

How Verizon engaged 89,000 employee volunteers in the middle of a global pandemic

Read time: 15 minutes or less

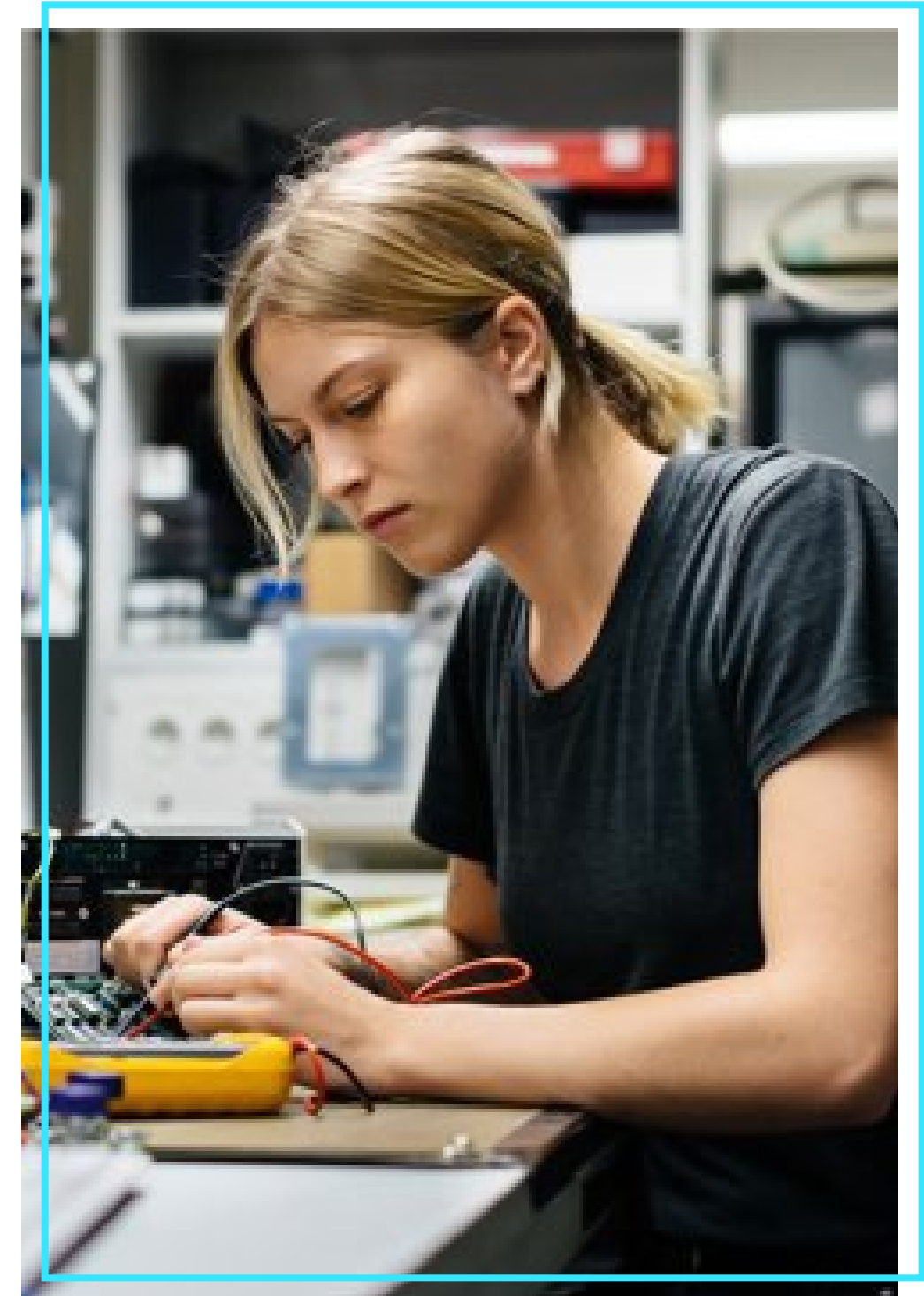


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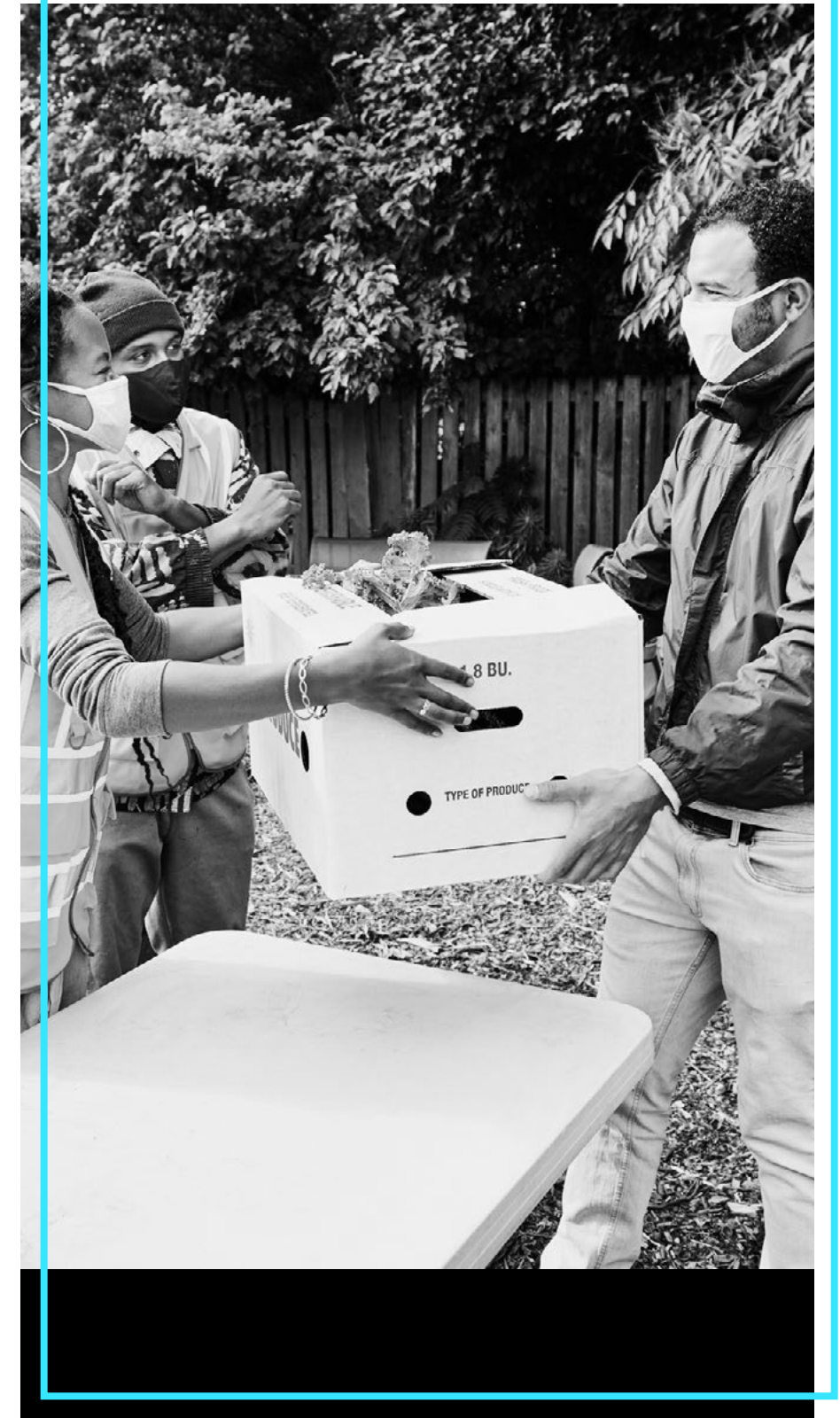
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Key organizations and people

NationSwell is in gratitude to the following organizations and individuals for making this case study possible:

Verizon

Verizon Communications Inc. (NYSE, Nasdaq: VZ) was formed on June 30, 2000 and is one of the world's leading providers of technology and communications services. Headquartered in New York City and with a presence around the world, Verizon generated revenues of \$133.6 billion in 2021. The company offers data, video, and voice services and solutions on its award-winning networks and platforms, delivering on customers' demand for mobility, reliable network connectivity, security, and control. The company's operating structure focuses on two customer-facing areas: Consumer and Business. Citizen Verizon is the company's responsible business plan for economic, environmental, and social advancement.





Hans Vestberg, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Verizon

Hans Vestberg is chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Verizon Communications. Prior to assuming the role of CEO in August 2018 and the role of chairman in March 2019, Mr. Vestberg served as Verizon's Chief Technology Officer and President of Global Networks from 2017.

