The following short summaries are intended to briefly describe the key trends and characteristics of corporate volunteering in each major region of the world. Detailed essays for each region will be available in Corporate Volunteering for a Post-Pandemic World, Part Two.
Africa

In a region spanning 50+ countries with differing political, social, economic and environmental realities and characteristics, corporate volunteering in Sub-Saharan Africa occurs in very diverse settings. In some of these countries, corporate volunteering is at a nascent level, bolstered by sustained surges in GDP growth over the last decade, as well as emergence of new norms of “shared value” where businesses increasingly take the welfare of communities into consideration in their planning and priority setting. Formal, structured corporate volunteering is largely concentrated among companies in South Africa, Rwanda, Kenya, Nigeria and Mauritius. South Africa and Mauritius have a mandatory Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) requirement while in the other countries it is voluntary.

Many corporate employee volunteering activities in African companies are broadly framed using the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) while simultaneously addressing specific local, national, and/or regional development needs. Companies most often focus volunteer programs on education, health, and economic empowerment. Others add environmental issues to these priorities.

African companies increasingly are adapting existing prosocial cultural traits and African philosophical worldviews and expectations into their employee volunteering programs. This includes umuganda (coming together in common purpose) in Rwanda and harambee (all pull together) in Kenya, ubuntu (humanity to others) in southern Africa and ujamaa (cooperative economics) in Tanzania. These are invoked, for example in calling attention to humanitarian needs such as famines or the COVID-19 pandemic. The philosophy of “pulling together” and the responsibility of the individual to care for the collective is ever present in African corporate volunteer programs.

As companies’ roles in society continues to evolve in Sub-Saharan Africa we expect to see more employee volunteer programs as well as advocacy for laws and policies to promote corporate employee volunteering.

Arab Nations

Historically, the practice of organized volunteering was not embedded in the culture of the Arab society. It is only relatively recently that civic service and volunteering have been included in the national plans of Arab states and that legal and political environments to support volunteering have emerged.
The Arab Spring was a turning point for corporate social responsibility in the region, as it transformed from a philanthropic or charitable act into a more strategic approach with greater impact for society, for companies and for their workers. There has been extensive progress since in the understanding and development of corporate volunteering in the region. Alignment of programs with the SDGs, development of new government policies and programs, and the emergence of newly committed top leadership in companies have all had a great influence in creating a philosophy of corporate volunteering in the region.

Challenges to the continued development of corporate volunteering in the region remain.

- The economic crisis in the region has had a direct impact on volunteering as many companies had to stop all activities while others downsized their CSR departments.
- COVID-19 had a double impact. Imposed lockdowns and other restrictions caused many companies to put their programs on hold; and while much corporate volunteering moved online, both companies and nonprofit organizations were not prepared for this shift, affecting the quality of the programs.
- There is a high priority need to raise awareness and to educate about its value to those who volunteer as well as to the community.
- Too often, companies approach volunteering as a “fun day” spent in a nonprofit organization without a focus on making a significant contribution to meeting the organization’s priority needs.
- NGOs are not prepared for corporate volunteering. Their primary goal in partnerships with corporations is to secure financial support while companies want the opportunity for their employees to create an impact.

Asia-Pacific

Corporate volunteering in Asia-Pacific reflects the diversity, dynamism and realities of the region. It also references its roots in the expectation for service present in the cultures and religions of the region. It exemplifies how the activities of corporate volunteers may be very similar from one country to the next while the contexts within which those actions take place may differ markedly. It has
grown steadily but unevenly across the region, increasingly well established in East Asia, India and Singapore, a recognized presence in Australia and New Zealand, emerging in other countries.

A distinctive regional characteristic is the role played by governments, business associations and leadership organizations in promoting and supporting corporate volunteering. In China, for example, government policy guidelines call for enterprises to create formal programs as volunteering has risen to be part of national strategy. In Hong Kong, there is sustained support from the government through the Social Welfare Department’s Steering Committee on Promotion of Volunteer Service. It presents annual awards and certificates to recognize the companies and their employee volunteers.

Businesses in Singapore may claim a 250% tax deduction on qualifying expenditures incurred when they send their employees to volunteer and provide services, including secondments, to “Institutions of a Public Character (IPCs).”

The Korean government includes a “social value score” in the management index for public enterprises, leading to expanded awareness among companies that social value creation can be quantified and managed. It has led to comparing the impact and value of volunteering with that of other CSR activities.

In India companies are required by law to spend 2% of their net profit on social responsibility activities. While companies are not allowed to monetize their volunteering and count it toward this requirement, the law has led to increased CSR and with it greater attention to volunteering.

Corporate volunteering in Japan has been stimulated by the ongoing leadership by the Keidanren (Japan Business Federation), particularly through its Charter of Corporate Behavior and its priority on responsiveness to the SDGs. In Singapore, the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre in partnership with the Singapore Business Federation Foundation leads the Company for Good Program, promoting and supporting social responsibility generally and volunteering specifically.

