

Work in Progress Episode 294: Giving Tuesday, Volunteering Through the Workplace

Ramona Schindelheim:

You're listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of Working Nation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators and decision makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges. Since 2012, the Tuesday after Thanksgiving has been observed worldwide as giving Tuesday. The message of the global movement is to give to your community, whether it is a donation of money or time to help build a better world. So what is the impact on a community when an employer encourages and sponsors its employees to take part in a workplace volunteer program and what are the benefits to the company and the worker? Working Nation has partnered with Ares Management to bring together leaders from business and philanthropy to answer those questions. Here is that discussion.

Hello everybody. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-Chief of Working Nation. Welcome to our 30-minute talk on volunteering in the workplace. Over the next 30 minutes, we will be partnering with Ares Management to talk about the impact that volunteering can have on your company, on your community, and very importantly on the employees, on their sense of purpose, their sense of personal growth and their career growth. We are going to be doing this in conjunction with Ares because today they're releasing a new white paper on the impact and it's a great paper. First up, I'm going to bring in Michelle Armstrong. She's the head of philanthropy at Ares Management Corporation and one of the authors of this new paper. Michelle, welcome. So glad to have you.

Michelle Armstrong:

Thank you so much, Ramona. Thank you to you and the Working Nation team for helping us to organize this event, to release this important publication.

Ramona Schindelheim:

For people who don't know Ares Management and Ares Charitable Foundation, what is your mission? What is the purpose of creating a foundation and then bringing in this kind of corporate volunteerism?

Michelle Armstrong:

Well, Ares Management Corporation is one of the world's leading alternative investment management firms. We are headquartered in Los Angeles but have offices globally. My team primarily sits in New York as do I. And for a long time, Ares has had a really staunch commitment to this idea of giving back to the communities where we do business and we do that through three key programs. We have our Ares Foundation, which strives to help accelerate equality of economic opportunity, and we do that through grant making to like-minded nonprofit organizations that share our ideals and our ways that we reimagine the world and society to be a better place. We also have our corporate contributions that allow us to respond quickly through contributions that support for very pressing causes like COVID relief. Then of course we have Ares In Motion or what we call AIM, which is our signature employee engagement program. That is a way for us to connect our team members to volunteerism in the communities where they do business and as a result allow us to demonstrate the ways that we take our core values as a firm and truly put them into action.

Ramona Schindelheim:

When we talk about volunteerism through the workplace, what kind of programs have you seen, and we'll get to some of the details on the white paper shortly, but what kind of programs have you seen and what are the companies doing in their own communities?

Michelle Armstrong:

It ranges. Some organizations are focused on service-based volunteerism, where you can get a lot of people involved for perhaps rallying around campaigns like beautification, park cleanup, doing something with youth and families, food insecurity, going to a food bank for example, and maybe helping to pack grocery bags. Those are I think quick and easy and very hands-on ways to get employees connected to this idea of giving back to their community. You can also do skills-based volunteerism where the employee's time commitment with the organization can be sustained over a period where they are perhaps serving as a mentor, as a board member, or as an advisory member of committee, committee member.

There are myriad ways that you can connect people to this idea of service. We try to take a bit of a multifaceted approach. We offer both the service base as well as the skills-based volunteer opportunities. We also recently launched as of fall of last year, a nonprofit board placement and training program where we're helping people now to go beyond the sponsored volunteer opportunities that we create as a firm and encouraging people to give back to nonprofits by serving on their boards and becoming even more intimately engaged with the mission and the causes that those charities are undertaking.

Ramona Schindelheim:

The new white paper, you found that there were some key takeaways, some things that were kind of universal I think in these volunteer programs. What were some of the findings that you thought were the most important?

Michelle Armstrong:

What I thought what really stood out is the fact that people are looking for a way to make a difference because they feel that they themselves have been privileged and blessed to have so much, that now they want to share out those blessings with others. What's particularly interesting, and as you will see as we probe the findings of the white paper, are the ways that the different generations think about volunteerism, why they choose to get involved, the effects and the benefits that they find that it has on them. Is it a way, for example, to be able to utilize their expertise or is it perhaps a way to strengthen and to hone expertise?