Vestberg was a founding member of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) Broadband Commission for Digital Development, where he led digital health and climate change initiatives. He is past chairman of the Swedish Olympic Committee and a current member of the Leadership Council of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Solutions Network, where he helped author the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. He is a board member of BlackRock, the UN Foundation, and the Whitaker Peace & Development Initiative. He also chairs the World Economic Forum's EDISON Alliance. Vestberg is a leading voice at technology and global economic conferences including the Consumer Electronics Show, Mobile World Congress, Brilliant Minds, and the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in Davos.



Rose Stuckey Kirk, Senior Vice President and Chief Corporate Social Responsibility Officer, Verizon

Rose is responsible for the company's CSR investment strategy and programmatic buildout, and as a senior leader in the marketing organization, oversees the strategic direction for all of Verizon's social impact marketing activity. Rose's background as a senior leader in various P&L functions has primed her to advance the social innovation work of Verizon.

Rose is host of her own podcast, *On the Porch with Rose Stuckey Kirk*, which tunes listeners into real conversations on social justice, climate, communities, economy, equality and more.

Rose is a member of the board of directors of BSR, Casella Waste Systems, and the World Childhood Foundation. She is a member of the Leadership Board of the Women and Public Policy Program at the Harvard Kennedy School, the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Leadership Council, the Executive Leadership Council, and C200, a preeminent global organization for women business leaders. Through Verizon, Rose Stuckey Kirk is a Vanguard member of NationSwell, a community of service-minded leaders.



Sara Link, Director of Societal Impact, Verizon

As part of the Corporate Social Responsibility team at Verizon, Sara is focused on how the company's innovation, talent, and business is making a positive impact on society. Prior to Verizon, she led CSR and social impact at Verizon Media (formerly AOL) and created the company's 501c3 private foundation focused on bettering the lives of women, girls, and underserved youth. Prior to AOL, Sara co-founded Little West Group, a philanthropic consulting firm and was head of the Social Impact and Philanthropy practice at Korn Consulting Group. Before that, she spent more than nine years at Goldman Sachs leading global leadership development programs for the GS Foundation and designing health and wellness programs for employees and their families.

Sara is on the National Board of Trustees of Step Up, a founding member of the advisory council of Reboot Representation Coalition, a mentor for the 92nd Street Y's Women in Power Fellowship, and is co-founder of The Josh Link Foundation.

Scenario

New leadership and a renewed sense of social purpose emerge at Verizon

Verizon welcomed a new Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Hans Vestberg, in late 2018. Under his leadership, the organization adopted a new brand purpose – “We create the networks that move the world forward” – and aligned its societal mission against this purpose.

In the months that followed, Verizon reorganized its business units, created a balanced focus on four key stakeholders – customers, employees, shareholders, and society – and updated its CSR strategy to better reflect the organization’s identity. Against this backdrop, it launched [Citizen Verizon](#) to reflect how it would use its assets to solve some of the world’s biggest societal issues. The design of Citizen Verizon was aligned with the expectations of its customers, shareholders, NGOs, and social responsibility analysts and influencers.

Verizon created specific externally-oriented impact goals around three social responsibility pillars and set an overarching ambition to mobilize its workforce to engage with Citizen Verizon through a centralized and focused volunteer program: **Citizen Verizon Volunteers**. The organization is committed to using the skills and talents of its 135,000 employees to generate 2.5 million volunteer hours by 2025.

As of December 2021, Verizon was well on its way to achieving this ambitious target, with 1,000,000 total volunteer hours logged across the preceding two years. More than 89,000+ Verizon employees engaged in volunteer work during this period, well ahead of the [average employee participation rate of 17% for large companies in 2020](#). Prior to the launch of Citizen Verizon Volunteers, the brand had historically committed to matching employee donations and time through its Global Giving Program. However, never before had the company made such a bold commitment to put resources behind building an employee-led, volunteer program of this scale.

Citizen Verizon prioritizes three pillars directly related to the brand’s core operations and capabilities:

- **Digital inclusion**
- **Climate protection**
- **Human prosperity**

Underpinning these pillars is social innovation, Verizon’s process to create solutions across these three dimensions that are good for society and good for business.

