



by LIM SU LIN

Paid to do good deeds

Recently in the UK, a public debate got heated over one party's manifesto to grant millions of workers paid leave to do volunteer work outside the workplace. Is Malaysia's corporate sector ready to embrace such a policy?

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LAST WEEK, in the lead-up to the May 7 general election in the United Kingdom, Conservative leader and Prime Minister David Cameron declared that he would introduce a pioneer volunteering scheme where workers at firms with at least 250 employees would get paid leave to volunteer for three days, in addition to their 28 days of paid holiday.

His plans, however, were not well-received by political opponents and stakeholders. A representative from the UK Institute of Directors criticised the idea of having a law that would force firms to pay their staff to do charity work, saying that it diminished the essence of volunteering – that it is meant to be a matter of choice.

Meanwhile, Labour was more scathing in its attack, with shadow minister Lisa Nandy describing the policy as one “that has unravelled before it's even been made”.

Their criticisms were levelled at the policy's economic impracticality.

“Giving every public servant three extra days off could cost millions of pounds ... if just half of public sector workers took this up, it would be the time equivalent of about 2,000 nurses, 800 policemen and almost 3,000 teachers,” Nandy was quoted as saying in a news report.

While their points may be valid, is having paid time off for charity work and volunteering really such a bad idea?

Not enough hours in a week

Many international companies and businesses nowadays include volunteering as part of their overall corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. Typically, companies liaise with NGOs, non-profit organisations and the community in gen-



■ The proposal to give employees paid leave to do volunteer work may affect company productivity and profit

eral to devise programmes for employees to spend allotted amounts of time doing charity work.

Our country is no stranger to this. Apart from regular CSR initiatives, the local corporate sector rose to the occasion most notably during last year's floods disaster. Many local companies sent teams of staff volunteers to hard-hit areas for relief operations during that time of need.

Malaysian citizens are generally a caring

lot. Given the chance, many would gladly spend a couple of hours on a weekly or even daily basis to help people in need.

But for those working in demanding jobs, the challenge is how to fit this in when they are chained to tight schedules during the week.

A majority of salaried professionals have to juggle round-the-clock work commitments, leaving them little time to commit to volunteer work.

One possibility is to carve time out during the weekends. But by the time Friday rolls around, the desire to go out and “do good” dips significantly. Call it selfish, but it's hard to blame those who would rather rest and spend quality time with family over doing charity work.

Employer and employee groups weigh in

To overcome the challenges of a so-called “work-volunteer” balance, why not have a policy, as the British Prime Minister suggested, which integrates the two?

According to Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) secretary-general N Gopal Krishnam, while employees would gladly take to the idea, employers may not be as enthusiastic as their production

targets would be affected.

Within the private sector, Gopal says that employers are mainly concerned about getting sufficient output out of the man-hours utilised. “Employers are only interested in profit margins at the end of the day,” he says.

Malaysian Employers' Federation (MEF) executive director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardin thinks that rolling out such a policy may not be feasible.

“While its intentions may be noble, calling for a formal policy may not go down well with employers as they would be concerned about productivity and meeting available mandates,” Shamsuddin explains.

Nonetheless, Shamsuddin admits that employees with a spirit of volunteerism would make valuable assets to any company.

“Investment in voluntary work inculcates a positive attitude. It builds credibility and accountability, as well as a willingness to sacrifice for the community. These are attributes that would benefit the company in the long run.”

However, instead of scrapping the idea, Shamsuddin suggests that volunteer work could be made part of the formal employee appraisal system.

“Companies could take note of employees who go the extra mile to volunteer outside of work and reward them with incentives,” he says.

“For example, additional key performance indicator (KPI) marks could be awarded to employees who show a willingness to sacrifice their own time over weekends to do social work. That way, companies can instill a volunteerism culture at the workplace, without having it eat into working hours.”

Gopal thinks that this would be a welcome move all around, since productivity is not sacrificed.

“If employers can make it part of the KPI achievements, I think more workers would be encouraged (to volunteer),” he says.

In order to wean employers on to the idea, a mainstream policy needs to be rolled out.

Shamsuddin says that the MEF would be willing to hold discussions with the MTUC and the Human Resources Ministry.

“It would be good if the trade associations and the associated chambers of commerce could play a part. Even though they are not concentrating on employers per se, they can also influence policy in the business sphere and give feedback,” he adds.

How to create a lasting culture of volunteerism

Shamsuddin's idea of awarding KPI incentives to altruistic employees is quite a good one. But, in the long run, can it produce a sustainable culture of volunteerism?

If only a handful of employees are willing to sacrifice their time over the weekends, what is the likelihood that rewarding them will spur other colleagues to follow suit?

It may encourage one or two eager beavers, but for the majority, such incentives may not be enticing when there are other ways to earn points which do not involve sacrificing one's weekends.

The carrot system will only work in the short term and appeal to a few workers. In order to create a culture that endures, off-time volunteering needs to be made a required component of KPI measures.

Otherwise, companies could do worse than to take on board the original idea of giving employees the freedom to participate in volunteering activities during working hours while still receiving regular benefits and pay.

If government intervention is too heavy-handed an approach, another approach could be adopted whereby individual company managers discuss arrangements with employees on a flexible basis.

It might involve certain sacrifices, but in the long run, paid working-hour volunteering programmes could go a long way in instilling a culture of social ethics among Malaysians.

Focusweek

SHARIL AMIN/FOCUSWEEK



■ Malaysian Employers' Federation (MEF) executive director Shamsuddin Bardin

MUHAMMAD HAZIM/FOCUSWEEK



■ Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) secretary-general N Gopal Krishnam

Getting the ball rolling

ONE FIRM, PricewaterhouseCoopers Malaysia (PwC), seems to be well ahead of the game. Fourteen years ago, it had already started giving employees paid time off to do volunteer work.

PwC's Community Outreach Programme (COP), started by a former senior employee, allows staff members to volunteer for two weeks worth of working hours each year from May to November. It targets charity homes in the community, with volunteers giving tuition to the children or helping with administrative work.

According to Florence Tan, corporate responsibility leader at PwC, the programme involves about 200 volunteers who clock 10,000 hours yearly.

“It's a well-loved programme, and slots are usually taken up within the first day of posting a volunteering request,” says Tan.

“The programme gives the company an avenue to engage with staff on issues they feel passionate about,” she says, adding that 85% of staff were reportedly satisfied with company's efforts to

be socially responsible.

According to Tan, plenty of Gen Ys nowadays look for companies whose principles resonate with their personal values. Many take pride in being associated with a firm that makes social responsibility a priority.

There were some teething problems, with staff having to pull out mid-way because of client commitments, but things became streamlined over time and with a dedicated team.

Because PwC's environment is one where people are placed in project-based engagements, Tan feels that it is impractical to spread the programme over the long term.

“It (the COP) wouldn't work if it goes on for too long, as staff need to clock in time for other commitments, training and development, professional exams, performance development, etc.,” she explains.



■ PricewaterhouseCoopers volunteers and children from the homes during a team building activity at the office. The firm invites the children to the office at the end of the volunteering programme for a session of learning activities and lunch



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