Skills-based volunteering (SBV) represents one of the fastest growing forms of corporate volunteering. It recognizes the breadth of people’s skills and the ways in which they can be put to work to enhance individual lives, improve organizational effectiveness and contribute to community vitality.
Major Takeaways

- While skills-based volunteering has existed for decades, there now is a rapid acceleration in its popularity among companies, employees and the communities they serve.

- The most common focus of SBV: improving the capacity and skills of NGOs. It applies technology to social and environmental challenges and provides educational and skill-building support for youth and underserved groups.

- As organizations come to rely on skills-based volunteers, ensuring consistent participation and quality becomes a major challenge.

- Skills-based volunteering originated in the professions, which remains a continuing emphasis. However, efforts to engage employees with craft and vocational skills have been steadily increasing.

- *Pro bono* traditionally has been used to describe the contribution of knowledge and skills by lawyers, executives and other highly skilled workers – often at the behest of their employers or in response to expectations of their professions. But now it is increasingly being used as an umbrella term for skills-based volunteering more generally.
Introduction

Skills-based volunteering has been part of the spectrum of corporate volunteering since before documentation of the field began in the United States in the late 1970s. Then, it most often was described as “loaned executives” or, in some more enlightened companies, as “loaned personnel,” in recognition that not only executives had skills that might be useful to community organizations. Companies gave those involved paid time away from the job to work in support of an NGO or a public sector agency, typically on a specific project for a defined period of time. A classic example in the U.S. was the loaned executive program which provided the leadership and management for annual local United Way fundraising campaigns.

Today, the breadth of skills-based volunteering has widened considerably. It has become a core part of most corporate volunteer programs. Eligibility for participation has expanded beyond executives to include both professional and technical employees, with a growing emphasis on those with technology-related knowledge and skills. Nearly every company interviewed for this research indicated that they are planning or are actively engaging in an expansion of SBV in their broader volunteer programs. Three reasons are cited for this.

- SBV can be highly beneficial to the nonprofit and public sector organizations served, bringing skills, knowledge and experience those organizations don’t possess and may not be able to afford in such areas as technology, finance, strategic planning, legal and marketing.
- Employees who participate can realize significant personal and professional gains as they are challenged to apply their skills in new and often more challenging contexts.
- Companies gain from SBV as their employees often come back renewed, with new perspectives, experience and networks that can benefit the business and yield favorable publicity, new customers and a potential pipeline of new workers.

Traditionally, SBV was reserved for professional employees – lawyers, accountants, engineers, medical staff, etc. Now, it is not uncommon to find vocational skills and those in craft jobs – for example, chefs, welders, carpenters, and gardeners – in demand for SBV.

Too often lost, however, is recognition of other skills important in volunteering: core human skills of empathy, caring and supportive behavior and avocational skills that can bring value to the people and organizations served.

This chapter discusses each of these broad categories of skills – professional, vocational and avocational – and their relevance to volunteering.
Despite its popularity, practitioners of SBV also confront significant challenges. This research identified six significant ones.

- **Identifying needs.** Nonprofit partners have to want and need the skills on offer from their corporate partners. As mentioned in other chapters, honest and ongoing conversations between them and their corporate partners about true needs, effective processes, and timing are critical.

- **Sustaining commitment.** When a program is underway that suits the needs of the nonprofit, the company, and the employee volunteer, there needs to be a commitment by all parties to continue the program for an agreed-upon time. But companies also report that it can be challenging to get volunteers to commit to longer-term assignments.

- **Maintaining consistency.** In interviews with global NGOs, the concern most often mentioned was the need for commitment and consistency on the part of the volunteers no matter the length of the assignment, particularly when vulnerable populations are involved, e.g., children, youth, elders, persons with disabilities, etc.

- **Inspiring creativity.** For as many volunteers who pride themselves on using their unique skills, there are just as many who want to do something completely different when they volunteer. When employees are asked to offer feedback on their experience, companies often find that employees don’t want to perform as volunteers the tasks they normally do in their work.

- **Supporting volunteers.** It is important to make the time and provide the resources needed to prepare and support volunteers. Focused orientation to the realities and expectations of the organization they will be serving and of the specifics of their assignment will be needed. Tailored training may be needed to prepare volunteers to successfully adapt their work habits to the realities of the organizations they are serving.