Approach

This case study details how Verizon designed and executed a strategy to transform volunteer engagement in the face of two monumental challenges: a widely dispersed workforce and a devastating global pandemic. The pages ahead will describe six elements of Citizen Verizon Volunteers that are critical to its success.

1. Cascade volunteerism strategy from the organization's broader societal purpose
2. Develop a volunteerism-oriented RFP that's empathetic and transparent toward applicants
3. Over-index to existing employee skills and organizational capabilities
4. Use metrics to elevate the strategic importance of volunteerism
5. Plan to tap diverse motivations among employees
6. Make participation as easy as possible for employees and partners

Cascade volunteerism strategy from the organization's broader societal purpose

When Verizon launched its new CSR strategy, the organization was bold and proactive in linking its goals to the time and talents of its employees. Several principles govern the new volunteer strategy:

Employee engagement should not be cause-agnostic. Volunteer commitments should align with one of the three primary priorities of Citizen Verizon.

Employee engagement should be intuitive and easy. The inputs should be manageable and the outcomes should be significant.

Employee engagement should be seamlessly integrated within the cultural thread of the business units.

Rather than treat volunteerism as an employee benefit with little relationship to a broader corporate purpose, the CEO and CSR teams committed to developing a strategy for generating deep engagement consistent with the mantra of “moving forward, together.”

Verizon understood that asserting greater clarity on the organization's role in society, and identifying the role its employees play in upholding its vision, are both critical to building an employee commitment that reflects volunteerism as more than a perfunctory benefit.

Mr. Vestberg announced Verizon's new vision for volunteer engagement in the fall of 2019 alongside the organization's first-ever centralized platform for connecting employees with volunteer opportunities.

Develop a volunteerism-oriented RFP that's empathetic and transparent toward applicants

In launching its new employee volunteerism program, Verizon understood that the right partners would be essential for attracting the time and attention of its workforce, and for advancing impact around the organization's CSR priorities. But it also understood that legacy mechanisms for identifying volunteer engagement opportunities with nonprofit partners were insufficient to achieve Verizon's ambition. Three notable shortcomings stood out:

Requests for volunteer support are often buried at the end of lengthy applications for corporate grants and sponsorships.

Successful volunteer engagement often incurs expenses for the nonprofit organization that aren't offset by their corporate partner.

Requests for proposals (RFPs) for any type of corporate partnership are often difficult to complete for nonprofit applicants and may involve opaque criteria or decision processes.

Verizon developed a partner selection process that subverts—or at least mitigates—these legacy deficiencies. Here’s how:

Verizon proactively identified nonprofit organizations—some existing partners, others nominated by organizational leaders in HR, DEIB, and elsewhere—aligned with one or more of its three CSR priorities. The organization sent RFPs to these potential partners with the central goals of 1) introducing the organization’s new volunteerism strategy and 2) learning how Verizon employees could help those organizations advance their missions. Volunteerism was the only concern of the RFP, not an afterthought.

Verizon invited partners to request financial assistance in support of volunteer engagement, rather than assuming that the nonprofits had the resources necessary to accommodate the organization’s involvement in their work.

Verizon streamlined the process for responding to its RFP in recognition of the administrative burden placed on resource- and time-constrained nonprofit organizations. While the organization is continually refining its RFP based on partner feedback, Verizon’s overarching ambition is to request only the information necessary to decide if an organization aligns with Verizon’s goals for a volunteer engagement. Verizon’s RFP adheres to several guiding principles:

- **Develop clear organizational criteria for potential partners.** In being transparent up front about the characteristics of a qualified partner, Verizon helps ensure that only highly-aligned organizations take the time to complete the application.
- **Have a conversation first.** Verizon conducts exploratory conversations with potential applicants in advance of requesting a formal application. During these conversations, Verizon gathers information aligned with three goals:
 - 1) To understand whether the organization fits within their 3 pillars of social responsibility,
 - 2) To understand the organization’s ability to contribute toward their CSR targets, and
 - 3) To understand the organization’s capacity to fund and allocate staff time toward the administration of the volunteer program
- **Ask for questions and respond generously.** Verizon offers applicants the opportunity to ask questions once the RFP has been circulated. The organization collates those questions and distributes comprehensive answers to the entire applicant pool. Verizon also provides organizations the opportunity to give direct feedback on which elements of the RFP are difficult to respond to so that Verizon can adapt appropriately.

