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Features

The Promise of Skills-Based Volunteering

By Christine Letts & Danielle Holly

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One of the fastest-growing corporate citizenship programs is skills-based volunteering—in which a team of corporate employees works for an extended period of time to help a nonprofit solve a complex operational problem. The benefits of the program for both parties are clear, but it's also tougher to implement than many initially think.

The Promise of Skills-Based Volunteering

BY CHRISTINE LETTS & DANIELLE HOLLY

Illustration by LUKE BEST

Over the past decade, businesses of all kinds have become much more socially aware and active. In 2015, more than 75 percent of large US corporations were engaged in corporate citizenship activities of one type or another.[1] Those included traditional philanthropic activities such as corporate giving and volunteer programs, as well as new efforts such as impact investing and skills-based volunteerism.

Among the array of corporate citizenship programs, skills-based volunteerism is the most rapidly growing, with more than 50 percent of companies now channeling the talents of their employees to nonprofit organizations.[2] The rise in popularity of these programs is largely because a strong business case can be made for skills-based volunteering programs, which have been shown to increase employee engagement and retention, while also measurably enhancing the skills and talents that employees bring back to their desks.[3] The programs have the added benefit of being particularly popular with millennial employees, whom companies eagerly seek to recruit and retain.

Businesses aren't the only entities interested in skills-based volunteering (SBV). It is also popular with nonprofit organizations seeking a way to bring in the very skills that companies can offer—such as marketing, operations, strategic planning, finance, and technology. The need for these skills is great. The average nonprofit organization spends just 2 percent of its organizational budget on overhead, compared with the average business that spends 20 percent on overhead.[4]

There are a variety of SBV models at work. Two of the higher-value, but more complex, models are the "skilled day of service" and the longer-term "project consulting." The skilled day of service model (also

called a "hackathon" or "flash consulting") is a skills-based take on the traditional hands-on volunteer days, where teams of employees come together for one to three days to help a nonprofit organization address a challenge.

The skilled day of service model is best for companies that want to engage a large number of employees (hundreds instead of dozens) and a large number of nonprofits (dozens instead of a handful). While the short time commitment can be appealing to companies and employees who are just starting to explore skills-based volunteering, it's a model that needs to be approached carefully—particularly by nonprofits that need to put significant thought into what can realistically be achieved from a day or so of corporate consulting.

This model has proved successful for nonprofits and companies that invest the time needed in advance of the day to prepare a realistic scope of work, form the right team of volunteers, and design an event that allows for various forms of gathering information and generating solutions. One of the largest annual skilled days of service is Charles Schwab's Pro Bono Challenge, which connects hundreds of employees to more than 75 nonprofit organizations across nine regions to address, in the span of five hours, strategic questions related to expansion, branding, and operations.

The project consulting model, on the other hand, connects individuals or teams to scoped nonprofit projects for much longer periods of time, anywhere from six weeks to six months. The projects are usually more complex, ranging from strategic planning and website design to phone bank training and program tracking software.

The project consulting model is integrated into a company's talent and leadership development initiatives, where employees are hand-tapped to participate as a way to enhance a specific set of executive, leadership, or functional skills. In this model, teams of 5 to 10 employees typically spend a handful of hours a week, baked into their workday, addressing a scoped nonprofit challenge. In Common Impact's 17 years working with this model, we've found that there are very few private sector skills that don't effectively translate into a nonprofit context.[5]

This article focuses on the project consulting model. When done well, we believe it offers nonprofit organizations the highest and most lasting value of all the skills-based volunteering programs. So when we write about the "skills-based volunteering" (SBV) approach, we are referring to the project consulting model.

Given the fact that so many nonprofit organizations need technical skills and management talent, and so many businesses are willing to offer those services to nonprofits for free, the skills-based volunteering model would seem to be a match made in heaven. And in theory it is. But in practice, it has proved to be difficult to implement—so much so, that a growing number of nonprofits are turning away from skills-based support.

The primary reason for the growing unease with SBV is that absorbing this influx of corporate talent is much more complex than anyone anticipated. What we have started to see as a result of this is frustration, confusion, and wariness from both companies and nonprofits about the skills-based volunteering model.

