

Champions for Social Good Podcast

The Power of Volunteerism: Strengthening Partnerships and Human Capital with Dr. Rebecca Hardin

Jamie Serino: Hello and welcome to the Champions for Social Good Podcast. A podcast for people dedicated to social impact. I'm Jamie Serino, director of marketing with the MicroEdge division of Blackbaud. I'm here today with Dr. Rebecca Hardin, performance improvement consultant and volunteer program director, with the federal sector. Welcome Becca.

Rebecca Hardin: Thank you Jamie.

Jamie Serino: So Becca, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself and a little bit about the work that you do.

Rebecca Hardin: I would love to, thank you. So I have my doctorate in Organizational Psychology, and for the past four or five years I've been working in human capital development. And most recently looking at how we apply volunteerism to our human capital strategies within the federal sector. I conducted my dissertation here at the agency looking at the return on investment of our academic outreach programs on our employee engagement strategies. And based on huge return on investment in that area, I've been able to build the business case for standing up the first federal employee volunteer program. So that's what I've been working on for the past couple years is getting that instituted. And then we also have our combined federal campaign which is the only way for federal employees to give donations to charities. And so we are right in the middle of our campaign season right now. So that's all about the work place giving portion of that. So all about giving, volunteerism, and then how organizations use that for human capital development.

Jamie Serino: That's great. So previously within the federal sector this was a difficult thing to do or it was like all over the place and you've organized it. Can you kind of connect the dots there a little bit?

Rebecca Hardin: Yeah, absolutely. So the main volunteerism we see a lot in the federal sector is academic outreach. So most agencies employ their employees to send them out to volunteer with local school systems. So during judging science fairs, tutoring, different things like that. And so this initiative was to expand our approach beyond the academic sector so that we're contributing to any charitable cause. So that's really the piece. And some agencies do it kind of ad hoc or they'll have specific days that they go out. But this is the first time that we're kinda trying to bring together a program where we're actually going out, we're building partnerships with local non-profits. We are identifying what their volunteer needs are, and then we're working with our work force to help align the right people to those opportunities so that it's a win-win. It's giving our employees the experiences that they need, and giving them skill development if that happens to be the thing that they are interested in. We've had a couple of events that were skills based. It might be team building, it might be just wanting to give back. So just aligning the right audience with what the volunteer opportunity is. So it's creating those one on one partnerships between us and the non-profits. And that's really that new piece that we're bringing into it.

Jamie Serino: Okay, yeah that's great. I mean, I think we're reading a lot about that in the news now. And so you and I actually met at an Impact 2030 conference, and you heard a lot about this and the need for something like this and the need to get the private sector involved period. So can you talk a little bit about that, about Impact 2030?

Rebecca Hardin: Yeah, absolutely, I would love to. So Impact 2030 is the only corporate led initiative to realize the Sustainable Development Goals. There are 17 goals to improve our world by the year 2030. And this is the corporate led initiative to realize those goals through corporate volunteering and human capital

investments. So again kind of trying to mobilize the assets that private institutions have, out into the community to help achieve these goals. So it's all about those cross sector partnerships, building partnerships between businesses, and non-profits, and government, and academia and that's all coming together to make the world a better place.

Jamie Serino: Nice. And you know it all sounds like, "Well okay, duh." But it actually is more difficult to do, and there are companies out there that want to be doing stuff and sometimes they don't know what the first step to take is, of course they could partner with a local, maybe, homeless shelter or something like that. But beyond that, they really are not sure what to do. And so, that was something that I discovered through that conference. Do you have any advice for people that run CSR programs, or people that run employee engagement programs. What's a good first step to take to get to skills based volunteering, to maybe take a next step outside their community and do something bigger?

Rebecca Hardin: Absolutely, absolutely. And I think for us in the federal sector, we have similar challenges but some unique ones as well. So for the federal sector, we're not able to endorse specific causes or charities. So whereas a lot of times we hear when we're working with industry we talk about kind of aligning their strategy with a cause area, and kind of honing in on that. But we didn't really get the privilege of honing in our scope and our scale so ours is very, very broad. But, I can mention we still target it to specific populations, so we still get the benefit of kind of creating those alignments. So my recommendation is to start with the pilot, that's what we do. That's always a good thing to do. Is kinda do a little test and see how things work. So for us, one of the first things that we did, we had a skill community so within our organization we have different skill groups of employees. And so, me and the director got together and kinda talked about within her population of folks, what types of things do they need experience in, and it happened to be support services roles. And so, we looked at what are the different types of experiences that would help them gain more confidence in their role, we're also allowing them to go out and give back.

