

## **Policy Visioning Assignment: Employer-Supported Volunteering**

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### **Defining the problem:**

In 2010, York University's then President and Vice-Chancellor Mamdouh Shoukri launched the Creating a Better Workplace initiative<sup>1</sup> to demonstrate a commitment to enhancing York's workplace culture within all its employee groups. The goal of this initiative was "to increase employee engagement through shared values, common goals and clear expectations, based on mutual respect, trust and credibility."<sup>2</sup> The survey measured employees' levels of engagement on two fronts: organizational engagement (with the University as a whole) and work/role engagement (with their specific work unit through their specific role in the unit). More specifically, Shoukri defined organizational engagement as reflecting "employee's perceived relationship with their organization – emotional commitment and a sense of belonging." (see footnote 2)

The survey questions honed in on 22 identified drivers of engagement, and among the organization drivers were "I am proud to be an employee at York University." and "York University cares about its employees." The survey results indicated that, on average, York's faculty and staff reported being only somewhat organizationally engaged (see survey results for a detailed explanation of how this rating was derived.) The organizational engagement score for York was calculated to be 63.8%, compared to a sector average of 68.9%.

The survey results for role/work engagement, however, indicated higher levels of engagement in that area, quantified as 74.6%, compared to a sector average of 75.1%. Drivers for work/role engagement included "I get absorbed in my work." and "My current work gives me a sense of accomplishment."

The Employee Engagement Survey results clearly indicate that, for York staff, organizational engagement, or the sense of emotional commitment to York, lags behind the dedication and immersion in jobs reflective of work/job engagement. If the University perceives that as a problem, then measures should be taken to increase the overall levels of the organizational engagement of its staff.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://betterworkplace.info.yorku.ca/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://yfile-archive.news.yorku.ca/2013/06/18/speak-up-be-heard-and-make-a-difference-president-reviews-the-results-of-employee-survey/>

## **Evidence to support improving employee engagement through an Employer-Supported Volunteering (ESV) policy: Strategies for social justice**

A 2013 Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating<sup>3</sup> found that almost two-thirds of Canada's volunteers were employed people, and 55% of that two-thirds reported receiving some level of support for or recognition of their volunteer activities from their employers. Levels of support received ranged from the implementation of flexible work arrangements to accommodate volunteerism, to systemic policies for sanctioned (and often paid) time off work for volunteer activities. Further, a 2010 Stats Canada survey<sup>4</sup> that measured employee volunteerism by industry indicated that the highest rate of employee volunteerism occurs in the educational services sector, and that 51% of employer-supported volunteers reported gaining work-related skills through their volunteer activity.

A 2015 study co-authored by York's own School of Human Resource Management Professor Paul Fairlie<sup>5</sup> described the effect on employee's attitudes toward their employers resulting from their perceptions of their employer's corporate social responsibility (CSR). Although the study was specifically looking at how the perception of CSR correlated to levels of stress and employee mental-health, one of Fairlie's findings was that the implementation of corporate-sponsored volunteer programs, in which employees were incentivized to volunteer during working hours had a positive effect on employee performance, commitment and satisfaction.

In addition to the mental health, employee engagement and social responsibility benefits of Employee Supported Volunteer programs, research shows that when volunteers are in the community with the support of their employers, they effectively act as organizational ambassadors, bringing increased brand recognition, improved community goodwill toward, and engagement with, the organization, and enhanced organizational reputation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Leading with Intention: Employer Supported Volunteering in Canada* (2016). *Volunteer Canada*. Retrieved November 14 November 2017, from <https://volunteer.ca/misc/CCOV/LeadingwithIntentionEN.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2012001/article/11670-eng.htm#a4>

<sup>5</sup> Fairlie, P., & Svergun, O. (2015). The interrelated roles of CSR and stress in predicting employee outcomes. *11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Occupational Stress and Health, May 8, 2015*.

<sup>6</sup> Meinhard, A., Handy, F., & Greenspan, I. (2008). Employee Supported Volunteering Programs in Large Corporations. *Centre For Voluntary Sector Studies, Ryerson University*. Retrieved from [http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/cvss/files/new-WORKING-PAPERS/WP33%202008\(1\)%20Employer-supported%20volunteering%20in%20corporations.pdf](http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/cvss/files/new-WORKING-PAPERS/WP33%202008(1)%20Employer-supported%20volunteering%20in%20corporations.pdf)

York describes itself, in its mission statement, as “a community of faculty, students, staff, alumni and volunteers committed to academic freedom, social justice, accessible education, and collegial self-governance.” And yet York has no formal program to encourage or reward employee volunteerism: behaviour that besides potentially increasing employee engagement would serve to support York’s identification as a social-justice university and demonstrate a commitment to including staff in the realization of that mission.

