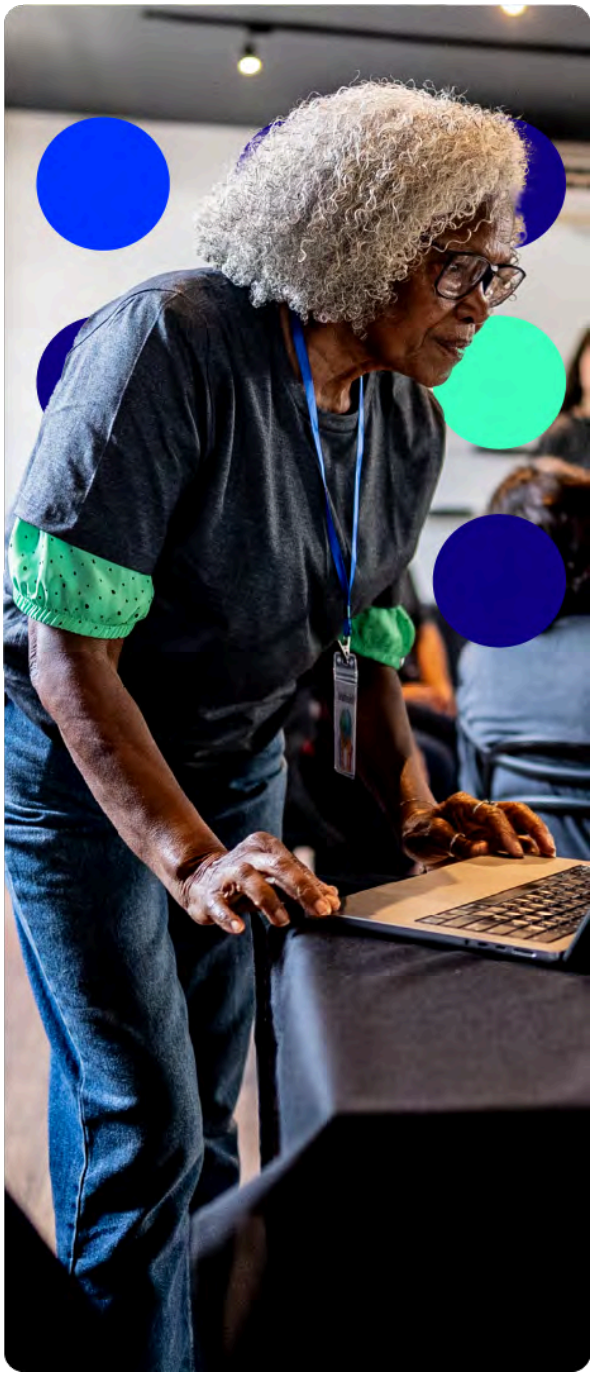
VITALITY IN AMERICA: 2026

The Volunteer Effect

Building better health and stronger workplaces





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Introduction

Across the U.S., nearly 1.9 million registered nonprofit and philanthropic organizations[1] provide services that help hold communities together, including food assistance, housing support, disaster relief, health care, and education. But today, these organizations are under pressure as changes in funding, rising costs, and growing demand have many nonprofits being asked to do more with less. Three-quarters of nonprofits say volunteers are important to their organization, and nearly a quarter call them essential.[1]

The benefit to society is clear: Volunteers help vital nonprofits continue delivering essential services and assistance to millions of people each year. The latest research from The Cigna Group shows that the benefit to the volunteers themselves is just as impressive. Volunteering is linked to stronger vitality, measurable wellness gains, and meaningful community and social connections. Those benefits carry into the workplace, where volunteers show greater productivity and capability in their jobs.

This paper takes an in-depth look at volunteerism in America: who the small but dedicated segment of the population is that supports the important services nonprofits provide, the positive impacts volunteering has on the people who give their time, and the opportunity volunteerism presents to employers looking to boost employee wellness and engagement.



CHAPTER 1

Who's showing up

Volunteering in America

Volunteers are a powerful force for good in communities across the country. Research from The Cigna Group finds that about 3 in 10 U.S. adults (28%) volunteered with a charity or nonprofit this past year, and those who did so are deeply committed to making a difference. Of those who volunteer, most do so at least monthly, and many show up far more often than that. Their dedication creates major impact, strengthening local organizations, supporting neighbors in need, and helping communities thrive.

