

Making a Business Case

for Employer-Supported Volunteerism

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For more information on Employer-Supported
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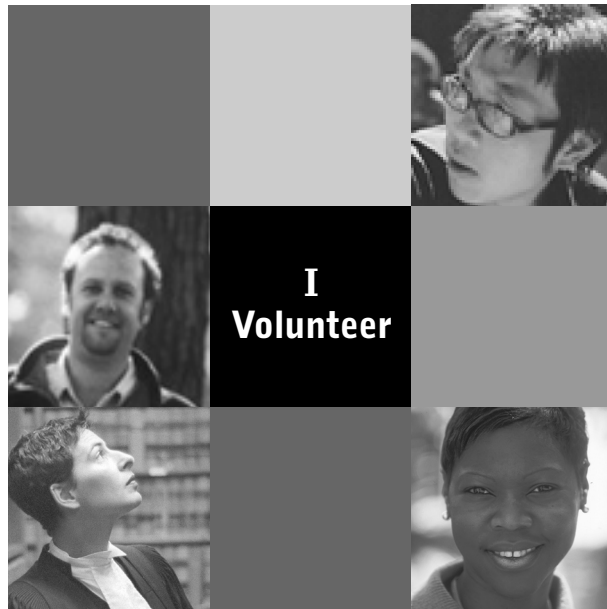
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Introduction

A growing body of international research and business literature has been turning up direct links between Employer-Supported Volunteering (ESV) and a host of benefits, paybacks and spin-offs to a range of constituencies. Those who benefit from the involvement of employees in voluntary action include, of course, “the community” that is typically viewed as the primary target of efforts to increase participation. However, recent research is revealing that the benefits of Employer-Supported Volunteering also produces value for the employee him or herself, as well as for the company that has supported and encouraged volunteering by its employees. It is this last area—benefits of Employer-Supported Volunteering that flow back to the employer—that is the focus of this resource. Recent reports prove that the payoffs to employers are both varied and significant, and include increased employee motivation and loyalty, increased investment, more media attention, lower employee absenteeism, higher productivity, enhanced employee competencies, and greater attractiveness to prospective new employees. Research shows that the return on corporate investment in Employer-Supported Volunteering is huge and that Canada has fallen behind in its recognition of its vast potential. The case is made for research to be undertaken on Employer-Supported Volunteering in Canada, and expanded efforts to notify the corporate sector of the value of this promising form of corporate community involvement.

We begin this exploration of the returns on Employer-Supported Volunteering with a definition of the concept. A brief background helps to situate this form of volunteering in the larger context of voluntary activity in Canada, and provides a sense of the growing prevalence of ESV in North America, the U.K., and beyond. The main purpose of this resource is to outline some of the many benefits of ESV, with particular emphasis on those that flow directly and indirectly to the employer who supports it in the first place. In so doing, a strong business case emerges from what the research on Employer-Supported Volunteering is revealing about this relatively new and increasingly valuable form of community involvement.



What is Employer-Supported Volunteering?

Known by a range of terms, including “corporate volunteering,” “employee community involvement,” “employee volunteering,” and “workplace volunteering,” the constant which underpins all forms of Employer-Supported Volunteering is that *employees perform work in the community with some form of support and/or encouragement from their employer to do so.*

Volunteer Canada uses this definition of Employer-Supported Volunteering:

The term refers to a continuum of employer support for employee volunteer activities. It describes a company that voluntarily supports its employees’ involvement in the community. Typically, employer-supported volunteer initiatives are integrated into the workplace and involve various levels of employer involvement and expenditure. ¹

The following definition of Employer-Supported Volunteering, under the label of “corporate volunteering”, offered by the Association for Volunteer Services in Beirut, Lebanon, points out that retirees and employees’ families can be involved as well:

Corporate volunteering is any formal or organized means a company uses to encourage and support its employees and retirees (and possibly their families) to volunteer their time and skills in the service of their community. ²

