



(Mis)Using employee volunteering for public relations: Implications for corporate volunteers' organizational commitment



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the conditions under which corporate volunteering initiatives can result in work outcomes. We posit that employees participating in company-supported volunteering activities (corporate volunteers) respond attitudinally to company support for employee volunteering (CSEV) based on the attributions they make about the company's purpose in implementing the volunteering program. Specifically, we examine the moderating role of corporate volunteers' attributions concerning the public relations motives underlying companies' employee volunteering programs. A sequential mixed methodology design is used for this study, consisting of two distinct phases: qualitative followed by quantitative. Results show that attributions of public relations motives undermine the positive effects of CSEV on corporate volunteers' perceptions of company prosocial identity, and subsequently, on corporate volunteers' affective company commitment. We discuss implications for theory and practice.

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1. Introduction

Company support for employee volunteering (CSEV) – i.e. companies' encouragement or accommodation of employee's volunteer activities during working hours and/or own time – has grown fast in the last decade, especially in Europe and North America (Allen, Galiano, & Hayes, 2011; Basil, Runte, Basil, & Usher, 2011; Bocalandro, 2009; Herzig, 2006). The reasons behind this phenomenon are multiple. CSEV is a corporate social responsibility (CSR) activity that offers great potential for strategic and human resource management, such as enhancement of employee motivation and commitment, cohesion and teamwork, professional development, as well as reputational gains with regard to investors, clients and future employees (Booth, Park, & Glomb, 2009; Deloitte, 2011; Muthuri, Matten, & Moon, 2009; Peterson, 2004). Yet, as Grant underlined (2012, p. 610), “corporate volunteering has taken organizations by storm, but organizational scholars have only begun to take notice”. While there are indeed several practitioner-oriented publications and company reports suggesting a number of human resource benefits associated with corporate volunteering initiatives, sound empirical evaluations are scarce. Furthermore, the lack of theoretical foundations for these alleged beneficial outcomes is repeatedly quoted as a major flaw of the corporate volunteering literature (Benjamin, 2001; Jones, 2010).

Recent progress has been made in the field to address these shortcomings. Social exchange and social identity perspectives have been identified as two key theoretical lenses to examine how employees respond to CSEV, and hypotheses derived from these theories have received empirical support (Bartel, 2001; Grant, Dutton, & Rosso, 2008; Jones, 2010; Pajo & Lee, 2011). Specifically, CSEV can provide the stimulus for positive employee reciprocation (e.g., increased affective commitment to the company, organizational citizenship behavior) when employees interpret this support as a signal that the company values them and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001; Jones, 2010). In addition, CSEV can trigger a “prosocial sensemaking process” (Grant et al., 2008; Pajo & Lee, 2011) enabling employees to see themselves and their company in more prosocial-altruistic terms, and resulting in a stronger emotional bond with the company.

However, while the literature provides valuable insights into why CSEV relates to employee outcomes, there is a need for a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions under which those outcomes occur (Grant, 2012). In particular, while scholars and practitioners usually frame employee volunteering as an opportunity for both public good and strategic business objectives (Bocalandro, 2009; Grant, 2012), very little is known about whether employees perceive it as one or the other, or whether they consider these objectives as mutually compatible. Recent studies suggest that strategizing corporate social activities can have double-edged effects (Van der Voort, Glac, & Meijs, 2009), but how employees respond to the motives they attribute to the company's involvement in employee volunteering largely remains an unanswered question. This paper aims to address this gap.

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Prior research suggests that human resource (HR) practices, such as employee volunteering programs, do not automatically result in the expected outcomes, and the meanings that employees attach to those practices should be examined to understand their effect (Nishii, Lepak, & Schneider, 2008). Drawing on the attribution literature (Kelley & Michela, 1980; Martinko, Douglas, & Harvey, 2006), we make the general assumption that employee perceptions of what the volunteering program means to the company can affect how employees themselves respond attitudinally to company support for employee volunteering. Specifically, we posit that employees' attributions of public relations motives underlying a company's volunteering program influence the relationship between CSEV and employees' affective commitment to their company.

