

BT Troubleshooters' programme: The impact of problem-based volunteering

Institute for Volunteering Research



**Institute for
Volunteering
Research**

Written by Nissa Ramsay, July 2012

The Institute for Volunteering Research is an initiative of Volunteering England.

BT Troubleshooters' programme: The impact of problem-based volunteering

This paper identifies how and why problem-based volunteering in a work context makes a difference to both charities and corporate teams involved. It draws upon the experience of a partnership between Volunteering England (in collaboration with consultants, Volunteer Centre Wiltshire, Volunteer Centre Dacorum and the Institute for Volunteering Research) and BT in delivering three events known as 'Trouble-Shooters'. These involved 12 charities and BT teams working together to identify solutions to strategic issues faced by the charities.

The BT people involved were highly skilled professionals and often in senior or managerial positions. The charities involved included national (such as St John Wales), regional (such as Wiltshire Blind Association) and localised (such as Herts Young Homeless) organisations, facing a wide range of strategic issues (from the need to radically reorganise to setting up a social enterprise). As such, the success of this type of volunteering relies upon the ability of BT people to apply their work related skills and experience to an entirely different context, as well as the charity to identify the heart of their strategic issue and learn from the different perspective provided.

This paper explores the impact of this approach to bringing corporate teams together to solve charities' problems. It is based upon an evaluation conducted by the Institute for Volunteering Research. This involved feedback forms (from 60 BT participants and 8 charities), focus groups (5 charities in 2 groups), observation (at 2 events, in-depth with 3 groups), and in-depth interviews (with 2 BT team leaders and 2 charities involved in past events) and case study interviews (follow up with 2 charities a few weeks after the event). Overall it has found a range of benefits for both charities and BT teams. This report is divided into four sections in order to examine: outcomes for BT teams, outcomes for charities, challenges for problem-based volunteering and charity case studies.

Section 1: Outcomes for BT teams

This volunteering opportunity was targeted at highly skilled professionals, managerial and senior BT people. Whilst 81% of participants were aware of BT's support for volunteering, only 35% had previously taken up these opportunities to volunteer through work. In other words, 65% were using one of their three annual BT volunteering days for the first time. In turn, most had little volunteering experience outside of work, including 27% of participants who had not volunteered before and 53% who had volunteered occasionally. In total, only 11 out of the 60 participants who provided feedback regularly volunteered (either within or outside of work). Overall, the majority of participants gained increased pride and motivation; a desire to volunteer more; self-efficacy; team working and networking skills.

1.1 Increased pride and motivation

Overall, the biggest impact of this event was the increased sense of pride amongst BT people, with 54% indicating that this greatly increased and a further 26% indicating this increased slightly (a total of 25 out of 31 providing this feedback). In addition, 38% of participants noted a great increase in motivation and 52% a slight increase (a total of 28 out of 31 providing this feedback). Overall, the increase in motivation was rated higher than any other outcome or skill measured in the feedback forms. When participants were asked openly to describe what they had gained from the day, responses overwhelmingly focused on the motivational aspect of having benefited a charity:

"[I valued] the opportunity to take a day from work to do something different, fun and challenging and to give something back to the community"

"[I will take back to my role a] sense of pride in BT, renewed motivation, improved teamwork/brainstorming skills"

1.2 Desire to volunteer more

Taking part in this event inspired participants to consider further volunteering opportunities with BT. Almost every participant (55 out of 60) indicated they intended to use further work volunteering days to take part in future opportunities. Of those who had never volunteered outside of work before, all apart from one indicated that they were considering doing so after the event. The feedback showed that this interest stems from having applied skills effectively to come up with ideas and potential ways forward for the charity:

"[I valued] the opportunity to think creatively about real life challenges that affect the charity and community and give something back"

Whilst the BT teams had no previous involvement with the charity, at the end of the event all had offered some form of further support and contact details to continue the

relationship. For some, this was feedback on a revised strategy, whilst for others this was to offer further advice from other experts in their team. Three quarters of participants were considering how to continue supporting the charity they were teamed with and some had committed to volunteer (for instance, becoming a trustee, providing further mentoring). As such, the event created a fruitful partnership between BT people and charities.

1.3 Self-efficacy

Whilst all of the BT people involved in the event were professional, managerial and senior staff, they all gained a sense of self-efficacy and valued having made a worthwhile contribution to the charities. In total, 59 out of 60 participants agreed or strongly agreed that they had identified new and creative ideas for the charity. Similarly, 56 out of 60 participants felt they had presented clear solutions for the charity to pursue. This is further highlighted in open feedback provided about the value of the day:

"I valued the opportunity to share some ideas with the charity and give them a fresh perspective - hopefully we made a difference"

As a result, the event gave BT people the opportunity to realise their own strengths and skills (95% agreement). This is again reflected in open feedback asking what participants would take back to their role:

"I have more confidence in my strengths and what I can offer"

"Knowing that we can make a difference"

This sense of having made a difference is significant given that very few participants regularly volunteer. Indeed almost all participants felt they had gained an understanding of the challenges faced by charities and the issues that they tackle. As such, this opportunity opened up a route to seeing the value to both parties involved in volunteering.