- **Recognizing volunteers.** Employees want to be acknowledged for more than what they do on their jobs. They have much more to give than their professional skills and often want to enthusiastically bring “the rest of themselves” to a volunteer assignment.

These challenges underscore the importance and the complexity of the roles played by those managing corporate volunteering. They always must be responsive to the realities of all of the parties—employees who volunteer and the organizations in the community with which they partner, as well as the company for which they work. The nature and visibility of SBV work elicits higher expectations on the part of all involved.
**Is It Volunteering or Is It Pro Bono?**

**YES.** But does it really matter in the face of more urgent concerns?

Classically, pro bono refers to the willingness of members of a profession to provide a portion of their services at little or no cost. Fields requiring a high level of education and training with defined areas of knowledge typically have ethical standards enforced among practitioners who organize themselves into associations. Examples include law, medicine, architecture, accounting, engineering, social work and teaching.

In the context of corporate volunteering, pro bono work primarily has referred to community service that utilizes professional skills and is supported by employers who consider it part of the job. Companies provide paid time off and other accommodations such as flexible scheduling, orientation or training. It is an institutionally supported form of service to the community. In some cases, it is done in response to strong expectations or even requirements of employers or of a profession.

For example, in many parts of the world, lawyers are either required or proactively expected to commit a percentage of their time to pro bono work, done of their free will and without expectation of full, if any, compensation. Many law firms actually require lawyers to provide pro bono services and provide released time with pay from the job to perform these activities.

The professional legal pro bono program at **Linklaters**, for example, is extensive and drives approximately three-quarters of the company’s volunteer work. The mission: to provide “access to justice and equal opportunities.” The program is based upon two or three social issues, and the firm’s 2,500 lawyers provide about 30,000 hours a year of pro bono advice. Recently, volunteers worked with the United Nations to have climate change recognized as a justifiable reason for claiming asylum. The head of the program at Linklaters summarizes their work this way:
S&P Global has leveraged employees’ skills within the company’s data visualization, legal and technology teams to work on projects with TrustLaw, the Thomson Reuters Foundation’s global pro bono legal program that connects NGOs and social enterprises with law firms and corporate legal teams to provide them with free legal assistance focused primarily on creating social and environmental change.

Over roughly the last 10 years, the term pro bono has been applied more generally to a broader range of skills-based volunteering, performed either domestically or across international borders. NGOs and consulting firms have emerged to manage those programs, often under contract to the sponsoring companies. The Global Pro Bono Network, for example, has some 60 member organizations in 34 countries across every continent.

The Network has five criteria it uses to define pro bono service. These can be applied equally well to describe skills-based volunteering generally. They are:

1. **Professionalism.** Pro bono work is led in a professional way, and beneficiaries expect professional services.

2. **Skills.** Pro bono involves skills the beneficiary is lacking that the pro bono provider can bring.

3. **Common good.** Pro bono serves the common good, meaning it can be used to support a social change, non-profit organization or a person who cannot access these skills because of money or location, etc.

4. **Free access.** The pro bono service is provided without compensation by the beneficiary. However, it requires some investment by the beneficiary in terms of time and human resources.

5. **Voluntary.** Pro bono is based on free choice. Those participating (both the provider and the beneficiary) are involved because they have agreed to.

It is important to stress that no matter what the label put on the activity – pro bono or skills-based volunteering – operationally, both have the same requirements: careful scoping of and formal agreement on the nature and specifics of assignments, informed recruitment and placement of volunteers, clarity of expectations for all parties, ongoing oversight with continuous communication and identification and resolution of any problems that arise.

We are most proud of the fact that we make a difference at both ends. On the refugee piece, we are working pro bono on legislation to reduce the amount of displacement of people, but equally on the ground, we’re supporting current refugees with problems they face today. It’s a good, unique position of a law firm, because we can look at both the causes and the effects together.
SBV and Professional Skills

Improving the capacity and staff skills of nonprofit partners increasingly has become a major focus of skills-based volunteering.

