- Vegetables high in iron
- Pasta with cream-based sauce
- Whole wheat pita bread with hummus
- Certain types of herb teas

Before bedtime, it helps to avoid caffeinated beverages and alcohol; certain hard cheeses and processed or smoked meats; foods that are acidic or spicy, contain MSG or are high in processed sugar; and fatty fried foods.
Regulatory Update

The following is an update on federal regulatory activity affecting U.S. employers.

1-Bromopropane Assessment

A new EPA draft risk assessment for 1-Bromopropane (1-BP) indicates health risks for workers with repeated and chronic exposures to the chemical, including neurotoxicity; kidney, liver and reproductive toxicity; and lung cancer. The EPA estimates up to 48,900 workers and occupational non-users are potentially exposed to 1-BP in spray adhesives, dry cleaning and spot cleaning applications, and degreasing operations. The draft document is available for download at Regulations.gov.

A related draft document, Criteria for a Recommended Standard: Occupational Exposure to 1-Bromopropane (1-BP), includes a proposed recommended exposure limit of 0.3 ppm (1.5 mg/m3 of air) as an 8-hour time-weighted average concentration during a 40-hour work week. The draft also contains safe-handling recommendations for 1-BP.

Medical Exams

Interstate commercial motor vehicle (CMV) operators must be examined and certified to drive by a medical professional at least once every two years. Effective April 20, 2016, examiners are required to use the following updated forms:

- Medical Examination Report Form (MCSA-5875), a long form completed as part of the exam.
- Medical Examiners’ Certificate (MCSA-5876), a short form usually referred to as the Department of Transportation (DOT) card.
- CMV Driver Medical Examination Results Form (MCSA-5850), an electronic form examiners complete online to report exam results to the FMCSA. Paper copies are not required.

To learn more about medical exam requirements, refer to WorkCare’s resource page.

Driver Training

The FMCSA has published a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking introducing mandatory national training standards for entry-level commercial truck and bus operators. Applicants seeking a Class-A license would be required to complete at least 30 hours of behind-the-wheel training from an approved instructional program, including a minimum of 10 hours on a practice driving range. Class-B license applicants would be required to obtain a minimum of 15 hours of behind-the-wheel training, including at least seven hours of practice-range training. Military drivers, farmers and firefighters would remain generally exempt from federal requirements.

Food and Drug Administration

Produce & Medical Device Safety

The FDA is requesting $5.1 billion to protect and promote public health as part of the president’s Fiscal Year 2017 budget—an 8 percent increase over the enacted FY 2016 budget. The request includes funds for continued implementation of the most sweeping overhaul of the country’s food safety system since the first federal food safety law was passed in 1906. This includes efforts to establish enforceable safety standards for produce farms. Funds to improve the safety and quality of medical products also are included in the budget request, along with support for the development of a virtual Oncology Center of Excellence.
The United States Pharmacopeial Convention has issued a new standard intended to help prevent exposures to hazardous drugs. A new general chapter has been added to the United States Pharmacopeia-National Formulary (USP-NF): <800> Hazardous Drugs—Handling in Healthcare Settings. It applies to all health care personnel facilities where hazardous drugs are handled or manipulated, including their storage and distribution. In the U.S., an estimated 8 million health care workers are annually exposed to hazardous drugs. Health care facilities have until June 1, 2018, to comply.
Long Work Hours Linked to Cardiovascular Disease Risk

Working long hours may increase risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD), according to a study published in the March 2016 edition of the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*.

Researchers analyzed the relationship between work hours and CVD using data on more than 1,900 participants who were employed for at least 10 years. During the study, angina, coronary heart disease or heart failure, heart attack, high blood pressure or stroke occurred among 43 percent of participants.

Risk of CVD events increased by 1 percent for each additional hour worked per week over at least 10 years, after adjustment for age, sex, racial/ethnic group and pay status. Dr. Sadie H. Conway of the University of Texas Health Sciences Center, Houston, and colleagues found:

- Risk increased as hours approached 40 among subjects who worked more than 30 hours per week.
- Risk decreased between 40 and 45 hours per week.
- Beginning at 46 hours, increasing work hours were progressively associated with increased risk of CVD.
- Compared to people who averaged 45 hours per week for 10 years or longer, overall CVD risk increased by 16 percent for those who worked 55 hours per week and by 35 percent for those who worked 60 hours per week.

“This study provides a foundation for CVD prevention efforts focused on work schedule practices, which may reduce the risk of CVD for millions of working Americans,” Conway said.