In a comprehensive review of Employer-Supported Volunteering, Darren Quirk appends the phrase “for mutual benefit” to his definition of the concept which he also calls “Corporate Volunteering”:

Corporate volunteering is about businesses supporting and encouraging staff involvement in the community - for mutual benefit. ³

¹ *Volunteer Connections: The Benefits and Challenges of Employer-Supported Volunteerism.* (Volunteer Canada, 2001: 3)

² *Corporate Volunteering.* (The Association for Volunteer Services, 2001)

³ *Corporate Volunteering: The Potential and the Way Forward.* (Darren Quirk, 1998: 4)

A Variety of Forms

Employer-Supported Volunteering can take many forms, and includes a wide range of programs and activities through which companies support their employees' volunteer work in, or on behalf of, the community. ESV can range from simple acknowledgement that employees perform volunteer work in the community, through to ongoing staff time-off and in-kind support of community efforts and charitable causes.⁴

The variety of ways in which employers can support their employees' volunteering might be considered as points along a continuum representing greater or lesser degrees of corporate support for employee volunteer effort. The constant in all of these forms is that employees are performing some kind of volunteer work in the community, in contrast to a range of other ways in which corporations might "give" to the community, including, for example, conducting their business in a socially/environmentally responsible manner or otherwise demonstrating their support of community efforts e.g., chequebook philanthropy, cause-related marketing, etc.⁵

What Kind of Volunteer Work?

What does employer-supported volunteering work look like? What do these volunteers from the workplace actually do? The short answer is—probably everything. Volunteer opportunities in the community are as varied as the human imagination.

Groups of employee volunteers deliver meals to the elderly and the homebound; employee volunteers mentor children or adolescents, in person or "virtually", as individuals, in teams or as families. Employee volunteers clean up parks, build fish ladders, participate in all manner of fundraising drives and projects, construct sets for community theatres, clown in hospital pediatric departments, dig survivors out of the rubble of collapsed buildings on the other side of the world, take their dogs to visit people in nursing homes, and build houses. They provide

⁴ For more information on how to build an employer-supported volunteer program, see: *Engaging Volunteers in the Community* (Volunteer Calgary, 2001); *Employee Volunteering: The Guide* (Lisa Ramrayka, 2001)

⁵ For more on the transition in corporate thinking from the simplistic practice of chequebook philanthropy to the contemporary shift to corporate social responsibility, see Martha Parker's exploration of the changing nature of profit-not-for-profit partnerships (Martha Parker, 1999)

legal, financial, property management, fund development, investment, and human resources management advice to non-profit organizations, help adults learn how to read, and drive patients to medical appointments and help them home again after their cancer treatments.

There are literally millions of possibilities open to corporations seeking to make a contribution to their communities and to employee-supported volunteers who seek to help, gain skills, have adventures, create smiles. The work itself is manual and managerial, in person and virtual. It is skilled and silly, done singly, as part of a team of colleagues or with a group of strangers soon to become friends. It is a response to a request, and the brainchild of a group of employees looking to make a unique contribution. It all qualifies as Employer-Supported Volunteering and it is boundless. Employers might channel their Employer-Supported Volunteering programs in certain directions to meet specific business objectives such as skill development, enhanced corporate profile or team building, for example, but in practice, employees make most of the decisions about what kind of volunteer work they want to pursue.



Why is Employer-Supported Volunteering Important?

