

Employee volunteering growing rapidly, communities and corporates reap benefits

While still an immature industry in South Africa, employee volunteering is growing rapidly in the country and punching above its weight given the positive impact it has on staff morale and community involvement. This is according to Andy Hadfield, CEO of [forgood](#), a social impact online platform that connects people to causes.



Discussing employee volunteerism at the Trialogue Business in Society Conference 2019 were (left to right) moderator Andy Hadfield, CEO of [forgood](#), with panellists Brenda Nkosi-Bakare, head of Sasol Group Social Investment and Community Affairs; Charlene Lackay, group CSI manager for MMI Holdings; and Gill Bates, CEO Charities Aid Foundation Southern Africa.

Hadfield recently moderated a panel discussion on employee volunteerism programmes, at the Trialogue Business in Society 2019 Conference. Hadfield said more than 20,000 corporate employees and 400 not-for-profit organisations (NPOs) are registered with [forgood](#). “In 2017 we tracked 80 connections a month between employees and NPOs around meaningful events,” said Hadfield. “In 2018 there were 422 connections/month – a 500% increase.”

Hadfield’s experience is backed up by the [Volunteer Activity Survey 2014 report](#) published by Stats SA. This reflected 2.2 million volunteers in 2014 compared to 1.3 million in 2010, an increase of about 898,000 people. The number of volunteered hours increased from 419.2 million in 2010 to 610.4 million in 2014.

Recent [Trialogue research](#), conducted with 74 leading South African companies for the 2017/2018 financial year, revealed that 80% of corporates had formal employee volunteer programmes in place in 2018. Over 60% had volunteering policies and 46% designated full or part-time staff to manage volunteering.

Benefits of employee volunteerism

During the panel discussion at the conference, Charlene Lackay, group CSI manager for MMI Holdings, said the benefits of employee volunteerism include staff recruitment, retention and engagement. It also enables employees to connect with communities. “Many people would like to act as fully engaged citizens, but feel they don’t have the means. Corporates can create that enabling space so that people can make a contribution.”

Panellist Brenda Nkosi-Bakare, head of Sasol Group Social Investment and Community Affairs, added that corporate support for employee volunteering enables staff members to feel more fulfilled and a part of a caring organisation, which makes them ambassadors for the organisation. “At Sasol we look at our employees holistically as they are key contributors with Sasol to shared value in society. In this regard, we enable them to give to causes of their choice. This is one of the key principles of our employee volunteering framework.”

Sasol offers employees 40 hours (five working days) of volunteer leave in addition to normal leave. Its employee volunteer programme is designed to enable staff to contribute to causes they are passionate about. “We support employees on giving ideas through our Sasol for Good volunteering platform, show them how to work on a proposal, give them and their causes training, and connect them to causes and people who may mentor or help them to fulfil their passion. In turn they feel they are part of a company that cares for them.”



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Incentives gaining traction

While many companies have in the past not been in favour of incentives for volunteers, Lackay said incentives are now gaining traction. “It creates more awareness of volunteering. We’ve also found that employees are not interested in incentives for themselves, but (are interested) if the benefits go to the NPO that is helping the community.”

Dialogue research shows that most corporates (98%) ran company-organised volunteering initiatives in 2018. Companies commonly held four or more company-organised volunteering initiatives per year (39%), while 21% limited these initiatives to Mandela Day. According to the panellists, it is preferable for employees to continue with their familiar volunteer activities on Mandela Day, rather than “one day disruptions” at NPOs.

This limits risk from eager but unprepared staff who are unfamiliar with the NPO or volunteering. As pointed out by panellist Gill Bates, CEO of Charities Aid Foundation Southern Africa, there are many benefits for companies in volunteering, but there are also potential risks to the brand, the individual volunteer, and the NPO.

“One has to carefully engage with all three risks. All parties must be aligned and on the same page. To address this, there can be codes of conduct, volunteer champions who show the way, and the NPO sector having more of a voice and not being a passive recipient of volunteering.”



