

Article

Capabilities of Corporate Volunteering in Strengthening Social Capital

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Abstract: Corporate volunteering is becoming increasingly popular among the ways that companies manifest their social responsibility. Its popularity is due to the variety of benefits it brings to all parties. Among other things, it is capable of strengthening social capital, although specific phenomena and processes related to this remain largely unexplored. The aim of the paper is to identify how the frequency and intensity of contacts between volunteers and beneficiaries affect social capital building. The empirical study was based on a qualitative research approach and conducted in the form of individual semi-structured interviews with employees responsible for corporate volunteering in their companies. The results of the study suggest that corporate volunteering strengthens social capital regardless of the extent to which volunteers have contact with the beneficiaries of their volunteering work. However, the frequency and intensity of this contact may affect specific dimensions of social capital, leading to the strengthening of bonding social capital and/or bridging social capital.

Keywords: corporate volunteering; social capital; bridging and bonding social capital; contact with beneficiaries; responsible business

1. Introduction

There are various ways that companies manifest their social responsibility. Among them, corporate volunteering programs are becoming increasingly popular [1–6]. Within these programs, volunteer employees use their time, skills, and knowledge in socially or environmentally beneficial actions taken outside their organization, being supported in this by formal and informal organizational policies [1,3,4,7]. Through the implementation of corporate volunteering (CV), companies manifest their community involvement in response to stakeholders' growing expectations in this regard [8,9]. Simultaneously, there is increasing awareness of the benefits that CV brings to companies themselves, which is encouraging them towards enhanced engagement in such initiatives [2,8,10,11].

Corporate volunteering is capable of bringing benefits beyond the company level [6]. This may include the strengthening of social capital. However, to our knowledge, only one paper (by Muthuri et al. [1]) has, so far, addressed this issue specifically. Therefore, the role of CV in generating and strengthening social capital is largely unexplored and represents a significant research gap.

The concept of social capital is analyzed and interpreted differently depending on the scientific discipline [12]. Most approaches are inspired by the seminal work of Putnam [13,14], who defined it as the capital accumulated in human relations, and as referring to social norms and networks that facilitate cooperation. In management studies, social capital is usually understood as the goodwill that has its source in the structure and content of relationships, and that affects information flow, mutual influences, and solidarity [15]. The relevance of social capital has been studied, in particular, in organizational behavior [16], knowledge management and innovation [17–19], corporate social responsibility [20], and entrepreneurship [21].

The aforementioned work by Muthuri et al. [1] argues that social capital is generated by corporate volunteering that facilitates social interactions. Simultaneously, other studies on CV specifically suggest contact with beneficiaries as a factor determining the effects of volunteering work [22–26]. Therefore, the aim of the study is to identify how the contact between employees participating in corporate volunteering and the beneficiaries of projects affects social capital. We put the following research questions: (1) How are corporate volunteering projects designed regarding the frequency of contact between volunteers and beneficiaries? (2) How are corporate volunteering projects designed regarding the intensity of contact between volunteers and beneficiaries? (3) How do the frequency and intensity of contact between volunteers and beneficiaries affect social capital in its dimensions of networks, trust, and norms?

In our empirical study, we adopted a qualitative research approach and conducted individual semi-structured interviews with employees responsible for corporate volunteering in their companies. Analyses are based on 13 interviews.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: firstly, we present the theoretical grounding in regard to corporate volunteering, social capital, and contact with beneficiaries of volunteering work. Secondly, the methodology is explained followed by the study results. Finally, we discuss our findings and present their implications.