A snapshot of volunteering in America



Roughly 3 in 10 adults in the U.S. are volunteers.

28%

have volunteered for a charity or nonprofit organization in the past year.

FREQUENCY OF GIVING



Most volunteers give their time at least monthly.

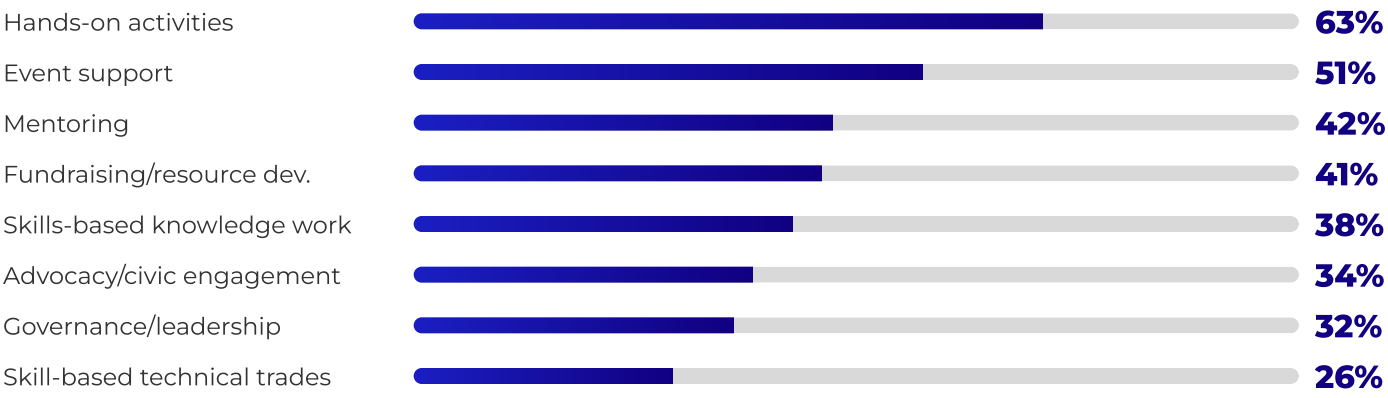


How people give their time

When you picture volunteering, you might imagine a crowded Saturday morning at a food bank or a group of neighbors clearing a park trail. And you wouldn't be wrong. Hands-on volunteering like packing kits, serving food, or lending a helpful hand is the most familiar way people give their time, and it's the most common. But the story doesn't end there. Many volunteers donate something just as valuable: their professional skills and expertise.

Nonprofits are often resource constrained, so individuals who have professional skills to offer, such as marketing, financial, or IT expertise, or those who are able to step in as mentors or participate as board or committee members, are filling gaps an organization might not otherwise be able to. These volunteers help organizations strengthen their operations, expand their reach, and do more for the communities they serve.

POPULAR VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES (% OF VOLUNTEERS)



Note: Percentages do not total 100% because respondents could select more than one answer.

The variety of ways people volunteer highlights an encouraging reality: There's a place for everyone to make a difference. Whether it's sharing a specialized skill or lending a hand at an event, every contribution matters — even if it's only a few hours a month. Nonprofits need help in all shapes and sizes, and communities are stronger when people show up in ways that fit their lives, their interests, and their talents.

CHAPTER 2

More than a feel-good activity

How volunteering fuels vitality

Ask anyone who volunteers why they do it, and you'll usually hear the same thing: They get just as much out of it as they put in. It's easy to write that off as a nice sentiment, but the research suggests it's something more. Volunteerism has a meaningful connection to an individual's vitality — the ability to pursue life with health, strength, and energy.

The Evernorth Vitality Index (EVI) is anchored in the idea that people thrive when three basic psychological needs are met: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The research shows volunteerism naturally brings these elements together. People choose to volunteer freely (autonomy), it makes them feel capable and effective (competence), and it builds real social bonds (relatedness).