A smaller number of volunteers is shouldering a bigger share of the volunteer work performed in Canada each year. In 2000, about one quarter of all volunteers in Canada contributed 73 per cent of all of the hours volunteered that year. Given that 27 per cent of all adult Canadians volunteered, one quarter of them represents approximately seven per cent of all adult Canadians. It is on the shoulders of that seven per cent that nearly three-quarters of all volunteering is carried out across the country. ⁶

This decline in volunteer participation in Canada has coincided with a substantive shift in how human services are delivered. Governments at various levels have been devolving services into “the community.” Because the increasing responsibility on community organizations is not always accompanied by sufficient resources, non-profit organizations are left struggling to deliver more service with ever-shrinking resources. Volunteer involvement has always been an important Canadian tradition, and with more work being undertaken by non-profit organizations, the involvement of volunteers has never been more critical. Their involvement is indispensable to the health, social service and education sectors, the arts community, the sports and recreation field, faith communities, and the political election system. Indisputably, community life as we know it in this country would grind to a halt without the efforts of our volunteers.

In light of increasing demand and decreasing supply, volunteer resources are in ever-greater demand, and any initiative that promotes greater involvement by Canadians in their communities is a welcome ingredient in sustaining the wonderful community life we have all come to enjoy in this country.

⁶ The National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (Statistics Canada, 2001).

The Prevalence of Employer-Supported Volunteering

Global Expansion

Employer-Supported Volunteering is clearly on the rise, worldwide. Consider the following evidence:

- Business for Social Responsibility, a San Francisco-based non-profit organization, reports U.S. research showing that one third of large U.S. companies had formal time-off policies in support of employee volunteer involvement, and their scan of additional research on release time policies reveals that 40 per cent of medium and large size companies in the United States offered paid leave time policies as of 2003. ⁷
- International Conference Volunteers, a Geneva-based NGO that connects prospective volunteers to organizers of non-profit projects, reports that many European countries have seen an increasing number of businesses, public and voluntary sector organizations become actively involved in ESV over the last five years. ⁸
- The 1998 Charities Aid Foundation in the United Kingdom found that a third of large U.K. companies have formal employer-supported volunteer programs. ⁹
- The National Centre for Volunteering in the U.K. reports examples of exciting developments in employee volunteering across the world, including programs in India, Brazil, Lebanon and Russia, where Employer-Supported Volunteering is part of a larger effort to address wider issues of social responsibility. ¹⁰
- Business in the Community (BITC), a U.K.-based non-profit organization, reported from their 2000 research that 89 per cent of their 700 members (businesses from around the world) supported employee volunteering, 53 per cent had a time-off policy, 40 per cent indicated it was of benefit to the bottom line, and 73 per cent connected employee community involvement to their overall business strategy. ¹¹

⁷ *Volunteerism and Release Time* (Business for Social Responsibility, 2003: 5)

⁸ *The Information Society, Volunteerism and Europe: Perspectives and Outlook*. (Gail Hurley, 2003:3)

⁹ Reported in *Corporate Volunteering: The Potential And The Way Forward*. (Darren Quirk, 1998: 4)

¹⁰ *Latest Research on Employee Volunteering: More Worldwide Research - Examples*. (National Centre for Volunteering, 2003: 1)

¹¹ Reported in *Latest Research on Employee Volunteering: Business in the Community ECI+ 2000 Survey*. (National Centre for Volunteering, 2003: 1)

- Points of Light Foundation research in the United States found that in 1992 only 31 per cent of companies reported using their employee volunteer programs to support core business functions. By 1999, that had increased to 81 per cent of all respondents. Moreover, the survey found a significant increase in companies that incorporate the volunteer program into the company's overall business plan—an increase from 19 per cent in 1992 to 48 per cent in 1999. ¹²

So what is the attraction? Why is Employer-Supported Volunteering such a fast-growing global phenomenon? The National Centre for Volunteering in the U.K. suggests the answer is obvious. It's because everyone involved—the companies that provide employees volunteers, the organizations where employee volunteers help out, the wider community and the employees themselves—gains from the activity.