Volunteering Western Australia (VNA), the state leadership body for volunteering, has the most developed overall leadership role for corporate volunteering in Australia, including convening the only “corporate volunteer council” in the country.

Programmatically, corporate volunteering throughout the region is shaped by responsiveness to disasters that call for mass engagement, environmental issues, the
growing youth population, the needs of seniors and poverty. An emerging development, particularly in China, is making available public access to corporate online systems that connect people with opportunities to volunteer.

Europe

In Europe, employee volunteering is a concept that applies to all employers regardless of sector, be it profit, non-profit, public or private. This is part of a broadly favorable environment that encourages corporate engagement. The European Union considers volunteering an important issue to build and reinforce EU citizenship and as a fundamental opportunity related to a wide range of EU policy areas and programs.

A 2020 research study by Voluntare on corporate volunteering in Europe, surveying 122 companies, highlighted that almost half the companies (46.7%) have had volunteering programs for more than five years. The most important motivations for having a program are internal: to respond to their employees’ social concerns and to reinforce their human resources policies related to employee development.

The great majority of the companies invite families of employees into their volunteering programs (72.1%), close to 27% include retired employees and 20.5% invite clients. More than 70.3% of the programs are aligned to SDGs, mainly to SDG 8, 10 and 4. A majority (67%) of the companies in the study evaluate their volunteer programs in some way, primarily measuring volunteers’ satisfaction.

Primary challenges faced by European companies are a lack of volunteer participation and a lack of staff to manage the programs. According to current corporate managers, half of the programs would improve with a better alignment to business and by establishing partnerships with other companies. At the same time, 85% believe that their programs will expand over the next five years.

As it has throughout the world, the COVID-19 crisis has greatly disrupted corporate programs throughout Europe. It is too early to have a clear vision of the changes that will remain post-pandemic but the digitalization of corporate volunteering appears to be an important trend for the foreseeable future. There has been a shift from team-based and face-to-face activities to individual volunteering through open platforms and cyber-activism. While it is certain that traditional activities will be restored when possible, these new digital and remote activities are obviously here to stay.
Latin America

The realities of the region dictate a focus on meeting basic needs, strengthening people, community development and citizen participation, as well as attention to climate change, natural disasters and migrants. The reality is that “light volunteering” is not possible in Latin America. The needs are so visible that it is impossible not to care. Latin Americans are motivated to volunteer by several factors: ancient community traditions, religion (particularly Catholicism), and an increasing awareness of the needs of individuals from vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly and the homeless.

There is growing belief in including the “other” as an active agent in the analysis, design and decision-making of the actions to be carried out. This implies developing activities designed together, recognizing and valuing the perspective of the communities, their priorities, their knowledge and their abilities, thus strengthening citizen participation. Volunteers are invited to propose solutions and to be co-designers together with the community or organization with which they are going to work. This joint construction of solutions, through local committees, not only develops a sense of co-responsibility in the volunteers but also in the beneficiaries of the organizations or communities served.

Latin American companies are inspired by knowledge of and feeling for the realities of their countries while international companies operating there are likely to adapt models from their global experience or from other regions.

Collaboration is an emerging development in some countries, both between companies around a common cause or of companies with NGOs and governments to serve a specific population. The umbrella organizations of the business world have played very important coordination, execution and evaluation roles in stimulating and supporting these collaborations.

The professionalization of volunteer coordinators will be intensified to maintain and develop initiatives that add value to companies and thus demonstrate the strategic nature of corporate volunteering.
North America

Corporate volunteering began in North America a little over a century ago with AT&T’s Telephone Pioneers of America. By 1979, in a survey of some 3,500 companies in the U.S., about 10% reported having some form of volunteer program. Since then corporate volunteering has grown significantly, becoming increasingly sophisticated and widespread.

Today, most major companies in North America support some version of employee volunteering. In 2019, the Business Roundtable issued a new “Statement on the Purpose of a Corporation” signed by 181 U.S. CEOs who committed to lead their companies for the benefit of all stakeholders – customers, employees, suppliers, communities and shareholders. Since then the concept of “purpose” has been invoked repeatedly to explain a rise in corporate involvement in communities, particularly through volunteering.

An emerging priority is to give increased attention to inequities in society, persistent human and social problems and social justice issues. This is particularly driven by the newest generation of corporate employees who, having grown up with an expectation of personal involvement, want their employers to share their commitment. Multiple studies have shown that this can be a critical factor in deciding which job to take. This has propelled companies to create a broader range of volunteering opportunities.

“Themed” employee groups (business resource groups or employee resource groups) have become strong proponents of volunteering focused on the themes or groups they represent, such as Black employees, Indigenous employees, LGBTQ+, parents, etc. These groups can supplement and support the efforts of corporate volunteer leaders, helping to resource nonprofit partners and volunteer opportunities.

In North America, corporate volunteering is increasingly woven into broader corporate social responsibility (CSR) or environmental, social and governance (ESG) strategies. Almost all companies now have their own version of skills-based volunteering, believing that it results in more significant and sustained impact for the organizations being served. Many also have opened their programs to participation by family members of employees and to company retirees.