1.4 Team working and networking

The team nature of this skilled volunteering was vital to the impact of the event for BT people, creating a shared experience and bringing different approaches and skills to the problem at hand. It is noteworthy that these teams might not necessarily have met before, often working remotely and based throughout the country (although some had). As a result of the event they were able to appreciate the skills and strengths within their team (average agreement of 4.2 on a scale of 1 to 5). Open feedback showed this was highly valued,

"[I valued] tackling a non BT problem as a team and adding value to it"

Similarly, the event enabled team members to get to know each other and to realise other peoples' skills. A great deal of the open feedback focused on the team nature of the event:

"[I will take back to my role an] appreciation of the value we can bring as a collective"

At least half of the participants identified a slight or great increase in their team working skills, creative thinking and leadership ability. The event provided the opportunity to realise these.

Section 2: Outcomes for charities

The charities recruited for the BT Troubleshooters events were wide ranging in terms of their sizes, histories, target issue and set up. Similarly the problems they identified for BT people to solve were varied in nature, ranging from setting up a social enterprise to generate income and involve users to a charity in severe financial difficulty needing to restructure. Some were matched with teams when the team leader was particularly interested in the charity or problem. Most matches were left to chance, relying upon the more general and transferable skills of BT people. The charities experienced a huge range of benefits from this, with key outcomes including confidence and reassurance, a systematic approach to solving their problem, new, creative and practical ideas, as well as an appreciation of BT peoples' qualities.

2.1 Confidence and reassurance

All of the charities had identified a current issue they were facing or a new direction they wanted to move in. They had consulted their trustees, staff and worked on plans. However, the Troubleshooters day provided time out from the day to day work of the charity, with a group of critical friends to question their thinking. It provided an objective point of view that they were identifying the right questions and following the right paths towards improving their work. All the charity representatives believed they had improved their ability to tackle the problem (10 greatly, 2 slightly). Open feedback showed they valued the confidence and reassurance most:

"[I will take back to my charity] more confidence in what we are doing"

"I am reassured about future of charity and feel a sense of relief"

2.2 A systematic approach to solve the problem

The BT teams had no prior knowledge of the charities they were working with or their strategic issues prior to the Troubleshooters' events. However, they were able to systematically identify the roots of their strategic issue and provide ideas in turn to tackle each of these. Focus groups with charities found that this systematic approach was highly valued as an outcome of the day, as this representative highlights:

"I've been able to think about this issue with more clarity and more systematically in the past three hours than I have been able to in the past three months".

The BT teams have extensive experience of project focused work and this was recognised and valued by the charities. Their use of management tools helped the charities to clarify and focus on the basic principles of what they were trying to achieve (rather than the detail and complexity of a new project):

"[I valued] seeing our problems and solving them in a systematic manner"

"We always think we are thinking critically but having this objective viewpoint has been very helpful. The day has given us a clearer view of our objectives and confirmed ideas we were thinking of using."

2.3 New, creative and practical ideas

Whilst the problem solving process was systematic, for some charities this process reframed the strategic issue entirely and for many, this generated new and creative ideas. One participant explained:

"The different perspective from BT has helped us to look at our problem in a completely new way. The solutions provided will definitely have a significant effect on how we approach and implement changes with the charity."

Their 'different' approach and perspective was highly valued by the charities. Many described a 'light bulb' moment, whether this was simply realising the need for a very practical activity (for instance, collecting data on a range of services provided for a period of time to understand staff time costs) or an entirely new approach:

"[I valued the] wide range of practical suggestions that will all contribute to improve our effectiveness, impact and ability to meet our goals"

"[I took away an understanding of] How critical integrating our website with social media is, how little time it will take once it's up and running properly and the importance of involving our trainees in the social media side."

Every charity could identify at least one idea they could implement immediately, as well as a more systematic approach discussed above.

2.4 Appreciation of BT people

In all feedback provided by charities, they particularly valued the professionalism, enthusiasm and friendliness of the BT people they worked with and as a result, had a better perception of BT. During the event, the charities had to be honest and open about how they worked and how this caused the challenges they face. As such, the attitude of the team was vital to the success of the partnership. They also felt that whilst the teams had very little understanding or experience of the charity sector (or the individual charity) they were able to penetrate the issues and identify the right questions to ask with ease. Feedback comments focused on the team:

"[I valued] the professional and friendly nature of the teams' approach - what a superb group of BT staff"

"[I valued most] the enthusiasm of the team to complete the task and their ability to take on a problem in such a short space of time, giving practical suggestions and next steps. Lovely people."