The paper contributes to CSR literature, specifically concerning corporate volunteering and building a business case for CSR, i.e., delivering rationales for business engagement in such initiatives.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Corporate Volunteering

Corporate volunteering is characterized by three core elements [4,7,8]: employees freely offer their time and competences to work for specific beneficiaries; their actions are planned, and companies encourage and support them in participating in volunteering. Within this broad concept, various forms of initiatives can be observed. Rodell et al. [4] distinguish employee volunteering and corporate volunteering, considering the former as any volunteer activity conducted by an employee, and the latter as activities conducted within a specific initiative organized by the company. Employee volunteering can also be considered volunteer work during working hours conducted at the expense of the company [10]. In turn, the distinction between interorganizational and intraorganizational volunteerism lies in the former involving company support in the form of time off or monetary contributions for employees doing volunteering work, and the latter involving the company developing volunteering opportunities [2,8]. Muthuri et al. [1] categorize corporate volunteering in terms of action recurrence, interaction modes and number of participants. On this basis, they distinguish team challenges (e.g., team-building accompanying cleaning-up events), team assignments (long-term forms of involvement), mentoring (face-to-face meeting of the volunteer employee and a mentee), e-mentoring (virtual relationships between mentors and mentees), as well as one-off (e.g., fundraising) and ongoing (e.g., homecare support) individual role volunteering. Some studies refer to corporate volunteering defined as formal programs implemented in the company [7]. This form of CV has become particularly popular in recent years in companies operating in Poland [27,28]. Specifically, in companies implementing corporate volunteering, each year, a call for proposals is announced and employees are invited to submit a volunteer project proposal. Usually, employees are free to propose a project with any purpose at all, as long as it is related to social or environmental problems and requires teamwork in its accomplishment.

Research on corporate volunteering tackles various problems, particularly including the antecedents and effects of CV, both of which are analyzed on individual, workplace, and organizational levels [4]. Individual antecedents of participation in corporate volunteering have individual characteristics such as demographics, personality, motives, identities [29–31]. Among workplace factors, the type of job, workplace norms, and the behaviors of co-workers are considered [7,32,33].

Company-level antecedents include organizational support of a financial or time-based nature, company recognition, and communication policies regarding CV [34–36]. The effects of corporate volunteering encompass, on the workplace level: employee job satisfaction and wellbeing [3,37,38], increased job performance, and organizational commitment, improved organizational citizenship behavior, and, on the organizational level: enhanced intraorganizational relationships [35,37,39,40], enhanced company image among stakeholders [37,41,42].

Corporate volunteering is capable of bringing benefits beyond the company level. This may include, primarily, strengthening social capital. However, to our knowledge, so far, only one paper (by Muthuri et al. [1]) has addressed this issue directly.

2.2. Social Capital

Social capital is operationalized based on three dimensions: Networks, trust, and norms [1,12,14,43]. Networks stand for formal and informal interactions that connect individuals and groups and create opportunities for acting together and leveraging each other's resources. Social capital is affected by the quality of interactions within the network [44]. Trust is considered to be the essential tissue of society [16,45] and refers to people's expectations of each other, organizations and their overall environment [46]. Norms refer primarily to cooperation and define what is acceptable and unacceptable according to shared understandings and informal rules [1].

The aforementioned work of Muthuri et al. [1] argues that social capital is likely to be generated by corporate volunteering that facilitates social interactions, uses existing social networks, and fosters bonding and trust among relationships' partners. Specifically, they propose to classify the networks by referring to the ties yielded by corporate volunteering in terms of the length, frequency, and emotional intensity of interaction among actors. They analyze trust according to the intensity of the relationships, and they consider norms of cooperation by investigating the existence of shared understanding and values. The study revealed that different types of corporate volunteering strengthen specific dimensions of social capital. These findings are in line with evidence from other studies on corporate volunteering, suggesting specifically that contact with beneficiaries is the factor of volunteer work quality that enhances its effects [22–26].

2.3. Contact with Beneficiaries and Corporate Volunteering Effects

Corporate volunteering work is designed to support a variety of beneficiary types, which depend on the essence of the volunteering project [38]. Within this context, beneficiaries are defined as those individuals or groups whose employees believe their actions have the potential to positively affect [25]. Following this, the contact with beneficiaries reflects the degree to which volunteering work is designed in a way that provides the employees with opportunities to interact and communicate with the beneficiaries [25]. This contact may range from intensive interactions, through occasional ones, to no direct contact at all [47]. More specifically, the contact with beneficiaries may be described based on five dimensions [25]: Its frequency, duration, physical proximity, depth, and breadth.

