

Corporate Peer Discussions Professional Services and Communications Industry
Response During COVID-19
Summary of Best Practices on Corporate Response

Virtual convenings held on April 24, 2020

Convening Organizations: ACCP, CECP, COF, and POL

Association of Corporate Citizenship Professionals (ACCP), Council on Foundations (COF), Chief Executives for Corporate Purpose (CECP), and Points of Light (POL), which collectively represent more than 400 of the most socially and environmentally responsible global companies, are joining forces to support leaders of corporate purpose and to advocate for the field by convening dialogue on relevant solutions and to share best practices. While some companies are still assessing their response, we have already seen hundreds of corporations respond to the COVID-19 crisis with courage and determination. Their leadership sets an example for the sector to follow. In the sessions on the Professional Services and Communications Industry Response During COVID-19, 7 member companies participated.

Key Themes and Best Practices

Taking Care of Employees

- Professional service industries tend to be set up well for virtual workplaces, but companies are investing in infrastructure and technology to ensure productivity and data security.
- For companies with industrial or retail settings that are not in use, they are enabling employees to use this time for upskilling and training virtually, to ensure a sustainable future path.
- Companies are making adjustments to expand childcare and eldercare benefits.
- Companies have leveraged their Employee Assistance Funds (EAFs) to provide relief for personal hardships during the COVID-19 crisis.
- HR teams are connecting with employees and answering questions about well-being and mental health as well as focusing on inclusion and supporting communities that may be facing discrimination.
- Internal platforms help employees connect with one another in a virtual environment and share resources related to having children at home, mindfulness, and other interests to connect on a human level.
- Employee communications at this time needs to be mindful of ways to ease anxieties and provide services, admitting that this is an extraordinary time and providing flexibility to employees if possible.

Collaboration

- Companies cited collaboration among competitors to develop guidance and good practices for how to bring people safely back to work. Learnings may be able to be transferred to in-person volunteerism.
- For companies providing digital connectivity, they have worked with their network to keep customers connected, prioritizing hospitals, government, and other front-line organizations.

Philanthropic Response

- Funding areas of grants and in-kind donations have initially focused upon food insecurity, education, and support for first responders; financial industry companies are continuing with their strategic focus areas which include youth empowerment, mental health services, domestic violence, and STEM education. They are working to shift their resources to be more parent-friendly and virtually accessible.

- In line with the [Council on Foundations Call to Action](#) for funders, financial companies are relaxing restrictions on grants to be repurposed for general operating support, converting sponsorships to grants, accelerating payments, and removing or adjusting reporting requirements from nonprofit partners.
- Many companies have increased the corporate match for employee donations related to COVID-19 response, often to 2:1 or providing employees with an additional \$500 match. One company enabled payroll deduction for one charity per country (ex: Feeding America in US, Canadian Red Cross).
- For those companies with educational outreach programs in STEM Education, the programs have quickly pivoted online and been made free for teachers.
- Pro bono services present a powerful lever for companies with tech expertise, given the demand for help from educators transitioning online as well as governments with legacy systems that are unable to process the volume of requests for unemployment benefits. One company is mobilizing employees to provide IT help desks for educators and redeploying project teams to help upgrade government systems.
- One company cited its approach of “running towards a crisis,” which is amazing in its ability to leverage manpower and ideas. However, close coordination is necessary to not have a fragmented response.
- Support for small businesses is another area of focus. For example, a company developed a social media campaign to provide funding for each tag of #PayItForwardLive (referring to a live virtual Dave Matthews Band concert) and tag of a favorite small business.

Virtual Volunteerism

- While the spring is typically a time for big hands-on service projects, companies have pivoted to provide virtual opportunities for people to get involved and step away from work to give back, such as becoming a buddy with a nursing home, reading to children via skype, making masks for health care workers, etc.
- Virtual volunteerism can provide safe opportunities to volunteer in areas such as capacity building, financial capability work, thanking donors, fundraising, digital transformation, and tech infrastructure.
- Many companies are providing employees with lists of curated virtual volunteer opportunities, drawing from resources such as Points of Light’s list of [resources for virtual volunteer opportunities](#).
- While virtual volunteerism isn’t new, it is a dynamic area that is developing rapidly. Local volunteer opportunities have been well-received as a meaningful opportunity to make an impact. To that end, corporate volunteer teams across regions are sharing knowledge and best practices with each other.

Flexible Definitions of Volunteerism

- Some companies are using social media campaigns like “#LocalLight” (from Points of Light), “#CreateChangeFromHome” or “#1000ActsofKindness” or “#COVIDkindness” to capture kind acts, such as shopping for a neighbor or reading a story over facetime, and sharing those uplifting stories internally.
- Many employees, working from home and seeing immediate needs in their community, have a desire to help neighbors, family, or their local community; in response, some companies are removing the 501c3 requirement for service time so that employees could use their Volunteer Time Off (VTO) time flexibly.
- Tracking volunteer hours will remain important for YOY comparisons, and software platforms like WeSpire, Cybergrants, YourCause, Benevity and others are starting to track these more flexible volunteer actions within their platforms by adding COVID-19 tags and categories for non-traditional volunteering.
- Companies are also focusing more on tracking metrics like employee satisfaction, engagement, and pride.

Communications

- Company CEOs and leadership are using livestreams and webcasts to connect with employees, often demonstrating authenticity and emotion. Medical and mindfulness experts have joined as guests.

- Companies are looking for ways to communicate effectively to employees who are navigating a new, virtual work environment and additional stress for some at home. One company sends weekly COVID-19 emails with updates about policies, philanthropic response, stories of impact, and changes in operating.
- One company is posting on its intranet quick, 30-60 second videos from nonprofit partners, thanking them for their grants or donations, as an uplifting mind-break for employees.
- Companies are cautious about how cause marketing may be perceived during this time of crisis. Similarly, companies have pulled back from any fundraising that goes to a corporate philanthropic campaign.
- Edelman's [Trust Barometer Special Report on COVID-19](#) shows the essential role of the private sector as a credible source of information for employees.

Future

- The demands on working parents with children at home are unsustainable and companies are considering what flexibility or permission to do things differently might be possible as long as schools are closed.
- Assumptions such as required travel for client work for consultants and sales teams will be reconsidered, in light of a broad acceptance for virtual work. Minds that have been resistant for years may change.
- During the crisis, companies have been providing learning materials for free in an effort to upskill populations needing to develop career pathways to formal employment as well as to upskill their own workforce to progress within the company. However, the question remains: what will happen if the partners who are helping companies to do this want to start charging for access?
- Companies expressed an interest in harnessing *meta-communications*, plugging into shared learnings from a thought leadership perspective. For example, one company is working with the UN Foundation to create a forum that talks about tech innovations coming out of COVID-19.

COVID-19 Resources from each partnering organization:

- ACCP: [COVID-19 Resources for Corporate Citizenship Professionals](#)
- CECP: COVID-19 Resources [Recap for CEOs](#) and [Recap for CR Leaders](#)
- COF: [COVID-19 Resource Hub](#)
- POL: [COVID-19 Action Plan](#)