Corporate volunteering and organizational outcomes: a theoretical model

Abstract
Even though the adoption of corporate volunteering programs has become an important trend among organizations (e.g. Grant, 2012), it is still not clear whether it benefits the employee-organization relationship or not. Therefore, the paper discusses its possible benefits and pitfalls and provide four theoretical propositions, which are integrated into a single theoretical framework. Specifically, the model links the participation in corporate volunteering programs to organizational commitment, which can be moderated by the experience’s evaluation; and to conflict, which can be moderated by the support of a servant leader.

Key words: corporate volunteering, organizational commitment, organizational behavior

Introduction
Corporate or employee volunteering programs are designed by companies to stimulate their employees to volunteer outside the company, but at its expense, often by allowing them to do volunteer work during working hours, in spite of their regular tasks (Gilder, Schuyt, & Breedijk, 2005). The adoption of these programs has become an important trend among organizations in a number of countries, such as The United States (Grant, 2012), United Kingdom (Muthuri, Mathen, & Moon, 2009), and Brazil (Santos, Cavalcante, & Souza, 2010). The reason behind it is that they see these programs as opportunities to have social impact (Lorenz, Gentile, & Wehner, 2011) and to increase employees’ satisfaction and involvement (Haski-Leventhal, Meijs, & Hustinx, 2009).

Due to this growth in corporate volunteering activities, researchers have become aware of its importance and this topic has appeared in a number of academic journals. They mostly point out how employees engage in these programs (Pajo, & Lee, 2011), what antecedents explain their repeated participation (Grant, 2012), how they benefit NGOs and communities (Vian et al., 2007) as well as employees (Vian et al., 2007).

Not only is it important to investigate why people would participate in corporate volunteering programs, but also, as soon as participation happens, to identify what are its consequences, since the way in which a company benefits from having a corporate volunteering program is still under-investigated by current literature (Pajo & Lee, 2011, Madison, Ward, & Royalty, 2012). For example, it is not clear whether corporate volunteering benefits the employee-organization relationship or not.

On one hand, one can predict that corporate volunteering programs can increase employee’s organizational commitment (Madison, Ward, & Royalty, 2012). On the other hand, one can imagine that not all volunteering experiences should present the same outputs. On the contrary, some experiences may affect organizational outcomes in negative ways (Bory, 2007, Houghton & Williams, 2009). It is known that the extent to which volunteers’ experiences match their motivations results in different satisfaction levels (Clary et al., 1998), and less satisfied volunteers devote fewer hours for volunteering and are less prone to maintain this activity for a long time (Finkelstein, 2007). Thus, it is reasonable that the employee’s evaluation of his or her volunteering experience may produce different levels of organizational commitment.

On the negative side, participating in corporate volunteer programs can generate conflict between volunteering activities and job tasks (Farmer, & Fedor, 2001). For instance, people who choose to participate might be seen as not focused on or not interested enough in their regular task (Gilder, Schuyt, & Breedijk, 2005).

Thus, there are a number of unexplored avenues concerning corporate volunteering and this paper aims to provide a theoretical framework to shed light on these possible relations between corporate volunteering programs and organizational outcomes. Specifically,
the model links the participation in corporate volunteering programs to organizational commitment, which can be moderated by the experience’s evaluation; and to conflict, which can be moderated by the support of a servant leader.

**Corporate Volunteering Participation and Organizational Commitment**

Commitment is often conceptualized as a psychological state, reflecting a desire, a need and an obligation to maintain employment in an organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991). This common conceptualization, however, meets important criticism claiming that it narrowly refers to the likelihood of leaving the organization, instead of an attitude regarding the organization (Solinger, Olffen, & Roe, 2008) and that it lacks preciseness, which threatens construct validity (Klein, Molloy & Brinsfield, 2012).

Other researchers define commitment as an employee's attachment, goal congruency, identification, loyalty and allegiance to their organization (Gallato et al., 2012), or as a particular type of bond (Klein, Molloy & Brinsfield, 2012). Jex (2002) defines it as the extent to which employees are dedicated to their employing organization and are willing to work on its behalf, and the likelihood that they will maintain membership.

