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Corporate Volunteerism: The Art of Giving Back (January 2011)

In this article, we would like to focus on the growing trend of businesses which support employee volunteerism, and encourage others to do likewise. Promoting company volunteerism in a difficult economic climate provides a unique opportunity for companies to give back to their communities. By encouraging employee volunteerism, companies can give back in a variety of ways, benefiting both local and national charitable organizations. Besides the obvious benefits to the community, volunteer efforts provide employees the opportunity to share in the good will and sense of working together to make the world a better, healthier, more caring and peaceful place for us all to live.

DataStar, like many companies today, has searched for ways to continue to act in a socially responsible manner, while still meeting budgetary constraints. According to Glenn Davis, co-founder and Vice President of DataStar, "We have to be more creative in our approach to giving back." Davis explains that the act of writing a check is not so easy these days. Allowing and encouraging employees to donate their time and talents can be a relatively low-cost approach to achieving an even greater, positive impact.

DataStar's policy allows employees up to two hours per month or up to three days each year to participate in volunteer activities during the work day. DataStar co-founder and President, Ellie Smerlas, puts it this way: "We are all on this ride together. How difficult is it, really, to share a part of ourselves, our time, our food, our emotional support, even our blood? Volunteerism has been a core effort of DataStar, Inc. over the past 20 years. To us, it is not 'time off.' It is 'time well spent' and we support every minute of it. To me personally, volunteering is a form of enrichment in my life, much like mulching the roses for winter, knowing they will be better bloomers in the spring. My heart smiles every time I see one of our DataStar employees reach out to help others."

Among the activities DataStar employees have participated in recently include volunteering at [Camp Sunshine](#), a retreat in Casco Maine for children with life threatening illnesses and their families. The Davis family has been volunteering at [Camp Sunshine](#) since 2005. The experience "can change your entire perspective on life," says Glenn. "[Camp Sunshine](#) is an amazing place and affords volunteers a unique opportunity to really feel they are making a difference. I am especially pleased that my coworkers have joined me in supporting [Camp Sunshine](#), and that my company has afforded them this opportunity."

Time has increasingly become a valuable resource. Employees appreciate the ability to not have to tap into their precious vacation time to pursue these endeavors. Cynthia Biagini, a Senior Project Director at DataStar, has volunteered at [Camp Sunshine](#) with her daughter since 2008. "It was so nice when families at [Camp Sunshine](#) would thank me for taking my vacation time to volunteer. When I told them my company allows us to volunteer without using vacation time but still get paid, they were absolutely amazed and grateful. Other volunteers were also impressed with the opportunity, as this is not a practice often seen at other businesses," said Cynthia.

Another group of employees has been participating in [Red Cross](#) blood drives a couple of times each year. A favorite event has been the 9/11 blood drive held at Fenway Park. "It's been a great opportunity to see the park from the inside, meet an occasional celebrity and actually hold the World Series trophy" according to Davis. DataStar's "Blood Club" has donated a total of 40 pints since 2005. According to Senior Project Director, Kristin Hennessy, "I appreciate working for a company that really encourages its employees to give all we can, even during office hours. There's such a desperate need for blood donations right now, and we go as a group to donate -- there really is power in numbers!" Kristin also participates in the [Annual Lupus Walk on the Charles](#), not only as a fundraising effort but also to increase awareness about this little-known, life-altering disease. "I've seen first-hand the debilitating effects Lupus can have on loved ones and their families, and strive to get the word out by walking and encouraging others to join the cause," she explains.

Operations Director, Tonya Strange, has participated in blood drives and also took part in the 2009 [Avon Walk for Breast Cancer](#) in honor of her mother, an amazing woman who battled the disease for 12 years. Tonya endured swollen knees and legs and considerable pain, but persevered to cross the finish line on the second day. "I was just completely overwhelmed with emotions and so happy to have been able to honor my mom in such a way, while at the same time helping to raise money to hopefully eradicate this horrible disease. Although my mom did not survive Breast Cancer, I know that my participation in the walk will help so many others and that's why it was worth every bit of pain I experienced!" Tonya also intends to volunteer at [Camp Sunshine](#) in the future.

This year, we discovered an organization called [Create The Good](#), an AARP-sponsored effort which connects people with community service opportunities. They encourage people to "Be a force for good -- whether you have 5 minutes, 5 hours, or 5 days." The site is a great starting point for organizations or individuals looking for ideas involving a wide range of commitment levels.

"We hope other companies will join us in providing this type of support to help the myriad of worthy causes out there," says Davis. "It's a win-win situation for all parties involved - the company, its employees and the receiving organization. Affording our employees these opportunities helps them become more compassionate people and more committed to company values." Clearly, a tough economy can provide unique opportunities for companies to give back. Please join us in promoting these world-changing and life-changing efforts.