Employees' contact with beneficiaries is argued to enhance overall employee motivation for helping others, due to the experience of the tangible effects that their contributions have on beneficiaries [23,25,26]. Moreover, high-quality relationships between employees and the beneficiaries of their volunteering work are capable of retaining volunteers in the organization and increasing their work satisfaction and wellbeing [48].

Based on the aforementioned literature review, in our empirical study we refer to the frequency and intensity of contact [1,25] between volunteers and beneficiaries [22–26] and its influence on social capital operationalized as networks, trust, and norms [1,12,14].

3. Materials and Methods

In our study, we chose a qualitative research approach because it enables holistic exploration of the phenomenon and examination of the context of related issues [49,50]. Notably, we conducted

individual semi-structured interviews with employees responsible for corporate volunteering in their companies. The interview scenario included a request to describe a specific volunteer project conducted by company employees, its essence, scope, results, beneficiaries, and forms of contact between actors. We also gave the interviewees an opportunity to narrate their experience of volunteering, and this way implemented elements of narrative interviewing [51]. Supporting sample questions in the interview included: What part/presumed percentage of time devoted to the project consisted of direct contact with the beneficiaries? How often did the direct contact occur? How long did a single meeting with beneficiaries last? How would you describe the relation built with the beneficiaries? How would you describe the effects of the project?

The study took place in May–June 2018. Interviewees represented companies listed in the ranking published by the Responsible Business Forum [52], a Polish think-and-do-tank in the CSR field. Firstly, we analyzed websites of companies listed in the ranking and selected those implementing corporate volunteering. As a result, we interviewed representatives of 27 selected companies. With this number of interviews, we achieved data saturation, i.e., no new information was discovered in the data, signaling that data collection might cease [53,54]. After preliminary analyses, for the present study, based on interview data, we selected 13 companies that would ensure that categories of our theoretical framework were represented in the data.

Each company was represented by one interviewee. In their companies, they hold managerial or specialist positions in the fields of CSR, corporate communication, or external relations. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed in order to allow for analysis. The analyses employed both deductive and inductive coding techniques [55]. Firstly, a list of researcher-generated codes was generated that reflected problems tackled in the interview scenario, such as the frequency of contact with beneficiaries of projects and the perceived intensity of these contacts. Then, during the coding, inductive in vivo coding was performed, i.e., new codes were formed based on interviewees' opinions. Each interview was coded independently by three researchers. After coding, the data regarding 13 companies were categorized based on the two dimensions: (1) The frequency of contact among actors (none/low vs. frequent), and (2) emotional intensity of these contacts (low vs. high). Projects located in the aforementioned dimensions were analyzed more in depth in order to identify perceptions of networks, trust, and norms built as the result of the volunteering work.

Table 1 presents basic information about the companies, interviewees, and the projects selected for the analyses. Due to differences in policy between companies with regard to allowing the company name to be revealed, all company names presented in the table have been changed.

Table 1. Companies analyzed in the study.

Company	Sector	Interviewee Position	Int'ee Gender	Project	Contact with Beneficiaries
Assurance.com	Insurance	Head of CSR Department	Female	One-day campaign of planting trees	No contact
BiggerDigger	Wholesaler of construction machinery	Marketing director	Male	Redecoration of rooms in an orphanage house	Frequent and intensive contact with children
BlueLine	Public transport	CEO of corporate foundation	Female	Organization of events aimed to encourage people to donate blood and register as bone marrow donors	No contact
Call3Me	Telecom	Coordinator of Volunteering and Internal Communication	Female	Training for seniors in a residential house, concerning usage of Internet	Frequent and intensive contact with seniors
ChairAuto	Automotive industry	Employee Department of External Contacts	Female	Child education program: "I am safe in journey"	Frequent and intensive contact with children
Drink4Fun	Brewery	Employee in press office	Female	Training children from dysfunctional families how to maintain and preserve food using traditional methods	Frequent and intensive contact with children
DriveMe	Automotive industry	Senior Specialist in Corporate Communication Department	Male	Building open-air library for patients in a spa resort situated close to the company location	Very rare and non-intensive contact with patients

Table 1. Cont.

