The Bristol Method

how to make corporate volunteering work

In it for good
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Introduction

Many businesses chose to put time aside for their staff to volunteer in the community as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility programme. This often takes the form of an off-site away day, where a team of office workers tackle a particular manual task such as clearing scrubland to create a community garden, or painting and restoring a run-down building.

In this way, corporates are able to ‘give back’ to the local communities they operate within. The benefit to the business is felt through increased staff engagement and closer working relationships with team mates.

The benefit to the charity or community organisation is free labour, and deeper ties with a local corporation.

However, this model presents a number of challenges for both sides of the equation, and interactions between them are not always as successful as they could be.

This module was written by a member of Bristol City Council’s Cities of Service team. It is drawn from a research project about green organisations that work with volunteers in Bristol and seeks to better understand the challenges associated with corporate volunteering days, and to explore how to make them more beneficial for both the business and the community.

Excerpts are taken from interviews conducted as part of the study between December 2015 and February 2016. As the UK government is now seriously considering a law for medium and large businesses to allow their staff to volunteer three days a year, there is a growing need to consider a better system to make the most of this donated time.

About Cities of Service

Cities of Service is a nonprofit organisation that supports mayors and city chief executives to engage local communities and residents in identifying challenges and solving initiatives together.

It works with cities to help them build city-led, citizen-powered programs that target specific needs and achieve long-term, measurable outcomes that improve the quality of life for residents and build stronger cities.

Bristol City Council has been working with Cities of Service since 2015.
Problems with the Traditional Model

The Cities of Service research quickly uncovered the struggle that not-for-profit community organisations have in working with corporate businesses. Below are the problems which seem to be common to many community organisations.

Businesses do not always appreciate the effort involved

Organising corporate away days can often be time consuming and labour intensive. The community organisation can be overwhelmed and may feel that, despite having been given a day of support, they have not accomplished much over the course of the day, and have lost one of their own working days.

Sophie Bull from St Werburgh’s City Farm explains why the charity has needed to charge business groups for volunteering days and how that money is used: ‘We run team challenge days, for which we charge £25 per business volunteer. That money goes towards the materials for whatever they’re doing that day and to pay staff to be with them. Businesses often think they’re giving you a favour by offering to bring 50 people for the day and when you say ‘that’s great, that’s going to cost you this much money’ they sometimes need a bit more communicating around why: why that would need to cost them money, why maybe it’s not beneficial just to have 50 adults coming to do something.’

Corrina Buchanan from The National Trust in Tyntesfield agreed that organising practical volunteering options for companies can be a strain on resources: ‘We have had some corporate volunteers but it’s not an easy relationship. We always talk about mutual benefit and there isn’t always that with them. I know that’s true for the businesses too, they say, ‘we have loads of people giving time, surely you must want us’ but it takes a lot of time away from other projects.’

Buchanan also voiced frustration that some corporates assume that not-for-profit organisations do not have the same forward planning and strategic work plan as businesses. ‘It’s usually been 15-20 people in a group, across two days, and they want to do it next month! They’re not thinking far enough ahead. Then you need to schedule extra staff to come in and work with them.’

Eve Morton from FareShare South West agrees: ‘We’ve had to say to people ‘we do charge for corporate group volunteering’ and sometimes businesses don’t understand that actually it does take time to prepare to have a group of people here for a day. Sometimes it is a bit of a struggle, explaining that we are a charity. It takes most of my day to coordinate what they’re doing – and we need the money.’

Julie Doherty from Avon Wildlife Trust adds: ‘We’ve got to impress that we’re providing a really valuable service for them, if they got a team builder or consultant in, it could cost them several thousand pounds a day and they wouldn’t think twice about spending that kind of money. But it’s changing the way people think; to think ‘actually we could do that by giving something back to the local community as well’. It’s purposeful and meaningful and adds value to your staff, and your business, and the local community.’
**Businesses want to deliver a noticeable outcome**

Typically, a business will want to complete a particular project during their volunteering day. This provides the team with a sense of accomplishment, and tangible proof that they have made a difference in their community. A discrete project is also easier to communicate in, for instance, an internal newsletter or the annual corporate social responsibility report.

However, in reality, community groups often struggle to offer a single clear task that needs doing.

