

# Call to Service

## **Millennials are drawn to companies that provide volunteer experiences, a fact some employers are successfully taking advantage of.**

By Carol Patton

When recruiters from Xylem meet with millennials -- born between the early 1980s and early 2000s -- a portion of their sales pitch focuses on volunteer opportunities within the global water-technology company.

"There is no doubt that this helps us in our recruiting efforts," says Christy Duane, vice president of talent management at Xylem, headquartered in Rye Brook, N.Y. "It's not the sole item [millennials] are looking for, but it's a tremendous tie breaker in many cases. We've also had a number of examples where top talent sought us out as a business because they learned about our programs."

For some people, this may be hard to believe. Millennials have been described as many things, some of them not all that complimentary. Consider the title of the recent *Time* magazine cover story, "The Me Me Me Generation -- Millennials are lazy, entitled narcissists who still live with their parents."

Despite these well-publicized sentiments, some HR professionals are learning this stereotype isn't true. Like every generation, millennials have their own characteristics, ranging from their technology obsession to a high need for recognition.

But they also have a very strong commitment and attraction to companies that support their communities and ingrain volunteerism into their cultures. Indeed, they're finding, millennials want -- actually, need -- to make an impact. Since they will form half of the global workforce by 2020, according to PricewaterhouseCoopers, employers that embrace volunteerism will become kings of recruitment and retention.

### **Extended Business Strategy**

Many studies and reports about millennials reveal their varying preferences regarding jobs and employers.

Earlier this year, Network for Good released a new guide, *Engaging Millennial Employees: Recruit and Retain Top Talent with Cause*.

Sponsored by Quantum Workplace, the guide explores the characteristics of millennials, offering tips on how to engage them.

"I talk to universities and get asked by college students about our own company's values," says Greg Harris, president and CEO at Quantum, a consulting-technology firm in Omaha, Neb. "We don't get asked that by other generations. So there are notable differences about this group and we wanted to explore this."

The guide reveals some interesting data about millennials based on various articles and research studies:

\* Eighty-three percent of millennials trust socially responsible companies, and 74 percent are more likely to pay attention to that company's message because of its deep cause commitment.

\* Millennials will punish companies that aren't socially responsible and environmentally aware by refusing employment opportunities.

\* When asked, "What is the most important to you?" 29 percent responded, "Being a corporate citizen."

At Xylem, millennial attraction and engagement is certainly behind its focus on community involvement. There, dozens of employees volunteer each year for its trip to India to spend nearly two weeks with its nonprofit partner -- Water for People -- in order to experience and monitor clean-water-related activities. The company, which has 12,500 global employees (4,500 in the United States), can only send between 10 and 20 employees, however. Others volunteer to work with nonprofit partners in the greater Rye Brook region for one or two days, or they participate in the regional water-monitoring challenge, teaching students across all grade levels about safe water and demonstrating how to test water.

All of the company's volunteer activities fall under Watermark, a program that was introduced in 2008, says Duane. Since 2011, more than 150 employees around the world have participated in its global volunteer trips and regional activities. Last year, more than 30 employees taught schoolchildren about safe water in their local community.

With offices in 50 countries, many employees volunteer to support Watermark by raising awareness, in different ways, of this corporate-citizenship and social-investment program. Called HR ambassadors, some make financial donations matched by Xylem. Others promote local fund-raising events through word of mouth for nonprofit partners, such as Mercy Corp., that help bring clean water to a refugee camp in northern Jordan. Their overall function is to ensure that employees meet program criteria, such as being employed for at least one year before traveling abroad. They also promote volunteer activities, which are coordinated by Michael Fields, director of corporate responsibility and social investment.

Fields hosts a quarterly, voluntary call with all HR reps -- who act as Watermark champions -- to update them on volunteer activities. He believes HR has helped break down silos, encouraging all areas of the company to work together on voluntary programs.

Likewise, Duane adds, such programs don't need to be run by HR, but must be supported by senior management to ensure the right resources are being offered to help employees benefit themselves and their communities.

"This has become part of our DNA," says Duane. "It has really helped us in extending our understanding to our employees [about] our business strategy. With the direct linkage and direct focus on solving water [challenges], that has really helped us with our workforce, ensuring everybody understands what the purpose of our business is."

### **Ongoing and Impactful**

Millennials are less interested in "done-in-a-day" projects such as volunteering at a food bank for an afternoon, says Kate Meechan, executive director at Volunteer Hampton Roads in Norfolk, Va., a nonprofit that hosts a corporate volunteer council composed of 55 local business representatives who develop employee volunteer programs and best practices.

She says millennials are seeking "really impactful volunteer opportunities." Many are not satisfied with donating cash because they want more control over how it's spent.

Meechan suspects that more than 70 percent search online for micro-volunteering opportunities. A good example and popular millennial website is Catchafire ([www.catchafire.org](http://www.catchafire.org)), which matches the skills of professionals with the needs of nonprofits and social enterprises. Millennials select projects and anonymously work on their own, at their own pace.

