

CORPORATE CITIZEN

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LEA King is a manager (marketing globalisation) and volunteer at Cisco. A Chinese national, she finds India a land of opportunities. Opportunities to empower a manager to grow better than others posted in mature-yet-stagnant markets — with the world's youngest workforce and also social challenges. King has been active at an Indian child welfare organisation. The benefits as she sees it? "I go home with a fulfilling experience and super-image of a manager, mother and volunteer," she articulates.

Employees at Cisco are keen to associate themselves with the company's 'new' social image. Here, employee volunteers can carry out social work after they have completed their work projects. In some cases, managers take their employees to the area of social work so as to forge a bond with the community, and also within the volunteer group. Employee volunteers can also sacrifice a workday for a cause the company champions. However, it has been found that employees prefer to donate their time on a weekend or on a holiday. "This is a double contribution — from the company in



Do they also serve?

Companies across the globe are using employee volunteers to drive their social responsibility missions

terms of money and the employee contributes a day off," says Aravind Sitaraman, VP and MD, Cisco Development Organisation.

Volunteering is a well-orchestrated concept globally. The tried and tested routes — global volunteering on a particular day like World Environment Day; government and NGOs getting together to promote concepts like Volunteer Week; and companies letting their employees to take up a cause they strongly feel about and volunteer. Keeping in mind the last practice, it could be said that volunteering is a tool corporates use to build their image without delivering much itself.

"Volunteering is an individual's efforts at the cost of personal time to do something not necessarily in the area of work. Most companies push these efforts post office hours and in the process not only fail to reciprocate to an employee's good intentions, but also try to cash on their efforts," says Shalabh Sahai, director, iVolunteer, a nonprofit body helping companies to organise volunteering.

The tasks range from working with underprivileged children, health, environment to relief work during a calamity. Sahai feels the response of corporates to volunteering is largely tick-in-the-box and at times knee-jerk with no strategy. On the other hand, society needs volunteers, who with their skills can take care of important tasks (like checking accounts at an NGO or teaching computer to students etc). Bridging the demand-supply gap is what iVolunteer does. "We divide the task (into different modules) and the volunteer strength (into small batches) and assign each batch a



module. This way, there is not much time expectation from a volunteer, the social task is done, and companies don't have to let go their office hours," he says.

Does volunteering make sense?

In one of his articles, investment strategist B Venkatesh discusses the economic output of an ideal corporate volunteering case. He focuses on the hourly income of an employee at a company (say Rs 1,000 for a mid-manager), and multiplies it with the hours one gives in a week to do voluntary service. The time could say be four to eight hours, making it Rs 4,000 to Rs 8,000. "What if the same amount is donated to a charitable organisation, which not only specialises in the task, but would also be around all the time in that area to deliver on whatever is pending?" he asks. Point taken. However, underlining the calculation to be too idealistic for India Inc, Sahai points at the other side of the story. "First, volunteering is not a CSR subject; it is very much part of human resource," he says. The 'haves' don't mind donating funds but want to know where that fund is being channelised. "Once they are sure

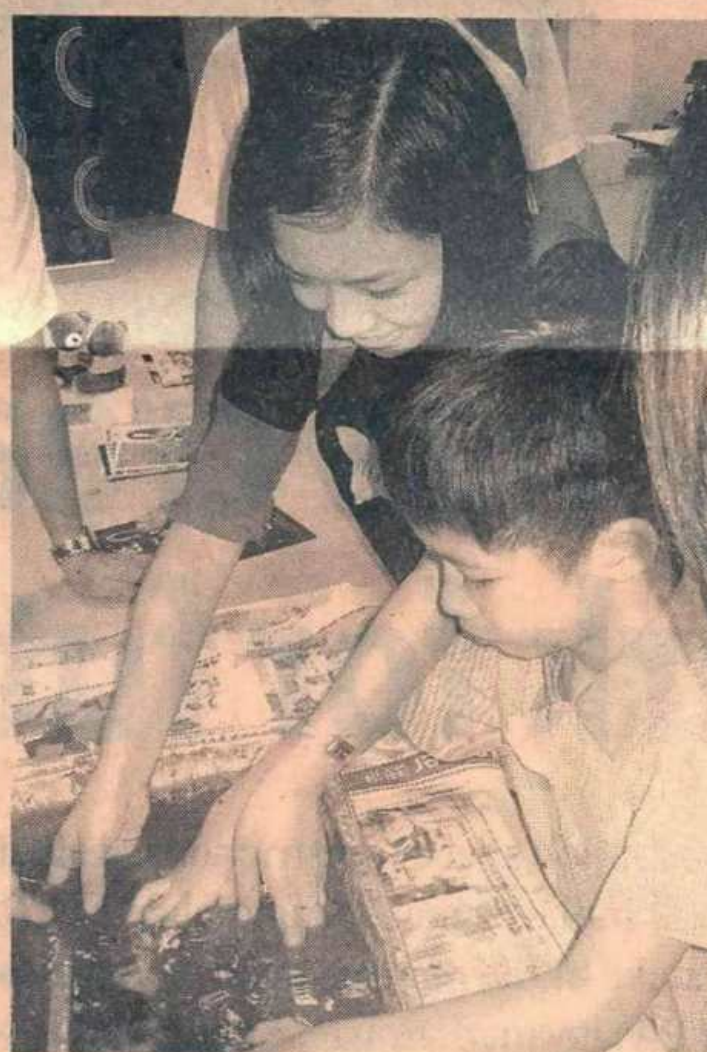
of the sanctity of the process, there is no looking back for them both in terms of contribution of funds and hours."

