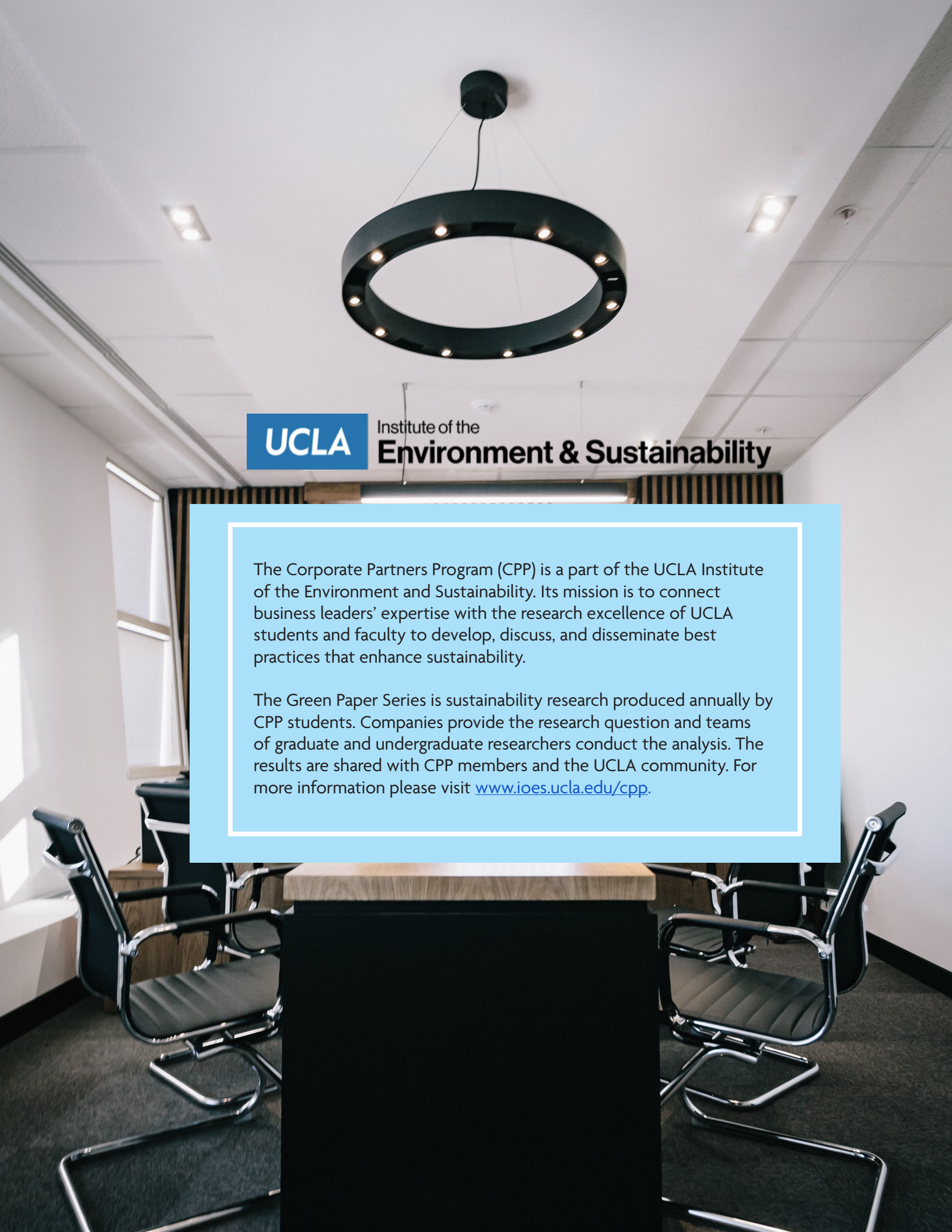




Getting Engaged: Maximizing Employee Engagement Around CSR Programming

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1 Introduction

In the face of the escalating climate emergency and growing social movements around the world, companies are developing robust corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs. Many publications have explored the issue areas and goals that these CSR programs focus on, but fewer analyze the role of the corporate workforce in establishing and executing CSR.