*“... a prosperous, health and crime-free community
benefits all who live and work there.”* ¹³

Employer-Supported Volunteering in Canada

A majority of Canada's volunteers are employed in the paid labour force. In 2000, about one half of all employed volunteers (1.7 million) received at least one form of support from their employer. Despite the decline of almost one million volunteers over the three-year period, 1997 - 2000, corporate Canada's interest in volunteerism grew. In that same three-year period, the number of employed volunteers who reported receiving approval from their employer to modify their work hours in order to accommodate their volunteer involvement rose from 22 per cent to 27 per cent. Twenty-two percent of Canada's employed volunteers reported receiving recognition from their employer for their volunteer work—up from 14 per cent in 1997. ¹⁴ The most common forms of employer support for employee volunteering were: use of workplace facilities (57 per cent), time off (57 per cent), and change in work hours to accommodate volunteering (54 per cent).

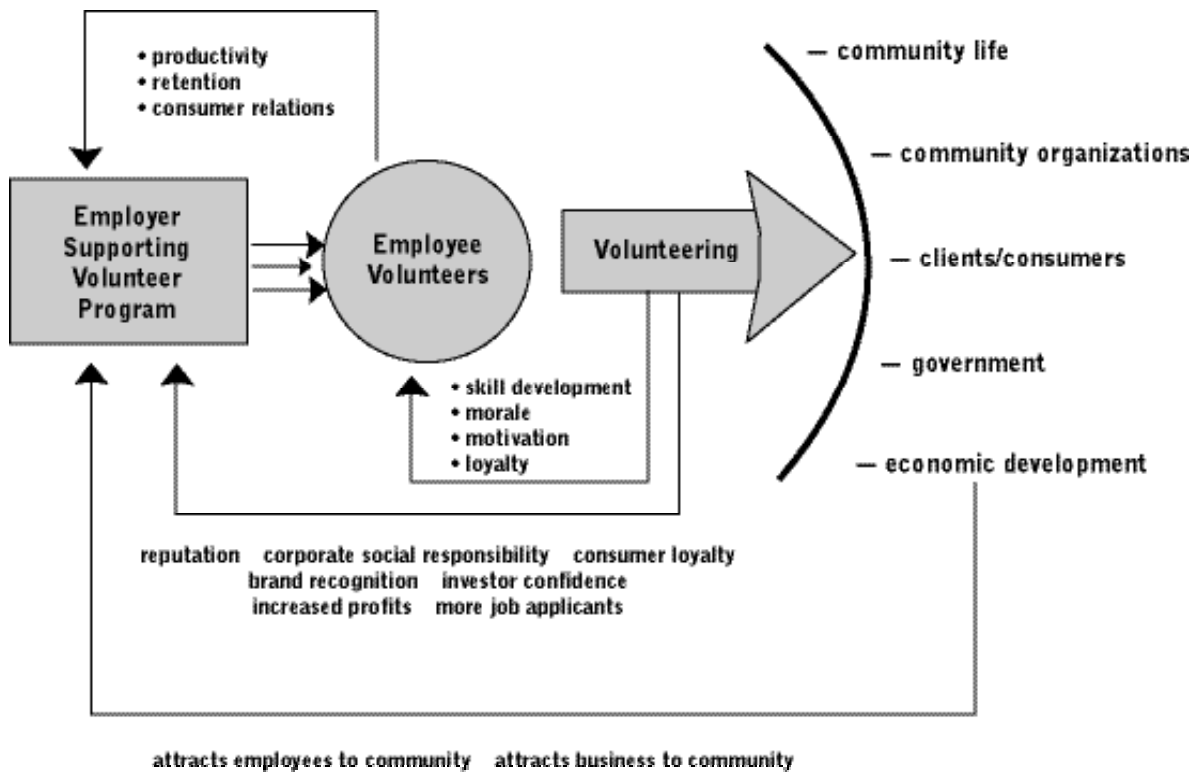
¹² *The Corporate Volunteer Program as a Strategic Resource: The Link Grows Stronger.* (Points of Light Foundation, 2000)

¹³ *A Summary - Employee Volunteering: The Guide.* (The National Centre for Volunteering, 2001: 2)

¹⁴ *Employer-Supported Volunteerism in your Association.* (Kristin Smith, 2002)

Exploring the Benefits

What exactly are the benefits of Employer-Supported Volunteering? ESV generates dozens of benefits to a wide range of constituents. Consider this illustration:



Community

The rather amorphous thing we call “the community” gains from the involvement of employee volunteers in a variety of ways, including: enriched community life; community organizations with more human resources and a wider variety of skills delivering enhanced health, education, and social services; citizens with access to more and augmented programs and services; new partners for government in service provision; and enhanced historical, artistic and cultural richness for citizens to enjoy.

