



OPTIONAL EXTRAS

SARAH HODGKINSON

Board-level volunteering can provide staff looking for a route to the top with a great learning opportunity

Volunteering as a board member of a charity, a school or a public body provides one of the best learning opportunities there is. If you want to develop your own, or your employees' skills, particularly leadership skills, you should consider board-level volunteering.

In many firms and public bodies today, the now relatively flatter organisational structure does not always readily enable staff to develop skills to prepare them for future roles as leaders. They may not, for example, have the chance to take part in strategic planning discussions, prepare budgets or plan PR campaigns. Board-level volunteering can provide this experience, and some companies include volunteering in the appraisal process, allocating the cost to individuals' personal training budgets.

An important benefit for employers is that their encouragement of this type of volunteering will make them an "employer of choice". Today, more and more employees want to work for an organisation that is doing something for the community and there is pressure on companies to demonstrate their corporate responsibility credentials. Also, board-level volunteering is a more cost-effective option than expensive leadership courses.

Meanwhile, individuals stand to gain so many personal benefits from this kind of work, such as expanding their contacts network, meeting new friends, and, of course, tremendous satisfaction from "putting something back".

The charity Getting on Board, a not-for-profit organisation, encourages employers to support their staff in volunteering as board members of charities, schools and public bodies, and can work with HR managers to incorporate board-level volunteering as an integral part of leadership development programmes.

We have worked with organisations as diverse as Ford, Shell, the Welsh Assembly, Government Office East and Marsh.

Andy Taylor, director of sustainability and corporate citizenship, Ford Europe, said: "Getting on Board should add to our staff's personal development, while improving the effectiveness of the management of school and charities, thus benefiting the community."

Schools and charities are always looking for new board members, but it is crucial to select an organisation that really inspires you. To select the "best fit" board, employees need to understand the options. There are various organisations that can help them to make the right choice.

Research commissioned recently by CR Search and Selection has highlighted the benefits of board-level volunteering for all concerned and urges charities too to take full advantage of this. Charities and schools are "people organisations", and particularly welcome board members with HR as well as other skills such as finance and IT.

But what about the closed minds in your organisation? How do you spread the word about the benefits of this kind of work? As always, start at the top. If the boss is supportive, persuading senior managers and then other employees is far easier. And involve your colleagues with corporate responsibility roles.

The growing importance of the third sector is widely acknowledged. The government is encouraging all civil servants to volunteer in the community as an essential part of a sustainability programme.

After all, today's volunteers are tomorrow's leaders. Everyone benefits from board-level volunteering: employers, employees and the community. It would be hard to find a more effective way of developing transferable skills – and there is a lot of fun to be had in the process.

Sarah Hodgkinson is chief executive of Getting on Board >> sarahhodgkinson@ukonline.co.uk >> www.getting-on-board.co.uk

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