Increased employee engagement in CSR programs can bring value to companies in a number of ways throughout the employment cycle: from recruitment, to tenure, and, finally, productivity. Strong CSR programming can bring a

Further, a separate study concluded that nearly half of workers would be willing to take a 15% reduction in pay to work for an organization that had a purpose that inspired them (Pfau, 2015). Similar studies of Canadian workers have found that 83% of Millennials would be more loyal to a company if they felt that their role at work would impact social and environmental issues and that turnover could be reduced by 57% or more for employees actively engaged with their company's purpose initiatives (Bernardino, 2021). Thus, strong CSR programming can be a major advantage for attracting and retaining workers and result

productivity among employees (2019). Greater employee satisfaction at work is also positively correlated with greater shareholder returns for a business (McKinsey, 2019). Together, these hiring advantages and productivity gains can be an important edge for a company and bring significant value to shareholders.

The objective of this study is to share strategies which increase employee engagement in company CSR programs. Through a literature review, investigation of software applications (apps), and interviews, best practices were identified and collated. Five best practices are explored: leadership support, strategic communications, personal connection, green teams, and rewards and incentives. The paper then concludes with a review of existing apps which may help with the execution of some of these best practices.



greater sense of purpose to an organization, which may make it more attractive to prospective employees. One study found that having a green culture helps attract high-quality applicants, because most job seekers are more likely to work at a company with a strong green culture (Harris, 2020). In fact, one survey found that working for an organization with a clearly defined purpose was the second most important criteria for prospective workers, behind only pay and benefits (Pfau, 2015).

in savings on recruiting and hiring costs for a company.

As the employees benefit, so do the shareholders of a company. The advantages in attracting and retaining workers can result in savings with recruiting and hiring expenses for a company. There can also be impacts on productivity. Research by the consulting firm McKinsey & Company has shown that robust CSR ESG programming, for example, can lead to greater motivation and higher levels of

2 Best Practices in Employee Engagement in CSR

Leadership Support

To increase employee engagement in sustainability programs, organization leaders should support and have responsibility for sustainability programming. Important leadership groups in this regard are executives and members of the board of directors. When upper-level management endorses sustainability programming values, it sets a priority that can cascade throughout the rest of the organization (Lamach, 2015). For example, by engaging with CSR programs themselves, these leaders act as role models and encourage other employees to engage with sustainability programs (Pellegrini et al., 2018). Beyond acting as role models, upper-level leaders embody organizational support for CSR strategies, which ensures that employees believe that the organization

can achieve these goals and thus support the goals themselves (Opoku-Dakwa et al., 2018). Beyond senior executives, supervisory support such as local managers and line managers are another key source of leadership support. Because managers have informal daily interactions with employees, they create relationships which make them credible agents of change (Pellegrini et al., 2018). An added advantage is that, as managers interact directly with employees, they can concretely address employees' responses to sustainability programs (Pellegrini et al., 2018). Thus, it is key to provide local managers and direct supervisors with guidelines and resources to ensure that they understand CSR policies and are empowered to be change agents (Pellegrini et al., 2018).

Tips



Have upper-level management endorse sustainability efforts through email and embedded in practice



Provide local managers with guidelines and resources relating to CSR policies





Strategic Communications

One of the most important criteria for engaging employees is good internal communication. With the many distractions and heavy demands of the modern workplace it can sometimes be challenging to get the attention of busy employees. This is especially true in large corporations. However, research uncovered several strategies for effective communication around CSR programming.

First, before beginning communication efforts, it is important to identify the “why” of the organization’s CSR goals. This includes creating a meaningful, actionable purpose statement (Kennedy, 2021). After a company determines its “why”, formal and informal communication

channels should be established to make the company’s sustainable values clear (Ali Ababneh, 2020). Furthermore, it is important to choose an appropriate source for the information. As we’ve already seen, employees often view organizational leaders as credible and influential. Thus, leaders should play a key role in the communication of sustainability policies (Norton et al., 2014). Supporting this notion was a survey of KPMG employees that found a correlation between leaders who talk about positive societal impacts of employees’ work and the employees’ engagement and morale (Pfau, 2015).

