

# Is it a Volunteer Program or Employee Activism?

By Bobbi Kloss



**Much is in the news today surrounding employee activism** and it has employers wondering “do our policies open the door for employees to turn our volunteer program into an act of activism?”

Employer based volunteering to help the disadvantaged - whether it be people, animals, or the environment - has been in the fabric of our workplaces since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Organizations such as the YMCA and the Salvation Army partnered with the larger employers as a means of securing funding to further their cause. Through employee payroll deductions, employees were, and continue to, be able to support their philanthropic values by directly donating money through agencies such as United Way.

In the 1980’s the oldest of the Baby Boomers, those born between 1946-1964, were stepping up to the helm of the workplace. Tempering their political activism ideologies that arose out of the tumultuous times of the sixties, Baby Boomers began looking for ways to balance their altruistic desires with the demands of the 50-60 hour work week they had gotten themselves caught up within. Looking locally, these baby boomer leaders created opportunities and developed a culture of social wellbeing by providing aid to the community and connecting employees to each other and the community. Employers began to include short-term volunteer programs and policies that allowed employees time away from work (whether paid or unpaid) to volunteer in their community. This social wellbeing component became a recruiting strategy that continues to this day. An additional employer strategy/benefit was the ability to market the efforts of the organization through social media, i.e. television and advertisements, recruiting announcements, etc., extending brand recognition locally and nationally.

## **New Generations: Taking Volunteering to the Next Level**

Like the Baby Boomers, building on the platform that came before them, the Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z’s are also giving of their time and money to support the disadvantaged and causes that are near and dear to their hearts. Although, they are also giving a voice to the causes they support and using the same platform that employers use to promote their brand - social media - to reshape the way the disadvantaged are being helped. These impassioned generations are using their technologically savvy skills by connecting through mass marketing their cause via social media to each other in larger-than- ever numbers.

They are also using the same social media marketing opportunities that employers use to showcase their brand in an effort to hold employers accountable for actions the employees believe are causing or contributing to societal harms. Several examples are as follows:

In the aftermath of the rise of nationwide mass shootings, using email and internal Walmart Slack channels, 40 employees connected together to plan and stage a 15-minute walkout and moment of silence to protest the sale of guns by Walmart. The result was that Walmart stopped selling ammunition for military-style weapons and no longer allows customers to openly carry firearms in stores.

Using Medium and other social channels, employees with Google, Amazon and other tech companies, petitioned these companies to not pursue contracts with federal immigration agencies such as the U. S. Customs and Immigration Enforcement in response to treatment of detainees. For similar reasons, Wayfair employees engaged in a walk off of the job as Wayfair was contracting to furnish migrant detention centers with their furniture. While not the response that the employees were looking for, Wayfair donated \$100,000.00 to the American Red Cross.

In solidarity to global climate issues Amazon employees staged a walk-out demanding that Amazon reduce its carbon footprint. In response Jeff Bazos, Amazon CEO, released [Amazon's Climate Pledge](#) policy.

## **In Conclusion**

Today, employers are being asked to have more than a volunteer program and offer opportunities for the workers to be responsible to their community. They are being asked to be ethically moral with their employees, shareholders and the community, i.e. being a good corporate citizen. And, if they don't respond? We have seen and continue to see the power of social media. Whole Foods, Papa Johns, Google, Amazon, and Uber all took hits when employees initially spoke out. From there, it then spread to the voice of the general public.

According to the Corporation for National and Community Service volunteering in America is up. The [2018 Volunteering in America Report](#) found that 77.34 million adults (30.3 percent) volunteered through an organization last year. Barbara Stewart, CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service commented, "Each and every day, ordinary Americans are stepping up to support their fellow citizens to help with needs both great and small because they understand the power service has to change communities and lives for the better."

Derrick Feldmann, President of the consulting firm Achieve that performed [Case Foundation's Report](#), for Millennial impact shared, "[We've learned in this year's survey](#) that millennials don't check their interest in causes at the door, they bring these passions to work."

Smart employers will tap into these passions that are brought to their doorsteps and engage employees into discussions on how to bring balance into the organization. Being those good corporate citizens, instead of arguing against or dismissing employees (literally and figuratively) employers today need to evolve their culture alongside the generations they employ and take a stance against social injustices as well. By developing a culture that promotes communication at all levels and expanding their volunteer programs by tying it directly to the mission, vision and goals of the organization, everyone will reap the most long-term success.

---

*Bobbi Kloss is the Director of Human Capital Management Services for the Benefit Advisors Network – an exclusive, national network of independent employee benefit brokerage and consulting companies. For more information, please visit: [www.benefitadvisorsnetwork.com](http://www.benefitadvisorsnetwork.com) or email the author at [bkloss@benefitadvisorsnetwork.com](mailto:bkloss@benefitadvisorsnetwork.com).*