Healthier and more active communities attract new businesses and new employees. They cost less to operate and thereby contribute to economic as well as social development. Vigorous communities create an environment which is clearly more conducive to business growth and bottom line success. Enriched communities also benefit those who live in them, so employees who get involved in their own communities directly and indirectly reap the rewards of their own efforts for themselves and their families.

Employees

Volunteering is not a unidirectional relationship in which the benefits flow only outward from the workers. As the following review of new research on ESV demonstrates, employee volunteers gain transferable job-related skills and competencies that are precisely the same competencies that the Conference Board of Canada has found to be the “employability skills” of the contemporary business environment—the skills needed to enter, stay in, and progress in the world of work.¹⁵ Employees who participate in company-sponsored volunteer programs enjoy enhanced morale, increased motivation and job satisfaction, and tend to have a more positive attitude toward their employer. They are promoted beyond what would have been expected without their volunteer experience, and, in a new research study by economists at the University of Ottawa, volunteer work has proven to increase the annual earnings of volunteers over non-volunteers by 6-7 per cent.¹⁶ Volunteering enriches the personal skills that generally enhance life choices and problem-solving abilities. A growing body of health and medical research literature is showing that volunteering is extremely beneficial to the health of those engaged in it; it creates better immune system functioning, lowers stress levels, helps in the retention of mental acuity, and heightens sense of self-worth and self-esteem.¹⁷ In startling new research, volunteers have been proven to actually *live longer because they volunteer!*¹⁸

¹⁵ *Employability Skills 2000*. (The Conference Board of Canada, 2000)

¹⁶ *The Payoff to Work without Pay: Volunteer Work as an Investment in Human Capital* (Day, Kathleen M. and Rose Anne Devlin: 1998)

¹⁷ See, for example, *Volunteer for the Health of It*. (Linda L. Graff, 1991) and *Volunteering And Healthy Aging: What We Know*. (Neena Chappell, 1999)

¹⁸ *A Little Volunteering Can Prolong Your Life*. (University of Michigan, 1999)

Return on Investment - The Business Case

The Changing Business Environment

The pace of economic change is accelerating world wide. Sweeping social and economic trends such as increasing globalization, information technology, frequent mergers and acquisitions, increased competition, increasing size and influence of companies, and the rise of grassroots and special interest activism are necessitating new ways of thinking about and doing business.

Societal stakeholders are playing an increasingly prominent role in the life of corporations. Michael Tuffrey, writing for the Corporate Citizenship Company in the U.K. and currently one of the most prolific producers of research on corporate community involvement returns, emphasizes the point that the modern business agenda is increasingly driven from outside, by customers.

*The old certainties are gone Today's maxim is 'change or die'. Unleashing the full potential of the workforce has become critical for success. Competence in terms of skills level, flexibility to adapt to change and commitment are paramount.*¹⁹

The Center for Corporate Citizenship at Boston College predicts that change will become inescapable as pressure on business in the coming years to pay greater attention to its role and performance in society is likely to increase.²⁰

In the non-stop search for the competitive edge, employers are increasingly recognizing the value of corporate social responsibility and corporate community involvement. Employer-Supported Volunteering is emerging as one the most cost-effective methods to demonstrate commitment to the community, while at the same time reaping rich and multiple rewards that have a direct impact on the business bottom line. Evidence demonstrates ESV to be a rare example of a win-win-win-win-win situation through which the community, individual citizens, governments, business and employees gain.