Although engaged in all types of volunteering, *FirstRand Ltd.* believes they can make a greater difference in communities when they leverage their professional skills. They make a point of not only tapping the expertise of employees in different sectors of the company such as healthcare, IT and finance but also promoting programs proposed by employees. Their primary objective is to strengthen non-profit organizations. They do this with teams of five to six volunteers with expertise in accounting, finance and communications working together to help build the capacity of the non-profit organizations.

Each year, *National Australian Bank (NAB)* co-designs a program with Australian Business Volunteers to send 10 employees for two weeks on a project with a nonprofit partner or customer to solve its business problems and further its social impact.

Other companies work to assist small businesses and microenterprises. Recently, *VISA* launched a skills-based volunteering program through which employees can mentor small businesses. They have partnered with Bridge for Billions in the United States and Latin America – with other regions to come – and have a partnership with Digital Boost in the United Kingdom.

*Belcorp*, a Peruvian company with more than 50 years of experience in the beauty industry, has developed skills-based volunteer activities to support the training of women entrepreneurs. The first beneficiaries have been its "beauty consultants." Volunteers act as trainers, mentors and coaches on topics such as entrepreneurship and financial management.
Volunteer Your Skill, SEDCO’s flagship program, gives employees the opportunity to channel their passions by transferring knowledge and expertise to benefit non-profit organizations, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and entrepreneurs. A SEDCO Holdings lawyer volunteered for an entire year at a non-profit as a legal advisor. His efforts and the relationship built resulted in his being made an honorary member of the organization’s board.

Another popular form of SBV is teaching, coaching, and mentoring youth and sometimes adults from disadvantaged groups. The CEMEX Building and Growing program, developed in Mexico and Egypt, focuses on construction workers and aims to strengthen or complement their education on the job site. Generally, construction workers have not finished high school and are migrants from the interior of the country. They travel from rural communities to urban centers looking for work. They are hired per day and during the course of the project have the opportunity to complete their studies. They learn English or computer skills on site in mobile classrooms installed by CEMEX UNITE, where employee volunteers actively engage to facilitate courses and workshops one hour prior to construction employees’ scheduled work.

Fujitsu is intent on providing youth with skills that will provide them with a prosperous future. In developing their program, Fujitsu Futures, employees worked with an external education consultant to design a series of lesson plans. The objective is to provide young people with skills useful to a digital future, including communication, empathy and critical thinking. These are skills that as a technology company Fujitsu has determined are essential for the workforce of the future. To execute Fujitsu Futures they have developed a number of lesson plans and learner outcomes. Employee volunteers go through training to
become acquainted with the lesson plans and learn how to deliver them. Volunteers work with community partners to reach young people through schools, youth organizations, orphanages and children’s homes.

**AIA’s Philam Foundation** leverages the skills of employees and independent financial advisors working with the company in their signature volunteer program, *My Peso and I*. The program focuses on Filipinos who are about to graduate from college and trains them on the basics of savings, investments, securities and mutual funds, so when they enter the workforce, they know how to manage their money. The president of the AIA Philam Foundation worked tirelessly with the government and other stakeholders to include the program in the university curriculum. The foundation also worked to attract others in the industry to become volunteer teachers of the program.

One of **Iberdrola’s** volunteer programs has a focus on climate change awareness through workshops staffed by employees with scientific knowledge to educate and mentor school children in local communities in Spain, Mexico and Brazil.
Marriott International has a huge international footprint with a presence in 131 countries, 7,000 properties and 700,000 associates. Some 90% of employees are hourly, and 70% of properties are franchised. The company’s social impact strategy and framework have been developed by its corporate headquarters, but individual hotels have discretion on how to serve their local communities. The Serve360 – doing good in every direction framework – supports NSEW: Nurture Our World, Sustain Responsible Operations, Empower through Opportunity, Welcome All and Advance Human Rights.

Marriott International is well positioned to provide new opportunity for people through the development of hospitality skills. The company partners with several leading nonprofits to ensure workplace readiness and access to opportunity, with a focus on youth, diverse populations, women, people with disabilities, veterans and refugees. Partners include Youth Career Initiative, We Connect International and the International Rescue Committee. Employees engage in workforce development programs to mentor, educate and provide job-shadowing opportunities in hospitality and food and beverage topics. Employee volunteers also help impart the essential skills that will help a prospect get hired: communication, resume writing and interviewing.