Seeing how different generations from the youngest employees to the most seasoned think about volunteerism and why they choose to get involved, I think is very much important for organizations to be considerate of as they are thinking about what are ways to connect their people and get them more engaged with the opportunities for giving back. The other piece I think that stands out is just how much philanthropy and particularly volunteerism and this workplace volunteer program body of work can really support employers when it comes to the ability to recruit talent, to continuously develop talent, and then also to retain that talent.

We found that volunteerism is helping people to develop those skills that go beyond the tactical or the operational capabilities that you need to get the job done. Really, it provides a way for that continuous ongoing upskilling when it comes to the soft skills. You learn, for example, how to work more collaboratively with others. You learn what it means to be maybe a conflict mediator or negotiator. You learn how to lead projects and I think beyond that, you learn what it means to act and to lead with empathy and with purpose. Those kinds of findings are not only illuminating, but we also feel that they can certainly be leveraged by not only us, but by others also who are looking to either fine tune or even

to stand up workplace volunteer programs so that they do so using strong evidence and data to guide their decision making.

Ramona Schindelheim:

I think that's a great point to thank you Michelle, and then bring in Joe Fuller and then and Asha Varghese to talk about some of that skills development and that impact, and we will see you a little bit later this half hour. Coming in right now are Joe Fuller, co-head of the Managing the Future of Work Project at Harvard Business School and Asha Varghese, the president of Caterpillar Foundation. I really appreciate both of you joining me today.

Joe Fuller:

My pleasure.

Asha Varghese:

Thank you, Ramona.

Ramona Schindelheim:

Joe, I want to start with you because what Michelle was just talking about is very important, that development of skills, this volunteering through the workplace gives employees the opportunity to try something maybe something they hadn't done before.

Joe Fuller:

That's absolutely right, and particularly if you ask younger workers what they're most motivated by in their work, much of what Ares is talking about, Michelle is talking about is it checks all the boxes. They want to work for an institution that expresses values that are consistent with their own. A place they're proud to tell their friends they work, but they also want two other things, the opportunity to learn and the opportunity to lead early in their careers. And in the latter, it's not that they want to be 25 year old CEOs. It's they want some responsibility, see how it feels, see if they get their arms around it and volunteer activities, check all three of those boxes.

It's an opportunity both to do some good in the world, but importantly it's an opportunity to take on some new roles to maybe take some risks in the way you manage something in a lower stake environment. And very importantly, as Michelle said, to hone those soft skills that are so critical to advancement. I think companies have got to view efforts like this more broadly than perhaps they do. They tend to view them as corporate social responsibility, something that does engage the better nature and better spirits of their employees, but they don't think of it as a training exercise. They don't think about going, I think to workers and say, "Why don't you get more involved in this?" With an express purpose of encourage them to cultivate or broaden their range of skills. There's some hidden benefits to companies and individuals in terms of skills development that I think the paper speaks to very articulately.

Ramona Schindelheim:

Asha, you and I had talked a little bit earlier as well about the Gen Z finding on how that was very, very important.

Asha Varghese:

Absolutely, Ramona. Equipping young people with the skills that they need to succeed at the workplace in order to find success is a major focus of the Caterpillar Foundation. As Joe mentioned, we believe that volunteerism plays such an important role in making that effort. We see many ways in which Gen Zs can be supported through volunteers and programs, and one of the ways in which we make sure is that we're actually developing programs that drive real change for them. At the backdrop of the UN General Assembly this week, one of the things that we've seen is more active participation by the Gen Zs at places where decisions are being made. That in itself is an example to show how actively and inclusively they are clued into driving social change. It really goes to show that they're tuned into sustainable development goals and making sure, especially within quality education and gender equality.