Klein, Molloy and Brinsfield (2012) define commitment as volitional bond reflecting dedication and responsibility for a target. They brought this definition after examining commitments several definitions, antecedents, and outcomes discussed in the literature. Their conclusion was that although commitments to different targets may serve different purposes for individuals, there is a generalizable and distinctive meaning. In this sense, commitment operates in a similar way, having similar antecedents and consequences, regardless of target or context. They argue that those similarities have been obscured by previous definitions’ ambiguity and inconsistency, leading to confusion about what commitment is, and how it operates. Because it better explains what commitment is, the later definition is considered for this paper.

Companies’ beliefs, that running a corporate volunteering program results in greater commitment from their employees, receive support from recent research. Madison, Ward, and Royalty (2012) found that employees who volunteered because of encouragement by corporate employers, governmental employers, or not for profit organizations reported increased organizational commitment to the organizations encouraging them to participate in the program. The underlying mechanism is that it increased agreement with organizational values and a perception that the organization and the employee share common values, which in turn, increased satisfaction.

In a case study from a corporate volunteer program organized by a large bank, Gilder, Schuyt, and Breedijk (2005) had similar findings, that employee volunteering seems to have positive effects on attitudes and behavior towards the organization. Accordingly, Madison, Ward, and Royalty (2012) cited Deloitte’s Volunteer IMPACT 2011 survey, which showed that employees who participate in corporate volunteering programs are 52% more likely to feel loyal toward their organizations in comparison with those who do not participate.

According to exchange theory, if an organization provides the employee with the use of individual’s abilities and satisfies his or her needs, the person reciprocates with commitment to the organization (Magenau, Martin, & Peterson, 1988). Because volunteer work enhances six aspects of well-being: happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, sense of control over life, physical health, and depression (Thoits, & Hewitt, 2001), one can expect that corporate volunteering may also enhance organizational commitment.

Grant, Dutton, and Rosso (2008) explain that giving strengthens affective organizational commitment, which was defined as an attitude of emotional dedication to organizations (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Because donating time in a corporate volunteer
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Program is a mean of giving, it should lead to the same strengthening of organizational commitment.

For these reasons, it is reasonable that:

P1: An employee’s engagement into a corporate volunteer program is positively related to high levels of organizational commitment.

It is important to mention that these relations found in the literature used different conceptualization and operationalization of organizational commitment. Thus, my proposition states that an employee’s participation in a corporate volunteer program leads to an increase in the volitional bond that reflects into more dedication and responsibility for the company.

Volunteering Experience Evaluation

Even though the relationship between participating in a corporate volunteering program and enhancing organizational commitment seems reasonable, it is unlikely that all volunteering experiences result in a homogenous increase. Volunteering experiences are very different, and the extent to which volunteers' experiences matches their motivations predicts their satisfaction (Clary et al., 1998), which shapes their willingness to continue (Pancer & Pratt, 1999).

According to Grant (2012), when participants of corporate volunteering programs face certain (tasks, social and knowledge) characteristics, they enhance their volunteering motives (prosocial, self-enhancement, belonging, self-protective, developmental and career), which, in turn, increase the likelihood of their repeated participation and the building of their volunteer identity. This prediction suggests that tasks' characteristics shape individuals’ evaluations of their experiences, which may moderate organizational outcomes.

Madison, Ward, & Royalty (2012) found that those who were more satisfied with the volunteering experience reported increased agreement with the components of normative commitment, which they defined as the extent the individual internalizes organizational goals and values and identifies with the organization due to shared values, in agreement with Caldwell, Chatman, & O’Reilly (1990).

Gallardo Vázquez et al. (2010) explains that when a corporate volunteering program is well managed, it can enhance valuable employee’s competences and skills, such as self-awareness, self-control, motivation, empathy, social skills and emotional intelligence. Madison, Ward, & Royalty (2012) also explained that when the employer sponsors volunteer opportunities that interest the employee, perceptions of existing shared values between the employee and the organization are positively affected.

These ideas are consistent with Pajo and Lee (2011)’s findings that initial engagement and ongoing motivation in corporate volunteering programs are determined by the characteristics of the volunteering activity. They explain that enriching volunteer tasks significance and meaningfulness and incorporating relational elements lead to more satisfying experiences, which, in turn, increases the likelihood of one’s participation. Taylor and Pancer (2007) had similar findings, positing that students who had a more supportive and positive volunteering experience were more likely to have continued to work as volunteers.

