This review of the literature will highlight some more common themes found by researchers investigating the impacts on organisations who undertaken employer supported volunteer (ESV) programs as part of their wider corporate social responsibility programs (CSR). While there have been numerous research projects undertaken, the findings and themes are similar, so a selected number of articles have been chosen for this brief review.

Before looking at the effects of such programs on organisations and their employees, it is important to note the effect these programs have on society. According to Speevak-Sladowski, Hientz and MacKenzie (2013) “having more volunteers, and more diverse and engaged citizens is not the end goal, but rather a vehicle to and a sign of a healthy, and resilient community” (p.41). ESV programs are one way to increase volunteer time in communities and therefore increase their resilience.

So what exactly is an ESV program? Rodell, Breitsohl, Schroder and Keating (2016) define employee supported volunteering as “employed individuals giving time during a planned activity for an external non-profit or charitable group or organisation” (p. 57). It is important to note in this definition the use of the term “time” to denote a difference between employee time and financial support from an organisation or business. It is also necessary to note that the volunteering is a planned activity not a random act of kindness shown by an employee and that the volunteering takes place within another organisation or volunteer lead group.

Employer Supported Volunteering (ESV) is becoming an increasingly important weapon in many businesses Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) arsenal. Basil, Runte, Basil and Usher (2011) note that as well as more traditional forms of CSR such as charitable donations and environmental causes, that “support for employee volunteerism is emerging as an important tool through which companies demonstrate their CSR”. (p.61). A view shared by Burnes and Gonyea (2005) and Lafferty and Goldsmith (2005). The number of employees and organisations involved in ESV programs is growing (Cavallaro, 2006). Basil et al (2011) write that “between 55% and 80% of US companies are estimated to support employee volunteering in some way” (p.61). While international research indicates that up to 90% of organisations have an involvement in supporting employee volunteering (Rodell, Breitsohl, Schroder and Keating, 2016).

It’s not just corporates who see the benefits of ESV programs, employees themselves appear to be backing the idea, and it is a growing trend. According to research undertaken by the Cone Foundation (2007) approximately 72% of employees in the United States want their employers to do more to support a cause or social issue, which has increased from 52% of the population in 2004.

There are numerous benefits for organisations which can be attributed to ESV programs. These include attracting and retaining talented employees (Bhattacharya,Sen and Korschun, 2008), increased job performance (Cavallaro, 2006) and increased employee engagement. According to the WorkUSA study (2008) employee engagement has a tangible benefit for organisations, noting that companies with engaged employees gain 26% higher revenue per employee. Siddhartha and Priyanka (2012) note that recent research is confirming the links between ESV and organisational benefits. They note the “payoffs to employers are both varied and significant, and include increased employee motivation and commitment, increased investment from stake holders, more branding as product as well as employer, enhanced employee competencies, and greater attractiveness to prospective employees” (p.38). These findings are backed by Rodell et al (2016) who note that the opportunities to take part employee volunteering programs can play a role in the attractiveness of that organisation to prospective employees. Rodell (2013) goes further to suggest that employees who are drawn towards volunteer activities may in fact be more likely to perform better in the workforce. Siddhartha et al (2012) report that employer supported volunteering also increases employee esteem, reduces absenteeism and improves people skills among employees. Speevak and Kaleniecka (2014) back this by noting volunteering is becoming a strategic tool to achieve business goals including culture change and improving employee engagement.

There are steps that can be taken to make an ESV program more likely to be successful and sometimes it comes down to things such as organisational size. In their study Basil et al (2011) found that formalised employer supported volunteer programs were more prevalent in larger organisations. They found that while this formalisation may lead to less flexibility in the volunteering option for employees, it does create greater awareness of the program and increased employee uptake. The makeup of employee demographics will also play a part in the program’s success. Rodell et al (2016) note that when considering the utilisation of an ESV program it is important to remember that the volunteer pool will be determined by several factors which need to be considered when creating a balanced ESV team. One factor is volunteer demographics which takes into account a person’s age, family commitments, gender, and education level. Rondell et all (2016) also note that personality traits of employees need to be considered, and that a prosocial personality trait often attracted to undertaking volunteering, with agreeableness and extrovertedness also rating highly. Businesses also need to consider the employee’s motivations for volunteering, and then decide if an individual’s motivations really matter or make a difference. Researchers have determined two main motivations, self-orientated and other-orientated motivations, either what will I get out of it, or how will others benefit? Finally, role identity has been shown to play a part in determining if someone will volunteer, and is determined by how well they align the role to be undertaken to their personal needs (Rondell et al, 2016).

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Speevak and Kaleniecka (2014) note that there are challenges for businesses in employer supported volunteer programs including unclear expectations, cultural differences and relationship building. These among other “barriers” need to be carefully managed and considered before engaging in any employer supported volunteering partnership. Speevak and Kaleniecka (2014) undertook research into policies, practices and programs in 27 Canadian workplaces. They found that successful programs were ones that had fully considered and embraced the opportunity. Included in the success elements they noted were those which included families and retirees in the programs, ones which had shared values with their partner organisations and those which had employers connecting employees to volunteer opportunities. Giving structure to the program may make it more successful as well as easier to monitor and measure. By creating partnerships with volunteer organisations, corporates may be able to meet their needs and the needs of the community more effectively. Speevak and Kaleniecka (2014) write that “moving from a charitable model to a partnership model with community organisations builds mutual respect, trust and a commitment to accommodating each other’s realities (p.12).

ESV programs have multiple benefits for corporates, volunteer organisations and the community. It will take work and time to build the necessary relationships to create successful ESV programs, however these costs are far outweighed by the benefits. By working together, not in isolation, businesses and agencies can help ensure their community is one which is connected, supported and more resilient.

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