As Emma Hodges from National Trust Tyntesfield explains: ‘Businesses want something at the end that they can talk about, they want a finished product, which was always quite difficult because the things that really needed doing were quite operational, but they wanted to say ‘we restored this roof’ or ‘we produced this’ and there aren’t actually that many opportunities to do that kind of work.’

Making sure that the work delivered during the volunteering day is in line with the community organisation’s strategy or key work is a necessity. However, it can be challenging to crow bar this into a discrete project that can be delivered by an inexperienced group of volunteers.

'It ends up being quite manufactured, they end up doing something quite tokenistic to give them what they are looking for; things which don’t really need doing so that you’ve got something from them and they’ve got something they can talk about in their newsletter.’

**Low engagement with purpose of the community organisation**

Some community organisations raised concerns about the meaningfulness of this ‘dip in and out’ volunteering option. In some instances, the volunteers are taking part in a compulsory day out of the office, with little information about why they are there or what they will accomplish.

Julie Doherty from the Avon Wildlife Trust explained that ‘when you have that one day volunteering option, people rock up because their team leader has told them to be at a certain place at a certain time. They often don’t have any information about our organisation or the relevance of the task until they arrive.’

This point was reiterated by Lizzie Spencer from Windmill Hill City Farm: ‘We’ve had some corporate groups where they come as a day off, a day out of the office. They haven’t been very motivated or cohesive and haven’t really got that much done.’
Positive Examples

Despite the challenges identified, the interviews with community groups did reveal that well-planned corporate volunteering days were hugely positive and of real value to them. Below are the common themes of successful events.

Careful forward planning and good communication

To achieve a well-run, useful volunteering day can take months of careful planning – on both sides. The earlier discussions begin, the easier it is to align both organisations’ expectations and create a meaningful event that meets everyone’s needs.

Corrina Buchanan from National Trust Tyntesfield explained: ‘If a company is willing to work with us more long term, the year before we could arrange at what points through the year support for the orchard project or meadows project or maintenance of the play equipment could be scheduled into the year.’

Sam Thompson from Friends of Horfield Common worked hard to plan a suitable event for one volunteer group from a local business: ‘We spent a long time planning it to make sure we had things for them to do. They were originally going to plant the hedge, but the date they could come was too early for that, so we had to find activities for 40 people to do in a day. In the end they cleaned and repainted all the benches in the café, they painted some of the fences and gateposts, tidied it up, they helped build the pond decking, they planted 2000 bulbs. It was wonderful, a swarm of people doing things.

Part of the success of this event was the positive attitude of the volunteers who were well briefed on what to expect and excited about the day: ‘We knew who was coming; we knew what they would be working on; and we’d advised them of things to wear. They brought a massive box of gloves and trowels and then donated those to us at the end. They were really enthusiastic and very nice. It was a brilliant experience for me. They want to come again and said could we start planning for that.’

Engaged and interested volunteers

In a number of cases, the volunteering day was successful because of the depth of the relationship that already exists between the two organisations. The volunteers are therefore well aware of the work the not-for-profit organisation does, and is better motivated to help them deliver their aims.

Eve Morton from FareShare South West explained the benefits of a deeper engagement: ‘We were charity of the year for a publishing company in 2014: that was great, they did lots of fundraising for us. Also, we were the environmental charity for a legal company for the last quarter of 2015. We may go and give a little talk about what we do which helps us raise our profile … it’s nice for people to know what we do and what we’re about. People coming from a big posh office to a warehouse and volunteering alongside our volunteers: they may not have met anyone from that demographic before, it’s really nice to see. People get a lot out of it, from both sides.’

Julie Doherty from Avon Wildlife Trust said: ‘A lot of our corporate groups go to Feed Bristol and that’s really nice because they mix with our community groups such as people in drugs rehab or adults with learning difficulties. [Volunteers] harvest their own food and we offer a service where they can pay to eat lunch there, so they harvest the food and then we cook it for them. I think they really enjoy that and a lot of groups come back year on year at Feed Bristol.’

Students prepare a community garden
Spread over time

One common feature to the most successful corporate volunteering projects were those which were spread over several days or a couple of weeks, rather than the whole team going out on a single day.

Sharing the burden

Community organisations are grateful when the business recognises that, as a charity, it does not have the capacity to provide staff support for free and so contributes time and money to the event; that might be paying for tools, plants or paying for the staff member’s time.