"It's important for millennials to have leadership roles ... to dive into something without any micromanagement and develop leadership skills," says Meechan. "Either HR does too much, offering so many opportunities that [millennials] feel like HR doesn't know what it's doing ... or HR makes it so restrictive that people aren't willing to give back."

But that's only half the battle. HR needs to boast about their accomplishments in a big way. Appreciation luncheons or award programs are fine but not nearly enough. This generation, she says, wants pats on the back such as HR writing letters to their families about how they made a difference.

Since volunteer programs are widely being recognized as millennial magnets, some companies are completely overhauling their volunteer opportunities.

Electronic Systems in Virginia Beach, Va., is working with Meechan to develop three pillars, or categories of, activities involving community service opportunities for employees, says Barbara Wielicki, vice president of HR at the technology company.

Roughly one-third of the company's 500 employees are millennials, she says.

Nearly eight years ago, the company was involved in various community activities such as blood drives, she says. But employee efforts appeared minimal, so HR became more focused. It polled employees on what activities they wanted to engage in, picked the top two and supported them.

Several years later, it refined its approach. Since Electronic Systems also supports offices in North Carolina and Maryland, it selected one type of charity found in each of its markets -- food banks -- so all employees could volunteer, Wielicki says.

However, several months ago, HR realized that many millennials wanted more hands-on opportunities. So the company adopted the pillar strategy.

While still in the design stages, Wielicki says, the first pillar focuses on the environment, offering a variety of activities such as cleaning the Chesapeake Bay. The second pillar may target information technology, offering opportunities, such as speaking to high-school students about IT careers. The last pillar would act as a catch-all for volunteer activities that don't fit in the other pillars.

Wielicki says the volunteer activities in each pillar will support the company's business strategy and mission, which is to sell products that are energy-efficient and reduce waste.

"What really caught our attention and moved us in this direction is that at least 75 percent of the applicants in the millennial age range who we interview ask about our community service activities or they comment on the fact that, when

they looked at our website, they could tell that we were well engaged in volunteer activities ... ," she says.

HR, several senior execs, and the head of marketing sit on the planning committee that is restructuring the company's social-responsibility platform. Wielicki says HR will drive employee communication and recognition activities while coordinating volunteer programs with senior management.

Among HR's challenges is developing policies about the number of hours employees can volunteer during the workday, identifying steps for management approval, generating excitement across office locations, and ensuring this is a companywide initiative, not another HR program.

Maybe the most difficult challenge will be convincing managers to approve volunteer days for staff, especially when they're on tight deadlines.

"HR has to help managers understand that this is a very basic, core value of our company and [help them] manage through it," says Wielicki.

Although HR plans to introduce these programs in new-hire orientations and post a recruitment video on its website addressing the importance of corporate social responsibility, Wielicki believes a mass-marketing campaign isn't needed. She says millennials are very good at conducting their own research and will connect with employees through social-media sites such as LinkedIn to become well informed about a company's social commitments.

"As long as we make it manageable and easy for people to be involved, it will simply grow on its own strength," Wielicki says. "[Millennials] will see we're involved with the community [and ask] how they can get involved, [whether] it's easy to get involved, and why we do this. They really want to know."

### **Driven to Serve**

Just don't expect millennials to compromise on their beliefs. When asked for the top three job-acceptance factors, millennial interns at Deloitte cited image and reputation, work/life balance and community involvement, says Jill Silliphant, citizenship lead for the consulting firm's western region and national pro bono program.

Each year, the firm encourages its 56,000 employees nationwide to participate in Impact Day, which is celebrated the first Friday in June. The firm offers 800 projects nationwide that employees can sign up for, she says.

Throughout the year, employees have ample volunteer choices. In the West, millennials mentor individual students or groups of students, helping them identify career opportunities, develop networking skills and build a personal brand.

"Millennials aren't looking for another opportunity to be a cog in a big effort," says Silliphant, adding that some develop their own volunteer programs. "They want to run something. It gives them opportunities to develop themselves as leaders, make their day much richer and leverage our resources for causes they're passionate about."

While HR doesn't coordinate Impact Day, it presents alternative volunteer experiences for employee groups unable to participate that day, such as volunteering at a soup kitchen. Based on responses from annual employee-engagement surveys, Silliphant says, nearly all employees believe Impact Day builds motivational and networking skills.

Since the firm is composed of multiple businesses, each operating a bit differently, volunteer experiences are sometimes factored into employee mid-year and annual performance evaluations.

But attractive and good as they may be, unless HR can show metrics to senior executives about the importance of volunteering programs to millennials and others, such programs risk being cut. Every year, employees have new pressures to deliver, so unless volunteering is embedded in the company's culture, Silliphant says, they'll start cutting it out as well.

At Deloitte, that's unlikely to happen anytime soon. At least 70 percent of its millennials volunteer, she says.

Read also:

[More About Millennials \(http://www.hreonline.com/HRE/view/story.jhtml?id=534357721\)](http://www.hreonline.com/HRE/view/story.jhtml?id=534357721)

Oct 14, 2014

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