Visual communication, such as posters and other imagery, can also be a key means of conveying information and engaging employees. However, to break through common message clutter,

messaging should be noticeable and memorable. This can be done by adding vivid visuals and dramatic headlines, such as “We Shape History”, which has been found to increase enthusiasm among employees (Pfau, 2015). Likewise, as people often emotionally relate to stories, adding narrative can be an impactful way to communicate a message. For example, Pellegrini et al. (2018) found that when CSR goals were promoted by success stories and projects, these communication campaigns influenced employees’ perception of sustainability in the company and their sustainable behavior. No matter the method or channel, it is also crucial that clear language is used in all internal CSR communications. This can help reduce confusion and make these programs seem less intimidating to staff that might otherwise be interested in engaging (Zabey, 2018).

Personal Connection to CSR Goals

According to the Ability-Motivation-Opportunity theory, employee engagement (including engagement in CSR activities) is a function of employees’ ability, motivation, and opportunity to participate. The “motivation” aspect is closely tied to employees’ personal connection to the organization’s goals. In fact, in their work on the subject, Opoku-Dakwa et al. defined engagement as “the investment and expression of the self in one’s work” (2018). These same authors determined that social and cognitive engagement theories show that, in order to engage employees, CSR initiatives must have outcomes that employees personally value (Opoku-Dakwa et al., 2018). Similar research, building on engagement theory, analyzed data from more than 15,000 employees at a large American professional service firm. This analysis found that authenticity, or “being able to show one’s whole self at work”, in CSR programming has a significant positive impact on employee engagement (Glavas, 2016). Likewise, a donation management platform, Benevity, examined donation transactions and found that employees are up to five times more likely to donate their time and money to an organization if they are able to choose the cause to support (“The top 8 employee engagement strategies to improve your social impact programs”). Clearly, aligning CSR goals with employee values harnesses motivation and therefore maximizes engagement.

Sustainability training is another opportunity to build employees’ personal connection to CSR goals and programs. This is because the “ability” aspect of the Motivation-Ability-Opportunity can be bolstered by training and development programs designed to enhance employee’s sustainability knowledge and awareness of how they can contribute to their organization’s goals (Ali Ababneh, 2020). Specifically, these training programs should promote the organization’s sustainability culture and objectives and enhance employees’ ability to perform environmental behaviors such as emissions reduction, waste management, and green purchasing procedures (Ali Ababneh, 2020). Providing a clear message during training will ensure that the employee feels more aligned to the company’s goals and thus engages in sustainability practices (Harris 2020).

However, simply having sustainability training is not enough to compel behavioral change. In an experimental study, Rizzi and Frey (2018) found that

sustainability training impacts employees’ in-role behavior (behaviors related to their job function) when employees are enthusiastic and proud about the environmental impacts of this work. Thus, to have the most effect, companies should focus on engaging employees’ enthusiasm during sustainability training.

Tips



To engage employees, CSR programs must offer outcomes that employees value

Authenticity and the ability to choose causes to support can increase engagement

Sustainability training should be clear

Sustainability training should explain what sustainability is, what the company’s sustainability goals are, and what employees can do

Sustainability training should engage employees’ enthusiasm by making a personal connection to the employee

Tips



Create a clear and actionable purpose statement before starting the communications campaign

Utilize credible leaders and vivid visuals as vehicles for communication

Include stories in communication



Green Teams

Recruiting passionate employees to act as sustainability ambassadors can also encourage employee engagement in CSR efforts. One way of empowering sustainability-focused employees is creating a “green team” made up of people from various levels and departments; this team educates other employees on sustainability and encourages them to adopt sustainable practices at home and work. Having a green team whose membership has diversity in roles increases the variety of ideas for CSR practices and helps embed sustainability throughout the company. In other words, having a green team can ensure that CSR includes bottom-up support, not just top-down directives (“How to Start a Great Green Team”).

To start a green team, companies can simply ask for volunteers, which empowers employees; organizers can further grow the group by asking green team members to bring an interested friend to the next meeting. These green teams can work together to work on sustainability projects of their choice, including identifying volunteer opportunities for the staff and providing waste sorting training (“How to Start a Great Green Team”). A successful example of this was Ingersoll Rand’s green team initiative that led to campaigns which encouraged bicycle commuting and proper waste sorting among their employees (Lamach, 2015).

