

Field Notes

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Promoting Employee Engagement

Today, more and more corporate leaders are turning to volunteer employee programs as a key strategy to help realize their business goals while positively engaging their employees in helping to meet the needs of the local community. Promoting employee engagement is thus part of the ongoing evolution taking place in the private sector to move beyond a sole focus on the bottom line to becoming socially responsible corporate citizens. With more than 90 percent of Fortune 500 companies currently supporting some form of employee volunteer program, standards for such activities are now being developed to help track their impact on the community and improve employee volunteer program practices. (See list of Resources at back of report).

The growing interest in these activities has triggered some important questions. Why is volunteering in the community important in the first place? What are some of the challenges facing companies as they get more involved in employee volunteer efforts? What are some of the benefits and “added value” for local NGOs? Given the time pressures at the workplace, what are the most effective and efficient ways to mobilize volunteers? What have we learned over the past few years that can help both

companies and local NGOs work together successfully to promote such efforts? To address some of these questions, we have chosen to highlight examples of how the staff of one company — Lucent Technologies — has supported the work of the International Youth Foundation (IYF) and its partner organizations in the field. In this instance, Lucent staff are contributing their time and talents to youth programs managed by the Global Fund for Youth Development (GFYD), an initiative of IYF and the Lucent Foundation (now called Alcatel-Lucent Foundation).¹

Why Get Involved?

Volunteering in the community can, among other benefits, help individuals learn new skills, contribute their knowledge and experience, gain self-esteem and self-confidence, develop important new contacts, and make a difference in someone else’s life.

¹ In December 2006, Alcatel officially merged with Lucent Technologies, with its CSR programs in 2007 being carried out under the auspices of the Alcatel-Lucent Foundation. Since 1999, the Foundation has invested more than US\$17 million in GFYD programs that promote education reform, teacher training, employment skills, and entrepreneurship in 17 countries around the world. This global initiative has directly benefited more than 600,000 youth over the past six years.

KEY LEARNINGS ON EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT:

- Planning face-to-face visits between the company and local NGOs to discuss project plans and employee engagement helps foster a spirit of teamwork.
- Assigning point-people from both the company and the NGO partner improves coordination and communications.
- Providing training or other orientation to volunteers helps them be better informed about expectations and more comfortable in their volunteer activities, particularly when working with youth or in disadvantaged communities.
- When company volunteers are not always able to travel to participate in activities, holding training sessions locally allows employees to have more consistent links with the project.
- Local youth organizations and the company must maintain clear and constant communication for the program to function well and to ensure that both parties feel comfortable with the relationship.
- Having a “cheerleader” in the company who is deeply committed to the project, and who can encourage employee involvement is vital, as is gaining support of company executives.
- Forging new alliances can require significant investments of time. Increased workloads may require outlining commitments under agreed time frames, which are realistic for all concerned.
- To ensure that employees are enthusiastic about getting involved, it is important to find creative and meaningful ways for them to participate so that their efforts can really make a difference, and they feel they have a positive role to play.

By harnessing employee volunteering, businesses can raise their own profiles in the community as contributors to the common good, while helping to retain a loyal and productive workforce. Reinforcing a company’s brand through strengthening ties with local non-profit organizations and gaining media attention for such efforts is also a key outcome. Increasingly, global companies are seeking to align their community service work with their corporate vision, to reinforce both goals. Explains Matthew DeCamara, program director at the GE Foundation: “We can help build the capacity of the non-profit sector and contribute in areas where our employees have expertise... so we can affect education and society more broadly.”

A number of companies offer their employees paid leave as a way to promote a service ethic, while others encourage staff to volunteer after work. A growing number of corporations now provide their workers with training in volunteering, where they learn how to plan, manage, and implement successful service events. But no matter how it is organized or promoted, employee engagement is increasingly viewed as a “win-win” strategy for companies, employees, and their communities alike.

Multiple Opportunities for Volunteering

Since 1999, when IYF first joined up with the Lucent Technologies Foundation [now the Alcatel-Lucent Foundation], the company’s commitment to expanding its employee engagement initiatives has resulted in many inspiring examples—and lessons learned. Involving their employees in community service has been an integral part of Lucent’s corporate culture, and its partnership with IYF has reflected that priority. “Lucent has a strong commitment to engaging our employees as volunteers in community service activities in the communities where we do business,” says Chris Park, President of the Alcatel-Lucent Foundation. “We have been especially excited to partner with our IYF nonprofit grantees around the world, and to use our people power to help them be successful in the work that they do.”

