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Charging for Corporate ‘Volunteer’ Teams

The purpose of this briefing is to help community growing groups that currently run ad hoc corporate team volunteering events or receive enquiries from companies but haven’t yet hosted a team to:

* Assess whether to charge companies looking to ‘volunteer’ at your site
* Decide how much should be charged.

It is focused on practical team activities that can be costly to coordinate. Community groups are encouraged to think of alternative ways to involve corporate volunteers such as mentoring, running (fundraising) events, market research or reviewing plans, finances and websites.

More tips on making initial links with businesses and running a successful corporate team challenge event can be found at [www.growingtogether.community](http://www.growingtogether.community) For further information about any aspect of this briefing please contact the Growing Together team.

Supply and Demand – thinking like a business

Charging a company to facilitate a day of activity for their staff is a business transaction between your project and the company you are working with. The value of the experience you offer them is dependent on a range of criteria in the same way as any other transaction. It will only happen if both sides agree the price is right (or there are no alternative options).

It can be helpful to consider corporate “volunteering” as corporate “community action/challenge days”. The employees involved are normally paid by their employer, who benefits from staff development and good PR, to participate in the day; so they are not volunteering in the traditional sense.

What to consider when help is offered

As community-based organisations we can be inclined to jump at the chance of bringing in a large team of willing helpers. But before accepting a company’s offer, it is worth researching to find out exactly what their expectations are. Coordinating a large team with little experience of working in a community garden, and no knowledge of your site, for a one-off activity will absorb lots of your limited time and resources. This is why we encourage community groups to consider charging a company to cover staffing and material costs.

These questions may be a useful starting point when assessing the impact that supporting a corporate team will have on your project.

* How many volunteers are expected and what percentage of the company’s staff is this?
* What are the professions of the volunteers, and do they have any specific expertise? (Don’t assume a construction company will send builders)
* Will they be looking to use professional skills or learn something new?
* Do they have a date in mind and how firm is this? Is this sufficient for your project to plan their activity?
* Are they looking for a one-off day or will this be an ongoing venture?
* Are they allocated paid volunteering days that must be used up?
* Is the initiative driven by management or passionate employees?
* Does the day have the support of management (who control the budget)?
* What type of tasks are they looking for? (Suggest opportunities you have)
* Do they have a budget to cover costs?
* How did they hear about you?
* What media and PR links do they have to publicise your project?

Assessing the Costs and Benefits

Based on the information you have gained from the initial enquiry you can assess what cost they are likely to be to you.

* Will they do a practical task?
* Will they require instruction, training and supervision?
* Do additional materials and equipment need to be purchased?
* How much planning will be required by you? (Include liaison with team leader, purchasing materials, risk assessment and insurance, preparation of suitable tasks...)
* How many staff will be required on the day to safely supervise the team?

These cost implications can then be assessed against the benefits that the team bring.

* Do they have professional skills that will be useful to you?
* Do they have access to quality tools and materials?
* Are they carrying out a relatively simple task that requires minimal supervision?
* Will they complete an essential task that requires many hands?
* Will they return regularly to become familiar with the site and do maintenance tasks?

It is also important to consider the needs and restrictions of the company and what other similar employee volunteering or team building opportunities are available in your area.

* Are there alternative team volunteering opportunities available locally with other charities? (Speak to them to find out about their knowledge and experience)
* Are you the only community group to make a charge for corporate teams locally? If so, what ‘added value’ do you offer the company, and the community, for the fee?
* Is the company aiming to get a certain percentage of its workforce volunteering, in which case they need to take up these opportunities? (Be aware that ‘volunteers’ who are forced to participate can require extra motivation and structure)
* Do they have a particularly large team that is difficult to host?
* Do they have specific needs such as an emphasis on team building or staff wellbeing, or a range of exciting tasks for mixed abilities?

Making a Charge

Once you have assessment all the costs and benefits, you can calculate whether you will need to charge the team to cover your costs or whether you can raise the price to make a profit. Remember that in addition to finances to cover the cost of staff and materials, you will also benefit from getting a task completed.

When you inform the company of the cost to deliver their request be clear about why you need to charge. This is normally because your staff need to be allocated to the corporate team to ensure a safe and effective day, and therefore cannot do the work they are funded to perform. Don’t apologise about charging, but explain that otherwise your beneficiaries will be negatively impacted (if this is true!)