Between York’s own Creating a Better Workplace commitment to enhance and improve rewards and recognition programs, the Employee Engagement Survey results and recent York-based and Canada-wide research results, senior leadership should be open to considering the implementation of an Employee-Supported Volunteering policy.

### **Stakeholders and policy development process**

A working group of stakeholders will need to be involved in determining direction for and impact of an ESV program. Any employee policy will necessarily require input from York’s Human Resource/Employee Relations units, as well as inclusive representation from all union and employee groups to which York’s staff are aligned. Human Resources will establish how an Employee-Supported Volunteer policy would align with current existing leave policies and the current collective agreements, as well as determine how implementation of such a policy would be impacted by the collective agreement negotiation cycle. In addition, as an effectively new leave policy, an ESV program would need to be incorporated into York’s existing Time Reporting Tracking system. Representation from the Talent Acquisition and Development unit will assist in informing the working group as to the effect such a policy might have on talent recruitment efforts, and position York as a preferred employer. Aside from the HR/union stakeholders, other working group participants should include:

- Mental Health and Wellness representation to speak to the alignment of an ESV policy with the Mental Health and Wellness Operational Plan 2016-2019 for Faculty and Staff and to potentially act as champions for the policy;
- Office of the Assistant Vice President Finance (AVP) representation to consider the budgetary impacts of an ESV policy;
- York academic(s) currently working in social-responsibility fields to provide additional background and current research into how an ESV policy is likely to affect employee engagement and employees’ views of York as a socially responsible employer;

- Representatives from potential organizational beneficiaries within the York community to speak to how an ESV policy would best serve the efforts of community engagement for their operations;
- Representatives from organizations comparable in scope and size to York who have implemented ESV programs to speak to their experience with design, implementation and data collection; and
- Employee members to provide insight as to how an ESV program might be perceived by employee groups and best implemented: what would be the most valuable rewards to volunteering and acceptable volunteering parameters.

Because of the large number of stakeholders involved in an ESV policy development project and the wide-ranging potential impact of such a program, the project should be broken into developmental phases including:

1. Investigational research which could include an employee survey to determine current volunteerism levels and potential levels should an ESV program exist;
2. Applicability to York;
3. Policy design;
4. Policy implementation; and
5. Benchmarking and data gathering post-implementation.

Once investigational research and recommendations are provided and the applicability to York established, working groups focused on the remaining phases can be deployed simultaneously.

### **Support, Resistance and Equity Considerations**

At York, new policy initiatives require senior-level sponsorship in order to be proposed. Since the benefits of an ESV program align closely with the goals of the Office of the President and are heavily vested with the Office of the Assistant Vice-President Human Resources, those are the primary sources of support and championship that should be pursued. The reputational benefits are likely the easiest to “sell” while HR and Finance may have the most institutional resistance because of cost and implementation considerations. Staff support for an ESV program can reasonably be assumed to be high whether the reward is recognition and/or paid time off work to volunteer.

In the development of an Employer-Supported Volunteering program, careful consideration must be given to designing a policy that is equitable for all parties involved: the organization, the employee-volunteers and the community recipients of volunteerism. The Canadian Code for Employer-Supported Volunteering<sup>7</sup> offers some guiding principles to the development of ESV policies that include:

1. Attention to reciprocity so that all partners in the program are aware of and committed to meeting each other's needs, goals and objectives.
2. Commitment to mutual respect in which all partners value the expertise that each brings to the table, and that the partnership operate openly and with transparency and within a shared decision-making model
3. Commitment to diversity and inclusion, acknowledging and being proactive to the differences in attitudes toward and capacity for volunteerism of partners from different ethnicities, ages, genders, physical and mental disability statuses, sexual orientations, education and religions. The Code cautions employers considering an ESV program that "employees bring diverse perspectives to their volunteer involvement, linked by the common purpose of building a stronger community."

This third principle is critical in the development stage that would determine acceptable volunteer activities and appropriate rewards. There may be vastly perceived differences in the value of volunteering and ability to volunteer among members of a diverse population, and care must be given to ensure that those who wish to or are able to volunteer do not reap rewards that in turn put those that are not wanting or able to volunteer at a disadvantage, either real or perceived.

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<sup>7</sup> *Canadian Code for Employer Supported Volunteering*. (2015). *Volunteer Canada*. Retrieved 14 November 2017, from <https://volunteer.ca/code-esv>