Putting corporate skills to good use

While many businesses chose to focus on volunteer days involving manual labour, an increasing number are opting for skills-based volunteering. This enables the community organisation to get access to highly valuable skills while giving the business member a chance to use their experience to bring real benefit to their neighbourhood.

Through the interviews and surveys conducted for this report, we have heard from charitable organisations who have received support from ‘professional’ volunteers who are trustees and directors, or able to help with complex financial or legal problem, or even committing time to revamp a website or help classify plants in a BioBlitz.
Case Study: Burges Salmon and Avon Wildlife Trust

During the autumn of 2015, independent UK law firm Burges Salmon partnered with Avon Wildlife Trust (AWT) on ‘My Wild Street’, a project designed to make a street in Easton wildlife friendly. This project was very successful for the street and both Burges Salmon and AWT felt that the partnership had been particularly successful for a Corporate Social Responsibility campaign.

This case study was drawn from interviews with Emma Dowden, Chief Operating Officer at Burges Salmon, whose Operations Department took part in the project, and Julie Doherty, Community Engagement and Volunteering Manager at Avon Wildlife Trust, who coordinated the event.

‘My Wild Street’ was part of the larger ‘My Wild City’ Avon Wildlife Trust project which, received a Green Capital strategic grant. As part of the project, over 2,000 wild start-up boxes were given to citizens to help them make their gardens more wildlife friendly. ‘My Wild Street’ took that one step further: AWT wanted to show how a typical Victorian Bristol street could be transformed into a wildlife haven.

The need for preparation

AWT had a big vision for ‘My Wild Street’, and was invited to Burges Salmon’s Bristol HQ at the start of the year to present its project.

Emma Dowden from Burges Salmon explained:

‘The charity was brought in early on and was involved right from the beginning. The project focused on ensuring everyone was empowered to get involved so, in 2015, we created an online tool where they could choose their day and activity they were involved in. Having this early buy-in from the volunteers was crucial to the project and meant that everyone understood the long term goals and benefit to the community, consequently the time they were out volunteering was meaningful and fun.’

Julie Doherty from Avon Wildlife Trust added:

‘Burges Salmon had a core team that we worked with from the beginning. We delivered an early presentation to this team and then we did another talk to the whole team closer to the time to say ‘this is where we’re at; we need you to do this’ to fire everybody up. When they came out everybody knew what we were trying to achieve, they knew what it was about and they were there and ready to make it happen.’

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Burges Salmon’s perspective

Emma outlines how these volunteering projects are organised and planned at the firm:

“We focus on one big project for the Operations Department. There are 100 of us so it would be difficult for us all to take the same day. We have found that by using those days over a period of time, focused on one community project, we can make a huge difference.

‘The projects we choose are ambitious and aspirational. We use one big project and make sure everyone gets excited about it. That feel good factor drives their passion and enthusiasm to get involved.

'It’s important that the community partner we choose to work with on these projects has the resources to work with Burges Salmon. We tend to choose a local charity that has vision. We focus on undertaking a project for one or two weeks with all team members getting involved. We aim for projects with meaningful work that keeps our staff busy during that time. They have lots to do and feel like they have achieved something at the end of their day.

‘As we undertake a community project each year, we can apply the learning to the next year. For example, last year we felt that one week wasn’t long enough – it was too rushed and difficult to organise the logistics of having everyone out in a week– so this year we extended it to two weeks.

‘Planning for the community project starts four to five months before the event, with discussions about which charities may be an option to partner with. Once the decision is made, then work begins between our project manager and the chosen charity.

We invest a lot in these projects because they are high profile and important for our staff and the firm. We make them as successful as possible and ensure this by providing not only funds but time so everyone gets the benefit.’

‘A project manager is assigned from Burges Salmon and they work closely with the charity, which helps keep communications clear and ensures problems are noticed and dealt with quickly. There are weekly meetings two months in advance of the project. You need to make the time investment for success.’

The Avon Wildlife Trust outlook

Julie Doherty from Avon Wildlife Trust views the project as a real collaboration: ‘Burges Salmon was involved at every step; the team got involved in sourcing materials, and many other aspects of the project.

