

Lend a hand: why workplace volunteering is a win-win

BT chairman Sir Mike Rake explains why he gives his employees time off to volunteer



Sir Mike Rake: 'As an employer, if you seed it, provide the opportunities, people end up doing more' Photo: PA

By Peter Stanford

7:00AM GMT 19 Feb 2014

With British business only just emerging from a prolonged and painful recession, it would be no surprise if its attitude to allowing employees to volunteer on company time was cool. Nice idea, doing your bit, but impractical given current priorities and balance sheets.

But that, says Sir Mike Rake, chairman of BT Group and recently appointed president of the CBI, is both wrong-headed in theory and often the very opposite of what is actually happening on the ground. Many employers, like his own company, he argues, offer a range of volunteering options to staff – including at BT up to three paid days a year for charitable or community work – because programmes represent a “win-win”.

“We do it because we recognise, first of all, that people who volunteer can make a real difference to their community, whether they direct their energy to poor children or helping older people with ICT [information and communications technology].

“Next we can see that it is really good for our people who do it. They build up their skills, develop personally and become better leaders. And finally, it helps us develop BT as a strong, engaged

brand, that contributes.”

Like Boris Johnson, who launched The Daily Telegraph’s Lend A Hand campaign earlier this year with an appeal to business to get behind volunteering, 66-year-old Sir Mike is quick to acknowledge what is being done already. “There is a long history of this sort of engagement. You can look back 30 years to the Brixton Riots and the setting up of Business in the Community by the Prince of Wales with the idea that if business can help heal the backstreets, it can also heal the high streets.”

He also concedes that there has been a small falling off in volunteering levels in recent times of economic hardship. Yet he believes passionately – like the Mayor of London – that there is so much more that can be achieved if small and medium-sized businesses, as well as the big boys, can be persuaded of the benefits of volunteering, not just to society, or even to their employees, but also to the bottom line.

When he took over as chairman of BT in 2007, after a stellar global career at management consultants KPMG, his new firm was, he recalls, going through a rough patch. “There was a real crisis, dark days, our share price fell by 75 per cent, and there was some concern at board level about maintaining our commitment to volunteering.”

Sir Mike is, however, a zealot on the subject. He pushed it at KPMG – “Most of our recruits were graduates and it did them good to go out and see at first hand some of the realities of life among people who have never had a job” – and has chaired Business in the Community, as well as volunteering his services on the boards of the Royal National Institute of Blind People and the Prince of Wales’s Charitable Foundation. Indeed service to the community and the society is in his blood – he hails from a family of doctors in the East Midlands (though his own initial ambition was to follow his father into the RAF as a pilot, he was thwarted on health grounds, which redirected him to accountancy).

So whatever concerns he encountered on the BT board at the time, under his chairmanship Sir Mike made sure it stuck to its pledge to direct one per cent of the company’s pre-tax profits into community action, and to encourage in every practical way its staff to take up the volunteering challenge. There is, it should be noted, no element of compunction.

“My experience,” he reflects, “is that if, as an employer, you seed it, provide the opportunities, people end up doing far more. Forget three days; many of them are doing many more hours on their own time, in the evenings and at weekends. For the employer, it pays back very quickly on any cost-benefit analysis. You see improvements in productivity. Morale is better, and you find it easier to recruit and retain people because they feel proud to be part of that volunteering proposal.”

He makes it sound so straightforward. So what is stopping every employer from embracing volunteering with gusto? There is, he admits, a particular challenge with small and medium-sized

businesses (SMEs). With a tiny workforce compared with the giants like BT, accommodating three paid days of volunteering a year, when not compelled by legislation, can be a logistical nightmare and therefore often proves too tall an order.

“I accept that it is hard for them to get involved in the same way as we do,” Sir Mike replies, “but there are other ways. How about joining with other firms, for example with others in the same supply chain, and doing something together? We may employ large numbers of staff in Britain, which makes it easier for us to be flexible around volunteering, but in South Africa we are very small, only 100 people — there our volunteering work is done by working with other businesses on joint projects.”

However lofty his position on FTSE 100 company boards, there is a down-to-earth wisdom about Sir Mike. His own hard graft has made him a wealthy man – he has a home in Argentina and his chosen sport is polo – so he can cast an acute and concerned eye over those in Britain struggling with unemployment and poor living standards.

Government can only do so much, he argues. “It is business that creates jobs – two million of them in the past three years.” In helping the jobless along the road to work, skilled volunteers from business can be a vital link.

“Let’s be honest. We have a skills shortage in this country. It may not be politically convenient to say it, but that’s why so many immigrants can come here and find jobs, especially from Eastern Europe. They have the skills we need. What volunteers can do is go and work on schemes with youngsters that include basic literacy and basic numeracy. That improves the skills base. And as a company, we can then try and offer work experience.”

BT has a range of programmes that reinforce the efforts of its volunteers – including a series of cash awards that can be applied for by staff members for the charities and communities organisations they have taken up.

“What we find time and again with young people who struggle to find jobs or get qualifications,” Sir Mike insists, “is that a few hours of volunteering input can make a really big difference.”

Getting a sense of achievement



Richard Norris (above) joined BT as a graduate in 1998. His first experience of volunteering with BT came soon afterwards at an “industry day” at a local school in Bristol.

“Afterwards, I would go along to the school and run communications awareness sessions with the children. I would organise these in advance, working with other BT volunteers to put together interactive exercises to help them to learn new skills. I got a huge amount of experience from doing it – and a sense of achievement”.

Richard believes that the management skills he has gained through working at BT have helped him to contribute positively as a volunteer to the community – for example as chairman of the Forest of Dean Round Table.

“I have undertaken coaching and mentoring of others within and outside BT, and this gave me the confidence to become a school governor.

“My experience in performance management within BT has already prepared me well to help to set the head teacher’s objectives.”

A sense of unity



Alex Watt (above) works in BT Group. He joined Foyle Paddlers in Derry four years ago for recreational kayaking; but has subsequently become involved there as a volunteer, with BT’s support.

He has worked on efforts to bring Northern Ireland’s divided communities together through watersports, and recently secured the club an award of £1,000 from BT.

“As communications lead at Foyle Paddlers, I organise a range of events which aim to be as inclusive as possible, enabling over 1,000 people to get either on the water or on virtual kayak machines. We have also provided experiences for the visually impaired and disabled, putting ourselves through additional training to work with children with autism and Asperger’s.”

Doing his bit for the environment and community



Nigel Barry (above) works as a project manager for BT. He spends his volunteering time with the Cardiff Rivers Group in South Wales, improving the cleanliness of rivers and waterways in and around the city.

On one such day recently, he and two BT colleagues organised an event that cleared 10 trolleys, one motorbike, one council bin, four pushchairs, five children's scooters, two car tyres, a number of scaffolding pipes and 36 bags of rubbish from a local beauty spot.

He does it, Nigel says, for a whole host of reasons: "pride, recognition, raised awareness of environmental vulnerability, creating a tangible improvement in the watercourses and of course it keeps me fit."

He recently won £1,000 for the group as the individual winner in the environmental sustainability category of the BT volunteering programme awards. This funding will be used to keep the group's donated 4WD vehicle roadworthy.

*BT is an official partner of Join In (joininuk.com)

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2014