

Volunteering Builds Workplace Skills By the Volunteer Center of Rhode Island

How do you learn job related skills? Traditional workplace training seminars or workshops teach employees desired skills, but how long do those skills last? In a typical seminar, the learner sits in a classroom or conference room, while the teacher lectures. Often, the instructor includes exercises, which give the learner an opportunity to do case studies or practice skills. Often, the exercises have no real consequences in real life or real time.

By contrast, some training programs today are incorporating a concept called “service learning” (or learning about a skill through volunteering and reflection). In service learning, the learner’s problem is a real problem in the community, not a case study. The learner volunteers his/her time to learn new skills, which is then translated back into the workplace.

“Service learning is one of the most exciting things to happen in education. It is a means of integrating learning with the needs of the community. After the needs of the community are investigated, learning experiences are designed to meet those needs,” says national education consultant, Marilyn Swierk.

Benefits of service learning include:

- Experiencing a personal service ethic, deepen citizenship and social responsibility
- Awareness of community needs
- Building skills and confidence in ability to initiate social action and change
- Strengthening community relations
- Developing critical thinking and problem solving skills
- Encouraging life long involvement in civic activities
- Aid in life transition phases (school to work, promotion/new job, etc.)
- Working on team building, communication and leadership skill development

Even business leaders believe that volunteering offers an opportunity for businesses. Peter Drucker in his article “*Managing Knowledge Means Managing Oneself*” observes, “It is the opportunity for business to develop managers far more effectively than any company or university can. It is one of the unique benefits that the social sector can offer- to provide a place where the knowledge worker can actually discover who he or she is and can actually learn to manage him or herself”.

The Volunteer Center of Rhode Island recently produced a booklet called “Developing Business Skills Through Volunteerism”, which offers service learning opportunities that are clearly linked to business skills identified by businesses across the country. Users design a personal career development plan and provide a selection of volunteer related tasks and programs that help build those skills. For more information, call Kelly Nevins at VCRI, (401) 421-6547.

This is the second of a new series of columns on the topic of volunteer management and volunteer related stories, written by the Volunteer Center of Rhode Island. For more information, visit our website at www.vcri.org or call (401) 421-6547.