**Citation:** Dose-response Relation Between Work Hours and Cardiovascular Disease Risk: Findings from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics; S Conway, et al.; *J Occup Environ Med*. 2016;58(3):221-6.

Opioid Prescription Guidelines Issued

A new *Guideline for Prescribing Opioids for Chronic Pain, United States, 2016* will help physicians ensure the safest and most effective treatment for their patients, according to officials from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
An average of 44 people die each day in the U.S. from prescription painkiller overdoses. A significant percentage of these fatalities are linked to chronic pain associated with work-related injuries and disability.

The guideline is intended for use in outpatient settings by primary care providers, who reportedly account for nearly half of all opioid prescriptions. The guideline offers specific information on medication selection, dosage, duration, and when and how to assess progress and discontinue medication.

Study Pinpoints Industries with Hearing Hazards

Hazardous noise affects approximately 22 million U.S. workers.

A new study from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) features detailed, self-reported information on hearing difficulty, tinnitus (ringing in the ears) and exposures to occupational noise in various industries.

Among U.S. workers never exposed to noise on the job, 7 percent had hearing difficulty, 5 percent had tinnitus and 2 percent had both conditions. Among workers who have been exposed to occupational noise, the prevalence was 23 percent, 15 percent and 9 percent, respectively.

In addition, workers in:

- Agriculture, forestry, and fishing and hunting industries had a significantly higher risk of hearing difficulty, tinnitus and their co-occurrence.
- Manufacturing had significantly higher risks for tinnitus and co-occurrence.
- Life, physical and social science occupations, and personal care and service occupations had significantly higher risks for hearing difficulty.
- Architecture and engineering occupations had significantly higher risks for tinnitus.
- Sales and related occupations had significantly lower risks for hearing difficulty, tinnitus and their co-occurrence.

“Hearing loss can greatly impact a worker’s overall health and well-being,” said NIOSH Director John Howard, M.D. “Hazardous levels of occupational noise exposure and environmental noise exposure both need to be avoided.”


Ebola Threat Diminishes

While the Zika virus is spreading, the Emergency Committee of the World Health Organization has determined Ebola transmission in West Africa is no longer “a Public Health Emergency of International Concern.” The committee found the risk of international spread is low, and that affected countries have the capacity to respond rapidly to new virus emergencies. The committee emphasized that there should be no restrictions on travel and trade with Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

To learn more about the Zika virus, travel precautions and prevention, visit the CDC’s Zika website and refer to WorkCare’s Fact.
What Color is Your Workspace?

Much attention is paid to color combinations in marketing and branding in order to attract buyers and convey the right image. But do colors—like the weather—affect mood?

Many psychologists are skeptical, but Kendra Cherry, a psychosocial rehabilitation specialist, cites some interesting findings from studies that suggest colors influence behavior. For example:

- People taking warm-colored, non-medicinal placebo pills reported better health results than those taking cool-colored placebo pills.
- Blue-toned streetlights appear to help reduce street crimes.
- Sports teams dressed in mostly black uniforms are more likely to receive penalties.
- Among college students taking a brief test, those who were given a red participant number scored at least 20 percent lower than those presented with a green or black number.

In addition, a University of Texas study found that among working women, offices painted in gray, beige or white tones reportedly induced feelings of sadness and depression, while men reacted more negatively to purple and orange shades in workspaces.

The following are some workplace recommendations from color and design experts:

**Blue and Green**
These low wave-length colors are believed to improve efficiency and focus and induce a sense of calmness and well-being. Blue has been shown to lower heart rates. Green helps reduce anxiety and is restful for eyes, making it a good choice for computer monitor backgrounds.

**Gray**
The color gray is found to make people feel passive, uninvolved and low in energy. When in a gray environment or wearing gray, it helps to offset it with brightly colored accents.

**Orange**
Research has found that orange increases oxygen supply, produces an energizing effect and stimulates brain activity. It may be a suitable color choice for places where collaborative teams meet.

**Red**
In many workplaces it’s best to reserve the color red for fire extinguishers, first aid boxes and warning signs. However, red is known to stimulate activity and get hearts pumping, making it a popular color in fitness facilities and other high-energy environments.

**White**
When paired with natural light, an uncluttered white work space contributes to a sense of spaciousness and helps stimulate creativity. It is also associated with cleanliness.

**Yellow**
Yellow is believed to inspire optimism and innovative thinking. It is often found where artists, writers, designers and other creative professionals work. However, it reflects a lot of light and may contribute to eye fatigue.

Sources: About Health, Entrepreneur, Inc. and Science of People