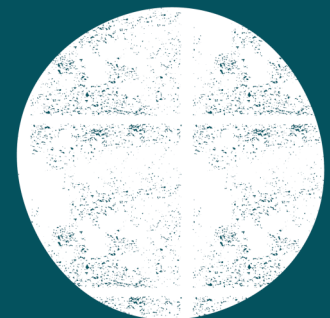


The Best of Both Worlds

Maximising the effectiveness of Corporate
International Service Learning (CISL)
Programmes in a Hybrid Context

Executive Summary

EMERGING W•RLD



Executive Summary

Over the past few years, to address the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, companies and their social partners have been working on new and innovative Corporate International Service Learning (CISL) initiatives that utilise virtual spaces to maintain their corporate volunteer programmes and to meet the needs of both partners and employees. However, in shifting delivery of programmes to virtual, despite the benefits that virtual spaces can bring, there are undoubtedly obstacles to overcome so that virtual CISL programmes continue to achieve the greatest impact.

What is Corporate International Service Learning (CISL)

Corporate International Service Learning* programmes enable employees to cross international borders, either in-person or virtually, to apply their work-based skills to a project or other assignment that serves a third party constituency. These programmes may also be referred to as International Corporate Volunteering (ICV) or Global Pro Bono.

* Based on and modified from the ISL model by Pless, Maak & Staal 2011.

This paper aims to identify the advantages and disadvantages that delivering CISL programmes virtually can offer. It will provide a deeper insight into how to use virtual spaces to maximise the impact of programmes. Through desk research on publicly available information and interviews with twelve companies with experience of virtual programmes over the last few years, we identified several benefits of virtual CISL programmes as well as areas that need addressing if virtual programmes are going to continue to play a strong role in a company's overall CISL offer.

Advantages of virtual engagement include the significant flexibility in terms of the participation of participants and partner organisations, that allow for longer-term engagement between the parties. Virtual programmes have been seen to be more inclusive so that a more diverse range of employees can participate. However, our research has shown that the level of participant learning in virtual programmes is sometimes lower than in in-person programmes. And another challenge is the difficulty of maintaining participants' motivation during virtual programmes.

We revealed some innovative approaches that companies have introduced to overcome these challenges. For example, to address the difficulty of maintaining a high level of commitment from participants, mentoring has been offered to volunteers during the project. In addition, building a community among the cohort participating in the programme both enables participants to support each other and to share insights from beyond their particular project. To address any difficulty in building cross-cultural literacy, tasks with human value, such as undertaking stakeholder interviews, have been included to create opportunities to build an understanding of the organisation from as many perspectives as possible.

Although the worst of the pandemic may now be over, the growth of virtual volunteering and the benefits generated from it are universal and will continue to be. The appetite for virtual programming remains high, with interviewees citing both cost savings and a positive impact on climate change given the reduction of carbon emissions from the absence of international travel in virtual programmes. And all this has been shared within the context of the current economic climate that has put pressure on programme budgets. However, it is also worth noting that interviewees stressed the value that can only be gained from in-person experiences and that cannot be achieved through virtual projects.

We believe that hybrid programmes that maximise impact by combining the best of both the in-person and virtual context could be the answer. Hybrid programmes would provide both the advantages of flexibility in a virtual programme and the advantages of learning from human interaction in an in-person programme.

The hybrid programmes add a new set of tools to the toolbox for corporate volunteering, CISL programmes and leadership and learning managers: virtual, in-person or hybrid; long-term or shorter-term programmes, one-off engagements hackathons, or short interventions over an extended period of time; a wider variety of tech platforms to support engagement and to manage the 'back end' of programmes, facilitated programmes, employee-led initiatives, etc. The role of the programme manager will need to adapt to meet this range of possibilities, but companies are left with difficult decisions. While current evidence is mixed and there are definitely advantages and disadvantages of virtual programming, trade-offs will need to be made and quantitative/empirical information is in short supply to support those choices. We aim to look at how programme managers should go about making real the tantalising possibility of finding the best of both worlds.

We could not have done this Study without the time and support from the 12 companies that participated in interviews; thank you to the companies including Credit Suisse, GSK, Johnson & Johnson, Medtronic Foundation, Microsoft, Novartis, Pfizer and Randstad.

Call to Action

In the new post-pandemic era, we are calling on business leaders, leadership development and CSR and CISL managers to embrace the possibilities that both virtual and in person experiences can offer. Your business case for considering this may be about cost savings; it may be about reducing carbon emissions or any number of other objectives. But, in order to make more use of the virtual environment, you need more evidence to support your choices on which employees will gain the most from what type of virtual, hybrid or in person experience; and what kinds of projects are most valuable for your partners in the same settings.

In Phase Two of our Study, Emerging World will survey programme participants to explore their experiences participating in and learning from virtual programmes to understand how to design and deliver hybrid programmes that maximise participant learning, employee engagement and partner impact. By sharing experience with other participating companies, you'll get the Best of Both Worlds.

If you are interested in including your virtual/hybrid programme participants in the Study and learning how to make your programme even more effective in the future, please contact us:

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