

# Employee volunteering

The 'three day a year' pledge –  
a genuine need or badly conceived?

Research by Three Hands

2015

# Contents

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<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. Context</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3. Highlights</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>4. Survey Findings</b>	<b>6</b>
i. Do charities need employee volunteers, and are the right ones getting them?	6
ii. Are charities getting the support they want?	7
iii. What differences are there between large and small charities?	8
iv. Do charities prefer one-off or ongoing support?	9
v. Do charities want more volunteers and can they handle them?	10
vi. Why do some charities never receive employee volunteers?	11
vii. Do charities feel obliged to take employee volunteers?	12
viii. Are charities satisfied with employee volunteers?	13
<b>5. Recommendations</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>6. Conclusion</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>16</b>

# 1. Introduction

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During the General Election of 2015, the Conservative Party pledged to give employees three days off for volunteering: *“A Conservative government would offer up to 15 million workers three days’ paid leave a year for volunteering. Under the party’s plans, a new law would be passed requiring public sector employers and companies with more than 250 employees to give staff up to three days a year to do voluntary work.”* (source: [BBC News](#))

Despite some initial uncertainty about the pledge going ahead (it now sounds like it will! See [Appendix 1](#)), we wanted to know if dramatic increases in employee volunteering – on the surface a welcome development – would genuinely benefit charities. We were particularly interested in:

- Charities’ views of employee volunteering, irrespective of the pledge
- Whether charities want or need more volunteers from business
- What types of volunteering are, and would be, of most value to charities
- Charities’ capacity to receive and manage more volunteers

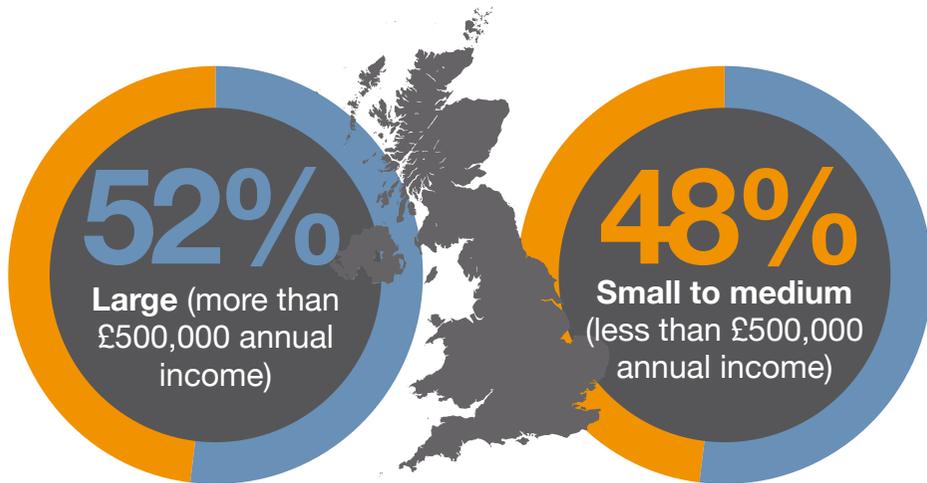
To gather charities’ views we conducted a survey that was completed by 111 local, regional and national non-profits of various sizes, and we carried out in-depth interviews with five of them (see [Appendix 2](#)).

**We define employee volunteering as activities designed to benefit non-profit organisations by individual or groups of employees during paid work-time, which may be organised by their employer. It may be one-off or ongoing, and skilled (for example, sharing business skills) or unskilled (for example, manual work). See [Appendix 3](#) for a model.**

