

American Cancer Society: *A Caring Workplaces, Committed Employees* Case Study

Report No. 4

Every nonprofit has a defined mission, and many rely on both paid and unpaid staff to achieve their goals. The American Cancer Society (ACS) conceptualized a system that integrates both types of staff—employees and volunteers—into a single talent management structure. This case study shows how ACS’s innovative approach is providing a great place to work while also increasing organizational effectiveness.

In partnership with its Divisions and local offices, the American Cancer Society’s national office is pursuing a cutting-edge approach to supporting employees and volunteers through an integrated talent strategy. This report profiles ACS’s philosophical and structural approach, with a particular focus on the implications for voluntarism.

This case study is one of a series developed by the Family Strengthening Policy Center as part of its *Caring Workplaces, Committed Employees* initiative; other case studies in our series explore specific benefits, policies, and procedures for supporting employees in nonprofit organizations. The *Caring Workplaces* initiative aims to enhance paid employee and volunteer commitment to nonprofit human services organizations by providing employers with practices that help them to create supportive workplaces. *Caring Workplaces* is about valuing all staff by being supportive of their responsibilities—at work, at home, and in the community. When staff members are healthy, supported, and have the

flexibility they need, remarkable improvements can occur in service quality, work effectiveness, and organizational climate.

About the American Cancer Society

ACS is the nationwide community-based voluntary health organization dedicated to eliminating cancer as a major health problem by preventing cancer, saving lives, and diminishing suffering from cancer through research, education, advocacy, and service. Headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia, the American Cancer Society, Inc., consists of the National Home Office, 13 chartered Divisions, and a presence in more than 3,400 communities throughout the United States. The National Home Office is responsible for overall planning and coordination of ACS’s programs and advocacy efforts, providing technical support and materials to Divisions and local offices, and administering research programs.

Impetus

In the past, ACS viewed its volunteers as a complement to employed staff. The turning point came in a 2005 analysis that reported, “While community volunteer involvement is neither at risk nor in immediate crisis. . . [t]he Society has *not* kept up with the pace of change in community volunteerism.”¹

In the ensuing strategic planning process, the Society developed a fuller appreciation of its community base of volunteers as a unique, essential asset. Additionally, the leadership of ACS recognized that achieving its mission depended upon the capacity of paid and unpaid talent. Volunteers, who are involved in all aspects of ACS’s core business functions, are an essential catalyst for success and are inseparable from paid staff in this context.

Today, an integral part of how ACS makes a difference in communities is by investing in volunteers and employees to build their engagement with the organization and their effectiveness in the workplace.

American Cancer Society: At-a-Glance

Employees 7,000+ nationwide

Volunteers 3+ million nationwide, most at the community level, but some also serve the National Home Office

Divisions 13 chartered Divisions and a presence in 3,400 communities

Snapshot ACS is committed to increasing mission impact by growing the engagement of a diverse volunteer and employee base that enhances ACS’s understanding of community, expands its reach, and provides effective services to all people.

URL <http://www.cancer.org>

Strategy

As a result of this shift in thinking, ACS adopted a “one people strategy” that tightly aligns investments in its paid and volunteer human capital with the ACS strategic plan.² The goal of the nationwide³ talent strategy is to:

Make ACS the very best place to work and volunteer —a place where people want to work, where people develop their skills throughout their careers, and a place where people stay because they are valued.

With top leadership commitment at the National Home Office, the Divisions, and local offices, the ACS talent strategy has the following elements:

- Integrating the formerly separate human resources, voluntarism, and diversity and inclusion offices into a new office of Talent Strategy (TS) headed by a chief talent officer.
- Renewing the commitment to recruiting and retaining the right people for the right job; TS focuses on talent attraction, talent development, and talent retention.
- Involving paid and volunteer staff in talent strategy development and implementation.
- Making informed decisions by collecting and analyzing data.

¹ COO Voluntarism Report to the National Executive Team, 2005.

² Prior to this new approach, ACS had a traditional structure with separate offices for human resources, voluntarism, and diversity.

³ The American Cancer Society, Inc. consists of a National Home Office with 13 chartered Divisions throughout the United States and a presence in most communities. The National Home Office is responsible for overall planning and coordination of the Society’s programs for cancer information delivery, cancer control and prevention, advocacy, resource development, and patient services. The National Home Office also provides technical support and materials to Divisions and local offices and administers the intramural and extramural research programs. The National Board of Directors includes representatives from the Divisions and the general public. The Society’s 13 Divisions are governed by Division Boards of Directors composed of both medical and lay volunteers throughout the United States and Puerto Rico. The Divisions are responsible for program delivery in their regions.

Performance goals and metrics are aligned across the national, Division, and local levels.

