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## An Old Chestnut in Volunteer Management Rears Its Head: Corporate Social Responsibility and Paid Volunteers

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There was a lot of buzz in the news this past August about a new six-month pilot program offered by The Starbucks Foundation and Points of Light. The pilot program, in essence, allows Starbucks employees to volunteer at selected non-profits for half the work week and be paid as Starbucks Service Fellows through a grant from The Starbucks Foundation. A press release about the pilot program stated the following ([see the full press release with the details here](#) [4]):

*Points of Light, the world's largest organization dedicated to volunteer service, and Starbucks have launched Starbucks Service Fellows, an innovative, employer-led service program inspired and informed by national service. The initial six-month pilot, launched this month, includes 36 Starbucks retail partners (employees) in 13 cities across the United States, who will serve with a Points of Light affiliate in their communities, collectively providing more than 17,000 hours of community service. . .*

*For the initial pilot, Points of Light identified 13 organizations in its nonprofit affiliate network that would benefit from focused volunteer efforts that align with Starbucks' global social impact priorities, with a focus on opportunity youth, refugees, veterans and military families, hunger, environment and disaster recovery. The 36 Starbucks partners, selected through a competitive application process, will work 20 hours in their store each week, while spending another 20 hours each week with their local Points of Light affiliate organization to help drive its mission, vision and programs forward through agreed-upon service activations. By working at least 20 hours at Starbucks, each fellow also remains eligible for Starbucks benefits like comprehensive healthcare, equity in the form of company stock, and the Starbucks College Achievement Plan. Starbucks worked with Points of Light to match partner volunteers with local affiliates, giving participating organizations the talent and support they need to maximize their impact locally, while enabling partners to serve their communities and gain experience and skills in the nonprofit sector, such as project management, volunteer recruitment, community engagement and stakeholder relationship management.*

But based on what Anna Cunningham of the Starbucks Social Impact team told me, some of what we saw in the news about this new program was inaccurate. One CNN [article](#) [5] was even revised, with

this statement now at the bottom:

*Update: This story has been updated to remove references in the headline to volunteering and to Starbucks' paying the workers. Points of Light pays fellows for their time through a grant from The Starbucks Foundation, which also provides money for the local nonprofits' programs.*

As anyone in volunteer management can attest, the issue of paying volunteers for their time is nearly always a controversial and complicated topic. For this issue of Voices, we set out to explore opinions on whether Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs like this pilot program create positive, beneficial experiences for volunteers, or whether paying someone to volunteer is simply absurd. We will hear from Alison Doerfler, Senior Vice President, Capacity Building, of Points of Light; [Jerome Tennille](#) [6], who has written extensively on the subject of employee volunteerism; and Mary Vandeveld and Roxanne Draves, two retirees who volunteer full-time to run a program that engages over 2,000 volunteers a year.

## Asking the right question to understand CSR

Alison Doerfler, Senior Vice President, Capacity Building, of Points of Light, told me she thinks we are trying to answer the wrong question as a sector – that Starbucks is not paying people to volunteer, but rather paying to invest in community.

What is the right question then, and how is this story different?

According to Doerfler, “The right question is – ‘how can companies create greater, localized impact by offering unique opportunities?’ ‘Volunteerism’ can be a confused approach. The work that the Starbucks Service Fellows do is very different in that we seek to increase capacity to create greater, more meaningful impact. For example, Fellows are working on new projects, with impacts beyond what volunteerism can achieve.”

Doerfler noted that in this pilot, Starbucks seeks a different kind of engagement than their CSR program has seen before. She likened it to privately funded [National Service in the United States](#). [7] It was too early for the Points of Light and Starbucks teams to answer questions about the program, because it is a pilot and continues through February 2019. But they described the goals as different from skills-based and pro bono volunteering, because this program seeks to increase the capacity of program locations and provide a suite of experiences for the service partners – they can build new skills and have enthusiasm, passion, drive, energy. It’s very similar to an internship, but different, because it results in benefitting the community through non-profit partnership. The age-old question of defining volunteering and service was starting to rear its head.

## Expanding the concept of volunteering

[Jerome Tennille](#) [6] has written extensively on the subject of employee volunteerism. “Volunteering isn’t black and white, although people think it is. It’s more of a big grey area with certain forms of volunteerism existing on a spectrum,” he said. “Truthfully, many companies struggle with how they define volunteerism and the nomenclature used to identify their actions. The challenge is that the definition of volunteer exists on a spectrum with certain variations of that definition not being recognized by different sectors.”

Tennille continued. “For example, there are forms of corporate volunteerism that simply aren’t acknowledged or tracked by some non-profit entities because the way the company defines their actions doesn’t match the definition of how the non-profit receiving those services understands the same action. The way some companies might define volunteer will have overlap and clear places of

differentiation when compared to that of the non-profit organizations they serve. To be sensitive of those differences I think we (leaders of volunteer engagement) must be accommodating and inclusive of these definitions that might not be held by mainstream or common understanding. I think leaders of volunteer engagement – more specifically those who work in the non-profit sector – often get hung up on philosophical debates of what a volunteer is and isn't. But I think how we've traditionally understood what volunteerism is and isn't is certainly changing as lines get blurred."