It is upon us as corporations to ensure that as they enter the workforce, that we're providing them with the right volunteer opportunities that speaks to these issues while at the same time we're helping them learn some of these new skills that they need in order to create an engaged workforce. For us at the foundation, we really embrace that to ensure that we are empowering them and really harnessing their passion, their time, the talent and through volunteer programs. One such example for us is that this year we launched our volunteer service match program, which allows employees to choose the volunteer organization that they already give their time to, but also then the foundation will match that through one of our funding initiatives. In just five months of launching that program, what we have seen is that employees have recorded 60,000 hours across eight countries. Now we're supporting a global workforce at Caterpillar and we want to make sure that we are providing these types of platforms that allow them to even more engage with the communities where they live and work.

Ramona Schindelheim:

That's a good takeaway that we could probably, what's the right word? Scale up for other companies, having the employee, the volunteer, kind of putting their voice into the conversation.

Asha Varghese:

Absolutely. I think what we are seeing is that more and more corporations are adopting these ways. It's no longer a nice to have, but it is a need to have for us to make sure that we are providing these types of different platforms and also ensuring that it's not just about the resources, but it is the time and the talent that we can provide them these types of opportunities within the corporation.

Ramona Schindelheim:

Joe, when you have talked to companies, is that high on the list? Is the idea of being involved in the community, is that something that companies maybe take into consideration or maybe they should start taking into consideration more?

Joe Fuller:

Ramona, I think that it is on certainly the minds of large companies, but what I would challenge is that the extent of the commitment is often pretty limited and it's limited in a couple of ways. One is that it's viewed as a charitable activity, therefore the budgets are tight and the extent to which they're prepared to deploy non-man-hour resources is very constrained. That's a very appropriate way to manage it because line managers don't understand this environment as well. You want someone who is a professional in the field running it, but how the manifestation of that concern about the community can range from very, very modest and a bit superficial and modest contributions trumpeted loudly to very sincere ongoing commitments. Where not only are there company activities, but there're real

encouragement of individual employees or small groups of employees to engage in civic good, maybe in a way that they're particularly expert.

Let's take somebody who is very knowledgeable about substance abuse or maybe has a formally incarcerated relative and is passionate about getting a group together that wants to work on that. It's not the day of service, it's not the photo op with the mayor, but companies can enable not merely people to get involved in those big activities but really give support. It can be as simple as a modest expense budget and access to a company conference room three times a year or something. But one likes to see is companies that are sustainably engaged, willing to deploy real resources, but also allowing if you allow the applications, some social entrepreneurship from within their workforce. People who will engage on critical issues that they care about they know well and bring their skills, corporate discipline and fellow employees who are interested in that specific cause to the service of the community and to people working on those issues in the community.

Ramona Schindelheim:

I think that's where that sense of purpose comes in and also if you have a happy employee, you have better chances of retaining them, I think. Thank you both. I'm going to now bring in Angela Williams from the United Way and don't go away just yet. Everyone just stick around. Angela is the president and CEO of United Way and a very familiar name in volunteering I would say. Angela, thank you for joining us.

Angela Williams:

Thanks Ramona. It's a pleasure to be with everyone.

Ramona Schindelheim:

United Way has, I believe I'm quoting the number correctly, 45,000 corporate partners. So you really do have a sense of what engaging with the community can be like. Tell me some of the things that you have seen from working with your partners. What is the impact for them?

Angela Williams:

Thanks, Ramona. I want to first frame my response in this way. I appreciate the conversation that has been happening with the other guests and the comments that they've made because what has come to light is the fact that we can't talk about corporations or the civil society and other sectors in isolation because in fact, companies operate and employ in communities and they draw from communities because employees actually live, learn, work and play in the community and where they are. We need to think about this not as isolated work. Whether the corporation wants to give volunteer days, it's a recognition that it's actually an investment in their employees and the responsibility of the company to be engaged in the community.

