

COREY BINNS is a journalist based in Northern California. She writes about science, health, and social change for NBCNews.com, NPR's Science Friday, and *Popular Science*.

As it turns out, do-gooders are also good for a company's bottom line. "Employees who volunteer are better employees," says Jessica Rodell, an assistant professor of management at the University of Georgia's Terry College of Business. According to her research, employees who volunteer—either through corporate programs or on their own—work harder than employees who don't. Employee volunteers are also less likely than their non-volunteer colleagues to engage in behaviors that are harmful to the company, such as taking lengthy lunches or surfing the Web during work hours.

For her study, which she conducted as part of her doctoral work, Rodell gathered data on several hundred people who combine full- or part-time work with volunteer efforts. In one phase of the project, she posed questions to 172 full-time employees who volunteer for organizations such as Meals on Wheels, the Humane Society, and Habitat for Humanity. She then surveyed each employee's coworkers to gain information on the employee's work performance.

Because employees have a limited amount of time and energy each workday, managers often view volunteering as a form of moonlighting or as a distraction from the job. But Rodell's research challenges that assumption, according to Jason Colquitt, professor of

management at Terry College of Business. "Volunteering was shown to increase absorption in one's job, which improves job performance," says Colquitt, who supervised Rodell's work in his role as chair of her dissertation committee.

That finding caught Rodell by surprise. When she surveyed coworkers about their attitude toward employees who volunteer, they often used words like "distracted," "self-righteous," and "brown-nosing" to describe volunteers. But such attitudes don't reflect the true impact of employee volunteering on work life. "I found it intriguing that there's actually no downside for the company to [employee] volunteering," says Rodell.

The decisive factor behind the positive outcomes, Rodell found, is that people have an insatiable desire for meaning: When they work at an organization or in a job that is meaningful to them, they want to engage more deeply with

it. Adam M. Grant, professor of management at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, agrees with that analysis. "When we volunteer, we gain a sense of meaningfulness that enables us to invest more energy in our work," says Grant, whose

own research has dealt with employee volunteering.

In Grant's view, Rodell's work has important implications for managers and employees alike. As managers learn that volunteering can enhance performance, they may become more enthusiastic about sponsoring corporate volunteer programs. "The key is to match volunteers with causes that they find personally meaningful and that either align with their skills or enable them to develop and hone job-relevant skills," Grant says. Rodell's findings may also inspire employees to give time to charitable groups. "Knowing that there may be performance benefits that go along with any happiness benefits could give them that last bit of motivation to take part," Grant suggests.

Rodell's work, according to Grant, is the first major research to examine how volunteering influences employees' experiences and their effectiveness at work, and it should spur further study. For her part, Rodell hopes that these findings will encourage companies and nonprofit organizations to work together more closely. "I'd like for nonprofit leaders to know that it's not just that companies are giving manpower and assistance to them. They're actually giving back to the companies," she says. "It helps their employees grow and develop, and it makes them better at work. It's a relationship that goes both ways." ■

Jessica B. Rodell, "Finding Meaning Through Volunteering: Why Do Employees Volunteer and What Does It Mean for Their Jobs?" *Academy of Management Journal*, 56, October 2013.

INDIVIDUAL GIVING

Fatal Flaw

By Corey Binns

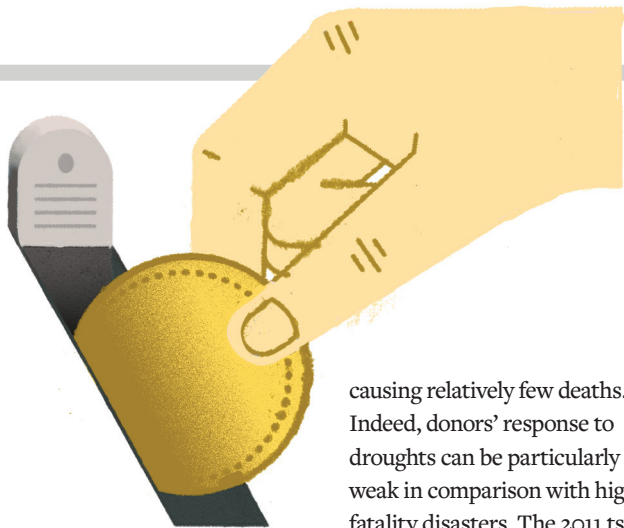
In 2003, the Bam earthquake in Iran killed 26,796 people and left 267,628 survivors. Donors responded by contributing \$10.7 million in disaster relief. In 2000, the Yunnan earthquake in China killed 7 people and affected 1.8 million others—and this time donors gave only \$94,586.

That pattern of disparity is common, says Ioannis Evangelidis, a doctoral candidate in marketing management at the Rotterdam School of Management. Donor behavior in the wake of catastrophic events suggests that donors put less weight on the number of people affected by a disaster than on the number of people who died from it. And that behavior arguably reflects a distorted sense of priorities. "We obviously cannot do much more to help these [deceased] victims," Evangelidis says.

