

The Science Behind Why Volunteering Works

Research & Resources



REALIZEDWORTH

Transformative Versus Transactional Volunteering

What is Transformative Volunteering?

Transformative volunteering creates space for participants to reach beyond the immediate context and circumstances of themselves and their communities. Instead of simply exchanging time or resources for the reward of making a difference, volunteers are guided to consider their potential to become increasingly pro-social human beings with a greater capacity for empathy.

The primary focus of transformative volunteering is the change that occurs in the volunteers themselves. Volunteering programs and activities are designed to invite all participants to “engage in critical reflection on their experiences, which in turn leads to a perspective transformation.” This transformation in an individual’s perspective is necessary to achieve change at the psychological, convictional, and behavioral level.

Read the research: Mezirow, J. (1991). [Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning](#). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

What is Transactional Volunteering?

Transactional volunteering is the voluntary giving of one’s time, knowledge, social network, expertise, skills, abilities, experience, knowledge, training, or insight for the benefit of another without any expectation of direct or commensurate compensation. The “reward” is typically the knowledge that one was able to “make a difference” by helping solve a problem or advance a cause.

Four Reasons to Adopt the Transformative Model

1. Increased levels of affective commitment

Employees who are enabled to act pro-socially (give, volunteer, and otherwise “do good” for their colleagues or communities) are likely to respond with increased affective commitment to their organization.

Read the research: Grant, A. M., Dutton, J. E., & Rosso, B. D. (2008). [Giving commitment: Employee support programs and the prosocial sensemaking process](#). The Academy of Management Journal, 51, 898-918.

2. Improved job performance

Research indicates that “volunteering was associated with both volunteer and job meaningfulness, and that the pull of meaningful volunteer work was even stronger when employees had less meaning in their jobs. The results further revealed benefits of volunteering for employers. Volunteering was related to job absorption but not job interference, and it was therefore associated with better job performance.”

Read the research: [Rodell, Jessica \(2013\). *Finding Meaning through Volunteering: Why Do Employees Volunteer and What Does It Mean for Their Jobs?*](#) The Academy of Management Journal 56(5):1274-1294

3. Competitive hiring position

“For recruitment practice, our results suggest that the net effect of leveraging CSR practices in employee recruitment is clearly a positive one from the perspective of a hiring organization. The majority of our participants — about two-thirds of them — reported they were more attracted to the employer as a result of its community investment or environmental strategies.”

However, the research contains a very distinct and important warning: if the company’s CSR program is seen to be inauthentic or too small, prospective employees will take a negative position towards the company. In those cases where a company may not be willing to substantially invest in CSR, it may be better to not use citizenship programs in recruiting efforts. Additionally, community investment programs must be experienced as meaningful and relational.

Read the research: [Jones David A., Willness Chelsea R., Heller Kristin \(2016\). *Illuminating the signals job seekers receive from an employer’s community involvement and environmental sustainability practices: Insights into why most job seekers are attracted, others are indifferent, and a few are repelled.*](#) *Frontiers in Psychology* Volume 7 (00426).

4. Improved organizational resilience

By developing leaders through and experiential process of learning that involves intentional moments of critical reflection and sensemaking, employees in leadership positions acquire the critical skills necessary to contribute to organization’s overall resiliency. Transformative volunteering approaches develop leadership through the cognitive process of learning, modeling a practice of sensemaking and the creation of significance or meaning.

Equipped with this experiential knowledge, individuals possess the necessary skills and experience to contribute to the “organization’s capacity to anticipate, respond, and adapt”.

Why Does Volunteering Make Me Feel Good?

[The Helper’s High](#) | **Jeanie Lerche Davis**

The 'helper's high' could help you live a longer, healthier life. In the last few years, researchers have looked at the so-called helper's high and its effects on the human body. Scientists are searching to understand just how altruism -- the wish to perform good deeds -- affects our health, even our longevity.

[Older Adults and Volunteering: Mental Wellness, Motivation, and Satisfaction](#)

The objective of this study was to examine the potential effects of volunteering on older people’s mental wellness, satisfaction, and motivation. To this end, 193 volunteers aged 51 years and above completed the self-administered survey questionnaires. The results show that older volunteers had higher scores on mental wellness, satisfaction, and motivation than that of their younger counterparts.

[Volunteering and subjective well-being in midlife and older adults: the role of supportive social networks](#) | **Pamela D Pilkington, Tim D Windsor, Dimity A Crisp**

Those who volunteer at higher levels (7 hr or more per week) also reported greater levels of positive affect in comparison to nonvolunteers, and this was related to their greater availability of social support from friends. Availability of support from friends accounted for the greatest proportion of the volunteering-SWB associations.

[How to Buy Happiness](#) | **Michael Norton | TEDxCambridge**

At TEDxCambridge, Michael Norton shares fascinating research on how money can indeed buy happiness -- when you don't spend it on yourself. Listen for surprising data on the many ways pro-social spending can benefit you, your work, and (of course) other people.

How Humans Have Evolved to Do Good

[The Brain with David Eagleman: Empathy and the Brain - Why Do I Need You?](#) | David Eagleman | Episode 5

In "Why Do I Need You?" Dr. David Eagleman explores how the brain relies on other brains to thrive and survive. This neural interdependence underpins our need to group together, and our ability to do the very best and the very worst of things to each other.

