The point of partnership: the case for employer engagement in education

This paper explores the benefits to employers and employees from engaging with schools on a voluntary basis. It highlights new research in four areas: staff development, staff engagement, recruitment and corporate reputation. The paper argues that the strength of emerging evidence of positive impact on personnel performance suggests that policy ownership of education volunteering is an appropriate core component of the HR function.

The paper considers employer engagement in activities having direct impact on the educational achievement of young people and school performance – including governors, staff continuous professional development (CPD), as well as work experience placement, mentoring, enterprise activities, workplace visits aimed at young people. Such activities are predicated on the personal interaction of volunteer employees with teaching staff and pupils.

Our place in the picture

Charity the Education and Employers Taskforce brings together leading employers and educational organisations to inspire and enable interest and engagement so that every school and college has an effective relationship with employers. The Taskforce's research group brings together academics, analysts, policy leads and practitioners who seek to better understand benefits for young people and employees and circumstances under which they are best secured. In March 2010, the Research Group oversaw publication of an unprecedented synthesis of recent research into impact *What is to be gained through partnership? Exploring the value of education-employer relationships.* This article draws from that review of the literature, and also addresses significant new findings. A second edition is due in October 2010.

Staff development

A review of the literature shows that competency development has long been expected from volunteering initiatives that engage in external communities. Drawing on the experiential learning than comes from the need to be effective in an unfamiliar and often unpredictable environment, volunteering requiring social interaction is widely understood to develop skills of direct relevance to the skillsbase required for effective leadership. As Geroy et al argued in 2000, from a US context, volunteering activities are well placed to deliver the development of understanding, influencing and persuading people and organizations; people skills – listening, negotiating, managing others; networking and alliance skills; information management and analysis; and, coaching and mentoring.[i] In a 2002 study by the University of Sussex, 64% of organisations agreed that volunteering increases leadership skills among employees.[ii]

Recent new research provides a deeper understanding of this impact. The 2010 report, *Volunteering the Business Case,* undertaken by research agency, Corporate Citizenship, draws on the experience of 546 employees in 16 multinational businesses operating in the City of London. Considering the learning and development of employees volunteering as school governors, student mentors, in enterprise activities, and supporting literacy and numeracy development of children aged 5 to 11, the report triangulates self-reported skills development with the views of line managers.[iii]

The report concludes that skills accumulation is focused on the softer competencies related to personal effectiveness in the workplace, but that different activities lead to different results.

Table 1: *Volunteering – the business case*

Developing Skills Through Different Volunteering Activities

★ Very effective in developing this skill/competence

✓ Useful for developing this skill/ competence

— Less effective in developing this skill/competence

	Reading, language or number partners	Student Mentoring	Enterprise Work-shop	Supporting an Education Charity	School Governor
Adaptability	✓	★	★	✓	✓
Teamworking	—	✓	★	★	★
Communication	★	✓	★	✓	✓
Influencing Negotiation	★	★	★	✓	★
Problem Solving	✓	✓	✓	✓	★
Leadership	✓	✓	★	✓	✓
Planning & Organisation	✓	✓	★	✓	✓
Decision Making	✓	★	✓	✓	★
Helping Others Improve	✓	★	★	✓	✓
Financial Skills	—	—	—	★	★
Building Relationships	✓	✓	★	★	✓
Willingness to Improve	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Business Awareness	—	—	★	—	★
Technical/ Professional Skills	—	—	—	—	★

The report differentiates between the skills developed through different activities.   Business mentoring, for example, was found to be especially helpful in developing decision making competencies, while engagement in enterprise workshops demanded higher team-working skills. Being a volunteer school governor is the activity assessed as securing the broadest and deepest skills development. [iv]

Uniquely, the City of London report attempts to quantify the costs of securing comparable skills development across seven competency areas as secured through volunteering and traditional CPD routes, finding volunteering to be a highly cost effective way of developing core competencies. "It is important to treat volunteering in the same way a company would treat any other learning and development processes."[v]

As well as investigating the business case for volunteering, this research has produces a generally applicable and widely accepted competency matrix and evaluation tool that will allow companies to gather hard data on competency development achieved through volunteering opportunities.