To truly unlock this resource as a long-term, sustainable model for public good, both nonprofits and companies need to develop a new muscle in preparing for, managing, and making the most of skills-based volunteering. To better understand the SBV model and how it can be implemented, we embarked on a research project to hear directly from practitioners—the companies and nonprofits that have tried different forms of pro bono and skills-based volunteering—to understand what works and, perhaps even more important, what doesn't work. This article is the result of our work.[6]

CHRISTINE LETTS is the recently retired Rita E. Hauser Senior Lecturer in the Practice of Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership at Harvard Kennedy School. Letts has also worked in the private sector (as vice president, Columbus Plant Operations, Cummins Engine Company) and the public sector (as the first secretary of the Indiana Department of Transportation).

DANIELLE HOLLY is CEO of Common Impact, a nonprofit organization that helps corporations develop skills-based volunteering programs and partnerships with community organizations. Holly is also a contributing writer at *The Nonprofit Quarterly*.

THE VALUE OF SKILLS-BASED VOLUNTEERING

Traditional partnerships between companies and nonprofits, such as grantmaking and volunteerism, provide many benefits, but they are largely transactional relationships that have little lasting effect. What makes skills-based volunteering different and important is that when it works, it knits together the expertise and resources from the corporate and nonprofit sectors to create strengthened sustainable solutions that don't come undone when partners part ways. We call this "the knitting factor."

Not only does this differentiate SBV from most traditional corporate-nonprofit partnerships, but it also differentiates SBV from the more well-known practice of pro bono. The classic example of pro bono is a consulting or law firm taking on a nonprofit client as part of a portfolio that it assigns to employees. The pro bono support is done using the company's model, approach, and structures, and is typically not customized for its nonprofit clients, as is the case with SBV.

While skills-based volunteering and pro bono are often used interchangeably, there are differences between the two. The most important difference is that with pro bono, the company's employees generally make little or no effort to work with the nonprofit's employees in a way that helps them learn new skills and knowledge.

To understand the benefits of SBV, consider the example of Capital Good Fund, a Providence, R.I.-based nonprofit that provides financial services to low-income communities, and its partner Fidelity Investments. The two organizations worked together to design a better interface for the client-facing online lending portal. Muna Idriss, the junior Capital Good Fund staff member who led the team, was deeply exposed to the technical aspects of project management by working closely with the Fidelity team lead. "This project was huge for me professionally," says Idriss. "I learned so much from the Fidelity team. It changed my career trajectory." She now manages the systems department at Capital Good Fund.

Often, the expertise provided by the company is not a skill that the nonprofit needs every day on staff. The ability to have "backup experts" increases the effectiveness of the nonprofit by providing it with technical and analytical expertise, such as system design, performance management, financial modeling, and market analysis, that it often doesn't have and doesn't need full-time. In addition to this injection of expertise, skills-based volunteering can provide an external perspective and validation for the nonprofit's model and systems. "They gave our internal team a buddy, a nudge, confidence," says John Breitfeller, CEO of Education First Steps.

For the companies that engage in SBV, there is also significant skill development for the employees who participate, particularly if that skill development is integrated as a goal of the engagement early on. Fidelity and John Hancock, for example, have established their SBV programs as experiential talent development from their inception. These programs are targeted, branded, and implemented separately from the company's other volunteer programs.

Fidelity's Workplace Investing group selects eight high-potential employees from its director-level pool (employees approximately 15 years into their careers) who are being considered for the next level of leadership. The skills-based project is focused on a strategic challenge at a growing nonprofit—tasking the Workplace Investing team with assessing market position, financial health, and programmatic impact. They are paired with a coach (a senior Fidelity colleague) who mentors the team and help guides the process.

Similarly, John Hancock differentiates its Signature Skills program from its community engagement work, Signature Corps, under which large groups of employees volunteer for traditional episodic projects in the community. Seth Williams, John Hancock's Signature Skills program manager, describes the talent development for their employees. "In addition to the value created at the nonprofit, many of our employees deepened their skills through the SBV project work, which helped accelerate their development within the company."

With this focus on talent development, it's critical to ensure that team members from both organizations have the core skills that are required to complete the project—and that they're stretching in ways that don't compromise the quality of the deliverable for the nonprofit. Take, for example, the team from Leadership Fort Worth [Texas] and Fidelity who worked together to develop a membership and outreach technology system. "The team members had never developed this app before," says Harriet Harral, CEO of Leadership Fort Worth. "They really liked the opportunity and have stayed in touch about how it is being implemented."