Over-index to existing employee skills and organizational capabilities

In order to build a program at scale—delivering millions of hours and engaging hundreds of thousands of employees—Verizon recognizes the importance of harnessing features intrinsic to the organization and its people.

This includes working closely with internal partners to enhance existing volunteer programs and emphasizing skills-based opportunities for the sake of big impact moments.

Verizon's CSR team is careful not to compete with the good work being done across various departments to channel employee energy into positive social impact. They collaborate with the DEI team, HR, and Employee Resource Groups to understand how communities around the organization are already volunteering, gather their recommendations on nonprofit organizations to bring into the program, and ultimately partner with those groups to create unique impact opportunities.

Verizon's volunteer program also emphasizes skills-based engagement. When employees can contribute expertise and skills from their professional roles they're more likely to feel a sense of purpose in their volunteerism, use their time efficiently, and, most importantly, create a deeper impact for the organization they're supporting.



Use metrics to elevate the strategic importance of volunteerism

Good data collection can help companies evaluate the efficacy of their volunteer engagement programs. At Verizon, program measurement tactics do more than that: they actively promote the strategic value of volunteerism to the business, its employees, and the communities they serve. Here's how they're doing it:

Embedding volunteer engagement in the business scorecard

At Verizon, each individual business unit has a goal around employee volunteer hours on its performance scorecard. Other senior leaders, including the CEO and CSR leaders, have visibility into the performance tracking of business units. This transparency drives accountability and creates a meaningful incentive for business leaders to promote employee engagement within their units.

Collaborating with nonprofit partners to identify and track programmatic metrics

While partner-collected impact data is a potentially powerful tool for assessing performance, the infrastructure and process can place a heavy burden on resource-constrained nonprofit organizations. Here's where Verizon sees an opportunity to provide capacity building and technical resources. For example, Verizon partnered with Jobs for the Future to help nonprofit partners establish and implement evaluation and reporting processes and technology improvements where they have not existed in the past.

Collecting feedback from employees on their volunteer experience

Verizon surveys individual employees following a volunteer engagement to gather information about their experience. They also partner with HR to add relevant questions on volunteerism to quarterly pulse surveys, which gather employees' sentiment on their satisfaction with Verizon as a place to work.

Analyzing volunteer data against other organization-wide engagement metrics

Verizon's CSR and HR teams are exploring opportunities to analyze volunteer data against recruitment, retention, and talent development data for the sake of better understanding the correlations.

Plan to tap diverse motivations among employees

In an organization as large and geographically dispersed as it is, Verizon correctly anticipated that a diversity of incentives and motivators would be necessary to bring employees forward to volunteer. Instead of relying on a single engagement lever, the CSR team uses a varied toolkit, including the following:

C-level commitments and communications

Verizon set the tone for its volunteerism strategy from the top. The CEO formally announced and launched the initiative in late 2019 and c-level leaders routinely demonstrate their personal commitments to using their time and talents to advance social purpose. Regular leadership offsites—events with a heavy emphasis on volunteer activity—further establish a culture of participation among the senior most members of the organization.

Nominating internal champions

Verizon's data shows that employees nominated by a colleague for a volunteer position are 58% more likely to sign up. With this in mind, the CSR team created the Global Champions program, through which leaders on the management committee nominate individual employees across the organization to lead volunteer opportunities within their regions. Champions—currently numbering over 350—are also afforded a budget and autonomy to select partner organizations that fit within Verizon's overall volunteerism strategy.

Matching volunteer hours with donations

Verizon incentivizes employees to volunteer by offering a nonprofit donation to match their time commitment, particularly following major disasters or significant cultural moments. This is in addition to the ongoing Matching Incentive Program that allows VTeamers to apply for grants on behalf of organizations they are personally donating to or volunteering with on qualifying projects.

Gamification

Each business unit at Verizon determines the right volunteer goal for their organization. The CSR team meets quarterly with leaders from those businesses to understand how they are tracking against goals and to provide resources on how to best engage their teams. Occasionally these conversations result in opportunities to catalyze new energy among business unit employees. CSR and business unit leaders collaborate to offer friendly competitions during key milestones such as National Volunteer Week and award prizes like swag and charitable donations to selected nonprofits.