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Employee volunteering policy

Some companies draw up strict guidelines specific to staff volunteering. Others expect the general corporate code of conduct to apply to volunteering practices.

Sasol has developed a formal employee volunteering policy that was approved in 2017, internally audited, and reviewed in 2018. Now known as Sasol for Good, it has been approved by Sasol's board. "It outlines responsibility as a business, and your accountabilities as an employee who wants to volunteer," said Nkosi-Bakare.

The MMI Foundation does not have a separate risk management policy for its staff volunteer programme, said Lackay. "At every event where MMI employees represent the company, they should subscribe to the company's code of conduct. It should be centrally driven on a company policy level.

"On a practical level there is peer monitoring, where people check on one another, and more seasoned volunteers – the champions – guide, direct and mentor new volunteers coming onto the programme."

Due diligence can also mitigate risks, said Hadfield, who advises both parties – the corporate and the volunteer – to rate one another through his platform. This not only highlights potential reputation issues early on, so that these can be dealt with timeously, but also identifies who the best volunteers are.

Managing volunteers

Panellists reported that NPOs are no longer "simply grateful" for assistance, but are better articulating their needs and defining exactly what help is required. They also actively manage volunteers: Trialogue research revealed that in 2018 a large number of NPOs – 71% – had a person responsible for managing volunteers.

"Excellent communication is key to efficiently accommodate volunteers," said Bates. "The NPO should develop a good relationship with the corporate volunteer, articulate NPO needs, and be clear on expectations and alignment.

"An innocent mistake could have major implications for both the NPO and the corporate, so it is essential that they be on the same page. Corporate volunteers must be well trained and also managed by the NPO," said Bates. She also noted the importance of monitoring and evaluation tools being in place, both to measure impact and also to manage risk.



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Passing on vital work skills

An important component of employee giving is skills-based volunteering. Hadfield revealed that when he established forgood, he expected goods donations to be the most popular intervention. However, 94% of activity on forgood is skills-based volunteering. Hadfield attributes this to companies wanting to build up a relationship with an organisation before giving goods and funding.

"Skills-based volunteerism also enables social cohesion in a way we don't rate highly enough," said Lackay, while Nkosi-Bakare added: "It is important to enable people to do volunteering in the best way they can. Sasol has many engineers and scientists, and allocates bursaries from undergraduate to PhD level. Our staff take learners through courses and also mentor academics at universities. They can help bridge the gap between what you learn at university and what you put into practice at work."

Given the many benefits of volunteering, how do they encourage staff participation? “Nothing is more powerful than word of mouth,” said Lackay. “We are guided by what our peers and influencers do, like and follow, and are passionate about.”

Recognising volunteers

Incentivising and recognising champions also helps encourage more people to get involved.

“There is something to be said for recognising people who are doing the right thing,” said Lackay. “When you give people recognition, it is recognition of their place in the world. In turn, it’s not just about one person being recognised, but also about exposing fellow employees to the opportunities they have to get involved. You can’t act where you don’t know a need exists.

“If you provide people with the opportunity to do good – for example a staffer may be very young and not have many resources to offer – they can feel enabled as an employee; they feel they can contribute because their employer is enabling them, so don’t shy away from incentives.”

Nkosi-Bakare suggested introducing the concept of volunteering at staff inductions, while “having passionate champions” also encouraged involvement. Buy-in from team leaders also helps – if senior managers have volunteering on their KPIs, junior staffers are more incentivised to get involved too.

In conclusion, awareness of the vital role of employee volunteerism will increasingly be under the spotlight, said Hadfield. He was involved in the consultative process that led to the release of the [National Social Economy Draft Green Paper](#) by the South African government in February 2019. This document discusses the regulation, improvement and measurement of the social economy, a people-centred approach to economic development. It focuses on inclusivity, social cohesion and active citizenship – elements embraced and reflected by volunteerism.

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