Rebecca Hardin: So, we just did some brainstorming, some mind mapping on the wall, and identified some different skill areas and experiences that would be helpful for them. And then we looked at the non-profit community and identified some organizations that would provide those opportunities. So, they've recently done three different volunteer activities kinda targeting that. So, one was signing folks out for Thanksgiving meals, so doing calls, kinda doing that customer service support for non-profit. They went in and helped organize the office space for a couple of non-profits, so helped them more with that infrastructure piece. And it was a huge success and it aligned that group of employees with a few non-profits, so that it was something that would help them with the experiences they were trying to gain.

Rebecca Hardin: So that's kind of it from that skill side. Find a group, a pocket maybe, and organizations often have development programs like a leadership development program, and identify where the experience is that those employees would benefit from. And then, how can we find that in the non-profit community? So that we're volunteering, we're helping our community, but we're also helping our employees gain those skills based experiences.

Rebecca Hardin: And then, aside from the skills based piece, a big thing that we look at here in the federal space is connecting employees to their causes. So, as you kind of do some pilots and start scaling, it's very important to understand what your employees care about. So, we see suggestions like that a lot in the literature, is serving your employees, a lot of corporations have climate surveys, and employee engagement surveys. So, find out what those causes are that the employees care about, and try and create some partnerships and some opportunities that also aligns with their passions, and what they wanna give back too, as well as the organizational strategy and values.

Jamie Serino: Yeah, that's good advice there too, is do a little bit of listening. And then, what we've been reading as well, is using it as an opportunity for leadership development, skills development, as you were saying, so you can end up accomplishing both things at the same time. So, that's really good advice. Something that we had recently done was job shadowing and this was out of our New York City office, and we had partnered with the YWCA, and they were partnered with a school, and they brought some students in. And

in polling the students afterwards, it was rewarding for them and helpful, but it was also rewarding for the people in our office.

Jamie Serino: And we did a lot of prep work in the beginning to get people involved and to explain to them what was happening, why we were doing this. And from what we've been seeing, that's helpful in creating a good volunteer experience, is this sort of pre... Kind of briefing and then a sort of then post-briefing. Can you talk a little bit about that, about setting up the right volunteer experience, so people really get something out of it as opposed to, "All right, I went to the soup kitchen. I ladled some soup into the bowls, and then I went home." Can you talk a little bit more about making it more fulfilling for the volunteer?

Rebecca Hardin: Absolutely, and that's huge. I'm really glad that you brought that up, because that's really what we wanna look at, is kinda of moving from this idea of transaction to transformation in everything that we do. So, we're doing that a lot here both in the work force giving piece, so we're giving donations, also to the volunteering piece. So, how can we transform individuals and change the way that they think, and behave, and perceive the world around them, based on having these opportunities. Because a lot of times it's very easy for us to kinda get in the motions of life, right? We go to work every day, we go home, we've got all the things we have to take care of with our family, and our houses, and our bills. And it's easy to kinda lose that connection to your community and to the world around you. So, that's really what we wanna do is kind of reconnect folks to the community and the context in which we work and live every single day.

Rebecca Hardin: So, a lot of best practices that I have seen, both in the literature and also in the volunteer activities that we've been coordinating, is a big piece is this concept of kinda meeting people at the highest level of their contribution. So, when you're looking at setting up a volunteer activity, kind of matching not only your organization to the non-profit, but also your employees to the opportunities.

Rebecca Hardin: So, each time that an organization comes to me and they wanna set up a volunteer opportunity, we meet first to talk about what do your employees care about? What are their different skill levels? What experiences would be beneficial to them? How can we maximize this experience? And kind of match your group to an opportunity that's just gonna be the most bang for the buck for both sides. You're providing the most skill, and experience to the non-profit, and the highest level of engagement for the employees.

Rebecca Hardin: So, that's kind of that upfront work. And then, when you're advertising it, you wanna call that out. So, we actually just sent one out today to another organization who's gonna be going out and volunteering, and we made sure to outline that. "This is the volunteer opportunity, here's why we chose it, here's what's in it for you, here is what you're gonna give back to the community." So, you have all of that language upfront for them.

Rebecca Hardin: And then on the non-profit side and certainly us as well, so I tend to go on a lot of these volunteer events to kinda help orchestrate the experience if needed. But there is one nonprofit in particular who just did an amazing job. We did that earlier this year. And the way they set it up is when your employees arrive, the first thing that they do is give a tour of their entire nonprofit. So there's only one place that they were gonna be volunteering, they were gonna be serving meals for the day. But it was important for the nonprofit to provide the context of the entire charity to that employee. So that they know that...