There is also value in the SBV process for the company and the nonprofit beyond the exchange of knowledge. Nonprofits get significant and immediate capacity-building results. Companies amplify the impact of their philanthropic giving and enhance their brand and reputation among customers and employees. Still, it is ultimately this knowledge exchange and the "skin in the game" that exists on both sides that enables a more balanced and integrated corporate-nonprofit partnership and results in the knitting factor that makes skills-based volunteering a new, powerful social sector resource. (See "Three Skills-Based Volunteering Projects" on page 46.)

WHY ORGANIZATIONS ARE WARY OF SBV

While many nonprofits and businesses participate in these programs, there is a wariness surrounding skills-based volunteering on both sides, largely driven by the lack of clarity around the investment required to produce a high-quality, mutually beneficial result.

Nonprofit wariness | There are several reasons why nonprofit organizations have not taken full advantage of skills-based volunteering programs. One reason is that the nature of the philanthropic environment has conditioned nonprofits to be largely reactive when seeking resources. For example, nonprofits often write grant proposals to accommodate the guidelines and program priorities of the funder, not their own.

When pursuing an SBV program, the opposite approach is required. Rather than reacting to a company's proposal, a nonprofit organization must start by doing an internal assessment of what its needs are, and then seek out a business partner that can help provide those skills.

Several nonprofit leaders we spoke with talked about the temptation to agree to overtures from companies simply because they were not used to turning down a donation. While some of these leaders admit to continuing this practice, they were adamant that it's a particularly detrimental approach when it comes to SBV. One nonprofit leader described a situation in which an intermediary brought forth an opportunity from a company that wanted to do three projects based on its own engagement goals. The nonprofit only needed one of those projects, but it felt pressure to accept all three, and in doing so it ended up wasting its own time and the company's time.

A second reason that nonprofit leaders are hesitant to engage in SBV programs is because they struggle with understanding the time commitment required from staff and fear that the ultimate result may not be worth the investment. "When I first heard that I'd have to spend about five hours a week, I thought, 'No way I can do that,'" says J.D. Newsom, COO of the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Fort Worth. "But the benefit of the result is so significant that the time I spent was not an issue." Newsom's view was echoed by every nonprofit leader we spoke to. They all agreed that the investment of time was worth it.

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Finally, many of the nonprofit leaders were hesitant about SBV programs because of previous negative experiences they had had with pro bono and paid consulting. Comments ranged from "Help from a board member is not always a good fit" to "He told me that he had 20 hours he was able to devote to a project, but then he got busy and we never saw him again."

In most cases, however, those fears about SBV proved to be unfounded. Nonprofit leaders described skills-based volunteering as a different type of engagement than pro bono—one that was much more customized to their specific organizational needs. Similar comments were made about the difference between SBV and paid consultants. In fact, several nonprofit executives described paid con-

sulting engagements as much less transparent, client-centered, and problem-solving oriented than skills-based engagements.

Corporate wariness | One of the reasons that companies are wary of skills-based volunteering is because it is complex to implement, it requires a longer-term commitment, and the results of the engagement can be harder to measure. Traditional community engagement programs such as grantmaking and volunteerism—by contrast—more readily align with a company's short-term quarterly outputs. And because the goals of these types of projects are narrower, the results can be easier to measure.

Working with a nonprofit organization can often put a company outside its comfort zone. For most corporations, the deep, operational engagement with nonprofits that is required of an SBV engagement means penetrating a black box. Nonprofit organizations are different, complex, and messy, and without significant investment to mitigate risk and reputation, companies are inclined to keep an arm's-length relationship that characterizes most grantmaking and volunteering programs.

While most corporations understand and generally embrace their role in the community, the department and staff that lead these activities are often considered cost centers and are measured as such. Traditional community involvement programs have clear costs: overall giving budgets, community engagement staffing costs, volunteer time-off policies. The "cost" of SBV, however, is not something that is as easily predicted and measured.

It's challenging for companies to establish a new investment, such as skills-based volunteering, when an immediate return can't be quantified. In fact, we found that the corporations that have embraced SBV have been led by a few leaders who were willing to take a leap of faith that the investment would yield identifiable results. And as with nonprofits who became believers after their first successful foray into SBV, companies tend to follow the same path.