An HR subject indeed

Multi-nationals like Accenture and Cisco find volunteering a way their employees get a work-life balance while on the job. For Sitaraman of Cisco, not all activities of a company are about cheques and balances. "We encourage all our employees to give at least one day in service of others. More is always welcome, but we need to start at least with one. By working with many NGOs, we create programmes where employees read to the blind, install water harvesting equipment, organise sports days in schools, build houses, etc. We also have a programme where senior executives are encouraged to work in an NGO and then come back to Cisco. Such experience greatly enriches the individual, the NGO they worked with, and Cisco."

Accenture India has Accenture Development Partnerships (ADP), a non-profit business model for development organisations, an initiative based on an affordable delivery framework, says Rekha Menon, lead, India

(Clockwise from top) Volunteers from DHL, Accenture, Cisco and Salesforce take out time from their work and give their return to the society



Geographic Services & Human Capital & Diversity, Accenture India. The programmes are drawn on the company's core skills of business and technology consulting, which is then offered to NGOs and donor organisations to help them achieve their goals at rates aligned to the development sector norms. "It allows our staff to work for charities and NGOs whilst remaining within the company and continuing their careers."

Says Indranil Mitra, an ADP participant, "I have understood that making a difference not only refers to doing grand things, but also doing the everyday things that affect people's lives. In a typical ADP assignment you not only hone your technical skills, but also your work ethics, values, human dignity and the ability to communicate and engage." Siddhartha Jain, senior software engineer, Global Logic, feels volunteering at a school is the 'best' time of the day. "It does not matter whether this is office time or beyond," he clarifies.

All in a day's work

Volunteer Day is a trend that has become global now. As part of the 'DHL Volunteer Day' in Asia Pacific, the company had more than 15,000 employees in over 20 countries jointly volunteering time and effort towards various local causes. Salesforce.com, during November-December, has an informal 'Global Spirit Holidays Week' where the company organises a series of volunteer activities to benefit the

under-resourced communities as a way of celebrating the festive season with the larger community. Cadence organises activities such as the MACS Mela, a half-day event annually at its cafeteria for CSR activities apart from frequent toy and clothes collection initiatives.

Sahai finds these initiatives short term. Also, not many employees come back to verify what results their efforts have thrown up. A continuous and personal involvement level makes one do a proper follow-up and take responsibility, he says. There are some companies that are trying to take volunteering to take to policy level. The two-day orientation for new recruits at Salesforce.com includes a half day of volunteerism to demonstrate to newcomers that this is a true priority of the company. Activities include serving meals at soup kitchens, working with kids in under-resourced communities to gardening in public parks. "Our new hires participate in a meaningful activity, experience team building and get to know each other and their community," says Aaron Katz, area Vice-President, Corporate Sales, Asia Pacific, Salesforce.com

Image building

Is CSR a brand building exercise? "For some companies, it is," says Prof Nasreen Rustomfram, Centre for Lifelong Learning, Tata Institute of Social Sciences. "For instance, there are some companies that will take up teaching job skills to a set of people, but the catch is they would insist the learners should use their products on the job. There are companies who treat social work as a business model. They want to justify the work, the hours put into it and also the money involved. Some organisations take up CSR for philanthropic reasons. For instance, Infosys and Wipro's model of elementary education is not linked to the recipients buying their computers. However, social responsibility is the art of the triple bottom line for a company — CSR, governance, profit. Companies have to justify their existence, social profits and excellence in governance." Excellence in governance relates to transparency and accountability complying with human rights regulation. Rustomfram says, "What is unacceptable is when companies put their own agenda before that of the people they reach out to, like teaching embroidery to tribals. The activity should be in sync with the needs of the population they serve."