# 2. Context

## 111 charities

from across the UK completed the survey



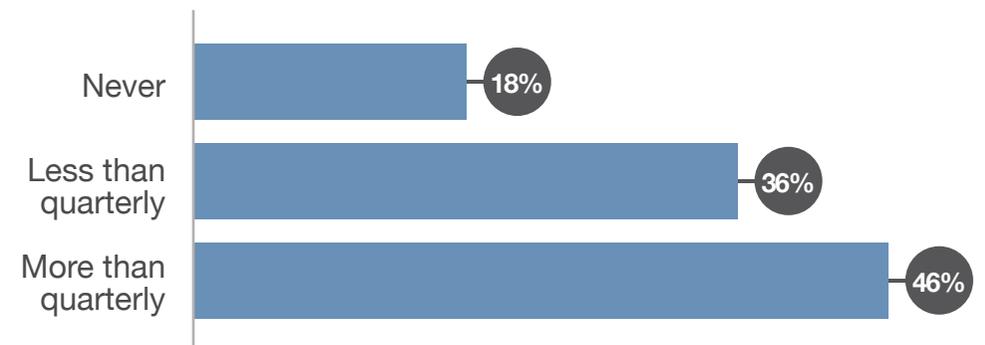
**5** in-depth interviews



## Tackling diverse social issues

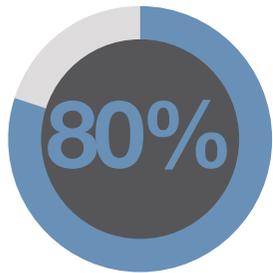


## Receiving volunteers...



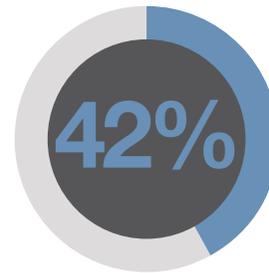
# 3. Highlights

The most significant findings for companies offering employee volunteering were:



## Need

Over 80% of charities have a **genuine need** for employee volunteers



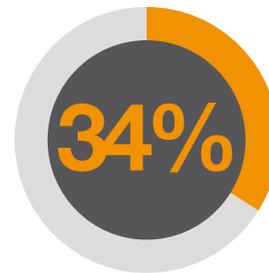
## Obligated

Many charities sometimes feel **obliged** to accept volunteers from corporate organisations



## More

68% charities would **benefit from more** employee volunteers



## Capacity

34% of these say they **don't** have the **capacity** to manage more



There are **discrepancies** between the types of employee volunteering charities **receive**, and what they would find **most useful**



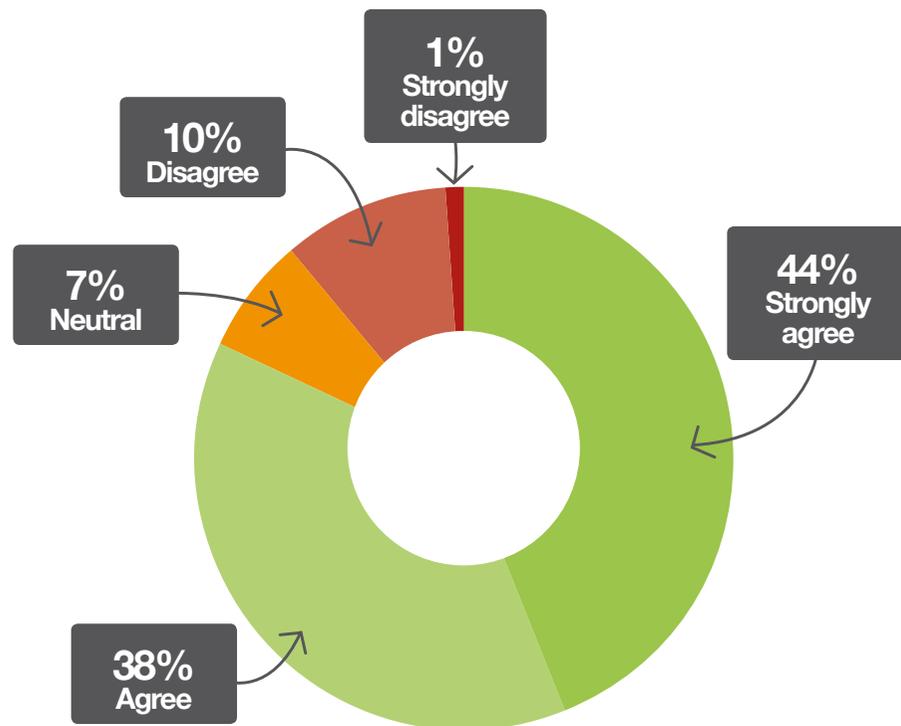
Charities' strong preference is for **skilled** volunteering, on an **ongoing** basis

# 4. Survey Findings

## i. Do charities need employee volunteers, and are the right ones getting them?

There are discrepancies between the charities that are receiving volunteers and the charities that want them:

Our charity has a genuine need for employee volunteers



- The **vast majority** of charities (82%) have a **genuine need** for employee volunteers...
- ... and **82%** of charities **receive employee volunteers** – but these are not always the same charities!
  - 10% of charities that need employee volunteers don't receive any
  - 70% of those who don't need them do!