Section 3: Challenges for problem based volunteering

Overall Troubleshooters events have proved to be a highly successful model for all those involved. At the end of the event, participants were all talking very positively about the opportunities each of the charities now had, rather than focusing on the initial 'problem' presented. We have found three core elements of the process which directly play a role in the effectiveness of the Troubleshooter model:

3.1 The charities' problem statement

Integral to the success of Troubleshooters is a clearly defined problem statement which can be understood and addressed in the time available. Yet, during the Troubleshooters events, most problem-solving discussions extended beyond this:

"We thought we were going to find out about intranet and instead we now recognise the need to think about consulting our users first to make sure the product is the right one for their needs."

Whatever the problem, most teams found it helpful to consider the charity's vision, marketing (ability to translate vision in to clear messages), core activities and costs, local partnerships (co-delivery of services or support in kind), organisational structure (including the board of trustees), data collection and budgets. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, some charities were not specific enough about the problem they wanted to solve and required more support to refine this. Secondly, some problems (such as a substantial financial deficit) required a much broader focus and a range of solutions to address it. Those teams working on focused problems were more likely to generate creative, new and practical ideas (outcome 2.3).

3.2 The time and focus of the problem solving process

The length of time given to these events and indeed the focus of this time has a significant impact on the problem solving process. Some teams were given three hours to work together, whilst others had almost five hours. When a short time is available, discussions focused upon brainstorming and ideas generation:

"It felt a lot more like a brainstorming session. I believe they took away ideas and areas to work on but I don't feel we presented clear solutions - however we all provided our details so that the charity could contact us once they'd worked up some of the things we discussed."

"We felt like we were able to get our thoughts/solutions down on paper but we did not have time to prioritise them and put next steps in place."

When a longer time is available, more time could be devoted to prioritising ideas and creating a strategy to implement them. Observation also found that facilitators played a key role in moving the team from idea generation to development. Those teams which created separate working groups were able to spend more time developing

ideas. When multiple teams are involved in an event, value was also added to the process of problem solving by 'borrowing' members of other teams who have expertise in a certain area. Finally, formal presentations at the end of the day can also help focus the process. A range of techniques can be used to ensure a systematic approach to problem solving (enhancing outcome 2.2).

3.3 Preparation and follow up

The Troubleshooter days were established with the expectation of no preparation and no follow-up. Feedback found that BT teams wanted to know more about the charity in advance (their problem, website and some background information).

"It would have been really useful to get the information about the charities problem statement before the session - the charity had provided a lot of information and it was quite difficult to get through it all and take it in during the time - I feel we might have been able to give more to the charity if we'd known some of this in advance."

Whilst, this may not be possible in reality given time constraints of peoples' roles, those team leaders engaged in advance were better able to recruit participants and addressed the problem solving process more quickly and effectively. In this event there was no formal mechanism for follow-up, which both BT teams and charities felt would add value to the process (all exchanged contact details informally). Providing information about what happened next would help BT people value their contribution and provide a platform for further volunteering (outcome 1.2 and 1.3). To this end, the case studies in the next section help highlight the value of this event.

Section 4: Charity case studies

Herts Young Homeless

Herts Young Homeless aims to prevent homelessness, empowering individuals to make positive informed choices and supporting young people, those in crisis and individuals at risk of becoming homeless. They are in the early stages of setting up an innovative social enterprise, called Baking a Difference, with the aim of launching by July 1st 2012. They approached BT Troubleshooters to benefit from their commercial experience. During Troubleshooters, the team presented three business models that could be followed. As a result, this gave Herts Young Homeless a different perspective on the role of Baking a Difference, focusing more on creating profit so that this could be invested in their other programmes.

Sunnyside Rural Trust

Sunnyside Rural Trust is a charity and social enterprise that works for people with learning disabilities to develop their skills and potential through a range of rural activities. They approached BT Troubleshooters because they wanted to better communicate their charitable and trading messages through their website and social media, targeted at their service users (and their support network of families and carers), customers (potential and current), local businesses, volunteers and local community members. On the day the BT team helped SRT realise they needed to raise general awareness in the community, so that they could drive traffic to the website, as well as improving the website itself. They came up with many ideas about how to improve their website and integrate this with all the different types of social media available, as well as ways to involve their trainees in this. The day enabled SRT to focus on the problem in a new way and to create a practical development plan. SRT found the day incredibly helpful because of the teams' genuine enthusiasm and ability to drill down quickly in to the issues.

St John Wales

St John Wales is a leading first aid charity with 4,500 volunteers, providing vital first aid and community care to tens of thousands of people annually in Wales. They approached BT Troubleshooters because they needed to improve the communications between Head office and volunteers. A current lack of awareness of volunteer activities and projects meant they were missing potential funding, business or pr opportunities. Furthermore, initiatives led by Head Office were not receiving the regional support they required because volunteers did not know about them or understand how they would benefit their local area. The day itself gave St John Wales some very practical ideas, such as running focus groups with volunteers to develop their communications strategy. They also felt they gained a different perspective from BT and believed this would have a significant effect on how they both approach and implement future changes with the charity.