AUTONOMY

A sense of initiative and ownership in one's actions

COMPETENCE

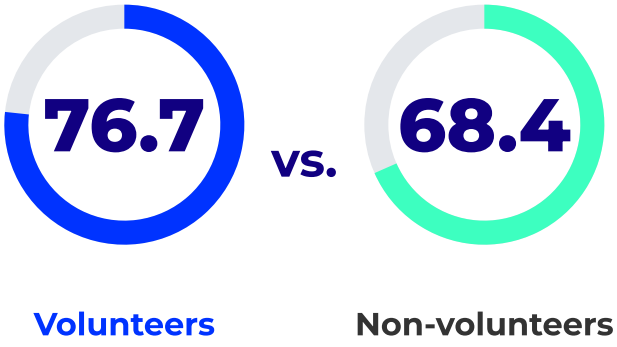
The feeling of mastery and a sense that one can succeed and grow

RELATEDNESS

The feeling of being connected and supported



The effect shows up in the data.
People who have volunteered with a charity or nonprofit organization in the past 12 months have an average EVI of 76.7 (out of 100), compared to 68.4 for those who have not volunteered. That gap tells a clear story about the connection between giving your time and feeling more vital.



And here's the encouraging part: A little volunteering can go a long way if it's done on a regular basis. **People who volunteer at least once a month are significantly more likely to have high vitality than those who volunteer less frequently** (32% versus 18%), even if they're only giving a few hours a month.

You don't need to move mountains to feel the difference.



"What's remarkable about volunteering is that it meets several fundamental psychological needs at once. When people choose to give their time, feel effective in doing so, and connect with others in the process, they're building the very conditions that support vitality. The impact extends beyond those being served and helping volunteers strengthen their own sense of purpose, connection, and well-being."

- Dr. Stuart Lustig, Lead Medical Director, Behavioral Health, Cigna Healthcare

Where volunteers see the biggest gains

The difference between volunteers and non-volunteers extends beyond any single measure of health. Volunteers outscore non-volunteers across all eight dimensions of health that contribute to vitality, indicating that the difference is not solely a matter of health status but also of how individuals approach and experience their overall well-being. The gap is especially pronounced in three areas: physical health, sense of purpose, and outlook on life, underscoring that vitality is shaped not only by how healthy people are but also by how connected, engaged, and resilient they feel.

Stronger physical health

People who volunteer appear to take a different approach to their health. They are more likely to make physical well-being a priority, stay active, get adequate rest, and feel positive about their overall health. Even when facing similar health challenges as non-volunteers, they report better perceptions of their physical health, highlighting the meaningful connection between volunteering and overall well-being.

EXERCISE **REST** **WELL-BEING**

PHYSICAL WELLNESS - VOLUNTEERS VS. NON-VOLUNTEERS





A stronger sense of purpose

In 2025, we explored the power of purpose[2] and its dynamic relationship to vitality. Purpose reflects the feeling that your life is moving in a meaningful direction and that you have the ability to make a difference. People with a stronger sense of purpose tend to have higher vitality, place greater emphasis on relationships and community, and feel a stronger sense of belonging with lower rates of loneliness.

Volunteering brings these benefits to life. Compared with their non-volunteer counterparts, volunteers are more likely to feel confident in their ability to do meaningful things, pursue a life with purpose, and enjoy strong social connections with the people and communities around them. They report a greater sense of belonging, engage more actively in their communities, and are far less likely to feel lonely. Together, these findings suggest that volunteering doesn't just strengthen communities; it can also help strengthen the sense of purpose and connection that supports individual well-being.

PURPOSE AND CONNECTION - VOLUNTEERS VS. NON-VOLUNTEERS





A brighter outlook on life

Perhaps most encouraging is the impact volunteering appears to have on an individual's overall outlook on life and their resilience. Volunteers have a higher sense of optimism, stronger mental health, and greater satisfaction with the quality of their life. They also report greater resilience, which plays a critical role in helping people manage adversity and sustain their overall well-being over time. Volunteers demonstrate this resilience in several ways, including in their ability to adapt to change and to bounce back from hardship. The combination of optimism, life satisfaction, and resilience reflects a deeper sense of well-being that better positions volunteers to maintain their health and well-being over time.

OUTLOOK ON LIFE - VOLUNTEERS VS. NON-VOLUNTEERS





The bottom line: The value of volunteering extends beyond the impact it has on communities. There is a meaningful relationship between volunteering and many of the factors that help people thrive, including physical well-being, purpose, connection, and resilience.

"We often think of volunteering as something we do for others, but the evidence shows it's also one of the most effective things people can do for their own health. The gains we see in volunteers across physical health, mental health, and sense of purpose are significant, and they don't require a huge time commitment. Even a few hours a month can make a real difference."