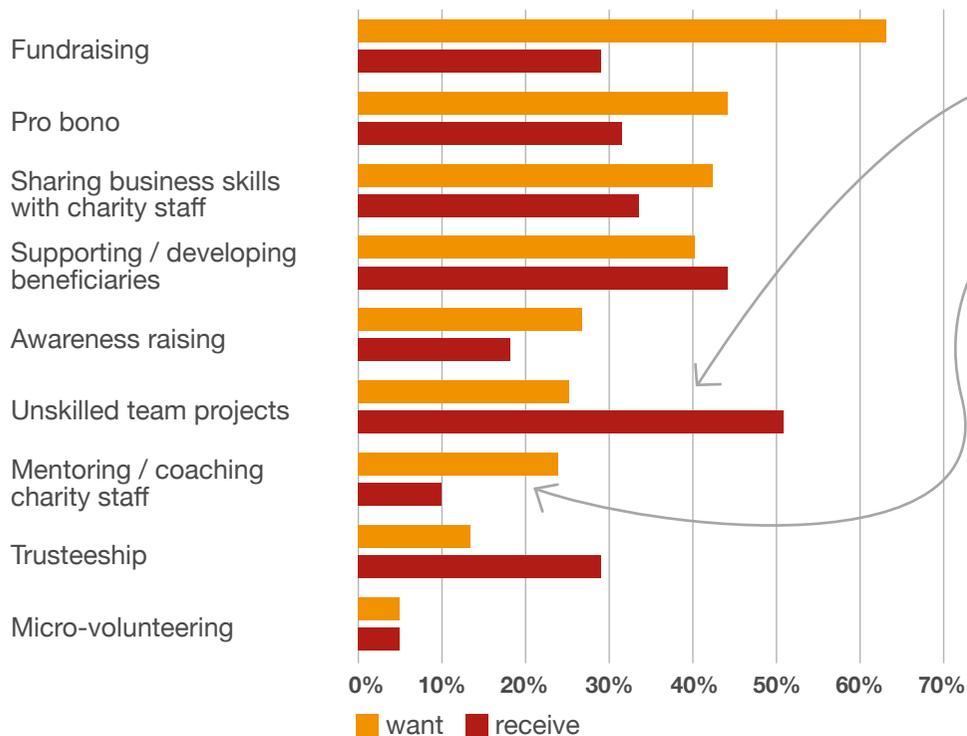
***“To have an external eye from the private sector really enhanced what we are doing.”***

Martin Broad, Boscombe Independent Advice Centre (BIAC)

## ii. Are charities getting the support they want?

There are some discrepancies between the support charities want, and what they receive:

### Support charities want from employee volunteers vs. support they receive



The biggest discrepancies are:

- **Fundraising** is the support charities most want; **less than half** the charities who want it get it
- **The most common** type of support given is **unskilled team projects**, however **less than a third** of charities **want** this
- Charities want **much more** mentoring and **coaching** for their **staff**

In other areas there is a good match between what charities want and what businesses are providing.



#### RECOMMENDATION 1:

**Base your volunteering on what charities need**

The top 5 needs are:

- fundraising
- supporting and developing beneficiaries
- pro bono support
- awareness-raising
- business skills