The Points of Light team seemed to agree with Tennille's assessment. With The Starbucks Foundation pilot still in the early stages, Doerfler reports that they talk about it as part of the experience, but they don't consider it volunteering. Most of the partners serving as Fellows took a reduction in hours at Starbucks in order to take on the Fellow role. All in all, they are working a similar amount of hours, but the financial element did not seem to be a prime motivator. Applicants seemed more motivated by the opportunity to explore the social sector.

## Rethinking CSR programs that involve payment

This raises a question: Are CSR programs that pay people to volunteer really 'volunteering'? Tennille believes they are. Said Tennille:

*The answer is 'yes' in most cases. I say this because volunteering has costs, and to some segments of the population volunteering isn't accessible as a result. These employers are simply making it accessible to those who may not otherwise have the opportunity – whether this is because they can't afford to, or because they're time-poor. For some employees in certain industries, the paid time off, or volunteering on company time, is the only opportunity they have to volunteer because it's otherwise outside of their means.*

*Another way to look at this is like taking time off for vacation. If we're given 'paid time off' or PTO to take vacation, does that still make it vacation because an employer is paying for the time we take off from work? The answer is 'yes.' You're being afforded time away from work at the company's expense. Otherwise you'd be taking time off and not receiving any compensation, only making it harder for vacation to be accessible. But regardless of receiving PTO or not, vacation is still vacation. So, we shouldn't get so wrapped around the wheel when employees are given 'paid time off' to volunteer. I see it more of the company gifting its material resources to the community by affording their employees the opportunity to volunteer at the company's expense.*

*That being said, I think we still have to be careful and not 'overclassify' something to be volunteerism when it's been classified as something else. And if any entity – corporate, non-profit or government – is claiming volunteerism when it's clearly not, it's on us to push back, have that debate and set the record straight. For example, if a company chooses to initiate a program that they call a 'fellowship' that is similar in programming to a National Service program in the United States, then we must not overclassify it as volunteerism. Think about it like this: AmeriCorps is a National Service program, sometimes called the domestic Peace Corps. While both are 'voluntary,' it's not volunteer work being performed. They're participating members of a National Service program which serves the community, but it's not volunteerism.*

## Accessibility to volunteering

The question of accessibility to volunteering is a key one, and came up in the [United Nations 2018 State of the Worlds Volunteerism Report \(p.14\) pdf](#) [8].

"Volunteerism strengthens local ownership, solidarity and inclusive participation, and it allows for

swift responses to proximate crises. At the same time, under certain conditions volunteerism can be exclusive, burdensome, short-term and of limited effectiveness. This potential duality of volunteerism means that governments and development partners have an important role to play in maximizing volunteerism's positive contributions. Stakeholders must be mindful not to partner with volunteers as a source of cheap labour but rather would be well advised to nurture volunteerism as an attribute of resilient communities. This can be done through developing an ecosystem for resilient volunteering and creating new community partnerships with that work towards local resilience."

## **Building capacity**

*Voice*s next caught up with Mary Vandeveld and Roxanne Draves, two retirees who volunteer full-time to run a program that engages over 2,000 volunteers a year. Vandeveld and Draves work to build the capacity of the organization they support, and they don't get paid at all.

The type of work they do sounded a lot like the impact the Starbucks and Points of Light team are looking for, so I asked them: How it is possible to volunteer and perform the work they do without getting paid?

Both Vandeveld and Draves said that they lived below their means for most of their lives, were lucky to be able to retire and live on Social Security, and to now have the time to devote to volunteering. They acknowledged that not everyone can do this; some of the volunteers they know work part time during the year and then volunteer the rest, while some have remote jobs they can do in a flexible way that allows them to volunteer. They said they could not have done this type of intense volunteer role when they were working – when they had kids in school and mouths to feed.

Vandeveld wishes she would have had the opportunity to volunteer more when she was younger. She feels that any organization that can give employees the opportunity to volunteer should do it, being mindful of the motivation of the person and the need to be accountable with expectations laid out. She stated that there is a difference between 'requiring 'someone to serve versus 'allowing' employees to volunteer and compensating them for it. If allowed to serve, people are not getting paid by the company, but being supported, like a patron who supports an artist. The idea of paid time to volunteer is great to promote the mindset of volunteering for young people because she noted that good volunteering opportunities can be hard to find.

As for Vandeveld and Draves, they say if they were paid, they wouldn't stay in their current role. But to replace them when they move on, the organization will likely have to think about paying someone.

## **Conclusion**

It will be interesting in the future to see the results of The Starbucks Foundation and Points of Light pilot, and to review what lessons can be shared with other companies and non-profits. In the meantime, perhaps the right question is: How can we as practitioners enable the offering of innovative opportunities to create impact in our communities, and make them accessible to all?

What do you think?

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