- Dr. Stuart Lustig, Lead Medical Director, Behavioral Health, Cigna Healthcare

CHAPTER 3

Beyond community impact

Why volunteering matters for employers

Beyond the clear benefits volunteering provides to society and to the individuals giving their time, it also benefits the workplace. As we've previously reported, **individuals with high vitality, such as volunteers, tend to bring qualities that contribute to a stronger workforce.** They are highly productive and engaged at work, contributing to strong organizational performance.

But simply hoping there are volunteers in the workforce isn't enough. Companies that proactively build a purpose-led culture, one that actively encourages, supports, and celebrates volunteerism, can see real results. When employers provide meaningful opportunities for employees to get involved, whether through volunteer events during work hours, dedicated paid time off for volunteerism, or skills-based volunteering opportunities, those returns show up where it matters: engagement, performance, retention, and even talent acquisition.

ENGAGEMENT **RETENTION** **CULTURE**

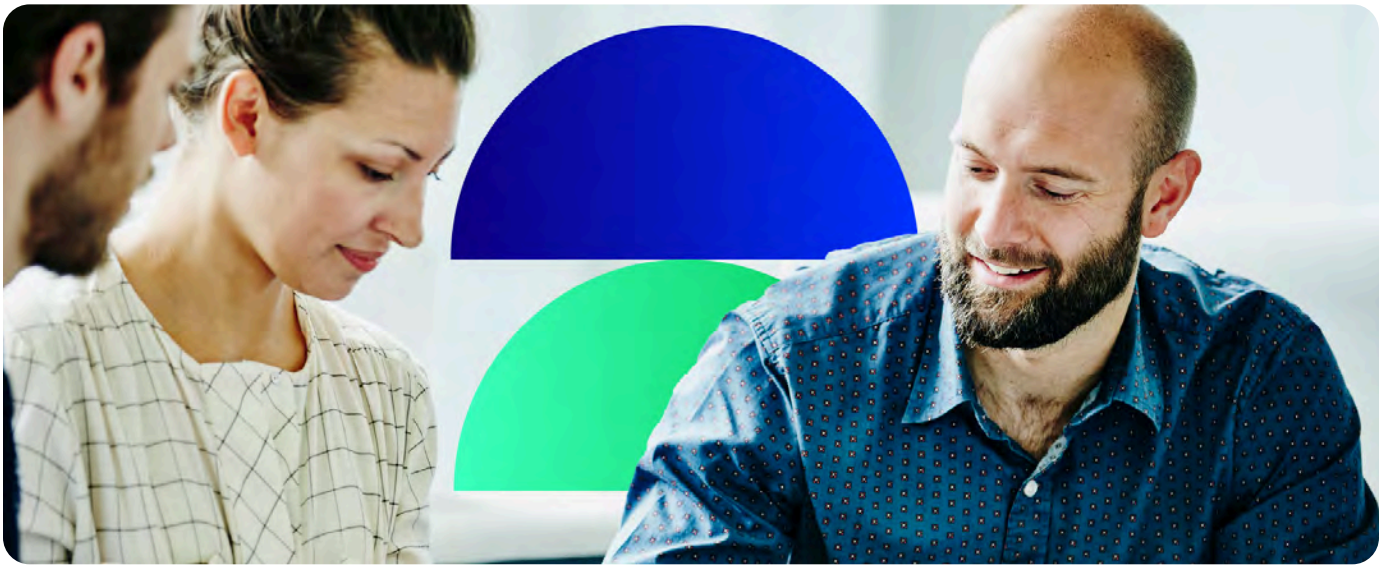
Skills-based volunteerism may be especially powerful because it's a practical pathway to help employees apply and strengthen the human skills that are increasingly critical in a constantly changing workplace shaped by AI, including adaptability, creativity, collaboration, problem-solving, and resilience. As organizations prepare for the future of work, volunteering can serve as both a community investment, as well as a strategic business decision.

See how The Cigna Group employees are supporting nonprofits through skills-based volunteering.