Company	Sector	Interviewee Position	Int'ee Gender	Project	Contact with Beneficiaries
GlobeBank	Bank	CEO of corporate foundation	Female	Contributing to a song festival for talented disabled people organized by a leading charity organization	Frequent and intensive contact with participants of the festival
Grout&Co	Production of building materials	Specialist in Corporate Communication Department	Female	Creation of "Parents' zones" in hospitals	Frequent and intensive contact with patients
HeatHouse	Production of air conditioning and heating systems	Communication consultant	Female	Charity run and collecting money for specific beneficiaries	No contact
NiceCar	Automotive industry	CSR specialist	Female	Redecoration of rooms in the institution supporting people with autism	Frequent and intensive contact with patients
SpeedLogistics	Logistics	Specialist in CSR Department	Female	Organization of events for local community, e.g., picnics or helping the elderly	Frequent and intensive contact with local community members
Sunflower Bank	Bank	Specialist in CSR	Female	Sowing honey meadows	No contact

In all companies, CV takes the form of a grant program. Once or twice every year, the companies announce calls for proposals. Employees are invited to submit their volunteer project proposals, which may have any purpose that addresses social or environmental issues.

4. Results

To our surprise, the analyzed corporate volunteering projects represented only two categories: (1) Projects encompassing no contact or low contact with beneficiaries, (2) projects encompassing frequent and intensive contacts with beneficiaries.

The first category of volunteering projects was identified in five companies, namely: Assurance.com, BlueLine, DriveMe, HeatHouse, and Sunflower Bank. Some projects have environmental purposes, such as planting trees or sewing honey meadows, so no specific beneficiary was indicated. Other projects served specific individuals or groups, but their nature did not include contact with beneficiaries. These projects included, for example, helping people with leukemia through promoting bone marrow donation amongst healthy people.

The second category was identified in eight companies: BiggerDigger, Call3Me, ChairAuto, Drink4Fun, GlobeBank, Grout&Co, NiceCar, and SpeedLogistics. According to the interviewees, in all projects, contact with beneficiaries was frequent and intensive. As one of them reported: It's incredible how close these relationships were. You know the children, they are so open and unpredictable. They suddenly approach you saying, "I like you! Can I hug you?" [representative of ChairAuto 18 May 2018].

Simultaneously, we have identified neither projects encompassing low frequency of intensive contacts with beneficiaries nor projects including frequent contacts of low intensity.

In the following paragraphs, we present the results of our analyses. Specifically, we will analyze the project results reported by the interviewees, referring them to networks, trust, and norms as the dimensions of social capital.

4.1. Corporate Volunteering Projects with Low Contact between Employees and Beneficiaries

4.1.1. Network

Concerning the effects of volunteering projects belonging to this category, interviewees pointed to building and strengthening relationships among employees. Specifically, they observed that, due to participation in the project, volunteers had the opportunity to get to know each other better: . . . they [volunteer employees] stop being anonymous to each other and become recognized by the others as people who have some additional competences. These are skills that would be hard to identify at work, such as courage or the ability to solve unexpected problems. [representative of Sunflower Bank, 17 May 2018]

The process of getting to know each other better seems very natural and driven by the simple fact of spending time together and performing uncommon tasks, i.e., tasks different than those performed at work: So, we spent a day together, in the fresh air, working together, doing different things. Previously, we had only done ‘work stuff’ together, and now we do different things that require a different kind of engagement. It shows colleagues from a different angle. [representative of Assurance.com, 05 June 2018]

Strengthened formal and informal networks accomplished this way are recognized as supportive for cooperation among employees: . . . teamwork is better now due to getting to know each other better. [representative of HeatHouse, 28 May 2018]

4.1.2. Trust

Participation in the volunteer projects analyzed in this category is believed to build trust in the organization. Notably, the organization’s organizing of the volunteering program is perceived to be a sign of its trust in its employees. As one of the interviewees indicated: I believe our employees can see that we appreciate them, that we give them the opportunity to be volunteers and we trust that they do the right things. [representative of Drink4Fun, 23 June 2018].