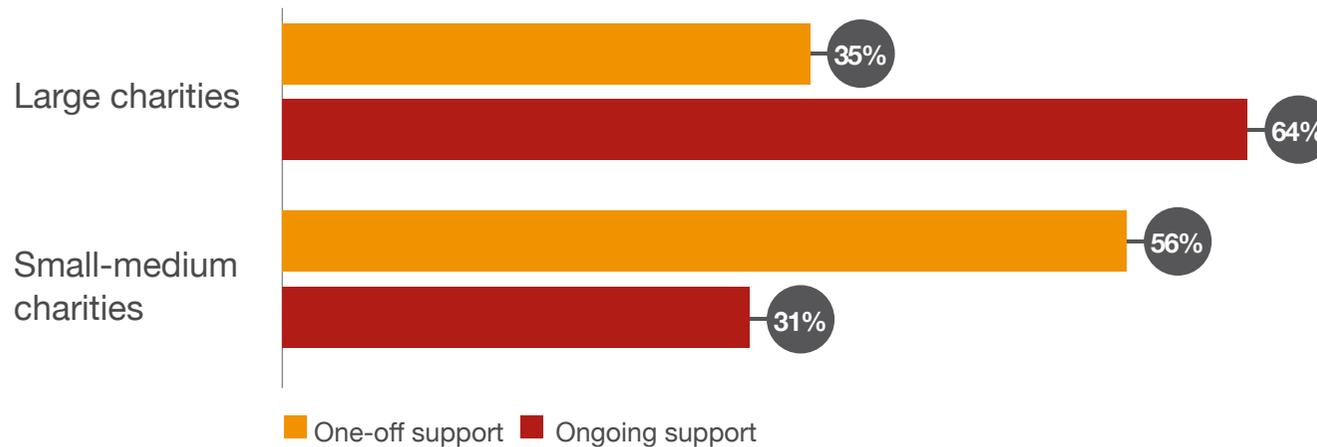
*“Pro bono support is incredibly valuable, for example it enables us to offer legal advice to families who would never otherwise be able to pay for it.”*

Josie Allan, Missing People

### iii. What differences are there between large and small charities?

Size made little difference to charities' responses, except in relation to fundraising:

% of charities receiving fundraising support from employee volunteers



'Fundraising *support*' is help to generate funding (not *providing* funding direct from the business or corporate foundation).

- **Large** charities receive more **ongoing** support with fundraising
- **Smaller** charities tend to receive **one-off** fundraising support

This might be due to the potential for **larger charities** to secure '**Charity of the Year**' type partnerships.



Fundraising for a charity may not be “strategic” for a business, when compared with skills-based volunteering which enables employees to, for example, learn about pertinent social issues and develop work-relevant skills. However, there is no reason why a good community engagement strategy cannot encompass both types of activity (see our [Community Investment Model](#) for more on how to develop an effective community engagement strategy).

## iv. Do charities prefer one-off or ongoing support?

Overall charities expressed a strong preference for ongoing support over one-off support in relation to all types of volunteering.



- There is a relatively **equal** split between **ongoing** support and **one-off** support
- Charities are more than **three times** as likely to **want ongoing support**

3x



### RECOMMENDATION 2: Offer little, often and skilled

Employers often look for one-off, one day team projects – but charities want and need volunteers to commit on an ongoing basis to carry out skilled activities such as awareness-raising campaigns, mentoring and business skills sharing. These can be highly meaningful volunteering activities that can also provide learning experiences for volunteers – and businesses have an opportunity to promote them as such.



Three Hands  
Insight

### The world is getting tougher for charities

- Government funding continues to shrink
- There is a shift towards payment by results
- High profile scandals are damaging the sector's reputation
- Fundraising is under scrutiny and increased regulation is likely