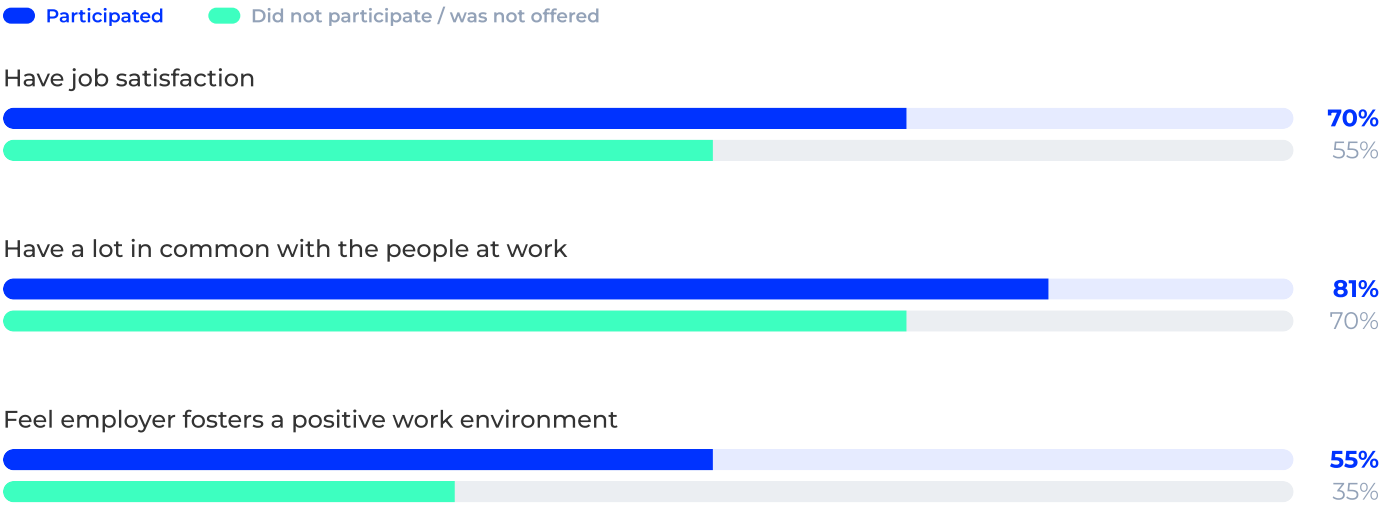
> *"Volunteerism is impact in action. When companies embed volunteerism into their culture year-round, they strengthen local communities and build a workforce that is more connected, more purposeful, and more engaged in the work they do every day."*
>
> **- Sara Quist, Senior Director of Community Programs and President, The Cigna Group Foundation**

More energized and engaged

Volunteering doesn't just create a positive experience for employees. It shapes how they feel about the place they work. Employees who participate in employer-sponsored volunteer opportunities bring more energy and enthusiasm to their work. They report higher job satisfaction and a stronger sense of belonging and are more likely to say their company fosters a positive work environment.



ENGAGEMENT – PARTICIPATED IN EMPLOYER-SPONSORED VOLUNTEERING VS. DID NOT PARTICIPATE / WAS NOT OFFERED



Better performance on the job

When employees feel purposeful and connected, it shows up in the quality and consistency of their work. The engagement advantage translates into performance. Employee volunteers are more confident in their abilities, more committed to helping their organization succeed, and better able to stay mentally focused at work. They're less likely to be distracted during the workday and more likely to go above and beyond what's required. For many employees, volunteering also provides opportunities to strengthen skills such as collaboration, adaptability, problem-solving, and leadership — capabilities that are increasingly important in today's rapidly changing workplace.

JOB PERFORMANCE - PARTICIPATED IN EMPLOYER-SPONSORED VOLUNTEERING VS. DID NOT PARTICIPATE / WAS NOT OFFERED





Stronger retention

Employee volunteers feel a strong sense of pride in where they work, and that matters for reasons that go well beyond sentiment. Research has shown that pride is one of the top drivers of employee retention,[4] making it an important factor in building and keeping a strong workforce. Volunteering gives employees a tangible way to see their organization's values in action and play a role in advancing those values in their communities. That shared sense of purpose can deepen employees' connection to their workplace and reinforce reasons to stay.

PROUD TO BE AN EMPLOYEE OF THIS COMPANY



Participated in employer-sponsored volunteering

Did not participate / was not offered

For employers, the stakes are high: Retaining talented employees helps preserve institutional knowledge, sustain team performance, and reduce turnover costs. Replacing an employee can cost anywhere from 50% to 200% of their annual salary,[5] depending on their role and level.