4.1.3. Norms

Employee participation in corporate volunteering projects described in this category supports shared understanding of company values and norms. In particular, this refers to company values and norms related to business social responsibility. Importantly, corporate volunteering programs organized in the company confirm that these values and norms are not merely claimed but consistently lead to actions: Definitely, the project strengthened employee attachment to the company and to the company’s core values. We show that we are consistent in all those actions. We show that what we believe and what our values are, we do in practice. [representative of DriveMe, 23 May 2018].

Moreover, sharing common values and norms supports cooperation among employees. This is connected with mutual understanding as well as perceived reliance. One interviewee expressed it as follows: It’s a feeling of community and bond. A community of people who think and act in the same way. These are people who you can rely on, and you can ask them for any help, not only regarding volunteering, and you can rely on them. [representative of BlueLine, 20 June 2018].

4.2. Corporate Volunteering with Frequent and Intensive Contact between Employees and Beneficiaries

4.2.1. Network

In this category of projects, employee participation results in strengthening work relationships: Effects? Relationships, for sure! That is, we do all this together, we are in it with such-and-such colleagues, and it’s cool to be there together. [representative of GlobeBank, 7 June 2018]. We got closer to each other and, naturally, it affects the way we work together. After the project, we know better whom we need to approach if we need help within specific problems. [representative of Call3Me, 15 May 2018].

However, in the case of projects encompassing frequent and intensive contact with beneficiaries, employees strengthen their relations with external partners too. Speaking about relations with people from other institutions participating in the volunteer project, one of the interviewees said: Firstly, it integrates people well. However, secondly, it is an opportunity to meet other people outside the firm, people interested in the same issues, and this is higher level of cooperation [representative of ChairAuto, 08 June 2018].

4.2.2. Trust

Projects analyzed in this category strengthen employee trust in the organization. Based on interviewees’ statements, it may be argued that projects including frequent and intensive contact with beneficiaries are considered to give volunteers more autonomy regarding the project content and scope.

According to interviewees, it triggers mutual trust: It's so important to give them [volunteers] a free hand [in designing their projects], to show them this trust. [representative of Drink4Fun, 23 June 2018].

4.2.3. Norms

Participation in this kind of project reinforces shared corporate values regarding social responsibility. As a result, interviewees describing projects in this category observe increased employee loyalty: It's so cool to identify with the firm that promotes such values. I know colleagues in here, who participate in volunteering, and they have done this for several years, like me. And we all stay in this company, we don't change our jobs, because we share these values with our company [representative of SpeedLogistics, 17 May 2018].

Frequent and intensive contact with beneficiaries strengthens prosocial motivation, i.e., motivation to help other people. Moreover, it strengthens the belief that helping others is more efficient if done in cooperation: I've learned about what is most important, that it is really worth helping others, and I've learnt how to do this through teamwork. [representative of BiggerDigger, 04 June 2018].

5. Discussion and Conclusions

In our research sample, we identified only projects encompassing no/low contact with beneficiaries and projects encompassing frequent and intensive contacts with them. Within this group of projects, the results of our study suggest that corporate volunteering strengthens social capital regardless of the extent of the contact that volunteers have with the beneficiaries of their volunteering work. Therefore, we can argue that all kinds of corporate volunteering projects contribute to strengthening social capital, and that beneficiary contact does not differentiate their effects in this regard. However, the frequency and intensity of these contacts may affect specific dimensions of social capital. Notably, if volunteering work does not include contact with beneficiaries, employee participation in it reinforces their inter-organizational networks, trust in the organization and shared values of social responsibility and cooperation. Projects involving frequent and intensive contact with beneficiaries also strengthen relationships at work, help to build trust in the organization, and strengthen understanding of company core values related to business social responsibility. However, they also build external relationships, i.e., create networks of contacts with people outside the company and reinforce norms of helping others. Therefore, the study suggests that the two aforementioned types of corporate volunteering projects strengthen bonding and/or bridging social capital, respectively.

