

99/06

## Lost Time

By Peter Lynch

Employees may be working harder and longer than ever, but businesses are missing out on a way to improve productivity -- and benefit society

Finding money and volunteers for 13 nonprofit organizations, ranging from the Boston Inner City Scholarship Fund to the international relief organization AmeriCares, is a high priority for me these days. The money part of the equation has always been a challenge -- unglamorous and difficult. Recruiting people's time would be an easier row to hoe, or so I thought.

Volunteerism is always said to be as American as apple pie. Without it, much of what we hold dear in this country, from Little League teams to church choirs, would simply cease to exist. And many of our grandest, most important cultural and charitable organizations can attribute their success as much to the donation of brains and brawn as to the collection of gifts and grants.

But volunteerism has gone through some rocky times of late. While initiatives like the 1997 President's Summit for America's Future have helped bring about a fresh uptick in the amount of man-hours committed to charitable activities, this progress has just barely offset the losses recorded earlier this decade. In 1995, America actually had five million fewer people donating their time than it did seven years earlier.

On the positive side, the number of African-American and Hispanic volunteers has been rising. On the negative side, the number of volunteers between the ages of 18 and 24 has fallen more than 5 percent. This shortfall is being felt especially in places like New York City, where the Big Brothers/Big Sisters organization says there are 250,000 children in need, but only 2,200 active BB/BS volunteers.

Changes in our society have limited the growth of volunteerism. People have less private time available because they are spending more time at work. Not only is a greater percentage of the population employed than ever before (with the biggest increase coming in the share of women in the workforce), but many people are also working longer and more stressful hours.

Businesses have benefited from this trend, but I see little evidence that they're doing their part to offset the toll it has taken on volunteerism. A scan of the private sector turns up few examples of well-designed employee volunteer programs. The exceptions -- such as those under way at UPS, Xerox, Lucent Technologies, and Helene Curtis -- prove the rule. Chase Manhattan Bank has a terrific program called Global Days of Service. Last year, it connected more than 10,000 employees to a spectrum of volunteer activities. But are many other companies now racing to emulate this success? Sadly, no.

One has to wonder why -- especially because research about the impact of volunteerism shows it can help raise workforce productivity. One study of employees by the Independent Sector, a philanthropy research and information group, cited the following benefits: "allows me to gain a new perspective on things" (78 percent); "makes me feel needed" (68 percent); "helps me deal with some of my personal problems" (40 percent); "provides me with new contacts that help me with my business or career" (23

percent). I've personally witnessed how these types of personal experiences can translate into reduced absenteeism and office stress, as well as improved job performance. So I feel particularly befuddled when it comes to understanding why corporations don't do more -- a lot more, in fact.

In a preface I wrote for a book called *Corporate Social Investing* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers), I made the point that businesses could be a force in getting volunteers connected with organizations that go head-to-head with some of our toughest social problems. Experts tell us an estimated 20 billion volunteer hours were logged in 1995. When I looked more closely at these numbers, however, I was dismayed to learn that fewer than 10 percent went to organizations that offered services to the needy. In contrast, 27 percent of the total fell under the category of "informal volunteering" -- in other words, things like baby-sitting for a neighbor and baking cookies for a charitable event.

I'm certainly not suggesting that volunteerism should be restricted to the so-called core problems in our society. Bake sales have their place along with everything else. But we could see more win-win results if businesses became more serious about mobilizing volunteers for soup kitchens, homeless centers, neighborhood revitalization efforts, and so on. The neediest parts of our society would benefit even as businessmen further honed their management skills, developed more team cohesion, and improved both their individual and collective sense of self-worth.

AT&T; Wireless Services must already know this well. Managers there start many of their national meetings with a community-service project. The Gap also has an aggressive volunteer program -- one that helps connect the company with the communities in which it does business. UGI Utilities supports an Excellence in Education program that helps bring volunteers, books, and the corporation's name into schools and the community. Unitrode participates in the Salvation Army's Reach Out program, where employees and their spouses get recognized for the time they spend acting as role models for children. Programs like these don't sap corporate resources; they enhance corporate resources. Posting a list of volunteer openings on the company bulletin board won't dent any outfit's second-quarter profits. Nor will a union howl if a company invites nonprofits to hold an annual volunteer fair in the cafeteria. Want to set up an inexpensive clearinghouse to match workers with nonprofit organizations? Then do what Johnson & Johnson does: Hire some college interns, and put them to work on it.

Regardless of how, when, or where anyone chooses to donate his or her time, volunteerism is important to our country. To the extent that corporations can motivate employees to do so, they themselves will only gain in the process. And if businesses are able to channel some of this volunteer energy toward nonprofit organizations that are wrestling with society's roughest issues, then all of us -- employees, shareholders, citizens -- will benefit.

Peter Lynch is a senior contributing editor.