Volunteering – the business case is available at: http://217.154.230.218/NR/rdonlyres/31FD45CA-3553-4584-A2EB-6A5D33CCD718/0/Volunteering_The_business_case4.pdf

Staff engagement - pride and performance

A growing body of literature concludes that employers are best placed to recruit, retain and motivate high performing staff by creating a "sense of pride and spirit" in the organisation. Conceptialised as "staff engagement", research by market research company Gallup shows that engaged employees are more productive. What Gallup refers to as their 'engagement ratio' is a macro-level indicator of an organisation's health that allows executives to track the proportion of engaged to actively disengaged employees. They believe that in 'world-class organisations', the ratio of engaged to actively disengaged employees is 9.57:1. In 'average' organisations, the ratio of engaged to actively disengaged employees is 1.83:1. Within the US workforce, Gallup estimates this cost to be more than $300 billion in lost productivity alone.[vi]

Further quantifying impact, recent work by the Institute for Employment Studies at the University of Sussex argues that employees who demonstrate engagement with their employer "are more likely to stay with the organisation, perform 20% better than their colleagues and act as advocates." Taking forward the analysis, researchers argue that commitment to corporate responsibility forms one of six key drivers of engagement.[vii]

Community engagement and staff performance

Drawing on a sample of 4,712 employees in a large national UK financial services company in 2002-03, academics from the University of Bath found compelling evidence that "employee perceptions of corporate social responsibility have a major impact on organisational commitment." Results were "particularly important in the light of observed relationships between organisational commitment, labour retention, labour health and staff performance. Taken together the contribution of CSR to organisational commitment is at least as great as job satisfaction."[viii]

Volunteering: the business case also considers the personal impacts of volunteering within education strengthening key indicators underpinning personal performance - organisational pride, motivation, commitment and general happiness.

Table 2: Volunteering – the business case

The Personal Impact of Volunteering						
The Volunteering activity improved/ increased my...	Strongly Agree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable	Response Count
Self Confidence	1.7%	10.3%	66.3%	12.9%	8.7%	526
Sense of well being/ happiness	0.6%	4.2%	56.7%	34.6%	4.0%	526
Understanding of and empathy with others	0.8%	2.9%	59.3%	35.4%	1.7%	526
Awareness of wider social issues	1.0%	3.0%	48.3%	45.4%	2.3%	526
Job satisfaction	2.1%	12.9%	50.7%	18.0%	16.3%	527
Pride in the company	1.1%	9.4%	50.4%	23.5%	15.6%	524
Commitment to the company	2.1%	16.0%	48.1%	17.9%	16.0%	526
Motivation	1.9%	13.2%	53.7%	19.7%	11.5%	523

Recruitment

Employer surveys routinely cite recruitment needs as the primary motivation for engaging with the world of education.[ix] 'Recruitment', however, has a number of meanings to survey respondents and unpacks into three discrete sub elemental motivations: immediate recruitment as a direct or indirect result of volunteering; raising awareness, and interest, in specific careers; and, increasing flow of future talent equipped with the right employability skills.

Immediate recruitment: becoming the 'employer of choice'

Engagement with schools plays an especially useful role for SMEs who mostly do not have HR departments to aid recruitment, often working to tighter recruitment budgets, and more commonly recruit school leavers. Growing numbers of employers utilise direct recruitment from local schools and colleges through young people doing work experience and showing their potential. While work experience particularly provides the future employee with highly prized relevant practical experience, it also enables the employer to engage in pre-recruitment selection. Through a school-mediated connection, the employer has chance both to set out their stall to potential future employees and to see how they might prosper in a specific working environment.[x]

Employer engagement can have indirect positive impacts on recruitment. In 2005, the UK Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development reported that two-thirds of graduates agreed that a company's ethical and environmental stance would influence their decision whether or not to apply for a specific job.[xi]

