



## Getting the best out of a volunteer programme partnership

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*The Institut pour le mouvement societal au Luxembourg (IMS) recently gave a lunchtime seminar on how to go about setting up and running an employee volunteer programme. Judging by the packed audience and extended question session, there is a lot of latent interest in this sort of programme in Luxembourg. The key to a successful partnership is to ensure that all three stakeholders are at the centre of the process: the company, the volunteers and the NGO. Be committed, focus on results and above all communicate: expectation management is a must.*

Xavier Heude, project manager of the KBL European Private Bankers staff volunteer programme and a board member of several Luxembourg NGOs, gave a powerful and very comprehensive presentation that included a number of “musts” and “must nots” for would-be project managers.

A business-NGO partnership is distinguishable from corporate philanthropy because it is not limited to financial or in-kind donations; it involves employee engagement in association with an NGO, for a social or environmental purpose.

Xavier Heude pointed to the results of the annual “Deloitte Volunteer IMPACT Survey” (07, 08, 09) which reveal a strong desire for volunteer work among young/generation Y employees, with employers recognising that such programmes can develop employee business skills.

### **What motivates the partners?**

Xavier Heude started by identifying some of the reasons that a company or an NGO would be willing to get involved in a partnership that is, frankly, hard work on both sides. On the corporate side, motivation typically includes reputation, people management (lower staff turnover, improved productivity) and business development (co-branding, certification opportunities in a new market). The NGO may be looking for similar things but with a different focus: new funding, project development/diversification, people management (employee fulfillment, professionalisation) and image (market credentials).

A successful partnership needs emphasis in two areas: technical, project management skills and soft skills. Without both, it is likely to fail.

### **Professional skills ... and a good dose of patience**

On the technical front, classical project management skills are required. The project must be phased: with upstream steps (management buy-in, setting goals & objectives and allocation of resources) as phase one, followed by the design phase, then project execution and project assessment. Xavier Heude did not attempt to paint an over-rosy picture: it took him fully two years achieve phases one and two, that is, to set up the project. Once the project is a reality, important steps include

- a very detailed project plan (macro- and micro-tasks, milestones, reporting tools)
- consultation with employees (ongoing marketing and communication)
- follow-up (maintaining momentum).

He went on to stress that analysis of feedback and KPIs - and the application of lessons learned - is vital to the organic growth and success of a partnership. Prejudices may need to be overcome on both sides: by corporate executives towards working with “greenies”; by NGO staff who may view corporate employees as unreliable, uncommitted and lacking humility.

### **Volunteer work is about people**

Talking about the “soft” or human dimension, Xavier Heude identified six elements:

- the need to identify a project that personally grips staff, that will create positive personal chemistry due to a shared passion;
- the need to “go beyond the syndrome of gratefulness”: all sides share a strategic vision;
- build partnerships where work/activities of both partners overlap (skill building);

- focus on outcomes: continue to search for measurable results and ensure a balanced win-win collaboration;
- foster an attitude of continual learning: an ethic of discovery and humility;
- non-stop communication: trust arises from openness, transparency and constructive criticism.

Commitment to the partnership can be fostered by feedback from both sides on the value of the collaboration, by setting clear boundaries to reduce misunderstanding and by respecting each partner's aspirations.

### **Avoid the banana skins**

Xavier Heude finished by highlighting three lessons he had learned from the KBL experience:

1. Do not forget that volunteering means "to make oneself useful to the community"  
risk to mitigate: loss of motivation.
2. Put the multi-stakeholder process in the middle  
risk to mitigate: losing adherence of one of the 3 partners
3. Draw up a comprehensive road map (clear tasks, with accountability)  
risk to mitigate: misunderstandings and conflict.

As project manager, Mr Heude noted that his time was spent 20% in design and operational input, 50% in stakeholder relationship management and 30% on administration.

As a final warning he added "Do not change the activity of your partner – just help him to think differently". Sounds like a good recipe for a marriage.

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