Supplement: From Philanthropy to the Front Lines
Tapping the Power of Virtual Volunteers
By Sylvia Bartley & Emily Lauer-Bader
Tapping the Power of Virtual Volunteers

As the pandemic forces everyone to work remotely, employees are taking their activism and volunteerism online.

BY SYLVIA BARTLEY & EMILY LAUER-BADER

The crises of 2020, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial injustices it has magnified, have required employers to rise to the challenge by not only adapting to a virtual work environment, but also responding to the increased demand from employees to connect and give back to their communities.

In recent years, employees have increasingly raised the bar as to what they expect of their employers. More employees, especially Millennial and Generation Z workers, now call for workplace-based social activism. A 2018 MetLife survey found that 76 percent of American employees expect their companies to make a difference in the local community. In fact, three out of four working Americans polled in 2019 by JUST Capital say they would choose to work for the more just company, even if it paid less. Business leaders can no longer sit on the sidelines when social crises arise. Employees expect companies to act and to provide opportunities for them to get involved, too.

This year’s circumstances have only increased that sentiment. A growing number of people and corporations are calling for lasting systemic change inside and outside of work. Millions of protesters have taken to the streets to demand action. Millions more are creating changes big and small in their own communities, from removing racist monuments to running for political office. For example, a record number of Black women are running for public office this year, and at least 122 Black or multiracial Black women filed to run in the 2020 election cycle, according to the Center for American Women and Politics. Texas-based Project HOPE, a leading global health and humanitarian relief organization that works to empower health-care workers to save lives, from the early days of the outbreak, Project HOPE was on the front lines in Wuhan, China, and its response efforts quickly ramped up globally as the outbreak became a pandemic.

From the start, training health-care workers and equipping them to triage and treat COVID-19 patients was one of the organization’s most pressing needs. In partnership with health and medical experts from Brown University, Project HOPE created a live remote training program, which allowed hospitals in Wuhan to rapidly bolster the number of frontline workers available to care for thousands of patients that were quickly filling hospitals and surge centers.

When the virus spread outside of China, Project HOPE knew the need for frontline workers grew exponentially. In response, Project HOPE partnered with the Medtronic Foundation and the community development social enterprise PYXERA Global to train a virtual cadre of Medtronic employees with previous clinical experience to deliver training to hospitals and clinics around the world. Working remotely, Medtronic volunteers helped mobilize more frontline health-care workers. Since the project kick-off in June 2020, Medtronic volunteers have completed...
the power of volunteers in helping to address some of the most urgent needs the global community faces as it cares for those affected by the coronavirus.

**FOUR APPROACHES TO GIVING BACK**

Medtronic volunteers have been eager to help their communities during the pandemic, and they aren’t alone. A 2020 Fidelity Charitable survey found 79 percent of people expect to give as much or more to charitable causes this year as they have in the past, and nearly half (43 percent) plan to volunteer as much or more than they have previously.

To respond to the increased desire to give, the Medtronic Foundation pivoted its in-person volunteer opportunities to virtual volunteering, which allowed volunteers to support important causes—like making masks, transcribing documents, or helping a museum move its collection online—all done by phone, mail, internet, and/or video chat. The transformation was guided by four approaches:

**Unleash the internal force for change by making it personal.** | To create a transformative volunteer experience, the Medtronic Foundation began by training volunteer leaders called Community Impact Champions (CICs). More than 379 employees in 44 countries volunteered for this leadership role. Their mission is to engage employees in volunteer activities and leverage the power of storytelling to relate volunteer activities to the true impact and meaning of their volunteer activity. For example, some CICs shared stories of personal experiences during video calls with volunteers and encouraged others to do the same. During a letter-writing activity for the elderly, one CIC spoke to the isolation her mother was feeling in a nursing facility and how a letter from a loved one, or even a stranger, could truly change the course of their day or even the next weeks.

**Offer virtual volunteer opportunities.** | The Medtronic Foundation knew that people wanted to give, but they didn’t understand how they could safely volunteer during the pandemic.

During a virtual volunteer power hour, Medtronic employees wrote letters, signed letters, and purchased items for families in need.

three trainings with assistance or co-leads from Project HOPE. Two trainings were hosted by Health and Education for All (HAEFA) in Bangladesh and one by the EMS training academy in the US Virgin Islands. Close to 150 participants from government ministries, medical college faculties, and staff from emergency agencies, clinics, and hospitals joined the training. In Bangladesh, an additional 175 medical professionals have been credentialed as a result of the train-the-trainer model.

“Within Medtronic, many employees read, research, and learn about COVID-19 as a part of their day job. It is our moral duty to share this knowledge and expertise with as many people as possible,” Medtronic volunteer Santosh Agarwal says, reflecting upon what led him to volunteer with Project HOPE.

The program has been so successful that it now serves as a pilot for virtual volunteering around the globe. It is truly demonstrating
In response, the foundation empowered its employees with thousands of global options to volunteer virtually via the Volunteer Match integration on Medtronic Foundation’s Volunteer and Giving website. Volunteer Match is a third-party website that helps volunteers search for opportunities that fit their interests and needs. The search tool was easily integrated into the Medtronic Foundation’s website, providing easy access to opportunities nonprofits around the world have listed. From sewing masks and tutoring children in need to collecting food donations for families in crisis, employees can give back in meaningful ways. Also, employees can find opportunities to contribute to the COVID-19 response or to participate in social justice causes in their own neighborhood or around the world.