- Centralizing talent management functions to enhance quality, outcomes, and/or cost-efficiencies. (For example, the National Home Office screens applicants for employment and voluntarism for local offices, Divisions, and national positions.)
- Investing in paid and volunteer talent directly, via training and leadership development.
- Increasing the value that volunteers and employees receive in return for providing services, whether recognition, new learning experiences, or, for employees, a competitive compensation system.
- Adopting accountability systems for talent outcomes, including performance metrics for voluntarism, employment, and diversity.

Distinguishing Features. From the perspective of the Family Strengthening Policy Center, some of the most distinguishing features of the ACS approach are:

- Commitment to volunteers as equally important to mission impact as employees.
- Investment in all paid and unpaid staff so that they not only continue to work with the organization, but also deepen their engagement.
- Integration of volunteers into all aspects and all levels of ACS work.
- Development of a holistic approach to attracting, developing, and retaining talent for employee and volunteer positions.

Terms as Used in this Catalog

Employee

Hourly and salaried workers

Staff

Paid and volunteer workers

Volunteer

Voluntary workers providing a service for the organization, including those receiving a stipend and/or other volunteer benefits

- Use of research, analysis, and pilot programs to inform talent strategy.
- Implementation of accountability systems to assure that the ACS re-investment in human capital achieves the desired results.
- Alignment of talent strategy to the overall ACS strategic plan so that TS recruits, develops, and keeps the right people.

Investing in and Caring for People

This section provides additional highlights of the ACS talent strategy that correspond with the Family Strengthening Policy Center's *Caring Workplace* framework.⁴

To shape its talent initiatives, TS has invested in research, such as compensation studies, talent pipeline analysis, pilot tests, systems evaluations, and input from volunteers and employees at all levels. Through this process, TS has an improved understanding of what makes work meaningful for volunteers and employees and what people need to succeed.

Across all three focus areas (talent attraction, development, and retention), TS has:

- Centralized many functions that the National Home Office can conduct efficiently and with high quality. (For example, TS updated ACS talent attraction branding, including a new tagline—*Save Lives. Fulfill Yours.*—to appeal to potential job and volunteer applicants.)
- Developed an accountability system to maintain a focus on achieving talent goals (For example, each Division receives an annual volunteer profile that compares their basic voluntarism statistics with nationwide voluntarism data from the Corporation for National and Community Service.)

⁴ To learn more about this framework, go to the *Caring Workplaces, Committed Employees Online Resource Center* at <http://www.nasassembly.org/fspc/CaringWorkplacesInitiative/index.html>.

Talent Attraction

OTS supports the recruiting and onboarding⁵ of volunteers and employees in all parts of the ACS network. Under the new system, TS helps screen applicants through the ACS Web site (Cancer.org) and provides orientation for new employees and volunteers. Onboarding for volunteers includes an initial introductory telephone call to discuss or select a program, a seamless transition from the national level to a Division representative, and a follow-up call after the initial service to learn about their experiences.

New talent attraction initiatives target specific lifestages, recognizing, for example, that young adults starting their careers after college are especially open to volunteer opportunities, as are experienced workers nearing retirement who want to give back to their communities. Also TS is piloting new strategies for diversifying its volunteer base. These include attending several national recruiting ethnic career conferences (e.g., national Black MBA and National Society of Hispanic MBAs) and recruiting volunteers as well as employees at these events.

Talent Development

Talent development aims to strengthen employee and volunteer engagement with ACS and increase mission impact. The newly centralized learning management system not only informs workforce planning, but also assures employees and volunteers understand career options and ways to build their competencies for the next step.

- **Core competencies** – In order to retain a position at ACS, both paid and voluntary staff members must show proficiency in specific core competencies developed by TS.

- **Career progression** – TS has defined new career paths for employees and volunteers, along with the particular competencies needed for lateral or vertical moves. With meaningful roles for volunteers at all levels of the Society, career progression is a viable option for volunteers as well as employees.
- **Career planning** – During periodic reviews, ACS ensures that all staff members understand their career options and ways to access learning experiences to build competencies needed for the next position. For employees and volunteers in positions with a high burnout rate, ACS offers alternatives to keep them engaged.
- **Training and learning experiences** – Increasingly, volunteers and employees are participating in training and learning experiences together.

After identifying young professionals and experienced professionals as two generations that are critical to the future of ACS leadership, TS developed the pilot Talent Opportunities Program. Through the program, paid make a three-year and unpaid staff make a three to 12 month commitment to building their ACS careers; in exchange, ACS places program participants in high-impact positions.

The Talent Opportunities Program for skilled young professionals (such as Gen X and Y) offers a set of developmental experiences over a three- to 12-month period. The program helps younger employees and volunteers expand their networks, enhance their professional skills, and obtain essential experience. Through the *pro bono* component, local businesses whose employees are also ACS volunteers agree to allow these staff members to “work” for ACS for a specific learning experience over a three-month to one-year period.

⁵ Onboarding is the process of preparing paid or volunteer staff for a new position, setting, or team.