Marriott’s volunteer efforts in the community near its headquarters in Montgomery County, Maryland have been recognized. Leadership Montgomery selected the company to receive its 2020 Innovation Award. This award recognizes businesses serving Montgomery County that have implemented a new angle or approach to employee volunteering through service to the community. In support of Manna Food Center’s Community Food Rescue program in Maryland, Marriott International helped launch CFR Cooks! in 2018, a cooking-with-recovered-food program. Over the past two years, Marriott chefs have volunteered their time and talent to create restaurant-quality meals, teach and lead volunteer cooks from Kind Works, and together produce meals for about 100 people twice a month. The meals are donated to two residential shelters run by the Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless (MCCH).

For United Metallurgical Company (OMK), a leading national manufacturer of steel products in Russia, skills-based volunteering is a fundamental component of project-based corporate volunteer projects. The majority of OMK employees (70%) are mechanics or line workers. They apply their skills to improve cities by welding fences and putting up playgrounds for local community children. This skills-based volunteering is included in grant projects, initiated by corporate volunteers. In 2019, company volunteers staged 130 events involving over 8,000 participants. OMK employees worked 33,000 hours at volunteer events and raised over 2,000,000 rubles for community projects.

\footnote{Research for and preparation of this chapter was completed in 2021.}
A Winning Combination:
Technology Skills + Company Products and Services

One trend that has grown throughout the last decade is the focus on technology: employee volunteers using their technological skills, sometimes in combination with their companies’ technology products and services.

Some companies focus on promoting technology careers. At the mobile telecommunications company, MTN Ghana, volunteers use their technical expertise to provide career counseling in schools, encouraging women and young people to study STEM subjects like engineering.

IBM’s signature volunteer program is designed to enable a better future for adults and students through access to online learning. The company developed two core education programs: Open P-Tech – a platform to bring digital skills to youth aged 14-20; and Skills Build – a platform to bring digital skills to adults. The idea is to put individuals on a path to employment through online learning, with up-to-the minute technical skills, without the need to secure a university degree to land a good job. IBM volunteers serve as coaches, mentors and guest speakers in the learning sessions. The platform for coaching and mentoring is provided by Kronos.

P-Tech and Skills Build are not programs that have been retrofitted to go online. Rather, they are initiatives designed with online usage in mind to maximize the company’s digital capabilities to help provide key skills to individuals. The goal is to have 1 million registered users for P-Tech; as of early 2021 there were 250,000.

IBM is working towards making their P-Tech and Skills Build platforms available to other companies’ volunteers so that even small and medium-sized companies worldwide can become involved and contribute their skills as coaches, mentors and guest speakers to enhance students’ online learning.

The P-Tech program is noteworthy for the volunteers’ long-term commitment. IBM employees typically commit one or two years to
the program, although options include a 3-, 6-, 12-, or 24-month commitment.

**Dell Technologies** has a number of initiatives that leverage the company’s commitment to improving digital literacy. To address the issue of unreliable and expensive connectivity, Dell’s *Solar Learning Labs* program has enabled learning to continue in Mexico, Colombia, Morocco, Kenya and South Africa. Each Solar Learning Lab is a standard shipping container that has been converted into a classroom, equipped with solar panels, workstations and network technology from Dell. With the addition of outside space and laptops, each lab can offer up to 20 people at a time a wireless connection to learning materials. To provide a comfortable experience, each lab features high-quality furnishings and good insulation from the elements as well as a community space that can be used for training or as an Internet café. Some labs (such as the first lab in Mexico City) are set up as double labs, featuring two classrooms that share a single roof and provide a covered area for outdoor classes when weather permits. Double labs are often also equipped with Dell laptops for mobile learning.

Dell volunteers have key roles in the Solar Learning Labs. They help to set up the labs, install the technology and provide overall project management. They also provide virtual mentoring chats and videos to share their STEM career experiences and answer students’ questions.