Another way of incorporating bottom-up employee input is creating “sustainability champions” who incorporate sustainability practices across a company’s functions, business units, and brands. For example, Unilever has a network of “sustainability champions” (Barkley, 2020). Similarly, UCLA utilizes “sustainability liaisons” who are volunteers from different departments on their campus that relay sustainability programming and resources from the Chief Sustainability Officer and the Facilities Management team to their peers.

Tips



- Create a green team by encouraging passionate employees from a variety of departments to volunteer
- Encourage green team members to start a sustainability project of their choice

Rewards and Incentives

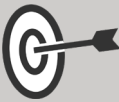
Financial and nonfinancial rewards can also be an impactful way to encourage employee engagement around CSR programming. The financial incentives can easily tie into performance management and compensation practices of an organization, which have been shown to affect employee motivation and attitudes (Ababneh, 2021). Incorporating CSR goals, or green behaviors, into performance management can also signal to employees that these programs are meaningful to an organization (Ababneh, 2021). To ensure a perception of equity and fairness in these measures, objective key performance indicators (KPIs) should be established and integrated to assess performance against CSR objectives for all stakeholders (Ababneh, 2021). Examples of financial incentives for individual workers may include subsidies towards green transportation fees, such as public transit passes or bicycle expenses, or additional compensation and performance bonuses tied to sustainability goals.

Beyond financial incentives for individual employees, CSR efforts can also be tied to the financial goals of a company as a whole to effectively drive employee engagement. One study of more than 400 workers from a variety of U.S. businesses found that the effects of incentives for environmental objectives were greater when they were complementary to the financial goals of an organization, compared to when objectives were aligned solely with company values (Merriman et al., 2016). An example of such a program would be to encourage employees to participate in an environmental program, like reducing office energy consumption or paper waste, with the goal to produce cost savings to help a company reach its financial goals and improve profitability.

There is also an important role for nonfinancial rewards, such as praise and recognition, in driving employee engagement. In fact, some studies have concluded that social and recognition awards may be more effective than financial rewards in engaging employees around environmental management practices (Tang et al., 2018). Examples of these types of rewards may include praise from a manager during a performance review on an employee’s CSR participation, or public recognition in a company meeting for top volunteers. These nonfinancial rewards have the added benefit of not impacting an organization’s budget and being available whether a company is profitable or not. Offering a combination of rewards, financial and nonfinancial, will entice broader engagement (Tang et al., 2018).



Tips



- Use objective KPIs to ensure the perception of fairness and equity around CSR awards and incentives
- Offer both financial and nonfinancial incentives to engage a broader range of employee motivations
- When possible, align CSR efforts with complementary company goals such as improving efficiency and producing cost savings

3 Utilizing Apps to Assist in Execution of Best Practices

As CSR has gained greater attention and become more mainstream, a number of software applications (apps) and platforms have begun providing services for measuring the effectiveness of these programs and engaging employees in the initiatives. Curious about the role that apps can serve, we reviewed fourteen apps. They focus on a range of CSR aspects, from employee volunteering and donations, to increasing energy efficiency and reducing carbon emissions. The table below gives a brief overview of each, as well as a link to its homepage for further information. But what is more impactful for the reader are the shared strategies that emerged when looking across the portfolio; these can be embraced by companies with (or without) the assistance of a specific app. The apps facilitate employee engagement through: measurement, automation, incentives and gamification.