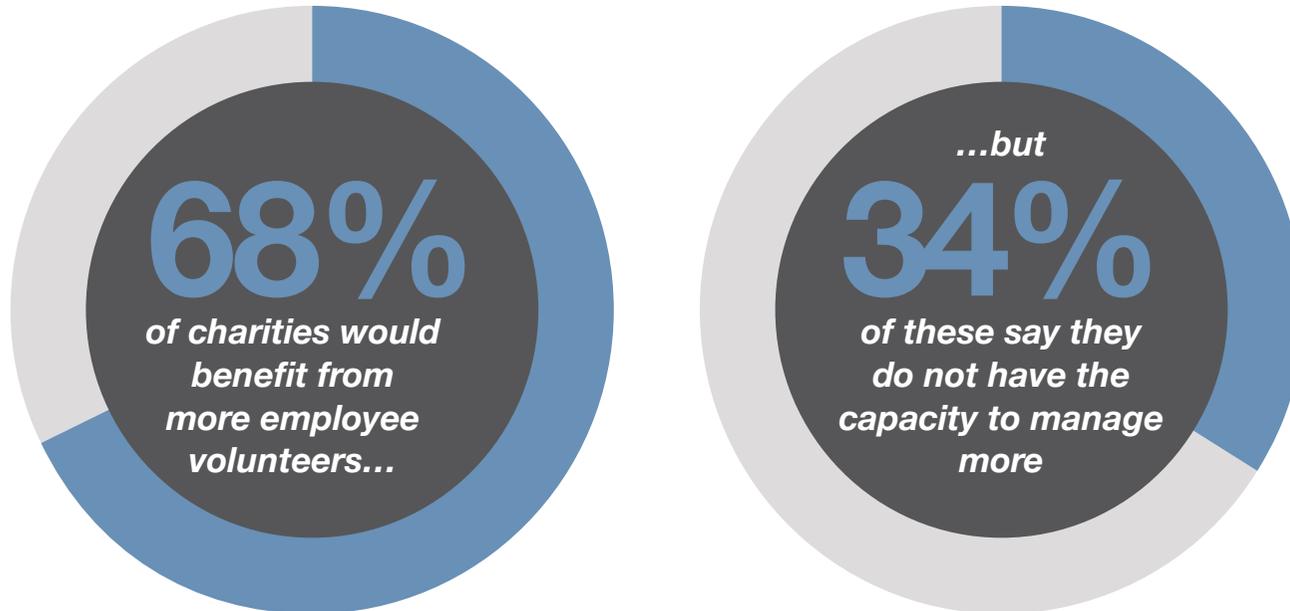
In this environment, it is more important than ever for charities that employee volunteering responds to genuine needs, is sensitive to charities' resource constraints, and makes a tangible difference.

*“Skills-based volunteering, for example an advertising company coming in to brainstorm with our team is great, however, putting it into practice is much more valuable.”*

Josie Allan, Missing People

## v. Do charities want more volunteers and can they handle them?

Many charities want more volunteers, however they do not all have the capacity to manage them:



It is easy to assume that charities simply want support, however businesses need to consider what we call charities' "capacity to receive".

***"There's definitely a difference between going to a business for support when you need it (e.g. with marketing, legal advice etc) and trying to accommodate a team of employees into your everyday activities. We only have a staff team of 6 (with only 3 in any one place) and so opportunities are fairly limited."***

Survey respondent

***"We are a fairly small team so cannot manage as many volunteers as we would like to."***

Survey respondent

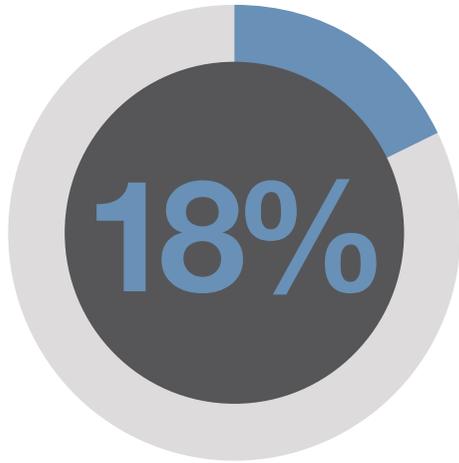


**RECOMMENDATION 3:**  
Ensure the charity has the "capacity to receive"

Many charities highlight the costs of organising employee volunteering. At Three Hands we encourage them only to take on volunteers when the benefits are sure to outweigh these costs. Understand the resources the charity has to take on your volunteers – and if you or they have doubts, think again about whether or not to go ahead.

## vi. Why do some charities never receive employee volunteers?

18% of charities never receive employee volunteers. Smaller charities are three times less likely to because:



- They **lack the capacity** to manage it
- Employee volunteers are **not best-placed** to provide the support they need (e.g. if they require highly trained, long-term volunteers)
- Some charities have **no relationships with businesses**, and don't know how to initiate them

***“We have never worked with employee volunteers, we would have to choose the right opportunities for them very carefully. I would like to know from businesses what their interests are.”***