Money is the way we establish value to most things (even subconsciously). By making a charge for your services, companies may perceive a team day with your organisation as a more valuable experience than a free opportunity.

Often businesses will say there is no budget available for employee volunteering. However, if they genuinely want their staff to do team community action activities, they will find a budget. They will be willing to absorb other costs involved in the day such as travel, lunch and covering the preparation time required by the team leader at the company. Community groups who are supervising and providing activities for the teams should not feel guilty about covering their costs or even generating a profit. By taking on much of the planning and preparation you can limit the time the company will need to put in. Although it sounds cheeky, you can suggest that your time is probably cheaper than theirs!

Within larger companies, departments can use their own budget to run this type of activity or teams could be encouraged to use training and development budget if you can deliver personal or team development outcomes. Some teams may choose to run a bake sale or other fundraising initiative before their activity day. It is worth noting that teams tend to be more willing to fundraise to cover the costs of materials than staffing, so you may need two sources of funding.

Maintaining a professional attitude and being clear about your pricing puts your organisation in the driving seat. If the company called you, then they are looking to do business with you. Community groups who charge corporate teams must deliver a quality, well-prepared and safe experience so the company feels it is getting value for money.

Key things to remember

* The company is donating staff time to you and if you need their hands and their skills more than they need a corporate challenge day then you probably can’t charge.
* Companies are concerned with the health and safety of their employees so it is important you can carry out a risk assessment, fully supervise volunteers and provide adequate insurance and first aid cover for team community action days.
* Employee volunteers expect a very high quality experience because they are essentially ‘at work’. This may include car parking or easy access, tea/coffee, clean and well-stocked toilets, somewhere warm and dry to take a break, as well as good organisation, clear instruction and safe, varied activities. It is important to consider these aspects of your site and organisation in preparation for the group arriving. Corporate teams can be wary of visiting areas with a poor reputation; you will need to reassure them that your site is safe.
* While offering a really cheap/free corporate volunteering day may seem like a good option if other groups are charging more, we encourage you not to undercut other community groups. If you are able to offer a cheaper experience make it clear to the company why that is, for example you are already funded to support volunteer teams, the task needs to be completed imminently, or the team is bringing valuable skills, resources or future engagement. In this way, you have the option to charge in the future should your circumstances change and you don’t devalue the experience other groups provide.
* By working in consortia or networks, community growing groups can gain greater access to corporate volunteers. Smaller gardens in particular will not always have tasks in which to engage a large team. If you can refer an enquiry to another community group you will maintain that corporate contact and the community group could return the favour in the future.

Publicity

Take as many quality photos as you can and get written feedback from the employee volunteers. Video can also be very useful and the company may have the capacity to create short films for future publicity. This information can be used on your website, social media, in local press and printed for your notice boards to showcase the activity. It should also be sent back to the company so they can share it internally and externally.

By publicising that you have worked with a corporate team you are more likely to get further enquiries from other corporates as they will only find you if you are visible. It is normally in the company’s interest to publicise their day spend with you so take advantage of their links to the media and other businesses.

Receiving a team of corporate volunteers can also be really encouraging to beneficiaries and regular volunteers who appreciate that people who don’t know them have spent a day working to improve their site. Make sure they know that a team has been in and they can spread the word to their networks.

Maintaining the Relationship

During the community action day, speak to as many team members as possible to find out what they do and what interests them. There may be other ways you can engage individuals, departments or companies on a longer term basis. Think broadly about how they could be involved, for example sharing professional skills you require, attending community events, delivering training, hiring your venue, recruiting new trustees, publicity, etc.

Keep in touch with your key contact and let them know what is going on at your site and suitable opportunities for involvement. Sharing time lapse photographs, of how the space they worked on has developed through the year and is being used can be a simple and effective way of maintaining contact without appearing pushy. Simple statistics, for example how many people have benefited from their work, can also be used for their reporting.

Be as specific as possible when making requests for help so they can give a “yes” or “no” and share opportunities with their colleagues.

Some companies will run their community activities during a specific week each year. Ensure you make annual contact to suggest they return to you. Other larger firms may be looking to get teams out regularly. In this case consider working up a contract to deliver a certain number of days/taking a certain number of volunteers during a specific time period. This will help you to plan both your income and the tasks you can give corporate teams ensuring better value for both parties.