Raising awareness, and interest, in specific careers

Interest in recruitment may be so high because young people demonstrate career aspirations which are often out of kilter with the reality of the labour market. A 2009 government survey by of 610 year 12 year old pupils found that 42% were interested in pursuing careers in just seven highly competitive areas: performing arts, professional sports, teaching, veterinary science, law, policing and medicine.[xii]

Engagement with schools and colleges can be a core element within long-term recruitment strategies to tackle future staff shortages that will hinder the ability of an enterprise to expand. By becoming involved in the educational experience of young people, employers have the opportunity to provide pupils with both a deeper understanding of the range of career opportunities open to them and a richer learning environment.

Employer engagement can be an effective means of challenging the preconceptions of young people and reach out to a more diverse range of potential recruits. A 2008 study of influences on Black and Minority Ethnic students in choosing science courses involved identified "perceptions of careers with physics or chemistry" as one of four high-influence factors in decision making and "images of scientists and the work they do" as one of four medium-influence factors. Positive images were "often due to work experience where they had seen what scientists do and talked to them about it." A 2007 UK survey of 1,034 young people who had recently completed a work placement provides reinforcing evidence: 37% of pupils agreed that work experience helped them to decide on a particular job or career.[xiii]

Increasing flow of future talent equipped with the right employability skills

As the UK CIPD reported last year, while recruiters assess candidates across a range of skills and competencies, three criteria are of prime importance: interpersonal skills, communication skills, and fit with the culture/values of the organisation. Frustratingly, these are areas that recruits coming directly from education, at any level, are most deficient in. The results suggest a potential disjuncture between educational outputs and labour market demand.[xiv]

This is a phenomenon experienced across the advanced industrial nations. Driven by technological change, organisational change and increasingly globalised market, labour market demand is in transition. Skill upgrading is experienced across many sectors with more and more careers requiring tertiary level education as a minimum. Demand for routine manual work has decreased significantly and there has been a corresponding growth in non routine cognitive and interactive roles, for example in the work of care assistants and software engineers. The new labour market requires a new skillset from young recruits and employer engagement in education is recognised as a primary means of delivery.[xv]

Hence, the EU's Vision 2020 calls on national governments to "develop partnerships between the worlds of education and work" as a key means to empower "people through the acquisition of new skills to enable our current and future workforce to adapt to new conditions and potential career shifts, reduce unemployment and raise labour productivity."[xvi]

In the UK, the CBI, the employers' association, has produced an influential definition of what it means to be employable in the twenty-first century.

> **CBI definition of employability skills**
>
> - **Self-management** – readiness to accept responsibility, flexibility, time management, readiness to improve own performance
> - **Teamworking** – respecting others, co-operating, negotiating/persuading, contributing to discussions
> - **Business and customer awareness** – basic understanding of the key drivers for business success and the need to provide customer satisfaction
> - **Problem solving** – analysing facts and circumstances and applying creative thinking to develop appropriate solutions
> - **Communication and literacy** – application of literacy, ability to produce clear, structured written work and oral literacy, including listening and questioning
> - **Application of numeracy** – manipulation of numbers, general mathematical awareness and its application in practical contexts
> - **Application of information technology** – basic IT skills, including familiarity with word processing, spreadsheets, file management and use of internet search engines
>
> **Source:** Confederation of British Industry (2007), *Time well spent*.
> http://www.cbi.org.uk/pdf/timewellspent.pdf

A 2010 CBI survey reported employers finding weaknesses in the current system and see employer engagement as key means of providing young people with practical experience and relevance learning experiences. Employers feel that school-leavers are inadequately prepared for work, notably in terms of their self-management (57%) and business and customer awareness (68%).