Bonding social capital refers to networks, trust, and norms based on close social relationships of people who know each other personally [17,56]. This kind of social capital, also referred to as "exclusive social capital", may be considered as an organizational resource determining organization members' ability to cooperate. Bridging social capital, also referred to as "inclusive social capital" [56,57], triggers cooperation among people who know each other little or not at all. Based on our study, we can argue that corporate volunteering projects in which employees do not have contact with beneficiaries strengthen bonding social capital. Corporate volunteering projects encompassing frequent and intensive contact with beneficiaries are capable of strengthening both bonding and bridging social capital.

Our findings are in line with the study of Muturi et al. [1]. Specifically, they argue that the greater the frequency and intensity of interactions within corporate volunteering work, the more varied the external ties that are created. These interactions lead to affective commitment generated by employees' personalized experience of contact with other people, which explains the process of strengthening social capital [25]. Our study suggests that this commitment is generated by contact with both beneficiaries and colleagues, i.e., other employees participating in volunteering projects. Such a result may be explained in reference to the AMO (ability–motivation–opportunity) framework, also referred to as MCO (motivation–capability–opportunity) [1,25], which is typically used in order to investigate the linkage between HRM practices and employee performance. Specifically, we argue that interactions accompanying volunteering work provide participating employees with the ability to define and act together on the prosocial and pro-environmental goals that support norms of cooperation and values

related to social responsibility. Regardless of the project's nature, CV motivates people to meet others and to socialize with them, which may lead to strengthening mutual trust. Finally, volunteer work also generates opportunities to meet other people, which may energize both internal and external networks.

The benefits that companies gain from corporate volunteering build a business case for CSR, i.e., they provide rationales for business engagement in CSR initiatives [38,58,59]. Social capital in business organizations has been argued to affect a variety of internal and external outcomes, including career success, internal resource exchange, innovation, intellectual capital, and lower staff turnover [15,18]. Corporate volunteering multiplies the effect of CSR on networks, trust, and norms of cooperation, both externally and internally, to the organization [20]. Therefore, our study delivers new arguments for treating corporate volunteering as an investment in social capital. It also delivers practical implications for companies implementing CV. Specifically, the study suggests the role of contact between volunteers and beneficiaries in shaping particular dimensions of bonding and bridging social capital.

Our findings provide the impetus for future research in this area. Interestingly, in our research sample, we did not find projects encompassing low frequency of intensive contacts between employees and beneficiaries, nor projects that featured frequent contact of low intensity. It is worth investigating further whether such projects are actually uncommon, and, if so, why. Nevertheless, we can hypothesize that frequent beneficiary contact intensifies the actual interactions between employees and beneficiaries, while rare contacts do not encourage either party to engage in intensive interactions. Both relations may be justified by reference to the experience of the tangible effects of volunteering work [23,25,26]. This experience, if frequent, may lead to an intensification of employee interactions with beneficiaries.

Future research should also attempt to measure the intensity of the analyzed effects as well as the influence that contact with volunteering beneficiaries has on specific dimensions of social capital. This requires quantitative research that will allow for more nuanced conclusions. To the best of our knowledge, there are no commonly accepted measures of corporate volunteering characteristics. Our study may inspire their creation.

As with any study, ours is also subject to some limitations. The methodological approach was based on the investigation of company representatives' perceptions of corporate volunteering projects and their outcomes, and the actual results of CV were not the focus. Moreover, our data were collected in companies operating in Poland, so the national context might play a role here.

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