‘Those who came out the first week were going back to the office excited about what they had done and telling everyone else. So it was getting them fired up about it at the office. Everyone was excited about it and was sharing their experiences. It worked well on so many levels; I just wish more companies would do it.

‘It was great for us as well, because we had a vision that there was no way that we could have implemented on our own. It raised our profile so it was great for us to tell the story of what we’re trying to do. It helped us achieve something we couldn’t have done otherwise or would have taken months, so we couldn’t have had the impact. It connected Burges Salmon with the community and that particular project created a buzz around the whole neighbourhood.’
**Business benefits**

Burges Salmon provides its people with two paid volunteering days per year, one that they choose and the other that is the firm volunteering day. This second day is explicitly used as part of its learning and development programme, and the success is measured through a day-long post-evaluation exercise where the group reviews what they learned and how well they worked together.

As Emma Dowden explains:

‘Rather than pay an outside company to come in and do activities for us, we invest in a community event. This means our people still get that team building and learning and development experience but they also get the feel good factor. We find this is a better use of funds and time, and is more meaningful for the community/charity as they can tackle bigger projects with our help.

‘We actively encourage and promote these volunteering days. We ensure the company has a permissive culture around volunteering so our people know we want them to make use of these days.

‘Our people are able to learn new skills, gain confidence and meet people they might not come across on a normal day.

‘Our team has the opportunity to try out a new role in a safer environment. If someone wants to move into Project Management they can take on that role, they have an opportunity to try and use new skills. We also have an organising team, so again more opportunity for people to use new skills.’

‘Each day we had maybe ten people helping us, each team of people came from that wider Operations Department. So you might have had someone from reception working with a maintenance guy and someone from IT, so they were really mixed up.

‘They used the experience to do their learning and development internally and they used it to springboard things they wanted to focus on for their internal professional development, which was brilliant.’

**Consolidation for improvement**

It was important to both sides that the project did not end unrecognised but that both the business and the charity got the chance to follow up afterwards and learn from it. Burges Salmon builds this into its year. As Emma explains:

‘Our people complete an end-of-day questionnaire based on the project and workshops that they have taken part in, and then we hold our Annual Conference the Saturday after the community engagement event. At the conference we engage in some reflective learning. A team from the charity is also present to tell us about what they have learnt and contributed. We reflect on the project, and generally it has always been very successful. Our people think about what they have achieved, what they learnt and then take it back to the office. As we run a community project each year, there is learning to apply to the next year.’

**Leading from the start**

One of the reasons this project was such a success was because of the buy in at a director level. Julie explains, ‘Alan Barr, senior partner of Burges Salmon was on the Board of Bristol 2015 Ltd with our CEO. For a big project like this you need a lot of people and you need someone with authority to give the go ahead and see the value, and that’s often quite difficult. How do we communicate the value in a way that the business community will really understand and get?’
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emma Thompson is Head of Volunteering for Bristol City Council’s Cities of Service team. She is working on a study into green organisations that work with volunteers in the city, identifying successes and sharing ways to improve the volunteer experience across the city.

Emma was seconded to Cities of Service from Bristol 2015 Ltd where she was Volunteer Manager. Over the course of 2015 she built a successful programme with over 200 volunteers and grew networks through the community.

Prior to this, Emma spent seven years building a volunteer programme for the prestigious Korean Animal Protection Society.

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ABOUT BRISTOL 2015

European Green Capital is a prestigious annual award designed to promote and reward the efforts of cities to improve the environment. Bristol is the first ever UK city to win the award.

European Green Capital is run by The European Commission, recognising that Europe’s urban societies face many environmental challenges – and that sustainable, low-carbon living is vital to the future of our cities and our people.

The award was first won by Stockholm in 2010. Since then, Hamburg, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Nantes and Copenhagen have carried the torch. Bristol handed the title over to Ljubljana at the end of 2015.

THE BRISTOL METHOD

The Bristol Method is a knowledge-transfer programme aimed at helping people in other cities understand and apply the lessons that Bristol has learned in becoming a more sustainable city, not just in 2015 but in the last decade.

Each module of the Bristol Method is presented as an easy-to-digest ‘how to’ guide on a particular topic, which use Bristol’s experiences as a case study. The modules contain generic advice and recommendations that each reader can tailor to their own circumstances.

The Bristol Method modules are published on the Bristol 2015 website at www.bristol2015.co.uk/method