App (name)	Category	Main functions	Key mechanisms of employee engagement	Gamification Elements?	Examples of Customers	URL
 PIPs Rewards	Broad ESG	Tracks users' "Positive Impact Points" (health-, socially-, or environmentally-conscious actions)	Measurement, automation, rewards	Yes	N/A (target audience is individuals)	https://www.pipsrewards.com/
 WeSpire	Broad ESG	Tracks employees' participation and impact against a broad range of ESG metrics	Program design, communication integration, measurement	Yes	BASF, MGM Resorts, Novartis, Timberland	https://www.wespire.com/
 Selflessly	Volunteering & Donations	Provide volunteer and donation opportunities and track employees' engagement	Automated donations, matching gifts, volunteer hours tracking, holistic reporting	No	Codelicious, Central Indiana Community Foundation	https://selflessly.io/
 Alaya	Volunteering & Donations	Track employees' participation in volunteering, donation, and other CSR projects	Measurement, social elements, incentives, gamification, pre-populated opportunities	Yes	L'oreal, Nestle, Johnson&Johnson, PWC, BMW	https://alayagood.com/
 Blackbaud YourCause CSRconnect	Volunteering & Donations	Tracks and encourages employees' participation in volunteering and donation	Easy to use software, program customization, nonprofit database	No	Berkshire Bank, Q2, Vizient	https://www.blackbaud.com/products/blackbaud-yourcause-csrconnect
 Spark Benevity	Volunteering & Donations	Tracks and encourages employees' participation in volunteering, donation, and other positive actions	Measurement, gamifications	Yes	GoDaddy, Cambia, Dolby, Experian	https://benevity.com/products/spark
 Sweep	Carbon Emissions	Measure company and value chain emissions	Centralized reporting, team assignments, emissions measurements	No	Saint-Gobain, Questel, Prose, Mediawan	https://www.sweep.net/
 Thrive	Volunteering & Donations	Offers volunteer, grant, and donation management	Configurable metrics, volunteer promotion and hours tracking, management dashboard	No	Coca-Cola HBC, Lewisham Homes, VolkerWessels UK	https://www.thrive-platform.com/
 YellowTin	Energy Efficiency	Platform provides insights based on local energy rates and incentives	Energy usage and tracking platform, notifications about incentives and new technologies	No	Unknown	https://www.yellowtin.com/



Measurement

Each of the apps we reviewed uses metrics to demonstrate progress. These metrics are shared with the client, which is most often a corporation or nonprofit organization. Data tracking and performance metrics vary by app depending on which aspect of CSR they are designed to address. Regardless of which aspect, they provide metrics, and sometimes offer automated tracking, which can be reported in company CSR reports or websites. Apps designed to capture employee engagement around volunteer activities and charitable giving may track KPIs such as the number of participating employees, types of organizations supported, the total number of volunteer hours for a given initiative, and total dollars raised among company employees (“Thrive” & “YourCause”). Some of the apps focused on giving and volunteering, like Thrive and YourCause CSRconnect, can also be tailored to recommend volunteer events and charitable organizations to donate to based on a company’s CSR goals. Together, these metrics and features make it significantly easier for organizations to connect to causes that align with their values and track their donated time and money.

There are also apps tailored towards environmental aspects of CSR programming. For example, organizations can create strategies and track progress for reducing carbon emissions from their business operations and value chain through an app called Sweep. This app engages employees by giving them access to tracking tools and assigning specific teams to concentrate on emissions reductions from particular business activities (“Sweep”). Another app, WeSpire, offers a broader range of sustainability-related tracking measures and KPIs aimed at boosting recycling, encouraging better energy efficiency, and reducing water usage (“WeSpire”). Specific metrics around these goals include pounds of waste diverted from landfills, kilowatt hours of energy reductions, and gallons of water saved. As many of these measurements can be complicated and entail collecting information from different systems, these apps may act as a convenient data depository for many companies.

Automation

A key feature of nearly all of these apps is automation. Reports can be customized and automated to track against company-specific CSR goals providing key insights and identifying top performing employees. For example, Alaya offers reports that can be tailored to track impact of select CSR programs for a given company and automatically shared with internal and external stakeholders (“Alaya”). With the carbon-emission focused app Sweep, data gathering can be automated for a company’s operations and run against Sweep’s “emission factor database” to track the emissions performance (“Sweep”).

Automated features can also help maximize engagement around charitable giving initiatives from both employees and companies themselves. The app YourCause CSRconnect offers integrations that allow employees to donate to causes of their choosing by opting into automated payroll deductions, either for set campaigns or year-round (Adamson). Likewise, Benevity offers real-time corporate matching for employee giving to pre-vetted nonprofit organizations (“Benevity”). Finally, some of these apps, such as Thrive and WeSpire, can send automated notifications to employees that have expressed interest in volunteering for, or giving towards, certain causes, further boosting engagement with these programs (“Thrive”, “WeSpire”).