Jamie Serino: Yeah, that's great.

Rebecca Hardin: Yeah. So even though they're gonna get plugged into, you might be putting ice in a cup for three hours. But by the end of that orientation and tour, I know exactly the impact of me putting ice in that cup. I'm the first person that this individual accessing services may see that day. I may be the first person that has smiled at them and treated them with respect. And the better that experience is for those folks experiencing homelessness and accessing those services, the more likely they are to access all the other services the charity provided. And they had a very wholistic array of services from helping people find jobs, and get homes, and case management, social work, and all of those types of things. So it was neat 'cause you got to see the

entire system, and then where you plugged in, and what your contribution was. And then you volunteered and then at the end, as you mentioned, you have that debrief. So at the end of the volunteer experience, everybody sat around in a circle, and they talked about what are you gonna take away from today? What was your impact? Who will you remember that you interacted with from the day?

Rebecca Hardin: So it really gives us that time to orient ourselves to the experience, what is our impact, and then at the end, reflect back on that experience. So that hopefully now it's creating this change within yourself. You're really connecting to it verses like you said, if I showed up and put ice in a cup for three hours and just went home, and never had that orientation, and that context, and that debrief, it may have not had a lasting impact on me. And our goal is to kind of create these community citizens, these global citizens that have this broader context and connectedness to the world around them so that even after this one volunteer event that we've exposed them to, hopefully it's gonna ignite something in them so that they're gonna wanna continue to give back outside of these opportunities on their own. They're gonna become these community citizens.

Jamie Serino: Right. That's great. And so I think it's about explaining to the people that run these events to just include that as a part of the checklist of things to do. It's not that difficult, it doesn't take that much time, but a lot of people just don't think to build that in. So I think explaining that to people, getting that message out would be helpful there. So in shifting just a little bit, earlier you were talking about creating this program in the federal government, and we've been talking about the UN Sustainable Development Goals and Impact 2030. And it just got me thinking then about measurement. Because of the program that you're building has a lot of positive attributes to it and a lot of reasons why you did it. But one thing I think that can come out of it also is the ability to measure. So I wonder if you can talk a little bit about that?

Rebecca Hardin: Absolutely. 'Cause measurement is while very very challenging, it's essential. It's essential so that we know the impact of what we're doing, and I know like you mentioned with Impact 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals, that's a huge piece of it too. Is how will we know that we've achieved these goals and that we're making progress towards them through the efforts that we're having? So for our look, we are taking three different lenses with our measurements. That's how we have it set up. The first lens is for the organization. So even though we're a federal sector, we have to be accountable to our tax payers and our overseers, and we have to make sure that when we're instituting a program, it does have a return on investment and it does have value. So there has to be kind of that business case if you will, even within the federal sector. So I can relate a lot to private companies with that because we have to do a similar thing. So for the business case looking at that organizational perspective, that's where we bring in the human capital piece. So we're looking at from hire to retire, what is the benefit of volunteering on human capital. So for recruitment, we wanna be able to look at that. So as we're implementing our recruitment strategies, and we're offering this new benefit of being able to volunteer, we wanna find out how intriguing is that.

Rebecca Hardin: There is a lot of studies that millennials are more likely to work for an organization that gives back to the community, and that has a social enterprise flare to it. So we wanna build that into our recruitment strategies as announcing that benefit, offering it, and then gauging from folks when we hire them on, was that kind of a deciding factor for them? Did that influence their decision to come and work for us? So from the recruitment side, we wanna build in some metrics on that end. From training and development, we obviously wanna look at that. So while we're kind of doing these one off opportunities right now as the program becomes more formalized, we really want to look at building this into our development programs and our leadership programs, specifically in the realm of succession management. So when we look at succession management, a lot of times we'll prepare employees, we have them on a bench for a senior level position. And we've identified their development plan for what they need in order to be ready to assume a senior position when it opens up. But the development needs that they have, we may not have an experience in house to give them.