Sharon Moncrieff, Carers Link East Dunbartonshire

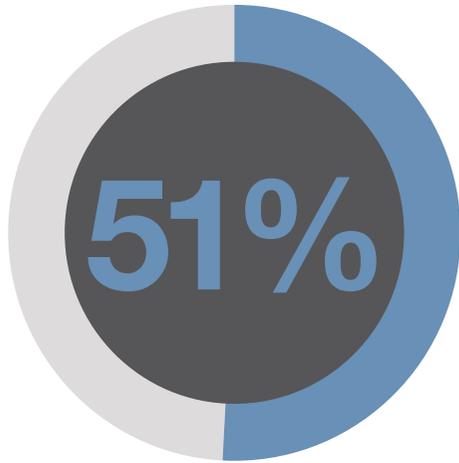


It may sound obvious, but there is no 'one size fits all' for employee volunteering:

- Some charities welcome all the volunteers they can find
- Some have all the volunteers they need
- Others don't want volunteers at all
- Some need specialists
- Others want employee volunteers but don't know how to get them

## vii. Do charities feel obliged to take employee volunteers?

Over half of charities who take on employee volunteers sometimes feel obliged to.



- Some charities accept unneeded volunteers in the hope that it will **strengthen their relationship** with a company
- Others worry that refusing requests will affect their **reputation**

***“We sometimes have pressure to receive employee volunteers where it’s linked to a bigger relationship (i.e. with a funding opportunity).”***

Survey respondent

***“Sometimes you feel like you have to take up the offer even though it creates more work for the paid staff than it provides in benefits”***

Survey respondent



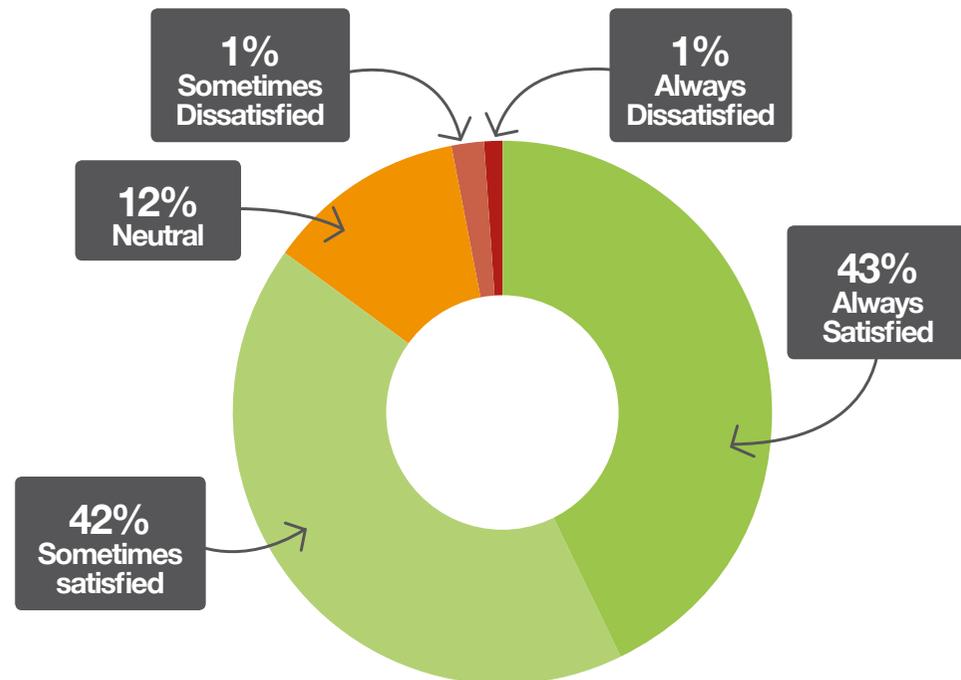
### **RECOMMENDATION 4: Make sure charities don’t feel obliged**

Companies that are ‘in need’ of volunteering opportunities for their employees – perhaps because they have targets for numbers of volunteers, or because there is a team that has asked for a volunteering opportunity – *should be absolutely certain that the charity partner has a genuine desire to receive the volunteers.*

## viii. Are charities satisfied with employee volunteers?

Charities appreciate the contributions and enthusiasm of employee volunteers, but only 43% are always satisfied with them.

How satisfied are you with employee volunteers?