Incentives

Our review of CSR apps found that just as rewards increase employee engagement in general programs, incentives built into apps also facilitate employee engagement. Apps harnessed financial, personal, and social incentives. First, several apps used monetary incentives: for example, Selflessly matches donations to encourage employees to donate to organizations (“Selflessly”). YourCause CSRconnect similarly has companies match employees’ gifts; the app also facilitates payroll deductions for giving and time off for volunteering (Adamson). Furthermore, this app can also give grants to volunteers (“YourCause”).



Apps also created personal incentives to give employees co-benefits for participating in CSR activities. Alaya matches volunteer opportunities to employees’ interests, thus increasing intrinsic motivation to participate in volunteering. This app also creates professional and personal development opportunities through volunteering: because employees gain extra skills through volunteering, they may be more likely to participate (“Alaya”).

Finally, apps also utilized social incentives. As humans, we all have a need to belong; the app uses this in a persuasive way by connecting sustainable behaviors to social needs. For example, Alaya has a social feature in which employees can post, like, comment, and financially support activities like volunteering, projects, and donating (“Alaya”). This app also groups employees into teams, which encourages employees to work together (“Alaya”). Finally, Spark Benevity enables employees to match each others’ donations (“Spark Benevity”). Each of these strategies connects CSR behaviors to social status and acceptance, which increases employee engagement in these programs.

Gamification

Apps also commonly use gamification, which includes adding game elements such as points, badges, and leaderboards to sustainability behaviors. For example, WeSpire creates competitions, which focuses employee attention for time periods (“WeSpire”). Spark Benevity similarly creates competitions between employees and allows them to see their ranking (“Spark Benevity”). Finally, Funifier includes a broad range of gamification elements in its model, including leaderboards showing employees’ rankings, live news feeds, avatars, and progress bars. This focus on competition and progress can encourage employees to participate in CSR activities such as volunteering and donating (“Funifier”).

4 Constraints and Needs for Future Research

This paper serves only as a preliminary analysis of the benefits of several strategies. Each section could be researched more in-depth and enriched if additional research techniques, such as more interviews or experiments, were employed. Specifically, research into methods of effective communication is a major area of opportunity. For example, researchers could implement a long-term study of a particular communications strategy within a company or apply theory of change to communication of CSR programming to employees. Furthermore, an experimental study could be conducted to determine the causal relationship between strategies and employee engagement in CSR programming.

5 Conclusion

Engaging employees in CSR programming can bring great value to an organization. The main benefits include advantages with employee hiring, increased retention, and boosts to productivity. In turn, these benefits can positively impact the bottom line through cost savings and performance gains, which may ultimately increase shareholder value. Therefore, companies should prioritize engaging employees with CSR programming by following a number of best practices. Efforts to engage employees should start with leaders in an organization supporting and taking responsibility for sustainability programming. This sets a positive example for the rest of the organization and shows that these programs are valued. Next, strategic communication and training around the programming should be done using clear language that connects to values that are important to employees within a given organization. Clear communication prevents confusion and ensures alignment on shared goals while personal connection to the goals of CSR programming raises enthusiasm.

There are many tools available for improving employee engagement. Some of these methods include establishing green teams within an organization as well as offering rewards and incentives tied to performance metrics for CSR programs. Green teams can be an effective means for empowering passionate employees and nurturing creative approaches to CSR challenges. Additionally, offering both financial and nonfinancial rewards has been shown to be a powerful incentive for raising engagement levels; a combination of the two will engage a broader range of employees that may be more motivated by different types of rewards. Finally, as technology advances, new apps are becoming readily available that offer new opportunities to maximize and track employee engagement. The key ways these apps offer value to organizations are by leveraging advanced measurement techniques, automation, innovative incentives, and elements of gamification. Together, these tools and practices can complement each other and help companies maximize employee engagement around CSR programming.



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