While employers understand the problem, they also realise that they can be a part of the solution. Over half of employers (56%) believe the biggest single contribution they can make to preparing young people for entry to a challenging labour market is to give them opportunities to gain work experience. Almost universally (88%), of respondents believe that it vital that young people go on work experience before they leave school or college.[xvii]

Corporate reputation

Ironically, given the long tradition of employer engagement being driven by corporate social responsibility (CSR), the evidence base underpinning reputational outputs from employer engagement in education is notably the weakest of the four strands considered here. Certainly, there is much to gain in terms of reputation building. Surveys of English school leaders, while finding overwhelming demand for higher levels of employer engagement across school life, feel strongly that the two key benefits to employers from becoming involved with schools were "stronger links with the communities in which they operate" and "improved reputation."[xviii]

Ambivalence

This is an area of engagement with schools and colleges, however, where public information is particularly limited and sensitive. As the UK Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) reports, many employers are ambivalent about the appropriateness of linking marketing priorities too closely to community engagement. Many parents, teaching staff and young people are wary of the commercialisation of childhood.[xix] Reflecting on a 2007 survey of 1700 small businesses, the Federation reported: "Many small businesses are not driven by any commercial or monetary benefits from engaging with social and environmental issues but consider these activities to be good and responsible business practice. 45% considered that social and environmental responsibility could be a useful marketing tool for business but over a third of respondents (31%) were ambivalent

about the marketing opportunities CSR provides. A number of businesses were at pains to state that they felt it was inappropriate to 'shout' about their activities.".[xx]

Such ambivalence is not restricted to small companies. This paper argues that there is now compelling evidence to show that business benefits for employers are so wide-ranging and meaningful that a positive case for engagement can be made without narrow reliance on the PR value of partnership.

Conclusions

Conclusions drawn for the recent research can be summarised in follows points:

- Business benefits for organisations of all sectors are increasingly understood
- There is a virtuous circle – developing staff at a lower cost, increasing employee satisfaction, making recruitment easier, building future talent pool fit for purpose, while building corporate reputation
- Where volunteers go into volunteering with a desire to increase skills, this is much more likely to be achieved, especially if integrated within appraisals
- Employer and education engagement is arguably too important not to be at the heart of HR function

Volunteering at BT

Helen Simpson, who leads on volunteering for BT Group, explains that BT has a long history of volunteering involving education. However, 12 months ago, BT reached a watershed when they relaunched the volunteering programme with a far broader scope. This was in part driven by the changing needs of the third sector and community groups. Previously the main focus had been in education programme, providing resources to schools to help enhance children's communication skills.

The new programme works in a wide range of subject areas, but still includes working with a mix of all types of schools and colleges, with most activity is concentrated on the 14 – 19 age group. BT's Chairman Sir Michael Rake, practices what he preaches, and was recently personally involved in speed mentoring 6th formers from St John Cass School in the City of London.

BT 's volunteering programme sits in the Human Resources Department, as a key part of our people agenda and skills and development potential it represents.

The volunteering programme as a whole has grown considerably in the year to April 2010, with employees giving over 28,600 days of volunteering. Many have been involved in the *Growing into Work* programme which is a partnership between BT and the two charities Careers Academy UK and Young Enterprise. This helps young people gain the motivation and skills for the world of work. New pilots have gone well from all points of view and BT are ramping up activities, moving from a series of one-off events as trials to a larger scale roll-out build on feedback from earlier trials.

The volunteering programme spans the whole of BT and the company offers each employee three days work time per year to volunteer. For example, some BT people becoming trustees on charity boards, some are Justices of the Peace, and it even includes a coast guard.

Going into year two of the volunteering programme even more activities are coming on line promoted through the use of a database of voluntary opportunities on the company intranet. BT also flags up news and human interest stories communicating the possibilities and benefits to encourage more people to get involved.

The different BT business lines – such as BT Retail, BT Global Services and BT Wholesale – are promoting volunteering in ways that are relevant to their different businesses. Nominated communication leads work as a virtual team and contribute to the *BT Today* intranet news channel. A couple of new items are added every week to keep it fresh and to show impact.