READINESS IS CRITICAL TO SUCCESS

The most important factor in determining whether a skills-based volunteering program will succeed is the readiness of the company and the nonprofit organization. Both parties may have great desire and need for this type of program, but if they are not organizationally ready to undertake it, the odds of it succeeding are small.

Readiness starts with the company itself. In our research, we found that one of the critical elements of success for skills-based volunteering programs is whether the program is based on the business needs and imperatives of the company. Given the level of operational involvement that SBV entails, and the need for a tight alignment between the employee talent available and the nonprofit challenge they seek to address, it is critical to define the commitment—both from senior decision makers and from participating employees—before embarking on an SBV program. Our corporate interviewees shared a few elements for companies to consider before launching an SBV initiative:

Understand the fit with business priorities | How does the program align with strategic goals? Are the associated business goals primarily employee engagement or talent development? How will the SBV program fit into employee's workday and business priorities? Do workers have sufficient control and flexibility over their schedule to meet the demands of the projects and team dynamics? What are the business cycles, logistics, and product or scheduling issues that will need to be aligned?

Targeting the effort | What social or organizational challenge is the company best positioned to address? What employees' capabilities best align with the support that nonprofits most need?

Calibrating control | What is the right balance between organic program growth and structured engagement and measurement? How much control do you want to exercise? Do you want to specify the project type and level of commitment that employees dedicate, let business units decide, or let projects dictate engagement?

Using an Intermediary

Many businesses and nonprofits, particularly those newer to skills-based volunteering, often engage an intermediary to help launch and run the program. Most intermediaries charge a fee to the corporation, and often to the nonprofit as well, to ensure commitment. "It holds us accountable to fully exploit the opportunity and is a signal to the company that we take this seriously," says Kathleen LaValle, executive director and president of Dallas CASA.

Examples of intermediaries include Common Impact, Taproot Foundation, Catchafire, and Pyxera Global. An intermediary provides several benefits to both the nonprofit and the business.

Benefits to Nonprofits

Project selection and readiness | With the rise in popularity of skills-based volunteering (SBV), nonprofits often find themselves with many more offers than they can handle. Intermediaries can help nonprofits manage the internal and external conversations required to ensure that they are pursuing the right project at the right time. "At the start, the Common Impact team creates a safe zone to help us identify the underlying issue the project will help solve," says Emily McCann, CEO of Citizen Schools. "While we often have a hypothesis, we don't know what we don't know."

Project prep, scope, and management | Once the intermediary has helped the nonprofit identify the right projects, the intermediary can help the nonprofit prepare, scope, and manage those projects. Intermediaries bring classic project management expertise, along with the added knowledge of how to make SBV projects successful. "They help keep all team members on scope," says Pam Cannell, membership and communications manager at Leadership Fort Worth. "They can help keep a big-thinking CEO within bounds."

Knitting needles | One of the most critical functions an intermediary can play is to act as the needles that knit together the skills and resources of the business and nonprofit, playing a consistent, objective role in moving the project forward. They focus on developing strong relationships among the players and

Iteration and adaptability | Be prepared to adapt. Don't copy a program from another company or another internal initiative that doesn't fit. Good will is not enough to make it successful. Once the program is defined, the corporation must support, follow up, refine, and adapt. Erin Dieterich, director of global corporate citizenship for Oracle+NetSuite, put it simply, "'Set it and forget it' does not work."

A nonprofit's readiness to engage in an SBV project is also one of the most significant determinants of project success. One should consider both organizational readiness (the nonprofit's level of stability in operations and leadership and the effectiveness of its program model) and project readiness (whether this is the right project at the right time).

The nonprofit must have the skill, creativity, and discipline to scope the project well or be willing and able to leverage the support of an intermediary organization to assist it. (Intermediary organizations can play an important role in helping nonprofits and companies to create and manage skills-based volunteering programs. See "Using an Intermediary" on page 44.) The project must be strategically important to command enough attention and warrant the staff time it will take to complete.

Readiness does not mean that the nonprofit already has the capabilities internally to undertake the project. Rather, it means that the nonprofit is ready to put in the energy and attention that the project demands. Consider the example of the Political Asylum/Immigration Representation (PAIR) Project of Boston. The new CEO, Anita P. Sharma, although having served many years on the legal services side of the organization, had little management experience. "We needed a new vision," says Sharma. "We had to get out of our crisis mode."