¹⁹ *Employees and the Community: Section A Setting the Scene (What are the study's objectives, how did it seek to meet them, and what is the business environment in which it was established)* (Tuffrey, Michael: 1995a: 5)

²⁰ *Making the Business Case: Determining the Value of Corporate Community Involvement.* (Stephen A. Rochlin and Brenda Christoffer. 2000: 3)

Direct Return to Employers

Employer-Supported Volunteering is a concrete manifestation of Corporate Social Responsibility which returns to the company enhanced reputation, increased consumer loyalty, and greater attractiveness to prospective employees. Research by Vanderbilt University and Hewitt Associates in 2000 showed that the 100 companies rated as “the best to work for” received 1.9 times more applications per post than average, offering a wider choice of candidates for each role.²¹ The Center for Corporate Citizenship reports that companies with extensive corporate community involvement programs consistently win battles for talent.²²

Involvement of employees in community activities increases a company’s brand recognition as well as the company’s awareness of community and consumer need which pays off in both market and product development opportunities. Research at both IBM and British Gas demonstrates that good news stories about employee volunteers generate significantly greater media coverage for the sponsoring company. In short, a reputation enhanced by corporate social performance can significantly improve a company’s ability to attract and retain investors, customers and employees.

Employers whose employees volunteer gain a more highly skilled workforce (competency gains are showing up at 14 - 17 per cent as a direct result of volunteering).²³ Employees whose employers support their involvement in the community are more loyal to their employer and stay longer, reducing the costly need to recruit and train replacements.

²¹ Reported in *Good Companies, Better Companies*. (Michael Tuffrey: 2003: 10)

²² *Making the Business Case: Determining the Value of Corporate Community Involvement*. (Stephen A. Rochlin and Brenda Christoffer. 2000: 9)

²³ *Valuing Employee Community Involvement: Practical Guidance on Measuring the Business Benefits from Employee Involvement in Community Activity* (Tuffrey, Michael, 1998)

A remarkable study of the linkages between employee attitude, customer relations and sales at Sears in the United States, published in the Harvard Business Review in 1998²⁴, reveals the direct connection between employee attitude and the bottom line.

- Improving employee attitudes by five points results in a 1.3 point improvement in customer satisfaction (as measured by Sears' surveys)
- Improving customer satisfaction by 1.3 points produces a 0.5% improvement in revenue.

Applied to Sears, a 0.5 per cent improvement in revenue means additional sales of \$65 million per year.

The Sears findings were replicated in the United Kingdom. Michael Tuffrey, writing for the Corporate Citizenship Company, reports:

*In the U.K., the Institute of Employment Studies worked with a British retailer in 1999, to establish a clear link between staff commitment, customer loyalty and sales growth. Research was conducted among 65,000 employees and 25,000 customers in almost 100 stores. The authors found that an increase of one point in employee commitment scores (using a five point scale) represented a one percent increase in monthly sales per store, worth £200,000. Similarly a one point increase in customers' intention to spend increased sales by four percent in this case £90,000.*²⁵

²⁴ *The employee-customer-profit chain at Sears* (Rucci, Anthony J., and Stephen P. Kim and Richard T. Quinn, 1998)

²⁵ *In Good Companies, Better Companies.* op. cit.

Increased morale and motivation, which turn up in study after study of the benefits of employee volunteering, have also been proven to increase customer relations which, as we have seen, pays off in increased sales and profitability. Again, from Tuffrey's work:

... employee community involvement does have a real impact on morale and motivation. Even those who are aware of the schemes, but not involved, tend to be more likely to recommend the company to others and be motivated to do their jobs than those who do not know of any schemes. This positive outlook increased further among those personally involved in schemes.²⁶

The skill acquisition and enhanced team work capacity (collaboration, communication, creative thinking, influencing) that employees gain through their volunteer work are proving to be roughly equivalent to the returns of the more traditional forms of training and team development activities. When community involvement projects and activities are strategically chosen or developed, companies can expect skill upgrades in the areas directly related to business objectives.