Because the Medtronic Foundation’s operational headquarters is in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the organization felt an immediate need to take action following the killing of George Floyd in the city. The Medtronic Foundation’s team worked with its own African Descent Network, alongside local nonprofits, to determine how best to serve its community. It organized a Volunteer “Power Hour for Medtronic employees around the world to volunteer for an hour anytime during a specified day to support social justice organizations, such as Amnesty International, the American Civil Liberties Union, and many others. Volunteers wrote letters, signed online petitions, and purchased items for families and children in need. On that day, some employees also read through 5,000 racial covenants and legal clauses embedded in property deeds that were used to bar people who were not white from owning or occupying property in Minneapolis. The goal was to show how these covenants were inculcated in the physical landscape to expose structural racism in the community and to serve as a foundation for conversations and fact-based policymaking.

The response was incredible—more than 2,700 employees from 44 countries logged more than 4,000 volunteer hours in just one day. **Enable volunteers to put their skills to use.** | Employees with health-care experience wanted to put their clinical skills to use to help people in need. Opportunities like the Medtronic Foundation’s partnership with Project HOPE, as well as partnerships with the American Heart Association and local community health clinic HealthFinders Collaborative, enabled virtual skills-based volunteer opportunities to be offered for Medtronic volunteers to support patients and frontline health-care workers. These types of volunteer projects aren’t new to Medtronic employees. The Medtronic Foundation offers the company’s employees year-round opportunities to collaborate with others to address global health challenges by putting their unique skills—from marketing to engineering—to work. For example, in India, a team of volunteers helped HeartRescue India—part of a global program working to reduce the risk of death from sudden cardiac arrest and severe heart attacks—with its business plan, including opportunities to expand services and better integrate with the nation’s health system. In rural Minnesota, a volunteer team spent several weeks helping HealthFinders Collaborative to enhance their quality of care and efficiency by streamlining the organization’s processes and data systems. These projects are often some of the most successful engagements because they not only provide financial resources but also provide on-the-ground support to ensure partnerships are both successful and sustainable.

**Recognize both big and small acts that make a difference.** | As employees navigate crises that hit close to home, their commitment to volunteering can take many shapes and forms. Just as employees and companies adapt ways of working to life in a global pandemic, they must also adapt ways of giving and embrace different models that meet the shared goal of helping the community. Not all employees have the capacity to get involved in larger volunteer projects as they manage the stresses in their own lives. Acts of kindness can often have as significant an impact as formal volunteering. So, the Medtronic Foundation recognized the 825 hours Medtronic employees spent on acts of kindness, like purchasing groceries for an elderly neighbor, reading books to a student learning virtually, or mowing the lawn for a friend in need. And, it continues to encourage employees to help their communities through activities like these.

**THE VALUE OF VOLUNTEERING**

Those who give back to society often are changed as much as the people they serve. According to Medtronic senior clinical research specialist and volunteer Keith Holloman, volunteering improves quality of life not just for those receiving the benefit, but also for those who give. “Volunteering provides an inner satisfaction that cannot be quantified,” he says. “It allows you to connect with your local community in ways you may not have.”

Prior to the pandemic, Holloman volunteered with organizations including the Twin Cities Urban League, Somali charter school Ubah Medical Academy, and the Minneapolis Parks Foundation. Since the crises of 2020 began, he’s deepened his commitment to addressing disparities disproportionately affecting people of color, including health, education, economic, and housing. Holloman is committed to help close racial disparities that place people of color at greater risk of poor health outcomes. “The events leading up to the killing of George Floyd only highlighted those needs,” he explains.

He’s also passionate about using his skills while giving back and has supported several Medtronic projects developing health-care solutions for underserved people in Ghana and Kenya, as well as Medtronic’s African Descent Network.

“Organizations wanting to engage volunteers should understand the passions of their members and identify opportunities that resonate and align with those passions,” he suggested. “Provide people with as much information as possible about your organization, your mission, and the outcomes you have achieved, so they understand how their efforts will make a difference for the communities you serve.”

**LASTING CHANGE DEMANDS ACTION**

Employees like Holloman demonstrate that the power to address and ultimately end these crises isn’t just in the hands of political leaders—it’s in all our hands. Since the coronavirus first appeared, people have been eager to help those in need, even when they can’t do it in person. Through mobilizing volunteers to help where they are needed most, employers have the opportunity to change the course of the pandemic and determine what the lasting effect on our communities will be while at the same time engaging and motivating their own employees. Together, companies can leverage the skills and actions of their teams to create the lasting positive change society desperately needs.

**Sylvia Bartley** is senior director of the Medtronic Foundation, where she leads employee volunteer engagement efforts for more than 90,000 Medtronic employees globally, as well as disaster relief and patient empowerment programs.

**Emily Lauer-Bader** is director of corporate partnership at Project HOPE where she develops partnerships with the private sector to advance Project HOPE’s global health and emergency response programming around the world through strategic investments, employee engagement, and marketing campaigns.