Individuals go on a journey with their volunteering. The programme provides a way for people to get started, often initially as a one-off activity, and usually this grows into a more regular commitment. Busy working lives and home commitments are the main barriers to getting involved but people love volunteering once they get started. Word of mouth is the most common way that new peoples' interest is sparked. Particular emphasis has been given to helping teams volunteer together, building closer more connected and collaborative teams.

Part of the value of volunteering is to weave it into the operational life of the business. A good example of this recent work with the talent community that targets people highlighted as future leaders of BT. A group of charities took the opportunity to work with talent pool members on the tactical and strategic issues currently facing their organisation. Feedback from both charities and talent teams has been very positive and BT is excited about plans to grow this innovative programme further.

---

[i] G D Geroy/P C Wright/L Jacoby "Toward a Conceptual Framework of Employee volunteerism: an aid for the human resource manager" *Management Decision* 38, 4 (2000), 280-86. See also, Institute for Volunteering Research, *Community investment: the impacts of employee volunteering at Barclays Bank* (2004)

[ii] IRS, *Employment Trends research* (University of Sussex 2001, 2002).

[iii] Corporate Citizenship, *Volunteering – the business case. The benefits of corporate programmes in education* (City of London, 2010)

[iv] See also Anne Punter/John Adams, Leah Kraithman, *Adding value to Governance: an evaluation of the contribution made by governors recruited by the School Governors' One-Stop-Shop to their schools' governing bodies and to their own development*. (University of Hertfordshire, 2007), 4

[v] Corporate Citizenship, *Volunteering – the business case. The benefits of corporate programmes in education* (City of London, 2010), 21

[vi] See http://www.gallup.com/consulting/52/employee-engagement.aspx

[vii] Gemma Robertson-Smith/Carl Markwick, *Employee Engagement – A review of current thinking* (Institute for Employment Studies Report 469, 2009), 32, v

[viii] Stephen Brammer/Andrew Millington/Bruce Rayton "The contribution of corporate social responsibility to organizational commitment" *International Journal of Human Resource Management* (October 2007), 1715

[ix] YouGov (2010), *Edge annual programme of stakeholder research: business in schools.*
http://www.educationandemployers.org/media/4616/you%20gov%20reseach%20paper.pdf

[x] See the Telford Hotel case study http://www.employers-guide.org/media/39636/telford%20hotel%20and%20golf%20resort%20supporting%20work%20experience.pdf

[xi] Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, *Graduates in the Workplace. Does a Degree Add Value?* (2006)

[xii] Graeme Atherton/Eric Cymbir/Ken Roberts/Lionel Page/Richard Remedios (University of Westminster), *How Young People Formulate their Views about the Future – exploratory research* (DCSF, 2009), 18.

[xiii] Iain Springate/Jennie Harland/Pippa Lord/Anne Wilkin, *Why choose physics and chemistry? The influences on physics and chemistry subject choices of BME students* (NFER, 2008). CBI, *Time well spent* (2007), 31.

[xiv] Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2009)*, Recruitment, retention and turnover: Annual Survey.* http://www.cipd.co.uk/NR/rdonlyres/41225039-A846-4D2D-9057-E02CDB6BFC0B/0/recruitment_retention_turnover_annual_survey_2009.pdf

[xv] Martin Schlotter, *Origins and Consequences of Changes in Labour Market Skills Needs – consideration from a European perspective* (European Expert Network on Economics of Education, 2010 http://www.eenee.de/portal/page/portal/EENEEContent/_IMPORT_TELECENTRUM/DOCS/SBTC.pdf

[xvi] *Europe 2020 – A European Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth* (European Commission, 2010) **http://ec.europa.eu/eu2020/pdf/COMPLET%20EN%20BARROSO%20%20%20007%20-%20Europe%202020%20-%20EN%20version.pdf**

[xvii] CBI, Ready to grow: business priorities for education and skills' Education and skills survey 2010.

[xviii] Business in the Community/Edcoms, *Business in school research findings* (2007)

[xx] Federation of Small Businesses, *Social and Environmental Responsibility and the Small Business Owner* (2007), 19