The National Work-Life Alliance reports that leadership development has become the top human resource issue facing companies today.

Leadership skills are critical for employees at all levels in an economy where staying ahead of the competition relies on innovation and sound decision-making.²⁷

²⁶ Ibid. p. 17

²⁷ *A Work-Life Tool: Leadership Development through Corporate Volunteerism - An Innovative Approach to Developing Innovative Leaders*. (National Work-Life Alliance, 2002: 3)

Based on extensive research among U.S. executives, the New York-based Conference Board summarizes the specific skills that can be significantly enhanced by employee community involvement as:

- communication skills - written and verbal;
- organizational and time management skills;
- 'people' skills - caring , listening, negotiating;
- accountability and assessment reporting;
- planning skills, short- and long- term objectives;
- budgeting and allocation skills;
- survival skills - stress management, personal priorities.

The Conference Board also observed changed attitudes about work and society among volunteer participants. These included:

- increased understanding of co-workers and respect for diversity;
- more innovative responses to difficulties;
- enhancement of calculated risk-taking;
- heightened appreciation for benefits provided by employers;
- enlarged sense of community and social obligation;
- greater appreciation for contributions from all levels of the organization;
- affirmation of personal capability and worth.²⁸

²⁸ Reported in *Employees and the Community: Section A Setting the Scene (What are the links between a company's human resources needs and its community involvement programme?)*. (Michael Tuffrey, 1995b: 6)

Future

In *Ongoing Conversations with Disbelievers*, authors John Weiser and Simon Zadek explore the inexplicable gap between the growing evidence of benefits of corporate community involvement and the failure of the business community to embrace what is clearly emerging as one of the most productive and cost-effective investments that corporations can make in this new business climate. They ask:

*Why is it that relatively few corporations have committed significant resources to enhancing their communities, when there seem to be so many studies that purport to show a clear business benefit? Often data painstakingly collected and analyzed proves fruitless when the audience remains unconvinced - or even more suspicious than before.*²⁹

While the research literature proving the benefits of CSR in general, and ESV specifically, has not been sufficient to move all employers to develop corporate community involvement initiatives, the empirical data on the extraordinary business returns of CSR and ESV is accumulating around the world. The business case is undeniable.

In his comprehensive review of how Employer-Supported Volunteering might be imported to New Zealand, Darren Quirk³⁰ contends that in the two countries where Employer-Supported Volunteering has spread fastest and most widely—the United States and the United Kingdom—such growth has been possible because of the existence of an infrastructure that acted as a catalyst to its development. The pivotal point in the infrastructure has been the presence of a specialist organization (in the U.K., Business in the Community, and in the U.S., the Points of Light Foundation) which has provided stimuli, such as the following:

²⁹ *Ongoing Conversations with Disbelievers: Persuading Business to Address Social Challenges*. (John Weiser and Simon Zadek. 2001)

³⁰ *Corporate Volunteering: The Potential and the Way Forward*. (Darren Quirk, 1998: 4-5)

- promotion of the benefits of ESV;
- provision of a vehicle to recognize the success of early adopters;
- assistance to businesses to locate community partners and identify community needs;
- presentation of different models of involvement;
- facilitation of volunteer placement programs;
- communication of principles of best practice.

In Canada, the National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participation provides evidence of modest interest and growth in Employer-Supported Volunteering in Canada, but we are lagging far behind many countries including the United States, the United Kingdom and many other European countries. As empirical evidence mounts on the unparalleled return on this form of corporate community involvement, a strong call is issued to governments and the business community to investigate both the returns on, and the potential for, strategic development of Employer-Supported Volunteering in this country since so many in the corporate community in Canada are missing the potential to take full advantage of this global trend.

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