

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Unleashing changemakers

RBC, SAP and Shell take different approaches to engaging volunteers at work

By Elizabeth Dove

Canadians want to change the world — and they want their employer to help them do it.

Given the choice between two jobs, 68 per cent would choose the workplace with a strong volunteer culture, according to 2017 Volunteer Canada research.

The same research also reveals Canadians are involved in more and more “informal” opportunities to contribute to community — such as crowdfunding, ethical purchasing habits and political engagement — to fulfill their unique sense of “individual social responsibility.”

To meet the demand for community involvement, many companies create opportunities for employees to volunteer with community organizations.

But with the increased professionalization of non-profit organizations, and changes in service delivery models, many charities do not have enough volunteering opportunities.

In fact, many non-profits find the growing demand from employers overwhelming.

So, how can companies help employees change the world, in addition to volunteering?

Royal Bank of Canada (RBC), SAP Software and Solutions, and Shell Canada each designed opportunities that position the employee not as volunteer, but as change-maker, unleashing both creativity and unique solutions to community challenges.

Discovering passions at RBC

At RBC, it all starts with providing ways for employees to learn about their community or cause, discover

their passions and allowing this knowledge to lead them to next steps.

“We know that employees can be overloaded with information at home and at work,” says Tanya Bell, senior manager of citizenship engagement at RBC in Toronto. “There’s so much competition for their time, money and attention, so many social and environmental causes that need help, and almost too many new and different ways to get involved in the community.”

“While they’re interested in having a real social impact (on their own and with their colleagues), many of them aren’t sure where to start or how they can best contribute. So, they experience a kind of paralysis and might only get involved when asked by someone else.”

By giving employees opportunities to learn about their community or cause — whether it’s in their own backyard, neighbourhood, nation, country of ancestral birth or global community — and showing them the various ways they can contribute, RBC believes employees will engage more confidently in their communities, have more impact, and inspire others to get involved as well. The company has dubbed this the “Learn, Act, Share” approach.

“We rely on a range of tried-and-true ways to help employees learn about causes and communities, such as agency tours, in-depth/at-work learning exercises about issues like youth employment, charity fairs and lunch-and-learns with charity speakers,” says Bell.

The bank is also exploring ideas such as online challenges, badging and gamification, she says.

“But the goal with all these ap-

proaches is to help employees learn about (and fall in love with) communities and causes, and help them figure out how they can best help.”

Fostering innovation at SAP

SAP has faith that educating employees about issues and resourcing entrepreneurship can change lives — one billion, in fact.

One Billion Lives (1BL) is a global SAP program dedicated to guiding, mentoring and investing in employee-driven ventures to incubate and grow the next generation of social-impact initiatives for the organization.

Expanding this year from an Asia Pacific Japan (APJ) initiative to a global opportunity for employees, 1BL starts with participation in an idea factory.

In these three- to four-hour in-person sessions, employees learn about community challenges from non-profit experts and curated materials about social and environmental challenges.

This design-thinking session puts employees into self-selected teams to begin digging in on solutions to pressing global issues. Teams that choose to continue developing their concept can compete before a jury of SAP leaders for the opportunity to incubate their concept into a full-fledged solution with seed money and paid fellowship time.

The process includes partnering with the social ecosystem to deliver pilot implementations — proving the viability of the venture — and, ideally, going to market.

Like the RBC initiative, whether the 1BL experience motivates the employee to create an innovative product or simply have a unique

conversation around the dinner table, turning talent on to community problems and their ability as an individual to create change equals success. If it manifests into volunteering with community organizations, the bet is that this will be done with new focus and enthusiasm.

“Change starts with the smallest actions, but when you create opportunities to connect intent with talent and expertise, that’s where things become real and sustainable,” said Agi Garaba, head of HR at SAP Canada in Vancouver.

In fact, SAP credits the company’s volunteering program with creating the conditions for enthusiastic employee participation in 1BL.

“We consistently nurture a culture of volunteerism to support our mission to improve people’s lives — and that includes the lives of employees as well. They want to do purposeful work — consistently providing supportive opportunities to apply their talents and expertise towards a greater good delivers on that.”

Fuelling kindness at Shell

The combination of tough economic times in Alberta and the imperative to deepen care in the community inspired the #FuelingKindness movement at Shell.

Community organizations are becoming strained to serve the growing needs of impacted individuals and families, and Shell leadership was compelled to look at what would enhance a sense of employee pride and purpose.

The solution was simple and inspired: Pay it forward by recognizing the efforts of those caring for community.

“It’s been a hard four years in Alberta,” says Susan Whitley, external relations advisor, social performance and Indigenous peoples policy at Shell in Calgary.

“In times of economic insecurity, many people turn inward, away from connecting and become isolated.”

“This project opens employees up to conceive of little acts of kindness that can give a lift to the work of community caregivers and, in the process, gives employees new joy and excitement by caring for others. Kindness is contagious.”

Employees apply online for funding for their projects, either on their own or in a team, she says.

“These are small, doable events — some only last an hour — with a lot

of flexibility built in for employees to be creative.”

Launched nationally in May, the uptake by employees has been enormous, says Whitley.

Following a successful initiative that included caring for families devastated by the 2016 Fort McMurray fires, further events were planned with employees at Shell’s Scotford manufacturing complex in Fort Saskatchewan, Alta., to recognize a local school and educators.

Initiatives in the current phase have included delivering cookies to community workers, recognizing the good work of local teachers with flowers, and positive chalk messages on school playgrounds.

“While it is intended to be a mes-

sage of care — caring for one another — it also sends a message to employees that they are valued and trusted,” she says.

“They don’t have to be told how to do it, and what to say. There are no performance measures attached to this. The impact is felt; it is qualitative.”

Creating changemakers

Fostering such a culture could involve the following:

- Invite community partners to a lunch-and-learn to share the root causes of the social or environmental challenges they are working on.
- Ask community partners for an opportunity for employees to come to their operations and learn. Find out

if there are experiential opportunities to better understand the issues.

- Provide employees with a chance to make meaning through reflection and next steps. Ask what was learned and how it was different than what was expected.
- Encourage employees to think about ways they could make a positive impact, based on what they learned. Is there an idea they are excited about? Do employees want to work together on it? Be ready to respond with ways the company could support new ideas.

Elizabeth Dove is the Toronto-based director of corporate citizenship at Volunteer Canada. For more information, visit www.volunteer.ca/corporatecitizenship.