A team from State Street Corporation signed on for a six-month strategic planning process. While Sharma admits to having been afraid of the time commitment, she says that she was more worried about ending up with something that did not fit the organization: "I was worried that the plan conducted by those in the corporate sector would not be a good fit for our small nonprofit." PAIR ended up with significant and actionable recommendations across marketing, operations, program, IT, and finance, providing a critical foundation for the organization as it started to navigate the changing policy environment under the new Trump administration.

The most common project scoping challenge we heard from our interviews was with projects that are too vague or too large. Another is spending too much of the project effort and time on preliminary data gathering or analysis. "For beginners, start small and tangible. This allows people to see other ways to get things done and the value of SBV," says Gregg Betheil, president of PENCIL. On the other hand, some projects can be successful when they're more ambiguous or less defined—if the two organizations have a high-performing and dedicated team working on it. For example, the Fidelity Workplace Investing projects are intentionally widely scoped to enable the team and nonprofit to work together to define priorities.

Project scoping is particularly important with these SBV projects, because many are unique and customized, and don't follow a predefined process. The nature of the way the work is done in an SBV project allows for tailoring and adaptation that few paid consulting arrangements can accommodate.

It is also important to instill a spirit of inquiry and openness in both the corporate and nonprofit teams. The corporate team shouldn't assume that it knows best and that all business practices can apply to a nonprofit environment. "Respect us. Recognize that we are experts in our field, operating for a long time with inadequate resources," says Esther Landau, development director at the Pomeroy Recreation and Rehabilitation Center. Nonprofits, however, also need to be open to listening to guidance from their business partner. "Try not to defend what you are doing," says Kathleen LaValle, executive director and president of Dallas CASA. "Be very open-minded and be prepared to over-share. Be curious and tolerant of speaking a different language. Terms like 'impact' might have very different meanings. Be prepared to learn about the company."

on accomplishing project deliverables—two goals that are sometimes at odds with each other in new corporate-nonprofit partnerships. The intermediaries can also assist in small and large course adjustments, and encourage both sides to be open about progress and issues.

Benefits to Businesses

Program strategy | Businesses generally have a clear understanding of their core talents, but many need help in understanding how their core talents can be best used by a nonprofit organization and applied toward social sector challenges. Intermediaries bring knowledge of the breadth of nonprofit capacity-building needs and can help slice that need from a regional and mission-specific perspective. In addition, an intermediary can help a business decide which of the SBV models to choose from—light-touch training opportunities, hackathon-style days of service, project consulting, and sabbatical and immersion models.

Partnership management | Intermediaries can help companies build, clarify, and manage their partnerships with nonprofits—something that can be especially beneficial for companies that have many different types of relationships and programs. Intermediaries frequently take on the primary relationship with each of the two parties, engaging directly with nonprofits and, separately, directly with companies when negotiating program and project opportunities. This creates a more consistent and balanced partnership, and it also can spare the company from the legal liabilities and risk that can sometimes come with providing guidance to social sector organizations (particularly related to financial, legal, and human resource issues).

Business and social impact reporting | Intermediaries have experience understanding and measuring the impact of SBV programs, and can generate strong impact reports covering both the business return and the breadth and depth of social impact. Detailing outcomes such as the talent development of individual employees, the increase in overall brand effectiveness, and the ability of nonprofits to better deliver on their mission promise can help a company refine and build its SBV program.

PEOPLE ARE ALSO ESSENTIAL

Organizational readiness may be the most important factor in creating successful skills-based volunteering programs, but coming in a close second is the need to have the right people in place, particularly at the nonprofit organization. Our research found that one of the most common reasons for slow-moving or ineffective SBV projects is poor nonprofit staffing.

To succeed, SBV projects need to be staffed and supported by people who have experience with project management, volunteer management, and the project focus area. They also need to have quick access to those with decision-making power within the organization. Typically, the person leading the project at the nonprofit organization will need to spend 10 to 20 percent of her time on the project. "You will have homework," says Pam Cannell, membership and communications manager of Leadership Fort Worth. "We have had corporate teams of 8 to 10 people working five hours a week. The nonprofit has to keep up."