One of the things that we have seen at United Way, we operate in 37 countries and we have longstanding partnerships for example with Asha and Caterpillar and so many more, is that employees do want to give back. Because they're giving back to their neighbors, they're giving back to communities down the street and they want to make sure that where they live, that it's thriving and that their community is resilient. That's a responsibility that all of us have, whether it's a corporate entity or whether it's an individual singular employee. We've seen such great outcomes from that.

Ramona Schindelheim:

How do you work with a company to get them involved or what advice would you give a company if they want to be involved in their community?

Angela Williams:

There are so many different ways, and again, the previous panelists have lifted up some ideas, but we have through our corporations employees that want to serve on our nonprofit boards. We have 1100 local United Ways and we cover about 95% of the communities in the United States, and as I said, we operate in 37 countries. We are always as a volunteer led organization looking for people that want to bring their lived experience or their background or their professional skill sets to the fore in their community. So that's one way. Secondly, what I would say is we are a 135-year-old organization and our partnerships with some of our companies go back just that far, a century.

What we've seen them do is to, for their high potential employees, say, "If you want to continue to grow professionally as a leader in our company, one of the ways to show how you can do that is leading a United Way Employee Giving Campaign." That takes a lot of skill. It's a great way to learn how to lead, how to engage, how to motivate and excite fellow employees. That's another example of how our employees get involved. Then, some other companies actually in their new employee orientation talk about the opportunity to volunteer and the ways in which the company allows their staff to be able to give back to the community.

Ramona Schindelheim:

I think the leadership part is something that, it goes to that same point about the sense of building new skills and career development. A lot of people may have that experience within their own organization, but to be able to step outside and to then start leading some type of volunteer program can be a very valuable career tool.

Angela Williams:

Absolutely, and you know what? If you look at current CEOs, legendary CEOs, every time I meet a corporate leader and I mentioned that I'm from United Way, they all recall their work on the United Way Employee Giving Campaigns, leading those campaigns and how it really was a prerequisite for moving up in their career path.

Ramona Schindelheim:

One point too, that I had not thought of before, but you mentioned to me in a conversation we had last week, I believe. That once an employee is connected with a nonprofit, they tend to stay connected to them, especially in their own community, and that creates a better sense of community and sense of purpose for everyone.

Angela Williams:

It really does. What I would say is that for everyone, we all have passions. There are things that we care about and I encourage everyone to find an organization where you can lend your experience, your hands, your brain power, your insights, because in so doing, you're making a difference in the lives of other people and you're making the difference in the lives of the community and setting the community up for success and to be thriving and resilient for generations to come.

Ramona Schindelheim:

Thank you very much Angela. I want to now bring in Lee Fabiacci. She is the vice president of employee engagement and community activity and impact for Ares Management. Lee, thank you very much for joining us.

Lee Fabiacci:

Ramona, thank you so much for having us. I'm incredibly heartened hearing all these conversations. It's so nice to hear peers and practitioners and just others in the space share their insights. As a peer practitioner, I'm on Michelle's team for the group's awareness and I lead our firm's employee engagement through what Michelle also described, we call Ares in Motion. It's so lifting to... It's sort of like being around those to just really get it. It's nice to hear the echo, so just thank you so much for convening and also for gathering all of us today.

Ramona Schindelheim:

I am so thrilled that you guys have put this white paper out and very important to say that that paper will be available on the Ares Management side and we will be posting on LinkedIn and we'll be sharing that link as well. Lee, as we go toward wrapping this up, I wanted to know why was it important for Ares management to do this research? What is at the heart of what you wanted to find out and why?

Lee Fabiacci:

Thank you so much. Ares Management has a really long and rich history of community impact and Michelle and I have... Our whole entire team have the great advantage of being the sort of shepherds of how we think about maximizing our employees' interest and engagement. When Michelle and I were first talking about this about a year and a half ago, we had this collective aha light bulb moment around we might intuitively know the link between professional skill development, volunteerism, community impact, impact for employers, but to be able to draw research and have tangible proof and say, "Aha, here's the actual proof that this is all linked together."