Dell also partners with Girls Who Code, a national nonprofit dedicated to closing the gender gap in technology. In this strategic partnership, Dell makes a financial contribution, provides the hardware for the program and also engages employee volunteers to lend their expertise. The company collaborates with Girls Who Code on field trips across North America to various Dell campus locations. Members of Dell employee resource groups recruit volunteers at each site to plan an agenda, issue invitations to the girls and then spend the afternoon with them. The girls get exposure to a technology company and are able ask questions of employees who are in STEM fields to learn about possible career
trajectories. The program includes a “hands-on” component offering the opportunity to use computers.

Google’s mission is to make the world’s information more accessible and useful. The company provides funds, products, technology, and people toward that end. Specifically, Google commits 1% of its profits to support nonprofit partners, while employees might volunteer to install wifi after a disaster. Google allows employees to use up to 1% of their work time, or 20 hours per year, to volunteer with eligible nonprofit organizations, and the company will also donate $10 for every hour an employee volunteers (up to $2,500 per person, per year). On average, Google employees worldwide log around 300,000 volunteering hours each year.

In 2019, the company launched its signature pro bono program, the Google.org Fellowship. Teams of Googlers are embedded with nonprofits and civic entities for up to six months, during which they work full time on technical projects that help accelerate the impact of the organization. Fellows work alongside the organization’s staff as a team to build scalable solutions to help ensure that the work has a sustained and lasting impact. Google typically deploys engineers, product managers, user-experience (UX) researchers and designers, and more on these Fellowship projects.

Recently, Google has intensified its focus on racial justice and equity, and Google.org Fellowship assignments reflect this. Eighteen employees work full-time with the Satcher Health Leaders Institute at Morehouse School of Medicine to create the Health Equity Tracker, a first-of-its kind, public-facing data platform that contextualizes health disparities facing communities of color throughout the U.S. Its initial focus has been on COVID-19. Other Google.org Fellows work with the Vera Institute of Justice to design and create a central source of jail population data for the nation’s 3,000+ counties. This data is being used to help advocates and policymakers in their work on criminal justice reform.

The Chinese conglomerate, Tencent, founded in 1998, offers a range of products and services including search engines, a web browser, artificial intelligence (AI), music, video games, films and social networking tools such as the popular WeChat. In 2006, employees took the initiative to launch the Tencent Volunteers Association as a platform for leveraging Tencent’s technology products and services in combination with volunteering to meet community needs. The company allows each employee one day of paid time off per year to volunteer. Skills-based projects have included using technology to track missing persons and the use of AI to prevent falls in nursing homes.
Microsoft annually hosts what they believe is the world’s largest hackathon, Hack for Good. Projects focus on digital transformation that allows partner nonprofit organizations to accomplish their missions more effectively. Recent projects or “hacks” have included ways to reach out to and more effectively help victims of sex trafficking. Others developed a robotic arm for an employee’s young son who was born without a full right arm. The solution even incorporated a way for the arm to be replicated in larger sizes in a cost-effective manner as the child grows. Another project monitors children who suffer from epileptic seizures to provide an early warning system as well as data that can be used in the search for prevention methods. Volunteers have employed technology to develop a way for a nonprofit partner to connect children all over the world who need life-saving surgery with organizations that will provide those surgeries at no cost.

Other Hack for Good projects are less dramatic but help nonprofits accomplish their objectives more efficiently and in a cost-effective manner. Typically, projects work one of two ways: Nonprofit leaders define and scope a project and then identify a Microsoft volunteer lead. The next step is to list the project on the hackathon site. More frequently, passionate Microsoft volunteers contact the organizations based on their personal interests to determine if they want to work on a hackathon project. They then scope the project together.

Airbus has developed a year-round approach to volunteer-led technological innovation through its Humanity Labs. The program is an innovation center run and staffed by company volunteers on their personal time. Their purpose is to respond to the needs of NGOs. The typical project creates a prototype of a critical product. For example, Humanity Labs volunteers were asked by a medical humanitarian organization to develop an accurate portable scale to weigh babies before and after breastfeeding to determine the need for supplemental nutrition. This product is now being used in Sudan. The volunteers also designed and produced a forearm prosthetic for a young girl using a 3D printer. Airbus volunteers designed a special wheelchair for a Paralympic badminton athlete. At present, the program is working on environmental projects such as wind turbines.