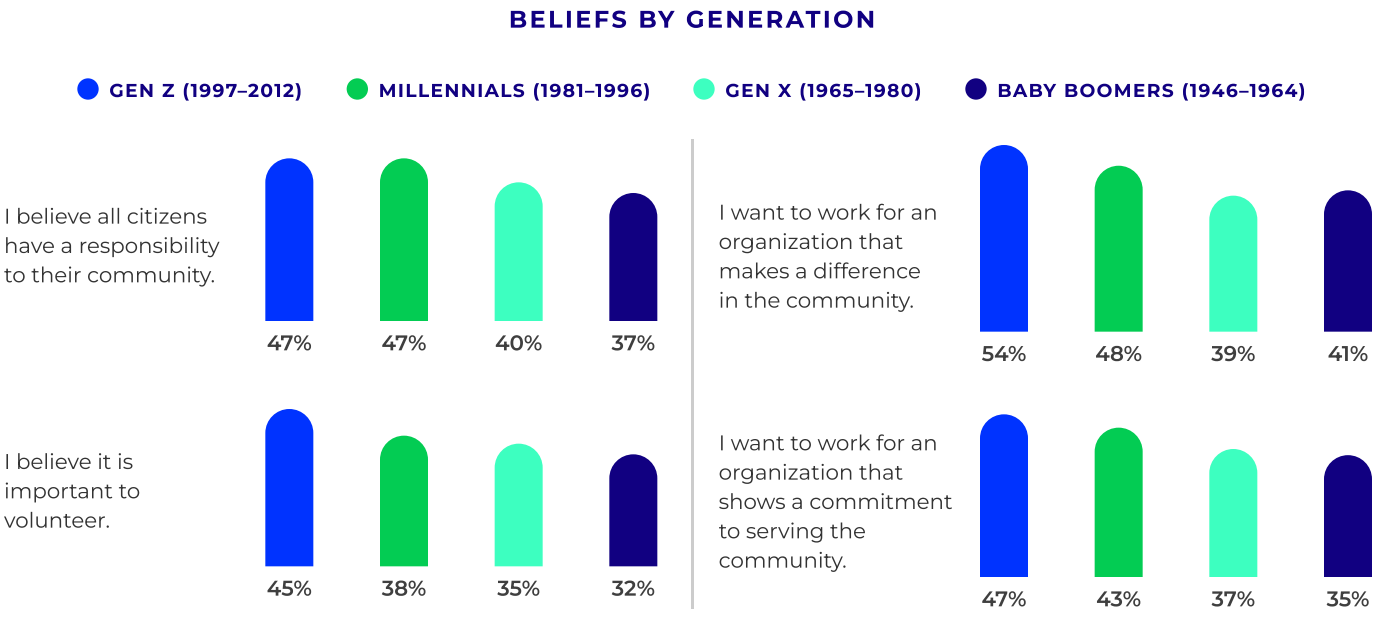
A magnet for new talent

Just as important as retaining talented employees is attracting new ones. Increasingly, job seekers are looking beyond compensation and benefits and prioritizing purpose, values, flexibility, and opportunities to have a meaningful impact. This is especially true for Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) and millennials (born between 1981 and 1996), who are expected to make up nearly three-quarters of the global workforce by 2030.

Research from Deloitte[6] shows:

89% of Gen Z and 92% of millennials say a sense of purpose is important to their job satisfaction and well-being. Four in 10 Gen Z and millennials have turned down a potential employer because of concerns about its ethics or beliefs.

Purpose may not always come directly from an employee's day-to-day role, but organizations can create opportunities to contribute to something larger than themselves. Our research suggests younger generations are especially receptive to volunteerism, with nearly half of Gen Z employees believing both that volunteering is important and that individuals share a responsibility to support our communities. Employers that create meaningful opportunities to give back can strengthen their culture while differentiating themselves in a competitive talent market.



The opportunity: If you build it, they will come.

Even though the benefits of volunteerism for both employees and organizations are clear, a minority of employers are fully embracing the potential of leveraging volunteerism for their employees. Just 27% say their workplace offers volunteer activities during work hours, while only 23% have access to dedicated paid time off to volunteer. Yet employee interest is strong. Six in 10 employees who were offered a volunteer opportunity through their employer took advantage of it. And many more who weren't offered these opportunities say they would have participated given the chance.