It just felt really powerful and really exciting. In addition to wanting to expand and enhance our own program, is we want to continue to be a thought leader and also offer our peers and practitioners, our community partners, real resources that they can put into practice. It's been a labor of love and it's been really interesting to hear about just the country nuances, the generational nuances, how we think about, there's in the white paper a great Venn diagram that overlaps what employees are looking for, what they can develop through volunteerism and what they think their employers are interested in.

It just really marries that volunteerism is so much more than just getting out there for a day of service. There is that personal benefit and we hate to sort of think about volunteerism like, "What's in it for me?" But there is a benefit. You can develop skills. I think about my own experience. So much of my professional career has been... My first time speaking in front of 200 people was with a megaphone leading a volunteer event. We've heard stories also about how people have this personal touch, this touch in their career path and for us to have this research drawback from it just feels like we're so excited to have this benchmark and this line in the sand to be able to say, "We knew it and we can see it." I can gush, but I know we have limited time, so I want to pause there.

Ramona Schindelheim:

I love you sharing your own volunteerism story as well, and it has served you well. You definitely are not afraid to speak in front of the public, so that's really good. What is it that you want to do when you take

away from these points that you learned, two or three things that you may want to use within your own program, AIM?

Lee Fabiacci:

Yeah, I mentioned Ares has this rich history of volunteerism. The AIM program is a little bit newer, so we're always enhancing and refining. There's still plenty of runway for us to think about what comes next, but what we're really trying to underscore is having our employees have choice and voice so that they feel like this is their program, we're the stewards and how can we best maximize what their interests are? But what works in Shanghai and what works in Chicago are different things. We want to make sure that our employees feel empowered to elevate the causes they care about. Then to the point around tailored opportunities for different generations.

Michelle mentioned part of our portfolio of volunteer engagement includes board placement. This year we're expanding that offering to do junior board placement for our newer colleagues. We want to be mindful of the skill development, but also the financial commitment. It's more focused on the fundraising and marketing boards versus governing boards, but trying to build that pipeline of how do you go from a one-time volunteer to a multi-volunteer to a board member to maybe joining one of our committees to help govern these actions. Really thinking about the pipeline of activities and how these things link. But those are our two big things is we want to make sure our employees feel empowered, that their voice matters for the causes they care about, and also have tailored opportunities to meet our employees needs.

Ramona Schindelheim:

How do you intend to share this information with other corporations, philanthropic organizations, nonprofits, employers, employees, everybody who's a part of this ecosystem?

Lee Fabiacci:

Well, you'll see me on rooftops yelling. No, but we're really excited to-

Ramona Schindelheim:

I'll get you the megaphone.

Lee Fabiacci:

We're really excited to have convenings like this, also bringing together just that power pack panel. We're excited by this work, but to hear others and how they're engaging with it and also looking for conferences, convenings, I'm so glad to see some activity in the chat. But we really want this to be a living, working, and breathing resource so it's not just us selling it. We have some plans to cascade this information through our peers and our other practitioners, but also thinking about our community partners and something that jumped out to me, we shared this early on at Points of Light to give a little bit of a sneak peek, but some of our community partners were saying, "Oh, this is so helpful."

If we can co-design to have you get leadership and communication skills through our volunteer engagement while we're serving our community purpose, we're moving in the same direction and maybe it's a little bit subliminal or less obvious to the people who are taking part in the activity, but it helps us achieve our mutual values. If companies are looking to have certain skills developed, if the nonprofits are looking to achieve certain community impact milestones, we can design these things in the background so that we're achieving the same bigger goals. I say all this as we want to be able to

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cascade and spread this information, but we want to also have dialogue. Thank you for those who have been in the chat. We also want to hear from you and have this go forward and we're hoping to get some great runway out of this. So more to come and you'll see us, I'll be out on the rooftops, like I mentioned, sharing the good word, and we'd love to have you also share this with your peers in the space.

Ramona Schindelheim:

I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of Working Nation. Thanks for listening.