The Sage Future Makers program was recently developed to inspire and teach young people about artificial intelligence (AI) and help them understand how technology can be leveraged to solve social and environmental challenges. A program was delivered face-to-face by charity partners and volunteers (prior to the pandemic) to over 500 young people in South Africa, Spain, the UK and the US. An online version was piloted in France during the COVID-19 lockdown. In the pilot young people created their own concepts for how to use AI to tackle
social challenges. Among the examples: a carbon-footprint calculator of private versus public transport systems and a video game to create awareness of the impact of public transport and its resulting carbon reduction where a points system illustrated the tradeoffs of speed versus carbon reduction.

The 1,000-person IT group at AXA has developed a global volunteer program focused on digital inclusion. To support the program, the company provided computers, tablets or phones to individuals in vulnerable communities who do not have access to technology. Volunteers provide lessons on how to use the various technologies.

The company also was concerned about the need to ensure children’s safe use of the Internet. AXA France developed a comprehensive prevention initiative called the Internet License for Children with AXA insurance agents throughout France and the French National Police. Volunteers have been giving talks in schools to help children learn to use the Internet and social networks in a safe, responsible manner, in an effort to avoid harassment, exposure to violence and other dangers.

An Intel employee recognized a problem and developed a solution with support from the Intel Foundation’s seed grant program. The volunteer realized that first responders, Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs), often arrived on the scene of an accident and were writing patients’ vitals on their hands, arms and scraps of paper. This information would then be used in hospitals to treat the patients. Seeing the need, the Intel volunteer used the grant to supply the EMTs with iPads. He also developed an app to convey patients’ critical information to hospitals in advance of their arrival.

The Vodafone Foundation created a Social App Hub which is part of the company’s Connecting4Good program that fosters the use of mobile technology for Social Good. It is India’s first crowdsourcing platform aimed at curating, strengthening and promoting social sector related mobile solutions within the critical sectors of health, education, governance, agriculture and disability. One app used by volunteers aims to improve financial literacy for individuals living below the poverty line. The content is based on a simple story-telling format, features games, activities and quizzes and is available as a free download in 10 Indian languages.
Activities outside of paid work can become the basis for volunteering. Hobbies or life skills, such as cooking or home repair, as well as the “human skills” that enable individuals to successfully navigate life, including empathy, compassion, communication, mentoring, caring about and for others, providing emotional support – all of these can, by providing avenues for helping others, contribute to the life of a community.

Employee volunteers at Kompania Piwowarska, a Polish brewing company owned by Asahi Breweries in Japan, often put skills acquired from their hobbies to good use. For example, a passionate and skilled photographer took pictures of dogs for a nonprofit’s calendar to help increase the animals’ chances for adoption. In another example, an employee who took a stylist course selected the colors and clothing for mothers of adult children with cerebral palsy as part of the fundraising Breath for Mums campaign.

At TELUS in Canada, one employee created her own volunteer project during the pandemic. She taught baby sign language to mothers unable to afford to pay for classes, so they could communicate with their babies.

The POSCO Pohang Clean Ocean Volunteer Group in Korea has had an impact, not only on the environment but also on the livelihoods of local fishermen. The award winning nationally recognized program was founded in 2009 and combines employees’ talents and
hobbies to preserve the marine ecosystem. POSCO executives and employees with skin diving experience or scuba certificates dive into the sea to collect marine waste such as tires, plastics, and discarded fishing gear from the seas of Pohang, Gwangyang, Seoul, and Incheon. To date, some 150 employees have participated on 582 trips and collected a total of 1,771 tons of marine garbage.

In an example of what the company terms “volunteering with pure heart,” Nikko partners with Daughters of Tomorrow, a nonprofit that supports women in difficult circumstances. The NGO runs a series of programs and evening courses for low-income women who have suffered abuse. The courses provide skills training to help the women become financially independent. One evening a week over nine weeks, Nikko employee volunteers serve as childminders/babysitters for the mothers attending the programs.

At OMK employees who know how to knit, sew and cook, provide those services for children in orphanages.

These are only a few examples of employee avocations providing the impetus for skills-based volunteer programs.
Corporate Volunteering for a Post-Pandemic World

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