For these reasons, it seems that:

P2: A boundary condition for an increase in employee’s organizational commitment due to engaging into a corporate volunteering program is having a positive volunteering experience.

Corporate Volunteering Participation and Conflict

Conflict arises when the emotional and behavioral demands of work and non-work roles are incompatible, making participation in one role more difficult due to participation in the other (Kahn et al., 1964; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). It can arise from a number of sources, such as between work and leisure (Staines & O'Connor, 1980), between work and
"self" (Holahan & Gilbert, 1979a, 1979b) or between work and family (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

According to its own definition, participants of corporate volunteering programs are allowed to volunteer during their working hours. Therefore, it is possible that demands of work get incompatible with demands of volunteering, so that participation on volunteering programs make work more difficult. As time is a sparse resource, the time devoted to volunteer could be precious for an employee to achieve his or her organizational goals. When employees feel that they are overload, they feel higher levels of conflict (Organ, & Ryan, 1995, Bolino, & W. H., 2005).

In addition, evidence from the work-family literature suggests that not only time constraints, but also emotional interference reduces both the quantity and quality of family contact time because workers do not feel emotionally capable of participating in family activities (Pisarski, Bohle & Callan, 1998). As such, it is possible that when work is too demanding, employees will not feel emotionally capable to volunteer.

Thus, it is proposed that:

P3: Participation on corporate volunteering programs is positively related to high levels of conflict.

Servant Leadership and Conflict

According to this large body of research, supportive work environments and managers can reduce conflict (Allen, 2001; Allan, Loudoun & Peetz, 2005). Thus, it is likely that the same happens when leaders support participation on corporate volunteering programs. In other words, when an employee really believes that his or her leader supports the participation on corporate volunteer programs, this participation may be seen as a genuine part of the job and conflict is alleviated.

This situation is more likely to happen when the leader has a servant style. According to Liden, Wayne, Zhao and Henderson (2008), servant leadership stresses personal integrity and serving others, including employees, customers, and communities. The authors found that servant leadership is a multidimensional construct, including the following dimensions: ‘helping subordinates grow and succeed’ and ‘creating value for the community’.

Consistent to it, Beck (2010) found that leaders that volunteer at least one hour per week demonstrate higher servant leader behaviors. In addition, servant leadership is positive related to community citizenship behaviors (Liden et al., 2008). Because a servant leader is more prone to understand the benefits of volunteering for both the communities and employees, it is more likely that he or she would support his or her followers’ participation in volunteer programs.

Therefore, the following can be proposed:

P4: The relation between participation on corporate volunteering programs and conflict is weaker when the leader has a servant style.

Theoretical Model

The model that summarizes these propositions is displayed in Figure 1.
Discussion and Future Directions

To better explain the impact of the participation in corporate volunteering programs on organizational commitment, a model that explains in which conditions these relations occur have been developed. More specifically, the model includes the fact that developing this kind of program will not affect organizational outcomes in a homogeneous way for ever kind of experience and for all participants.

From a theoretical standpoint, this model meets the need to extend current literature about corporate volunteering (Pajo & Lee, 2011, Madison, Ward, & Royalty, 2012), doing the important task of bringing the focus of organizational research to real and current organizational phenomena (Rynes, 2007).

First, it relates the participation in corporate volunteering programs to organizational commitment. Because commitment is an antecedent of a number of important outcomes, such as intention to remain, attendance and performance (Steers, 1977) corporate volunteering programs can be sources of competitive advantage, in accordance with Madison, Ward and Royalty (2012). It also aggregates two moderators in this relationship, which make theoretical sense, but have not been proposed by the literature yet.

Moreover, it suggests that participation in corporate volunteer programs also has its pitfalls, which, from my best knowledge, has not been suggested by the literature yet. In addition, it shows that under certain conditions (e.g. the presence of a servant leader), these pitfalls can be minimized.

From a practical perspective, it sheds light on a growing organizational phenomenon, giving attention to the importance of providing positive experience to participants of corporate volunteering programs, and suggesting that even though participants will tend to increase their commitment within the organization, it will not happen homogeneously to all of them.

After proposing this model, the natural next step is to test it empirically, using data from employees working for companies that offer corporate volunteering programs.

References
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