[The Brain with David Eagleman: In-Group/Out-Group](#) | David Eagleman | Episode 5

David shows that a single word label can decide over how much you care for another person in pain.

[Rewiring the Brain with David Eagleman](#) | David Eagleman | Futures with Luke Robert Mason

Neuroscientist David Eagleman shares his insights into the mystery of neuroplasticity, how modern technology impacts our brains' development, and the different ways we might soon be able to augment our senses and enhance our cognition.

[The science of de- and re-humanization](#) | David Eagleman | Video series [by Intelligence Squared](#)

How do ingroups and outgroups form, neurally-speaking? How does social context and obedience to authority navigate mass behavior? Here's David Eagleman's take on these questions, through the lens of neuroscience.

[The Bystander Effect: Neuroscientist shows how our brains dehumanize homeless people](#) | Dorothy Allen-Pickard, Noah Payne-Frank and Jess Gormley | The Guardian

The Museum of Homelessness worked with neuroscientist Dr Lasana Harris and several participants who have experienced homelessness to understand what is termed 'the bystander effect', where people form a dehumanized perception of others through a lack of social engagement. In this film the camera tracks across three scenes to hear stories of homelessness from various different perspectives in an effort to change the way it is understood and discussed.

[Social Cognition and Dehumanization](#) | Lasana Harris | Psychology Is Podcast 26

Dr. Lasana Harris joins the 26th episode of the Psychology Is Podcast for a conversation about social cognition, the flexible use of social cognition, and the psychology of dehumanization and anthropomorphism.

Find more research and resources like these on [Social REV](#) along with the ready-to-use tools, templates, how-to guides, courses and more to systematically build or scale your Corporate Social Impact programs.

Other Related Research and Resources

[Leveraging Employee Volunteering to Build Equity and Empathy](#) | Engage for Good with guest Chris Jarvis

What does “allyship” mean in the workplace? In this webinar led by Realized Worth’s Chris Jarvis, you’ll be challenged to consider how employee volunteering might provide insight into the concept of allyship as well as a practical and safe place for immersive learning.

[This is your Brain on Volunteering with Chris Jarvis](#) | CREA REAL TIME Podcast

On Episode 32 of REAL TIME, Chris helps us understand how we can reprogram our brains to feel empathy for groups with whom we don’t identify. By breaking down barriers, and adopting a transformative approach to volunteering, it can help us see the world with a fresh perspective.

[Volunteering as a Mechanism to Develop Empathy](#) | The Neurons that Shaped Civilization | Vilayanur Ramachandran | TED Talk

“Neuroscientist Vilayanur Ramachandran outlines the fascinating functions of mirror neurons. Only recently discovered, these neurons allow us to learn complex social behaviors, some of which formed the foundations of human civilization as we know it.”

More about Realized Worth

[About Us](#)

[About RW Social REV](#): *The Ultimate Resource for Social Impact Professionals*

[RW Presentations](#)

[Realized Worth blog](#)

[TedX Presentation](#) | **Design Employee Volunteer Experiences** | Chris Jarvis (2018)

Need help building or scaling your Social Impact Program? [Social REV](#) gives you the tools, templates, knowledge and more to build and improve Transformative Social Impact programs that develop leaders, foster belonging, and retain talent. [Chat with us to learn more!](#)

More about the RW Institute

[NudgeTheGood](#) – A project looking to formally apply behavioral insights to the practice of employee giving and volunteering

[The Technology Review](#) produced in partnership with the Gates Foundation and GivingTuesday.

[The Listen Up! Show](#) - (only a few videos available from the 40 we are uploading)

[ESG Roundtable Discussions](#) - a three part series kicking off a new initiative to shape the "S" in ESG.

[The Disorienting Dilemma](#) podcast - How do we live in a diverse and equitable world?

[IMPACT2030](#) - an initiative we launched with the United Nations and 60 partner companies in 2014

[Transforming Lives and Communities Report](#) - An overview of the first 5 years of work

[The Impact Council Network](#) - Individuals from regions around the world representing the private sector, public sector, academia, and civil society, with a shared interest in achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through employee volunteering.



REALIZEDWORTH

ABOUT REALIZED WORTH

Since 2008, Realized Worth has offered strategic consulting services to some of the biggest brands in the world. We help companies successfully create or evolve their employee volunteer strategy through a comprehensive design, transition and implementation process that results in a scalable, robust employee program. It's our mission to bring meaning to action through our Transformative Volunteering approach, which teaches employees how to practice behaviours that create engaging, effective and impactful volunteer projects for their peers.

With a wide range of over 100 clients including Apple, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, SAP, Altria, Deloitte, Microsoft, Abbott Labs, McDonald's, AstraZeneca, and others, Realized Worth's specialized expertise is uniquely suited for the corporation seeking meaningful impact through its employee volunteer programs.

The co-founders of Realized Worth, Chris Jarvis and Angela Parker, are based in Baltimore, Maryland. The extended team is based throughout the US and Canada. Realized Worth Canada is based in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

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