### RECOMMENDATION 5: Invest time in getting to know potential charity partners

There are around 200,000 registered charities in the UK; they vary massively in terms of size, activities, objectives, and engagement with businesses. One partner's needs may be very different to the next. Take time to understand what they need and how you can best support them. If you don't have time to do this yourself, get someone else to do it ([get in touch!](#)).

*“Often a lack of budget and an inflexible approach [on the part of the corporate partner] means compromising and extra work from our end.”*

Survey respondent

Key factors in charities' dissatisfaction include:

- **Poorly organised** projects e.g. cancelling at short notice, volunteers arriving late or unprepared
- Getting a **satisfactory return** on the time they put into managing the project e.g. if volunteers do not complete tasks as expected

# 5. Recommendations

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## 1. Base your volunteering on what charities need

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The top 5 needs are:

- fundraising
- pro bono support
- business skills
- supporting and developing beneficiaries
- awareness-raising

## 2. Offer little, often and skilled

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Employers often look for one-off, one day team projects – but charities want and need volunteers to commit on an ongoing basis to carry out skilled activities such as awareness-raising campaigns, mentoring and business skills sharing. These can be highly meaningful volunteering activities that can also provide learning experiences for volunteers – and businesses have an opportunity to promote them as such.

## 3. Ensure the charity has the “capacity to receive”

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Many charities highlight the costs of organising employee volunteering – Three Hands encourages them only to take it on when the benefits outweigh these costs. Understand the resources the charity has to plan volunteering – and if you or they have doubts, think again about whether or not to go ahead.

## 4. Make sure charities don't feel obliged

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Companies that are ‘in need’ of volunteering opportunities for their employees – perhaps because they have targets for numbers of volunteers, or because there is a team that has asked for a volunteering opportunity – *should be absolutely certain that the charity partner has a genuine desire to receive the volunteers*. Employers should consider that 42% of the charities surveyed sometimes feel obliged to take on employee volunteers – and ensure that they are not contributing to this trend.

## 5. Invest time in getting to know potential charity partners

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There are around 200,000 registered charities in the UK; they vary massively in terms of size, activities, objectives, and engagement with businesses. One partner's needs may be very different to the next. Take time to understand what they need and how you can best support them. If you don't have time to do this yourself, get someone else to do it ([get in touch!](#)).

# 6. Conclusion

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**There is much to be gained from employee volunteering by both charities and businesses, and it should always be a 'win-win' arrangement.**

However, it is often too easy for a charity to put business wishes before their own needs and accept volunteers to do the wrong type of work, or who they don't have the capacity to manage, or even who they don't need at all. Likewise, it is easy for businesses to simply assume that charities will need their volunteers, whatever they are offering.

Developing an understanding of one another through open, honest relationships can help charities and business to work with each other on a truly equitable basis – and we hope that this report will help businesses by shedding light on charities' views and experiences, and help charities by encouraging them to be frank with businesses about their objectives and concerns.



Our recommendations suggest simple steps which businesses can take to ensure that employee volunteering is a more satisfying and beneficial experience for all involved – whether or not they plan to increase it.

Employee volunteering is just one manifestation of a company's purpose and role in society. It is not only a way to benefit charities, and engage and motivate employees; it can also provide valuable exposure to business-relevant external issues and societal trends. Whatever the motivation for volunteering, mutual benefit needs to be the core value behind it.

Authors:  
**Natalie Tucker, Project Manager**  
**Piers Clark, Intern**

# Appendices

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## Appendix 1

An [article](#) in the Financial Times on 8th June 2015 suggested that the Party's focus had shifted away from the pledge, whilst in a [piece](#) in the Huffington Post on 6th August 2015, Yvette Cooper MP (Labour) cited it as a "*broken promise*" of the new Government. However, in a [speech](#) given on 25th June 2015, Rob Wilson MP, Minister for Civil Society expressed the Government's intention to "*make this a reality for people*", and on 23rd November 2015, HR Review [reported](#) on the Prime Minister's intention to revive the promise.