Rebecca Hardin: So we talk a lot about, "Okay I know that Joe needs these two experiences in order to be fully ready to assume the senior position, but there's no open positions for me to put him in house." So, that's when I can look at leadership volunteer experiences. How can I develop these and place assignments for him, and these assignments in the community to develop those. We really wanna look at as we incorporate it into the development programs, is that increasing competency in different areas that people need? Are these

effective development experiences for them? So that's a piece that we're gonna look at. Engagement, that's kinda the realm of my dissertation. So looking at, is it increasing people's well-being, and job satisfaction, and morale, and engagement when they go out, and they volunteer? So specifically, the angle that my research looked at was, the impact of volunteering on organizational commitment, so that's associated with retention. So, looking at how much my values align with the values of my organization, and that increases my loyalty and my effective commitment to the organization.

Jamie Serino: Right.

Rebecca Hardin: So, really looking at that whole engagement piece. So our agency, similar to industry, we do an annual climate survey across the federal government. We're gonna work to add some questions in there to kinda gauge, who's volunteering, and can we track? Is that increasing the engagement level of our employees who volunteer? So, just that whole kind of recruitment, training, engagement, retention, human capital package of that hire to retire model. That's our internal measurement strategy for the organization. We also wanna look at the satisfaction of the volunteer experience for employees, and you and I already talked about how important that is. After every volunteer event, we send out a survey to employees asking them, "How was your experience? What were your expectations going into it, and were they met? Did you have any of your assumptions upturned? So, were any of your thoughts or behaviors changed as a result of this? How likely would you be to volunteer with this organization again? And how likely would you be to volunteer at all again?" So, kinda gauging their exposure. And have they ever volunteered before? So, we really wanna know, is this the first time they're going out? A lot of times what we see, at least in industry, and I'm curious to see how it unfolds as we move this into the federal space, is a lot of times, the first exposure employees are having with volunteering is through these corporate volunteer programs.

Jamie Serino: Yeah. Yeah.

Rebecca Hardin: So, it's neat to look at. Have they ever gone before, and then how impactful was this experience, and is it gonna lead them to want continue on? So, we look at the employee as well. We wanna make sure that they are having a good experience. That's the most important part, because that's gonna ripple into those human capital benefits that we talked about. And then we also survey the non-profit, because we wanna make sure that our partner on the other end is getting a good experience as well. So we have a survey that we send out to the non-profit after every event, and we ask them to fill that out. And it's basically asking them, "What was the impact of the volunteers that we sent out to them? How did that contribute to their mission? Were the volunteers professional? Did they accomplish what they were asked to accomplish? And again, how satisfied are they with their volunteers? Would they host our volunteers again?" And then just any recommendations they may have from a process standpoint. "So, did everything flow smoothly? Is there anything that we could've done on our end to make it go more smooth for them?" We also ask them just that programmatic question as well.

Rebecca Hardin: We try and look at those three angles to really look at the experience. "What is the agency getting back? What are the employees getting out of it? And then what is the non-profit getting out of it?" And I'm sure as we keep going with this, we'll find more things to look a little bit more long-term at the outcomes, because a lot of these are still that reactionary, how was the experience today, type of measurement.

Jamie Serino: Right, right. It sounds like you're doing a very thorough job of measuring that piece. And so, you're alluding to then measuring outcomes. Will there be a measurement piece plugged in that relates it back to SDGs, or Impact 2030? What are the outcomes of these efforts?

Rebecca Hardin: Mm-hmm. Yeah, that's our hope long-term is to really get that out there. The big thing with the Sustainable Development Goals, as you know, is right now, it's that marketing piece. It's getting people just familiar that this exists. So, one thing that we've done within the federal sector, we approached our overseers with the Sustainable Development Goals, and our hope is in the next couple years, that will be integrated as part of our combined federal campaign. That's really gonna increase that exposure of marketing to non-profit so that they're aware of the goals, they're able to start tracking what they're doing against the goals, which will

then help us track when we send employees out to support your mission, how is that aligning as well? And then, we look at that too, internally. So, from the few opportunities we've done, we kinda know which buckets it's falling in. But we know if I send 20 employees out for four hours, how am I really expressing the impact of that towards meeting a sustainable development goal? So that's the challenge, is looking at what's our piece? What's the non-profit's piece? And together, as we do more and more of these cross-sector partnerships, how are we as a team moving the needle on these goals through all of our individual actions? How do all of our little bits add up to those big bits that really push these goals forward? So that's definitely gonna be a challenge we'll all continue to tackle moving forward. [chuckle]

Jamie Serino: That's great. Looking a little bit more long term. It seems like there is momentum here, and it seems like the work that you're doing, people are receptive to it, and people are kind of asking for this sort of thing, organizations, corporations. Can you talk a little bit about what you see three, five, 10 years from now as this kind of trend continues?