Lucent’s “Global Days of Caring” reflects this broader commitment. Every year, for a week or more, local offices around the world commit to support local philanthropies, from working with young people in schools in Mexico City to mentoring disabled youth in Bangalore, India.

Among the many activities carried out by Lucent employees in support of IYF partner organizations and others over the past few years:

- Providing information technology support to the project
- Participating in media events, including outdoor radio broadcasts
- Helping develop a website forum on informal education
- Acting as resource persons to technical training institutions
- Giving lectures on IT-related fields
- Mentoring youth in career counseling
- Raising funds for books and libraries
- Participating in annual job fairs
- Teaching computer skills or providing basic academic tutoring
- Providing internships for young people in the office
- Building personal relationships with young people
- Helping to build stage decorations and sets for youth events.

Working With the Community

Joint efforts by local Lucent offices, IYF partner organizations across many countries, and scores of committed individuals have made a difference in the lives of thousands of young people. The following are more in-depth examples of how Lucent employees have supported youth development programs.

- In **Russia**, IYF’s partner, the New Perspectives Foundation (NPF), sponsored a contest to encourage young people to develop innovative information technology products. The Foundation received over 100 applications from all parts of Russia and selected the most promising 16 projects for funding support. Several Lucent employees were involved in helping out with the program’s press launch. Additionally, two Lucent representatives were fully involved in processing applications, assessing the quality of the work, and ensuring promotions of the project throughout the company. NPF credited the success of the selection process to the significant contributions that Lucent staff made in terms of time and expertise, including valuable feed-

back on the technical aspects of the proposals. Valerie Avacheva, NPF's Executive Director, noted that employees can successfully be recruited into activities "if they are made aware of how both the company and community can benefit from their contributions."

- In **India**, several NGOs affiliated with IYF have formed an alliance to bring computer-assisted learning models to schools and communities, and discussions are underway to bring in Alcatel-Lucent employees as guest lecturers. To date, however, Lucent employees have been more involved with Youthreach, another IYF partner in India. And while employee engagement here is still evolving, it has been marked by very good cooperation and communication. (See sidebar below.)
- In **Mexico**, IYF partner *Fundación Rostros y Voces* is involving hundreds of middle school students in implementing service learning projects in nearly 60 rural communities. They also train over 1,200 teachers in innovative science teaching methods through a project called Innovec. Among others, Lucent employees have volunteered at Innovec project sites and visited the *Fundación Rostros y Voces* offices, and there are plans to further involve the Yucatan Lucent office in more projects. Having a "cheerleader" has also helped. Mónica Fabiola Segura, with Alcatel-Lucent's Human Resources/Central America division, had established an internal committee responsible for involvement with the initiative, and she ensures that project information is regularly shared with employees. "It's hard to encourage employees to get involved initially," says Mónica, who launched a big communications campaign to "touch people's hearts" about the



At a conference outside of Madrid, Spain, over 180 youth volunteers came together from the *Conecta Joven* program, a unique intergenerational project supported through the Alcatel-Lucent Foundation, which educates young people about social and community participation. Here, a young volunteer shares with her peers her experiences training adults in digital literacy.

project. However, she adds, "once they are engaged, it's easier to convince them to share their time." For herself, Mónica notes that volunteering has taught her to value her own blessings, and to become "more sensitive to the basic needs of others."

While these and other examples demonstrate some of the successes of employee engagement activities, it is important to keep in mind that there are always challenges along the way. In South Korea, for example, a number of Lucent employees have participated in volunteer activities organized by IYF partner Kids&Future, a nonprofit organization that aims to narrow the digital gap among low-income youth. As such, Lucent employees have volunteered at job fairs and helped to counsel students on career goals. While Lucent Korea and Kids&Future were in regular

EMPLOYEES STRENGTHEN YOUTH OUTREACH PROGRAM IN INDIA

GFYD is supporting a number of projects in disadvantaged communities in India. The projects are implemented through a group of NGOs—including Dhriiti, the Hope Foundation, and Sahara—and are managed by IYF's partner organization, Youthreach. In brief, the projects are helping to develop the entrepreneurship and employability skills of young people who have dropped out of school or who live in extremely distressed communities such as leper colonies or slums. The relationship between Youthreach and Lucent has benefited from strong relationships and consistent communications, and the programs, with their focus on children's rights and the environment, are a natural fit with the company's interests. Youthreach representatives have actively promoted their community work, preparing talks, film screenings, site visits, monthly updates, and promotional materials for Lucent employees. As a result, the employees have become far more aware of child rights concerns, more committed to the projects, and have provided key support to Youthreach's special events.

