

Interview

Andy Curtis: "Employer-supported volunteering can introduce people to volunteering who may not have thought of doing it before"



09/06/2016 - 12:12

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Andy Curtis is Senior Research Officer at the Institute for Volunteering Research.

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One day team building events are just one type of ESV / Photograph: Vivienda Digna, Flickr.



Releasing employees to undertake volunteering within work hours is also a type of ESV / Photograph: Seattle Parks.



According to Andy Curtis, communication and compromise is vital to make ESV a success / Photograph: Fundación León.



Is it correct to classify ESV as volunteering at all? / Photograph: Fundación Síndrome de Down Madrid.

The Senior Research Officer at IVR made a presentation on his ESV research at the Voluntary Sector and Volunteering Research Conference. He shared some insights with us.

The archetypical form of Employer-Supported Volunteering (ESV) is a one day team building activity in which a big group of employers take part. However, the report by IVR highlights that there are other forms of ESV. Which are they?

Like volunteering in general, ESV is diverse. **One day team building events** are logistically easier in the sense that it enables employers to tick the box that 20 or so of their employees have engaged in ESV and it is contained within a day (although **it will take a lot of preparation beforehand**).

The second type is skill specific placements, *pro bono* work if you like, where **an employee uses their specialist skills**, such as accountancy or IT, to support a charity. This tends to be over a longer period of time. This was **the more popular type** of ESV amongst the charities we spoke to.

Whereas the above two types take some organization on the part of the companies, the third type, which is often overlooked, is simply about **releasing employees to undertake volunteering within work hours**. It may be a role they are already doing or a new volunteer role. This is what I do personally. I found a volunteer placement and use my ESV leave to volunteer in work hours (I need to be at a particular building to volunteer) five days a year, but I also volunteer in my own time.

How would you describe the present situation of ESV in the United Kingdom and how do you think it will evolve in the near future?

We know that it has **gradually risen** over the last few years [to just over 7% of adults](#) (in employment) engaging in ESV at least once a year.

In the 2015 General Election the Conservative Party committed to **three days a week ESV for public and private sector organizations with 250 or more staff**. This appears to be a potential game changer, potentially embedding and expanding ESV in the UK. However, it is not clear when it will be implemented. Also 'Brexit' (the UK opting to leave the European Union) has changed things. Some predict that Brexit will dominate the legislative agenda for the next few years. This may impact on the implementation of the ESV and other policies, but this is unclear at the moment.

Which factors must be taken into account to make ESV a success for all employers, employees and charities?

Communication and compromise is vital. During the research I sometimes found it frustrating that ESV opportunities were being missed because initial conversations between companies and charities did not work out. This could be, for example, about a fee being charged in order to host ESV activities. Hopefully these issues can be discussed and not be too quickly dismissed by either party. There is obviously a potential mutual benefit to ESV, it just may take some time for both parties to develop an appropriate activity.

The thoughts and wishes of employees (i.e. the volunteers) **can be overlooked**. This includes in our own research, which did not include interviewees with employees (mainly due to the small scale of the project). The wishes of the volunteer should be paramount. For example, they may not want to do the same duties as their day job. Or they may not want to volunteer full stop. The companies should work with their employees to highlight the opportunities available but also understand and respect their views.

Let's focus on individual volunteering. Is it common that employers give individual employees time off to pursue volunteering opportunities during work time?

There is not systematic data available on this to my knowledge. Many employers we interviewed developed **bespoke opportunities**. But policies were often flexible about how the ESV leave can be taken. In addition, whether employees take their full allocation of ESV leave is another matter, again with little data available.

Individual volunteering is apparently the least appealing ESV strategy for an enterprise, since the benefits

might not reach its corporate image. What advantages find employers who promote this?

In general ESV **can improve staff** [retention and development](#), so companies can benefit this way. Also it might be offered as a suite of employee benefits, such as enhanced parental leave, holidays etc.

I think that this form of ESV can still enhance their corporate image. There is no reason why companies cannot promote the various charities their employees volunteer for. In the UK, for example, [Volunteers' Week](#) provides an opportunity to promote and celebrate volunteers' stories.

At the [Volunteering & Voluntary Sector Conference](#) you will be giving a presentation on the role of 'volunteer' in ESV. What will be the focus of your speech?

I am really interested in exploring how ESV compares with volunteering in general. Indeed, **is it correct to classify it as volunteering at all?** After all, volunteering tends to be seen as having the following three characteristics: it is unpaid, of someone's freewill and of benefit to others. Whereas ESV is paid, and the freewill aspect can be debatable. Does this matter? I personally think, as well as being valuable in its own right, ESV, if facilitated correctly, **can introduce people to volunteering who may not have thought of doing it before.**

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