EMPLOYER-SPONSORED VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES DURING WORK HOURS



DEDICATED PAID TIME OFF (PTO) FOR VOLUNTEERING



The gap between employee interest and employer investment represents a meaningful opportunity for organizations looking to strengthen engagement, performance, retention, and talent attraction.

> *"The desire to give back is already there in the workforce. When employers make it easy for people to act on that desire, whether through organized events, skills-based volunteering opportunities, or paid time off, everybody benefits. Communities gain valuable support, and employees gain experiences that strengthen purpose, connection, and skills that can carry back into the workplace."*
>
> **- Sara Quist, Senior Director of Community Programs and President, The Cigna Group Foundation**

CHAPTER 4

Turning intent into action

How employers can build a culture of volunteering

Volunteering is an investment in workforce vitality. When employers support their employees' desire to give back, they strengthen engagement, reinforce purpose, build future-ready skills, and create a workplace people are proud to join and stay with. Here are several ways organizations can make volunteering part of a broader employee engagement and workforce development strategy.



Make volunteering part of your total rewards

Treating volunteering as part of a total rewards package signals that the company values community impact, employee well-being, and personal development alongside compensation, benefits, and time off. It also makes participation easier by embedding volunteering into programs employees already understand and use.

- Offer volunteer time off (VTO) so employees have dedicated paid time to give back
- Integrate skills-based volunteering into employee development programs to support both community impact and career growth
- Include volunteer opportunities and programs alongside other benefits and rewards communications
- Track, recognize, and celebrate volunteer contributions to reinforce their value to employees, communities, and the organization



Get employees excited about volunteering

Many employees may not realize the personal, professional, and community benefits volunteering can provide. Employers can help spark interest by making those benefits visible and helping employees understand how giving back can support their own well-being, development, and sense of purpose.

- Communicate the benefits of volunteering, including its connection to vitality, purpose, well-being, and workplace engagement
- Share employee stories[7] that bring the impact of volunteering to life
- Use tools such as the Return on Volunteerism tool[8] to help employees understand the value of their contribution
- Equip managers with resources and talking points to encourage participation across their teams

Make it easy to participate

Good intentions only turn into action when participation is simple and accessible. Employers can help by reducing logistical barriers, offering a variety of experiences, and supporting employees' own choices in how they engage.

- Offer a variety of volunteer experiences, including skills-based projects, mentoring, hands-on service, and event support, so employees can engage in ways that feel meaningful to them
- Provide both local and virtual opportunities so employees can participate regardless of location or work arrangement
- Make it easy to find opportunities through a centralized volunteering hub, calendar, or employee platform, and offer resources on how to find local causes that need their help
- Build volunteering into existing team activities, such as offsites, team-building events, or department initiatives, while giving employees flexibility in how they participate



When employers take these steps, they create value for employees, communities, and their organization. Employees gain a stronger sense of purpose, better health and well-being, meaningful connections, and the opportunity to develop skills that help them succeed both inside and outside the workplace. Nonprofits receive the dedicated support they need to expand their network. And employers build a workforce that's more engaged, productive, resilient, and likely to stay.

Volunteerism is one of the rare investments that benefits individuals, organizations, and communities alike. The employers that embrace it aren't just supporting the communities they serve. They're helping build healthier, more connected, and future-ready workforces.

Behind the findings

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METHODOLOGY

The Cigna Group conducted an online survey with 5,000 U.S. adults from June 2 to July 14, 2026, in collaboration with YouGov. This bilingual (English and Spanish) survey assessed health, vitality, volunteerism, and workplace engagement and productivity across generations.

Participants were U.S. residents 18 years of age and older, fluent in English or Spanish. To ensure that the sample was representative of the U.S. population, quotas were established based on Census Data using a cross-section of age and gender, with employment quotas based on Bureau of Labor Statistics data. Data was then weighted to match the U.S. population on gender, age, ethnicity/race, region, education, and income.

SURVEY RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

The sample composition was 48% male and 50% female, and 1% preferred to self-describe their gender. Respondents were split representatively between the South (39%), West (24%), Midwest (20%), and Northeast (17%). 60% of respondents were white; 17% reported Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin; 12% were Black; 4% were Asian; 7% were other races. The majority, 60%, of respondents work for pay and 89% had health insurance or health care coverage.

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