Microvolunteering

Lately, there has been a lot of excitement around the term "microvolunteering." But what is this and how can corporate volunteer programs leverage this concept?

Microvolunteering can be thought of in two distinct ways. The first definition describes a type of volunteering that has been occurring since the earliest record of mankind. As a form of face-to-face volunteering, it refers to short, episodic durations of time to help a cause or a person without expectation of reward. Like volunteering to carry someone's groceries, or picking up some trash while walking on the beach. However, this term has evolved into the second definition which describes a task done by a volunteer or team of volunteers using an internet-connected device like a smart phone, computer or tablet. For the remainder of this article, microvolunteering will be used to describe volunteering in the virtual sphere.

An important point to remember is that microvolunteering is essentially no different than traditional volunteering when it comes to helping worthy causes—it is just the delivery method that is different. By enabling remote, flexible and convenient forms of technology, volunteering has been made more accessible and is far easier for people to engage. Microvolunteering can be as short as 10 seconds to as long as 30 minutes. It can be a one-time event or an ongoing activity. Microvolunteering can be done alone or with a team and is not location-dependent. One great example of microvolunteering has volunteers transcribing historical documents into an online database, **oldweather.org**, for future climate prediction research. Another project asks volunteers to tag photos, **describeme.museumvictoria.com.au**, with descriptions to help the visually impaired. Other assignments could include providing feedback on a website, promoting a cause through one's social media channels, or designing an email template.

Microvolunteering offers companies many benefits including, but not limited to, the following:

- Non-location dependent and can be done in a variety of environments
- Convenient, allowing volunteers to determine when the activity best suits their schedule
- Lends itself to skill-based volunteering activities
- Minimal training requirements—microvolunteering typically requires a minimal amount of training since it uses the existing skillset of the volunteer. A volunteer will read about the task, decide to participate and start.
- Easy-to-complete and simple to accomplish—can encourage employees to explore deeper, longer volunteering engagements
- Non-time zone dependent—employees can be pooled from across the globe on the same project, while volunteering in their own native time zone
- Complex volunteering projects can be broken into discrete micro-actions, creating a 'distributed' form of volunteer engagement
- More flexibility—microvolunteering empowers people to have more control over the types of volunteer activities and timeframe
- Non-committal—microvolunteering allows for a volunteer to 'dip their toes' into the volunteering arena with less barriers to entry than traditional volunteering

Sparked, a software company which specializes in hosting microvolunteering opportunities, describes microvolunteering as having four defining characteristics:

1. **Convenient.** This is volunteerism that fits into your schedule when you have the time, typically via an internet-connected device like a smart phone, laptop or tablet. To achieve this level of convenience, usually no training or vetting is required.
2. **Bite-sized.** Volunteer tasks are broken into small(-ish) piece in order to complete a task within a short amount of time.

3. **Crowdsourced.** A nonprofit asks a large(-ish) group for assistance. Microvolunteers who have the time, interest and skills, and who may be previously unknown to the organization, collectively do the work.

4. **Network-managed.** The time demands of the nonprofit or corporate volunteer manager are reduced through the ability to distribute much of the project management and quality review through the network of microvolunteers. This work style differs from a more traditional top-down model of project management.

Microvolunteering can be seen as a 'gateway' to get employees to start volunteering. However, in order to encourage people to continue to volunteer, companies also need to understand the motivations of the employees and provide meaningful, quality volunteer experiences that suit an individual's aspirations and lifestyle. These types of volunteers are more likely to re-engage in volunteering if their goals are satisfied and their involvement has had a positive perceived impact. Microvolunteers are also more likely to show a preference for working alone and are less sensitive to recognition and appreciation than 'traditional' volunteers.

To find out more about the world of microvolunteering and how your company can join in, these resources provide further detail:

- **Sparked.com**
- **Helpfromhome.org**
- **Networkedneighborhoods.com**
- Sony Company and its Microvolunteering app (UK)
  tinyurl.com/sony-microvolunteering
- Smartphone volunteering
  tinyurl.com/smartphone-volunteering
- Do Some Good (UK)
  dosomegood.orange.co.uk
- 'New ways of giving time' white paper from IVR
  tinyurl.com/new-ways-of-giving-time