## Appendix 2

We are grateful to the many charities who volunteered to participate in interviews, in particular the following five individuals who took the time to talk to us about their experiences of employee volunteering:

**Josie Allan**, Regional Manager: South of England, Missing People

**Heather Boxer**, Chief Executive and **Sam Garbett**, Administrator, West London Action for Children

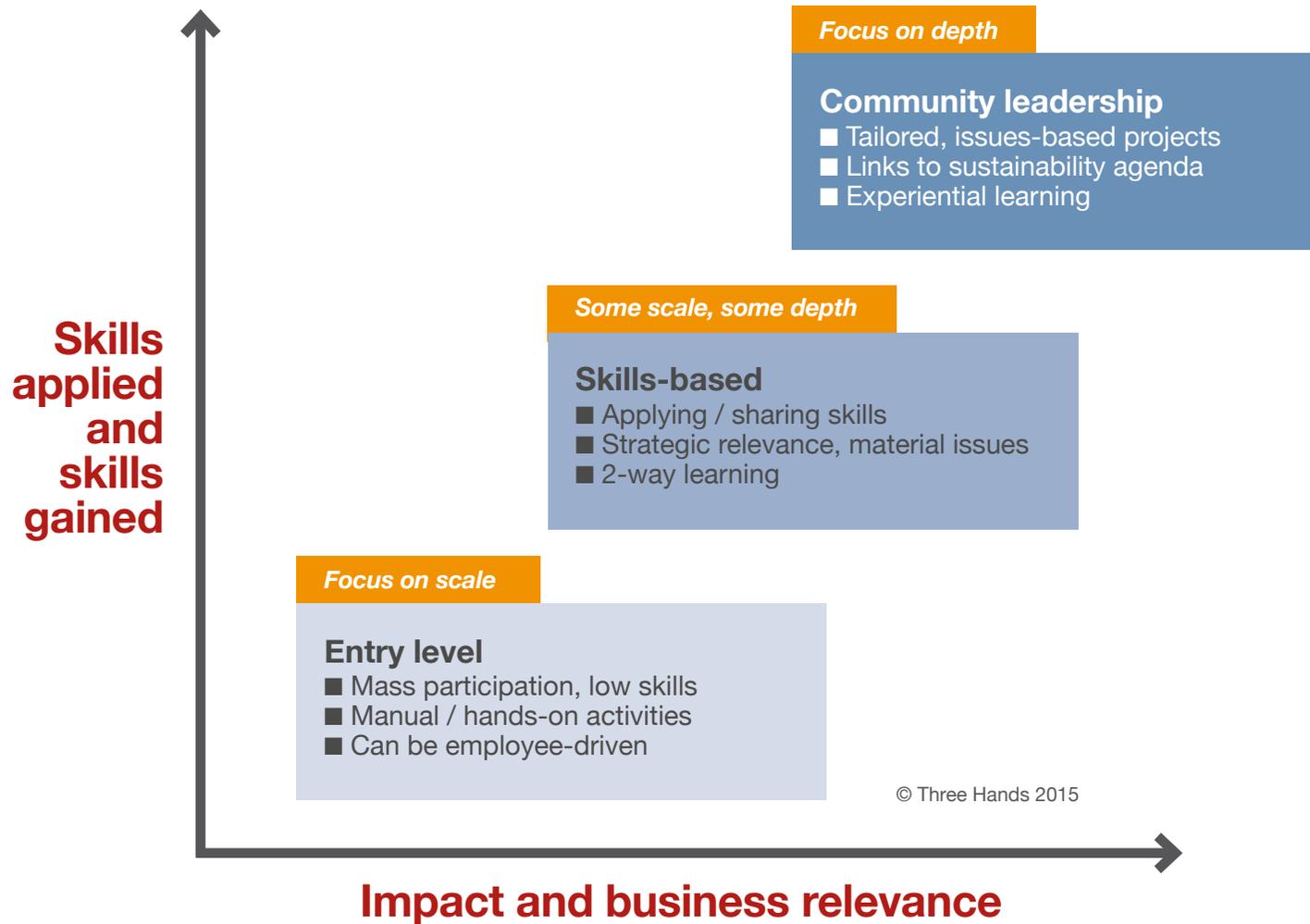
**P Martin Broad**, Chief Executive, Boscombe Independent Advice Centre (BIAC)

**Neil Hay**, Volunteering Coordinator, Edinburgh Cyrenians

**Sharon Moncrieff**, Volunteer Co-Ordinator, Carers Link East Dunbartonshire

## Appendix 3

### A Model for Employee Volunteering





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