Make participation as easy as possible for employees and partners

Volunteer engagement can require significant commitments of time and financial resources from both ends of the relationship (think: planning, staffing, training, travel and logistics, materials, opportunity costs). While Verizon is clear-eyed about the resource requirements of its strategy, it remains diligent in its pursuit of easing the burden for employees and partners. Here's how:

For employees:

- A centralized platform for volunteer opportunities that are aligned with core company goals
- A mix of virtual and in-person opportunities to accommodate the challenges associated with volunteering during a global public health crisis and the competing demands on individuals' time
- Planned offsites to provide structured time for teams to use their time and talents together
- Skills-based approach to helping employees lean into meaningful engagement that aligns with their existing strengths

For nonprofit partners:

- Streamlined RFP response to make seeking support as light a lift as possible, particularly given uncertainty of a positive outcome
- Additional funding to partners to offset the resource burden that hosting volunteers can create
- Outsourced third-party event support to free nonprofit partners from the strain of planning volunteer activities with Verizon team members

Verizon's approach to making volunteerism accessible is about more than lifting barriers to entry for participants. It is also about creating opportunities for engagement that are highly-responsive to the current environment. Citizen Verizon Volunteers allows employees to step in at a time when communities, colleagues, and the company culture need it most. For example, Verizon pivoted to virtual volunteering in March 2020 at the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic and immediately stood up events that supported frontline responders, small businesses, and food insecurity programs, to name a few. Following the murder of George Floyd and the focus on racial equity, Verizon stood up events to rally the community around social justice opportunities. And they were quick to establish opportunities in response to the war in Ukraine in early 2022.

Results

1,000,000

Total volunteer hours logged from December 2019 to December 2021, at an average of over 7 hours per employee. By contrast, in 2020, the average number of volunteer hours per employee at large companies was just [1.40 hours](#).

*Occurring almost entirely during the Covid-19 pandemic.

These deep and broad commitments by VTeamers have enabled significant progress on Verizon's three pillars of social responsibility, including:

DIGITAL INCLUSION

When it comes to the digital world, access is only the beginning. Verizon wants to promote technology as a tool to improve communities, education and the workforce.

178,286

Beneficiaries served

10,943

Blind and low vision individuals were helped to complete daily errands and tasks

2,461

Hours spent engaging young individuals in STEM activities including coding workshops

CLIMATE PROTECTION

Verizon is working to achieve net zero carbon emissions in its operations by 2035, investing in renewable energy and improving the energy efficiency of its networks and facilities.

107,781

Beneficiaries served

15,274

Pounds of litter collected from neighborhoods in which employees live and work

150,000

Trees planted across five National Forests in Virginia and North Carolina. These trees will absorb approx. 75,000 metric tonnes of CO2 over their life span

HUMAN PROSPERITY

Verizon is committed to reskilling and upskilling those most vulnerable in the future economy, ensuring prosperity through volunteerism, and inclusivity for employees and suppliers.

278,282

Beneficiaries served

2,132

Hours spent helping individuals use technology to gain access to resources and services

2,500

Relief kits distributed for communities in the wake of a natural disaster

Pareto's page

Also known as the 80/20 rule, the Pareto Principle observes that 80 percent of outcomes are derived from 20 percent of inputs. Below you'll find NationSwell's take on which inputs are most strongly associated with positive outcomes in this case study:

Using a streamlined, targeted, and volunteerism-centered RFP process for selecting highly-aligned partner organizations

Adding volunteerism metrics to individual business unit scorecards as a means of driving commitment and formal accountability across the organization

Empowering individuals from across the organization to design and lead volunteer opportunities through the Global Champions program

Developing programmatic solutions to meet employees where they are and removing barriers to meaningful participation in volunteer opportunities



TIME MACHINE:

One thing Verizon would do differently

If Verizon could turn back the clock, they would have invested in a best-in-class, Verizon-specific web experience to meet the needs of the volunteer program from the outset. As it were, that investment did happen, but not until two years after the program launched.

Related resources

For continued learning on the topics discussed in this case study, we recommend the following:

- McKinsey, [How McKinsey volunteers used data to help the children of Atlanta](#)
- The MGSM CSR Partnership Network, [Corporate volunteering: Connecting People, Participation & Performance](#)
- Verizon [Volunteer Webpage](#)
- Harvard Business Review, [Reimagine Your Corporate Volunteer Program](#)

Thank you

If you have feedback or questions related to this case study, or would like to learn more about NationSwell's resources, please reach out to nickcericola@nationswell.com.

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