

# LENDING A HAND

## COMMUNITY INVESTMENT MAY BE THE BEST ROI FOR RECRUITMENT, ENGAGEMENT AND RETENTION

By Heather Hudson

Once upon a time, when a company wanted to give back, they'd partner with a reputable umbrella charity like the United Way, set a dollar target, hold a few fundraising events and match donations made by their employees.

Sound familiar? It's the corporate social responsibility (CSR) or workplace giving model that many organizations still follow today. But, according to CSR specialists, altruistic efforts like these don't harness the power and possibilities associated with contemporary community investment.

"Historically, top-down, employee-facing [CSR] initiatives have been once-a-year arm-twisting exercises to raise money for a cause the company chooses. There's nothing particularly engaging about being 'voluntold' where and how to give back," said Bryan de Lottinville, founder and CEO of Benevity, a digital "corporate goodness platform" that helps companies create and manage CSR programs that engage employees and customers. "The opportunity to infuse the modern employee-employer relationship with a sense of meaning and purpose requires a more thoughtful approach."

Over the past decade, the landscape of CSR has changed dramatically. Factors include:



- **Millennials and Generation Z in the workforce:** Younger employees are more socially conscious than boomers and are accustomed to empowered choice and digital options for everything. Mechanically giving a portion of their time and resources for a cause they didn't choose does not jibe well.
- **A shifting cultural awareness that good begets good:** More and more, consumers are choosing to do business with companies that give back to their communities and strive to make a positive difference in the world at large. They want to feel that their dollars count toward something meaningful. And employees – especially younger generations – want to work with those same companies.
- **Calls to action from business leaders:** Larry Fink, head of BlackRock, the largest fund manager in the world, recently put company CEOs on notice: if they want the support of one of the most influential investors in the world, they have to deliver more than just compelling financial math; they need to contribute to society. "Companies must benefit all of their stakeholders, including shareholders, employees, customers and the communities in which they operate," he wrote in an open letter.



Indeed, individual businesses and entire industries have awakened to the reality that CSR provides more than just the obvious benefits: it has the potential to help recruit, retain and engage top-quality talent in a competitive landscape.

“We’re in a time when people are hungry for more meaning – and they’re looking for brands to deliver substantive, measurable, meaningful social change. Companies are responding with more robust CSR programs,” said Paul Klein, president of Impakt, a Toronto-based business that helps corporations and non-profit organizations profit from innovative social change.

Modern solutions like Impakt and Benevity empower employers and employees to work together to build a visceral connection between their companies and the causes their workforce cares about. Rewards in the form of corporate matching gifts, donation currency incentives for volunteering and charitable gift cards motivate participation while digital platforms help market, measure and distribute funds efficiently. Corporate goodness is integrated into operations and becomes part of the identity and culture of an organization.

### ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL CSR PROGRAM

de Lottinville and Klein advise a more holistic and tailored method to the one-size-fits-all approach to CSR. A successful program will:

- **Be specific and match the ethos of the company:** It’s important that the social cause(s) adopted by a company align with the values of the business and its employees. Klein points to The Home Depot Canada Foundation, which has taken up ending youth homelessness.
- **Engage and provide choices to employees:** Whether it’s payroll-enabled micro-donations, employer donation matching, time off to volunteer for a cause of choice or employee-led friend-raising initiatives, the more companies involve their workforce in CSR, the more successful it will be. “Enabling employees to distribute grants and give their time and money to charities they’re passionate about and then seeing the impact creates an emotive connection between that person and their employer – that’s a recipe for greater engagement,” said de Lottinville.
- **Leverage in-house skills – and offer opportunities for team building and professional development:** A new element of

## feature

CSR is allowing employees to leverage their professional skills and interests in service of the company's social change focus. Not only is the company fulfilling its CSR mandate, but employees are doing meaningful work beyond their regular role, team building and developing new skills. "This type of engagement is a direct contributor to recruitment and retention," said Klein. "There's also evidence that it contributes to things like creativity, productivity and teamwork back at the office."

- **Run all year round:** The one and done annual approach to CSR translates to "dutiful, obligatory participation," according to de Lottinville. When it's woven into the fabric of the company, the impact is significantly higher. "When the goal is engagement, rallying around a dollar figure may actually subvert results. Many companies pick thoughtful participation and impact goals and work toward them throughout the year."
- **Be measurable and managed digitally:** Like any company-wide investment, CSR needs to be measured to truly understand its impact. Most progressive CSR software like Benevity's takes the pulse of the program and monitors for things like employee engagement. Online platforms are also helpful for creating efficiencies and allowing everyone to manage and report on donations, volunteering and other activities in one place. Linking program participation to more conventional HR measures like employee churn and engagement surveys provides powerful ROI for programs.

### TELUS TAKES MODERN CSR FOR A SPIN

Over the last 10 years, TELUS Canada has restructured their CSR program by integrating it into all other business areas.

"We moved from philanthropy to strategic philanthropy. We leverage the assets of our business to address social issues and engage our team and customers," said Jill Schnarr, vice president of corporate marketing.

Changes have included empowering community investment managers in regions across Canada to run TELUS's community granting program locally. These managers also sit in on monthly business sales meetings and are brought into key conversations with charitable customers in their communities.

"Because of what we do in the community, that manager is part of a conversation with those customers and helps drive significant amounts of new business into TELUS because we've leveraged what we've done in the community to create a better connection with an end business customer."

The company's chosen social purpose is ending the technological and socioeconomic divide in Canada. The goal is to enable everyone to be connected, safe and healthy in a digital world, particularly at-risk youth and low-income families who may not have access to technology. Their CSR program includes engaging employees and retirees in volunteering, donation matching and giving back activities across Canada. Last year the company reached an unprecedented goal of volunteering one million hours to charitable organizations across Canada. Giving is closely intertwined with TELUS's culture, and incentives include a donation matching program and a volunteer rewards program that provides grants to a charity of an employee's choice when they give their time to the cause.

They've recently begun using Benevity to better run and measure their social impacts – and have found positive results in employee engagement.

"We've seen that the more employees participate in these community engagement programs, the more choice we give them and the more we relate to their passion, the more they're engaged with the company," said Schnarr. "We've learned that when our team members give back, they're happier, and provide even better service to our customers who, in turn, are happier. It's an amazing chain link effect."

TELUS integrates the CSR program into recruitment by detailing their social purpose on their career website and at career fairs. They also include the company's social purpose mission in all welcome and training programs for new team members, "a major component in onboarding new team members is sharing what we do in the community. We preload a \$25 donation into our new recruits' giving account so they can give to a charity they care about at the very beginning of their career with us. It speaks to them immediately about who we are and how we value giving back."

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– BRYAN DE LOTTINVILLE

### WHERE DOES HR FIT INTO A MODERN CSR PROGRAM?

In large organizations, CSR may be its own entity, but more typically it's part of the marketing, communications or HR functions. Due to its potential for employee recruitment and engagement, HR may have a special interest in developing and nurturing a program, regardless of where it reports in.

Whether you're a small organization or a conglomeration, the first step is simple: talk to employees.

"Surveys, focus groups, lunch-and-learn discovery sessions or arranging time for small groups of employees to meet with a charity are all ways to understand what's important to them," said Klein.

Investing in CSR software is also a good step toward creating an integrated program. de Lottinville says providing a convenient and tech-savvy way for employees to give back can be enough to enhance the kind of engagement HR is looking for.

"We are hardwired to do good; we just need to give people more opportunity to be their best selves," said de Lottinville.

No matter the budget, it's clear that CSR can play an integral role as part of a bigger talent strategy. It may be a revolution worth beginning. ■