SBV projects require diligent project management by both the corporate and nonprofit teams. Nonprofits need to be prepared to put in the time required to codesign a feasible project plan, and outline the interdependencies and pivot points within a project. Then they must hold their internal team, as well as the SBV team, accountable to that plan. While this requires classic project management expertise and facility with tools such as GANTT charts, more critical is the soft skill of volunteer management to ensure that a documented project plan can be effectively implemented.

Nonprofit organizations that regularly use volunteers in their program work are more likely to be able to optimize SBV at a quicker pace. Two of the nonprofit organizations we interviewed, Citizen Schools and PENCIL, use volunteers as their primary program staff. They understand the concept of matching skills to the task and know that it takes an investment of time to make volunteers work well in the organization.

Post-project support by the nonprofit organization is just as critical. "A project alone does not change behavior in a nonprofit organization," says Emily McCann, CEO of Citizen Schools. "You need an executive sponsor to lead on the integration of the project and on the culture change that must accompany it." Even with the support of an organization's leaders, skepticism can remain among nonprofit staff who have not experienced SBV. "We still need to win hearts and minds," says Daphne Barlow Stigliano, CEO of Boys & Girls Club of Greater Fort Worth.

Finding the right person to lead the nonprofit effort is critical. While it can be rare to find one person who has this full combination

Three Skills-Based Volunteering Projects

	NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION	CORPORATE TEAM	PROJECT	RESULT
FIRST North Carolina and Fidelity Investments	FIRST North Carolina, a Greensboro, N.C.-based organization that supports STEM education through technology and robotics competitions for young people.	A senior leader in Fidelity Investments' technology group recognized the need to develop the confidence and leadership abilities of the company's female technologists, so he pulled together an all-female team who were focused on growing their executive leadership skills through experiential learning.	FIRST North Carolina was managing all of its program data on Excel spreadsheets. The team designed and launched a streamlined database using software from Salesfore.com to help the organization more effectively organize and track program data.	An organizational dashboard on key program outcomes that has enabled FIRST North Carolina to refine and build its programming.
PAIR and State Street Corporation	PAIR, a Boston-based organization that provides free legal services to asylum seekers and promotes the rights of detained immigrants.	A cross-functional team from State Street Corp. pulled together by its corporate citizenship group, led by a seasoned corporate program manager who had supported multiple skills-based volunteer engagements.	The need for PAIR's services was increasing, and the organization needed to develop a stronger funding and operational strategy to meet that demand without burning out its hard-working staff.	A road map to support PAIR in implementing new strategies toward increased funding and scenario planning, which has become even more critical in a changing policy environment.
PENCIL and JPMorgan Chase	PENCIL, a New York City-based nonprofit that fosters a thriving community of business and school leaders, utilizing their talents and expertise to strengthen public schools and put students on the path to success.	A team of HR experts from JPMorgan Chase that were brought together after signing up on the company's online portal, where employees can peruse various skills-based project opportunities.	PENCIL recognized the need for its staff to be clearer on the performance dimensions that were driving employee promotion and compensation. The team helped create a performance review and assessment tool.	A reformed performance review process, along with insights into PENCIL's culture that helped the organization's leaders better understand what it takes to develop and retain a talented team.

of skills and capacity, it's important to try. "Bring the best people with the highest potential," says Education First Steps' Breitfeller. "The creators of our Steps 2.0 project ended up as leaders in the organization."

It is important to involve a company's upper management in the SBV project to ensure that the programs will be sustained in the face of business imperatives and challenges that would otherwise shuffle SBV initiatives to the bottom of the priority list. Their involvement also helps to ensure that appropriate backup will be available if needed. In addition, both the nonprofit and corporate team members are energized by the presence and help of higher-level corporate executives.

Each Fidelity team, for example, has an executive sponsor and a business unit sponsor, to help make sure that the SBV projects are fully supported by the company. "Our employees take their skills-based work very seriously," says Laura Hudson Hamre, senior director of community relations at Fidelity. "They approach it the same way they do in their professional roles and are eager to assist when called upon." A nonprofit leader in Fort Worth recalled how impressed she was that a Fidelity executive with higher-level expertise in Boston was always available and even traveled to join project meetings occasionally.