Rebecca Hardin: Absolutely. Well, I'll tell you what I would love to see, and I'm gonna hope that [chuckle] all of us, Champions for Social Good are gonna get us there. Really a microcosm of what we saw at the Impact 2030 summit. So, I was facilitating our Southeast Asia group, and out of that we all kind of formed this agreement that we were gonna form a complete action team that had two non-profits, three companies, and myself kind of starting it, and then opening up to anybody else who wanted to join.

Rebecca Hardin: And it's this idea that, I like to think of it as almost like a fusion center. Where you're really getting together partners from a community, and looking at, what are the biggest community needs, and how can we bring our assets to bear upon that? So, the action team we formed was a little bit different 'cause we're going to put out grand challenges to the youth in Southeast Asia, and ask them to come up with sustainable solutions to social challenges that are happening in Southeast Asia, which is a beautiful model and I really loved it, because the best people who are gonna have solutions are the local folks, right?

Rebecca Hardin: So, we learn a lot from especially like disaster volunteering that all change has to begin and end locally. You can get outside help, but for it to be sustainable it has to happen at that local level. Because eventually, the people in the local communities are gonna have to be the ones to sustain it on and out. So, it's really gotta look at that local perspective. So, I like that concept of kind of issuing these challenges out to the community, finding out what are those innovative ideas that people in the community have, that they wanna implement, and then using the non-profits, and the corporations to support them with that implementation with assets, and resources, employee volunteers, funding, whatever it is.

Rebecca Hardin: So, it's kind of like we're all coming together as a family to say, "We want the world to get better. Here's a huge challenge in the area. How can we all bring our assets to bear, and move the needle, and make that work?" 'Cause right now, I don't think there's a lack of goodness in the world, right? There's over a million non-profits in the world. There's tons of organizations, and companies, and lots of state, and local, and federal resources, and there's a lot of programs that are doing a lot of really, really good work.

Rebecca Hardin: But often times, again it's just like we're talking about with us as employees. We kind of get stuck in our own little world, right? We're doing our mission, we're working hard in our area, and we oftentimes just don't take the time to kind of come up for air, and look broader, and look across the whole context. So, I think that's what I would love to see in the next few years, is just this idea of these local fusion centers that would pop up, and really kind of bring folks together from all the different sectors to look at communities, look at their biggest needs, and how they can all come together with an integrated strategy to help make it better.

Jamie Serino: Yeah, that's really nice. You bring up a few important notions there, I think one that there are people out there sort of waving their arms around that have solutions, and wanna help, and be a part of something, and they don't know where to plug in. Others find ways to plug in, and now we are in a state where it's a sort of DIY kinda attitude. But then that kind of goes to your second point that, people do need to sort of pick their heads up, and look around them and see what else is going on.

Jamie Serino: And that's something from Impact 2030 that I took away that, even large organizations think, "All right, I'm gonna go and try to solve this problem." And they first won't stop and see, "Well, who else is working on this problem. Is there a federal organization working on it, a state organization, is there another company or a non-profit, before I sort of charge at this thing?" And so, those two notions that you bring up, those are things to solve for, and I think that once we do, there will just be a lot more collaboration, and a lot less kind of duplicative work, stuff like that.

Rebecca Hardin: Absolutely. There's plenty of people doing great work. It's just bringing it all together, and harnessing all that energy collectively, really makes some good things happen.

Jamie Serino: All right, well, Becca is there anything else you'd like to add before we conclude?

Rebecca Hardin: I think we've covered a big scope. So, really looking at creating those transformational experiences for your employees, looking at how it benefits your organization from that human capital perspective, and then like we've said, while we're all acting locally, how can we think more globally, and really lift up, and see all the things that are going on, and integrate, and create those cross sector partnerships, and help realize the Sustainable Development Goals? So, that's one of the things I love about the Sustainable Development Goals. It's a platform to unite all of us no matter what community we're from, what sector we're from. They're global goals, they're for everybody, they're for every sector to make the world a better place. So, yeah, act locally and think globally.

Jamie Serino: All right, great. A really great thought to end on. So, Becca thank you for joining us today.

Rebecca Hardin: Thank you Jamie.

Jamie Serino: Yeah, I really enjoyed our conversation. For our listeners, I hope you enjoyed this episode of Champions for Social Good. You can connect with Rebecca Hardin on LinkedIn and you can follow her on Twitter at enlightenforme. Make sure to subscribe to our podcast so you don't miss an episode and keep up with the conversation between episodes by following us on Twitter @jamieserino @microedgellc and @Blackbaud. Thank you for listening.