

How Community Service Projects Can Boost Your Career (Really, They Can)

MAY 19, 2016

Vicki Salemi, Contributor

Recently, I was invited to speak to a group of middle schoolers in Harlem about their careers and what specific steps they should take to land their dream jobs. The opportunity, hosted as part of a company's community service program, got me thinking about the importance of giving back to communities, and also how employees who participate in these programs can build valuable skills for their careers. Whether in their current job or for the future, the skills employees develop outside the cubicle will inevitably benefit them professionally.

Just take it from Leslie Bobb, office administrator at law firm Polsinelli in Chicago. For the past five years she's been volunteering with the All Stars Project of Chicago Development School for Youth. Leslie mentors students between the ages of 16 and 21 at their spring workshops, which take place two to three nights a month. At these events she conducts a series of corporate training sessions on how to dress professionally, network, interview and more.

"From the day they walk into the workshop for the first time to the day they graduate — a huge transformation takes place," Bobb says of the students. "Being part of that was so exciting! I can't get enough of it."

In addition to enjoying the process and growing personally, an enthusiastic Bobb says she gets more out of it than she ever thought she would. "I have learned to be a better supervisor," she notes, like how to be sensitive on the job. "These kids might be wearing a glittery shirt. How can you kindly but assertively let them know that's a really cool shirt but a little distracting? We coach them to be more conscious of their choices in attire."

Bobb's firm reaps benefits from the program as well. They sponsor two summer internships with students from the program, and also provide support and recognition. For instance, Bobb was recently featured in her company's national diversity newsletter for her efforts. And she's never had any pushback from her employer when it comes to asking for time off for her various volunteering commitments with the Project throughout the year.

Convinced yet? If you volunteer and wonder how your out-of-the conference room experiences apply to your career, take heed. Community service projects are typically valued by employers of all kinds.

Standing Out From The Crowd

Aside from the requisite skills and experiences, employers look to hire candidates who are active in their community. As a former corporate recruiter, take it from me: They don't just want book smarts; they also want candidates with street smarts and unique, well-rounded experiences. That means your activities outside of work count too, from volunteering roles to global internships, traveling and more.

You can tie these experiences back to your career during job interviews by giving examples, such as how you've built compassion and sensitivity skills volunteering at workshops like Bobb's. Or how



helping to transform students professionally taught you to be a better manager. If you're working on a house with Habitat for Humanity, you can highlight how the experience relates to your commitment, focus and willingness to pursue something outside of your comfort zone. Employers asking behavioral-based questions look for real examples that illustrate your answers. What better way than to stand out from other candidates than with your unique community service projects?

Engaging In Positive Company Activities

Whether you volunteer during working hours or on your own time, the experience may help you feel more engaged with your employer. By volunteering for your manager's favorite charity or just taking a chance to spend productive time with your coworkers outside of the office, community service gives colleagues a chance to interact in a more casual setting. Additionally, many times companies choose to support corporate responsibility initiatives that relate back to their mission, such as Whole Foods Community Giving, which enables employees to donate store products and company time to local food shelters. It's easy to lose sight of your company's larger purpose in the day-to-day meetings and spreadsheets, and these programs are a chance to remember what you're working toward as an organization.

Plus, as a representative of your company, volunteering gives you real world, hands-on ways to represent your company's positive community efforts. This can be particularly rewarding for young Millennials, nearly 80% of whom said they "would be more motivated and committed at work if they felt their employer made a positive impact in society," according to the Deloitte Millennial Survey 2016.

Whether you want to see how your work has valuable impact on the world or build skills for your career, volunteering represents a win-win situation, both personally and professionally.

Vicki Salemi is an author, public speaker, columnist and Career Expert for Monster.