



School of Business

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“When give-back turns to blowback: Employee responses to learning from skills-based volunteering”

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Paper Abstract

Skills-based volunteering programs are designed by organizations to enable their employees to donate their job-related skills and develop new ones, while making a positive difference in the community. Although skills-based volunteering is one of the fastest growing trends in corporate citizenship, we know little about how employees respond to it. Using interview data from a financial institution (volunteering managers, n=2; employee volunteers, n=27), we explored this research question: How do employees react when volunteering is framed as an avenue for learning? Our findings show that one-third of volunteers expressed anger or defensiveness and ultimately rejected the notion of learning from volunteering; two-thirds reacted with curiosity, using the interview process to make sense of what they learned. These two groups of volunteers reported different attributions about why their firm supports volunteering. Whereas the former group was cynical about their firm’s motivations, the latter believed that the firm’s intentions were altruistic. However, not all of the participants fit neatly into this pattern; for a minority, manager support for volunteering altered the relationship between attributions and acknowledgement of learning. The key contribution of this paper is a theoretical model that explains how employees respond when volunteering is framed.