Evangelidis and Bram Van den Bergh, an assistant professor of management at the Rotterdam School of Management, looked at relief donations made in response to 381 natural disasters that occurred between 2000 and 2011. For the study, they used data collected by the World Health Organization's Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters. Their comparative analysis of those data revealed that each additional disaster-related death corresponded to a \$9,000 increase in donor contributions.



RESEARCH



Certain causes “tug on our heartstrings,” says Deborah Small, a marketing and psychology professor at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. “This article points out that people are wrongly sensitive to death counts, relative to survivor counts. There’s something compelling about fatalities that drives donations to a greater extent than thinking about survivors.”

The tendency to focus on fatalities, Evangelidis argues, becomes a serious problem when a disaster kills relatively few people but leaves many survivors who are in need of assistance. In 2012, newly built shelters helped protect people in Bangladesh from floods. As a result, there were fewer fatalities—but also fewer donations—than there had been after previous flood-related disasters in the region. Survivors had lost everything, yet they received little financial aid. “These people actually need more money than before [the installation of shelters] but end up receiving less,” says Evangelidis.

A similar dynamic applies to droughts, which can cause devastating food shortages while

causing relatively few deaths. Indeed, donors’ response to droughts can be particularly weak in comparison with high-fatality disasters. The 2011 tsunami in Japan brought roughly \$1,000 per surviving victim in need, whereas the drought in Uganda that same year garnered only about 40 cents per survivor.

People are generally insensitive to the scope of a problem when it comes to charitable needs, says Cynthia Cryder, an assistant professor of marketing at the Olin Business School at Washington University in St. Louis. Evangelidis and Van den Bergh’s research “uncovers an important instance of when people are in fact sensitive to the scope of a humanitarian problem,” Cryder notes. “In the process, [that research] sheds light on why scope insensitivity occurs in other instances, and how it can be overcome.”

As part of their research, Evangelidis and Van den Bergh also studied the impact of different ways that aid groups communicate with donors. Using descriptions of fictional natural disasters, they surveyed more than 900 participants to find out how people respond to various kinds of relief appeals. The researchers discovered that using terms such as “people affected” doesn’t help potential donors to appreciate the scope of a charitable need. The use

of more specific wording, however, seems to increase donors’ level of responsiveness. In the survey, participants showed a greater willingness to donate money when they learned that a large number of people were “homeless” as a result of a disaster. “The term ‘homeless’ feels more precise and less ambiguous than ‘affected,’ and as such donors rely on it more,” says Evangelidis. ■

Ioannis Evangelidis and Bram Van den Bergh, “The Number of Fatalities Drives Disaster Aid: Increasing Sensitivity to People in Need,” *Psychological Science*, 24, November 2013.

NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT

Leading Indicators

By Adrienne Day

Lots of nonprofit associations rely on volunteers to fill important leadership roles, and the effort to recruit and retain such leaders raises a pressing question: What motivates people to serve in that capacity—even in the absence of compensation or coercion?

The answer to this question has profound implications for the health of civil society. “Societies that have more people who participate in voluntary organizations have stronger, better-functioning democracies,” says Matthew Baggetta, assistant professor of public and environmental affairs at Indiana University. “It’s important to understand these organizations, because they play such an important role in political advocacy, in public service, in connecting citizens to each other, and in teaching

ADRIENNE DAY is a journalist based in New York City. She has written for numerous publications and today serves as contributing editor at *Demand*, a publication of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers.

us how to be good citizens.”

Baggetta was part of a team that undertook a study of the Sierra Club to discover what drives leadership commitment when the rewards of serving as a leader don’t include a paycheck. The team collected data related to 1,616 volunteer leaders from 368 Sierra Club chapters. Baggetta and his colleagues then analyzed various determinants of behavioral commitment among those leaders. For their metric of commitment, the researchers used the number of hours each leader devoted to Sierra Club activities.

The researchers found that individual situational and personal characteristics—applicable skills, available time, motivational alignment—are indeed significant indicators of leadership commitment. Far more important than a leader’s individual qualities, however, are the features that characterize his or her team. The factors that really matter, Baggetta says, are “how well that team works together, what it does, and how it organizes what it’s doing.” In particular, the team characteristics that appear to foster commitment among volunteer leaders include strong team interdependence, a sharing of workloads, and a minimal amount of time spent in meetings.

To assess how much influence each variable had on leaders’ commitment, Baggetta and his colleagues used a multilevel regression analysis to create hypothetical models of two Sierra Club leaders. First, they posited an ideal leader who has a lot of free time and a high level of motivation, and they placed

Copyright of Stanford Social Innovation Review is the property of Stanford Social Innovation Review and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.