The attribution literature provides a theoretical basis for the argument that employees attempt to understand companies' motives for their volunteering support. CSEV can be primarily motivated by business return expectations (e.g. adding value to the company by building employee skills, strengthening brand and enhancing reputation) or by social and human development concerns (e.g., helping those in need for charitable reasons, empowering people by increasing their awareness and knowledge of social realities; Allen et al., 2011). Thus when offered CSEV, employees are likely to search for what meaning should be given to the company's action (Bhattacharya, Korschun, & Sen, 2009; Nishii et al., 2008; Roeck & Delobbe, 2012) and assign one of the two primary types of motives to the company: self-serving (e.g., gaining marketing and reputational benefits with stakeholders) or public-serving (e.g., helping those in need). In this research we focus on employees' attributions of public relations motives (i.e. the self-serving type of motives) as many companies envisage employee volunteering as a powerful tool to strengthen the brand and relationships with external stakeholders (Allen et al., 2011). We argue that these attributions can undermine the positive effects of CSEV when employees perceive the volunteering program as being motivated by companies' self-serving intentions of communication. More precisely, we posit that attributions of public relations motives can damage the positive effects of CSEV on employees' perceptions of their company as caring and generous (further referred to as "company prosocial identity") and subsequently, on employee's emotional attachment to the company. Fig. 1 illustrates the proposed relationships.

A sequential mixed methodology design was used for this research, consisting of two distinct phases: qualitative followed by quantitative (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In the first, qualitative phase, we relied on 49 interviews from employees participating in company-supported volunteering activities (further referred to as "corporate volunteers") to inform and enrich the development of our hypotheses, and to help develop our scale items (Bryman, 2006; Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2002). In the second, quantitative phase, we tested the hypotheses using

survey data from four different samples of corporate volunteers. In the next section, we present the underlying theory and concepts, and develop our hypotheses. This is followed by a description of the methodology and the results of the quantitative study. We conclude with the theoretical and practical implications of our findings, together with the study's limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Theory and development of hypotheses

In developing our hypotheses, we adopted an a priori theoretical perspective but we also made use of qualitative data obtained from 49 semi-structured interviews. This complementary qualitative approach served two main goals (Bryman, 2006). First, we used the qualitative study to complement our theoretical development and help generate hypotheses. Second, we employed our qualitative data to help develop the survey questionnaire that was used in the quantitative phase of the research (see Measures section). Additionally, we referred to the interviews we conducted to enrich the discussion of our findings (see Discussion section). It should be noted that participants in the qualitative study were not included in the samples of the quantitative study.

Two companies operating in France were chosen as settings for our qualitative investigation: a multinational automobile company which we shall call Company X (N = 24), and a French health insurance company which we shall call Company Y (N = 25). We chose companies engaged in a form of corporate volunteering that requires a high amount of involvement both on the part of the company and from the volunteer employees (Pelozo and Hassay, 2006); this makes it likely to offer meaningful insights to our research question. When this qualitative data was collected, only ten companies in France had put into practice this form of company volunteerism. We contacted all of these companies and selected the first two who agreed to participate in our research. Both organizations offered employees several volunteer opportunities (e.g., tutoring disadvantaged students, simulating job interviews, collecting old clothes, cleaning up natural sites) and proposed either one-off or repeated activities which could be undertaken individually or in groups.

In-depth interviews were conducted with volunteering program managers and corporate volunteers from both companies. Interviews varied in duration, but all fell within a 45–90 minute range (with most lasting at least 1 h), and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview protocol included questions about employees' motivations for joining the program, the meanings associated with being a volunteer, employees' experience as volunteers within the program and what they thought of the fact that their company had set up the program. These transcripts were supplemented with archival data (including progress reports from the internal associations which set up the volunteering program, their newsletters, the minutes of their

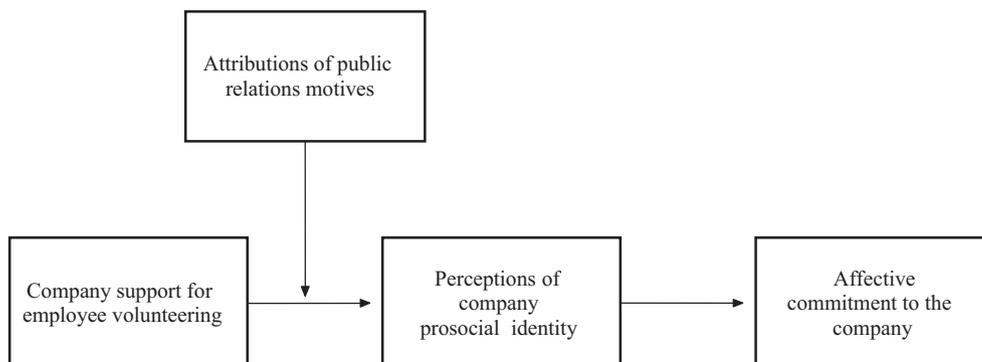


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

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