While getting time commitments from company employees is a challenge everywhere, country and regional level leaders at Lucent have been committed to these efforts. Three company employees have also served on the advisory board of the projects and, as such, have helped select them. Chris Park, President of the Alcatel-Lucent Foundation, noted that this very hands-on relationship in India has given both parties a greater commitment to finding additional ways to work together. Sushmitha Paidi, a Youthreach manager, adds that "the business perspective brought by Lucent has been very valuable to the projects." At a more personal level, she said that the young people were inspired by professionals from the corporate world who came to speak to them and help motivate them to improve their lives. "This is particularly impressive to the young people because such individuals rarely visit slum communities," says Sushmitha.

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— Chris Park, President, Alcatel-Lucent Foundation

communications, however, the company’s employees have not always been fully familiar with the volunteering environment, which is still growing, or understood how to best work with disadvantaged youth. Kids&Future has proposed a volunteer training program to improve the experience for all parties.

Due to the recent merger with Alcatel, employee engagement will likely grow in new directions. Clearly, many of the company’s employees remain committed to making a difference in their communities. For example, Virgilo Martins of Alcatel-Lucent in Brazil, who has helped strengthen the relationship with local IYF partner organizations, remains passionately dedicated to his company’s efforts to invest in youth. He proudly points out that 60 percent of the young people participating in an employability program supported by Lucent employees have obtained jobs.

Lessons Learned

IYF, through its work with numerous corporate and NGO partners over the years, has identified some suggested guidelines that can make the experience more successful for everyone. Please see “Key Learnings” on page 2, some of which have been drawn from material already prepared for company employees by IYF.²

Chris Park, President of the Alcatel-Lucent Foundation, says that “one of the most important lessons the Foundation has learned is the value of getting a volunteer cadre engaged early on in designing programs, so that they feel ‘ownership’ of the program.” Relationships are also key, adds Park. She notes that “sometimes, both our employees and the non-profits with whom they are working see their relationship in limited terms, or under the constraints of the particular program being funded.” Thus, she continues, they do not always take advantage of the opportunity to brainstorm creatively about pursuing activities that could benefit both sides. “Despite some missed opportunities, there are many cases, like in India [see box, Page 3], where strong relationships between Lucent offices and nonprofit partners have led to successful outcomes that have been a ‘win-win’ for the company, for the employees, and for the young people in those communities.”

IYF, for its part, underscores the importance of having a strict and rigorous program in place for volunteers, and recognizes, as well, the necessity of having key people at the company taking

² “Employee Engagement: Ideas and Tips,” prepared for Lucent by IYF, can be found at www.iyfnet.org. IYF also helped produce an in-depth guide to employee engagement for Nokia, entitled “Engaging Nokia Employees as Volunteers to Enhance Youth Programs.”

responsibility for the project. “Within our program, this ownership evolved over time, but didn’t happen systematically,” noted Petula Nash, Director of the Global Fund for Youth Development at IYF. She underscored the impact of a meeting held in Barcelona, Spain, in November 2005, that brought Lucent representatives and IYF nonprofit partners from 13 countries together for the first time (see cover photo). “The discussions about enhancing collaboration and synergy,” said Nash, “really energized our work.” Park agrees, adding that bringing grantees together in Barcelona was “extremely valuable for outlining expectations and building relationships.”

For Alcatel-Lucent staff, resources on employee engagement are available on the company’s intranet. Please contact Alcatel-Lucent Foundation for details.

Additional Resources

- Information about volunteerism worldwide, and links to volunteer agencies in some 40 countries, is available from the site of UN Volunteers at www.unv.org/partners/index.htm.
- The Centre for Volunteering in Australia includes information on corporate volunteering, including case studies and research resources. Go to www.volunteering.com.au/index.asp.
- The Points of Light Foundation, a national network for volunteering in the United States, offers resources on corporate employee engagement (www.pointsoflight.org/networks/business).
- In December 2006, a coalition of nonprofit groups in the U.S. developed a set of standards for corporate volunteer reporting. Please visit www.worldvolunteerweb.org/browse/volunteering-issues/corporate-volunteering/doc/standards-for-employee-volunteer.html.

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International Youth Foundation
32 South Street
Baltimore, MD 21202 USA

Tel +1 410 951 1500
Web www.iyfnet.org
Email caroline@iyfnet.org