If upper management support is secured and junior-level employees are eager to participate, many companies consider the program ready. However, it's middle management that needs to support these programs over the long term in order that they understand and see the benefits to employee productivity, development, and retention. Without that, middle management sees only the cost of SBV—employees taking time away from their day jobs to focus on nonprofit clients. "For one [corporate] team member, it was important that his boss knew what he was doing," says a nonprofit leader. "So we wrote notes to the boss telling him about the contribution."

The corporate team lead is critical to the success and experience of the team members and the project. One nonprofit leader said of a JPMorgan Chase team lead, "Personal dedication is noticeable and it matters." The team lead needs project management, coaching, relationship, and client sensitivity skills. Project management skills are important even in technical projects. "Don't let the nonprofit think something is going to happen if it isn't," advises Andrea DeSimone, principal systems analyst at Fidelity.

It is also useful for new team leads to talk to those within the organization who have had experience with SBV projects. Providing the team leader with appropriate authority and freedom is important. The leader of a nonprofit technical project described an instance when they needed a certain piece of equipment to continue the installation of a new system. The team leader went back to his office and brought back the equipment, saving the project a few weeks of acquisition time by the nonprofit.

Even within programs that select high performers for projects as part of a leadership development initiative, corporate team members should always have a choice about whether they participate. Many corporations identify the members of the team for projects first, and then identify a nonprofit project that fits those skill sets. This ultimately makes for stronger projects by ensuring that the right expertise is available for a challenge. DeSimone advises, "Let team members have a choice about stepping out of their comfort zone or just doing what they are good at."

One company executive led a team that was all "voluntold" by the company. She did not know why she had been picked, nor did any of the rest of the team. Several of the team members ended up dropping out of the project when work priorities prevailed. Some had a negative attitude and others just drifted away.

As important as relationship development, staffing, and support is, both sides need to be focused on making measurable progress toward the goal. While SBV has many additional benefits, the agreed-upon project deliverable must stand paramount as the engagement progresses. "This engagement worked well because we achieved the result, not because everyone got along," says one nonprofit leader. This means that all members of the project must be prepared to push back. In order to be a true capacity-building resource, both sides need to be held accountable to a tangible result.

LOOKING AHEAD

There is enormous potential for skills-based volunteering to be a game-changing approach to addressing social challenges. By knitting together the best resources, talents, and expertise from across sectors, SBV develops and transforms relationships between institutions that need to work together to make progress on social problems.

The nonprofit leaders we spoke with are sold on using this valuable resource in an ongoing way and have begun considering SBV during their annual planning processes. Business executives are also realizing the value of moving beyond checkbook philanthropy and transactional support, and finding ways for their company to be engaged in long-term programs that create lasting change.

Employees, particularly those at the beginning of their career, who are engaged in skills-based volunteering are now being trained to understand nonprofit organizations and the complexities of the social challenges they are trying to address. SBV is laying the groundwork for new types of knowledge, relationships, and creative problem solving. While pro bono support has been in use for many years, the practices of SBV are just emerging, and new models will no doubt develop as companies become more engaged and devote their significant resources to improving their ability to contribute. ■

NOTES

1 *State of Corporate Citizenship 2014*, Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship, 2014.

2 *Giving in Numbers 2016*, Committee Encouraging Corporate Philanthropy, 2016.

3 William D. Eggers, Nate Wong, and Kate Cooney, *The Purpose Driven Professional*, Westlake, Texas: Deloitte University Press, 2015.

4 *Assessing the Problem: Underinvestment in Organizational Infrastructure*, Common Impact, 2008.

5 Common Impact is an intermediary that designs and implements corporate skills-based volunteering programs.

6 This research was conducted in partnership with Common Impact. We interviewed 15 nonprofit executives from nine organizations and 7 corporate executives from five companies: Fidelity Investments, John Hancock, NetSuite, Charles Schwab, Blackbaud, PENCIL, Citizens Schools, Boys & Girls Club of Greater Fort Worth, Dallas CASA, Leadership Fort Worth, EARN, Pomeroy Recreation and Rehabilitation Center, Education First Steps, and Political Asylum Immigrant Services. Two of the five corporations are not Common Impact clients, and several nonprofits have experience with multiple intermediaries. Interview questions covered history with pro bono work, specific experience with recent SBV engagements, key success factors, and advice for both nonprofits and corporations on this work. We also pulled from Common Impact's previous research and 17 years of experience managing hundreds of skills-based engagements with Fortune 500 companies and their nonprofit partners.