For experienced staff near retirement and experienced volunteer leaders, the Talent Opportunities Program provides a different set of experiences. Program participants help ACS cultivate young talent through mentoring. They also have opportunities to apply their professional expertise in meaningful ways, leverage their networks, and receive reverse mentoring so they can learn new skills from young professionals.

Talent Retention

To keep and develop its talent base, TS and the whole ACS system are strengthening human capital practices. To demonstrate that the Society values each employee and volunteer, managers are trained and expected to create settings for staff to succeed—through valuable work experiences, opportunities to develop competencies, and chances to take on new responsibilities or roles.

TS has increased the emphasis on volunteer retention with a primary focus on improving volunteer relationship management practices from beginning to end so that people are more likely to stay involved. Beyond an effective onboarding process and volunteer development system, TS has strived to improve the value exchange for volunteers. Highlights include:

- Recognition and rewards designed to make sure volunteers feel valued, want to stay involved, and see themselves serving for years to come.
- Development of both online and neighborhood communities to help keep volunteers connected and motivated.
- Attention to child care needs. (For example, local affiliates may coordinate with other volunteers to serve as the care providers.)

- Transportation assistance so rising costs are not a barrier to service. (For example, volunteers who transport patients to cancer screenings or treatments may receive gas cards to offset their fuel costs. Other times local offices bring the service to volunteers, such as at a worksite or shopping mall. The Society is also expanding virtual volunteering opportunities from home or other computers.)
- Accountability by use of specific performance metrics for volunteer engagement, abiding to the principle that “what gets measured gets done.”

To help employees achieve a high quality of life and succeed at work, ACS encourages a healthy work/life balance by offering flexible work schedules, telecommuting, job-sharing arrangements, alternative work hours, a generous fringe benefit package, and paid time off for holidays, vacation, illness, and personal reasons.

Required Resources

Adopting and implementing the “one people” strategy throughout the Society has required a

CEO Statement

“The American Cancer Society is as dedicated to our greatest resource—our staff and volunteers—as we are to our mission to eliminate cancer as a major health problem. The goal of our talent strategy is to ensure that our staff and volunteers remain committed to our organization because they can do important work in a dynamic environment that is both personally and professionally fulfilling.”

— John R. Seffrin, PhD, CEO, American Cancer Society

sustained commitment at all levels. ACS leaders invested in:

- Research and analysis to inform the transformation.
- The reorganization of formerly separate ACS offices (i.e., human resources, volunteer resource management, office of diversity and inclusion, and training) into the new TS.
- Internal capacity to effectively mobilize, onboard, and retain volunteers, with an end goal of encouraging their continued involvement.
- Updated talent management information and communication systems.
- The development of a business model in which affiliates pay a fee to the National Home Office for services (i.e., the initial onboarding and training) to finance the centralization of talent management functions.

Results

ACS reports the new system is working well based on preliminary data. (Many of the initiatives discussed in this report were launched in 2007 or 2008.)

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Advice for Other Nonprofit Organizations

ACS offers these suggestions to other nonprofit organizations in which volunteers are a major part of their workforce.

- Recognize that achieving mission impact requires effective people—both volunteers and staff. Invest smartly.
- Develop a centralized voluntarism relationship management system (both process and technology) that advances the organization’s capacity to provide a top-notch experience.
- Provide sustained leadership and resources for integrating and centralizing talent management; this process should not be rushed.
- Make the time to stop and plan. A strategic plan is a “must have,” as is an accountability system with performance measures to motivate implementation.
- Bring together directors of voluntarism, human resources, and diversity into roundtables to share best practices. This facilitates learning, builds relationships, and helps align work around organizational goals and strategies.

Contact

Laura Reeves
Chief Talent Officer
Talent Strategy, National Home Office
American Cancer Society
(404) 329-7949; Laura.Reeves@cancer.org

Linelle M. Blais, PhD
National Vice President,
Voluntarism Talent Strategy, National Home Office
American Cancer Society
(404) 329-7627; Linelle.Blais@cancer.org

This series of policy briefs produced by the Family Strengthening Policy Center (FSPC) seeks to describe a new way of thinking about how to strengthen families raising children in low-income communities and how this approach can and should influence policy. The premise of “family strengthening” in this context, and as championed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is that children do well when cared for by supportive families, which, in turn, do better when they live in vital and supportive communities. The series describes ways in which enhancing connections within families and between families and the institutions that affect them result in better outcomes for children and their families.

The Family Strengthening Policy Center is funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and is an initiative of the National Human Services Assembly, an association of the nation’s leading national nonprofits in the fields of health, human and community development, and human services.

The Center benefits from the guidance and involvement of the Family Strengthening Peer Network, which provides opportunities for its members to share knowledge on family strengthening strategies, learn what other organizations are doing, and find synergies and potential areas of collaboration.

This brief reflects the findings and views of the Family Strengthening Policy Center, which is solely responsible for its content. For more information or to access other family strengthening policy briefs, visit www.nassembly.org/fspc.

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