

# CORPORATE VOLUNTEERING EVALUATION

A TOOLKIT FEATURING  
DIGITAL STORYTELLING

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Corporate volunteering is “an important vehicle for delivering care and compassion to causes and communities in need” (Grant, 2012: 589). Identified by Bussell and Forbes (2008) as the fastest-growing area of volunteering in North America and Western Europe, corporate volunteering is being adopted more readily by organisations and their employees as it is often perceived as a more important form of corporate social responsibility (compared to philanthropic contributions for instance - JA Worldwide, 2009) (Paço & Nave, 2013; Pelozo, Hudson & Hassay, 2009) and indirectly as a stronger contributor to a company’s reputation and employer brand.

Under ideal circumstances, corporate volunteering can create a win-win situation for all parties involved: “public welfare is achieved while the state is relieved; the image of a company is ameliorated while costs for personnel and organisational development are outsourced; employees improve their skills while being paid and valued by their employer” (Van Chie, Guentert & Wehner, 2011: 122). Additionally, employee volunteering has been linked both with increasing job meaningfulness, job absorption (Rodell, 2013), professional development (Green et al, 2012), and increased employee commitment to the organisation (Brammer, Millington and Rayton, 2007), as well as with being a practice that was credited by supervisors and co-workers alike when it was attributed to intrinsic motives (Rodell & Lynch, 2016).

Despite the growing investment and interest into corporate/employee volunteering, there is a disconnect between what the organisations and employees, both when it comes to goals and outcomes. More importantly, an integrated approach that links employee expectations of volunteering with the organisations’ volunteering/CSR objectives and integrates that insight into evaluation of the volunteering program both by employees and the organisation is currently missing.

This paper aims to address this void by proposing a toolkit for effective evaluation of corporate volunteering programs using digital storytelling.

In doing so, the paper presents the methodology of a study using digital storytelling reflecting the experiences of corporate volunteers, discussing its setup and its limitations. In criticizing the self-serving and risk-averse reception of the study among corporate communication/CSR managers and reflecting over the high dropout rate of the online-only study, the authors propose a toolkit for the assessment of corporate volunteering experiences going beyond the use of digital storytelling. The toolkit features three steps: participant assessment of their work environment and their work relationships prior to joining the corporate volunteering program, digital storytelling screening and post-volunteering participant assessment of their their work environment and their work relationships.

As corporate volunteering activities could affect an organisation’s image, employer brand perception and organisation’s reputation, we deem corporate volunteering (whether recruitment into the program, program progression, results of the program or personal outcomes) to be strongly linked with communications.

We argue that the methodology that we present here, although tested on a matter related to corporate volunteering, can be expanded and applied to other areas of communications spanning from internal communication, employer branding, or stakeholder engagement just to name a few. Moreover, we argue that digital storytelling as a methodology and evaluative practice of communications activities has only few known implementations into practice and even fewer into academic literature. Most of the known research and application present storytelling as an integral tool to (corporate) communications, performed and created by communicators (see Adi, Crisan & Dinca, 2015a; Dobers & Springett, 2010; Gill, 2011; Kent, 2015; Shamir, 2005).

Our digital storytelling toolkit and its associated pre and post-program evaluation, enable practitioners and researchers to become curators, facilitators and perhaps co-creators of stories. This, we believe, it is highly necessary in a time when peer-to-peer communications are either preferred or paid more attention to.

# DESIGNING A METHOD OF EFFECTIVE ASSESSMENT OF CORPORATE VOLUNTEERING THROUGH DIGITAL STORYTELLING

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Corporate volunteering is “an important vehicle for delivering care and compassion to causes and communities in need” (Grant, 2012: 589). The programs can take various forms. Campbell's Soup Company and Exxon Mobil match their employees volunteering with corporate donations, the latter considering the volunteering hours of company retirees, spouses, dependent children, and even surviving spouses of deceased employees (Scott, 2012). Coca-Cola allows its employees to work actively in local public infrastructure works as a means to stay active and do something useful for the community (Barkay, 2013). Other forms of volunteering programs include enabling staff to work for a set number of hours as volunteers serving causes they see fit, to NGO-corporation partnerships where the corporate volunteers provide expertise in their field of knowledge that the selected NGO is requiring support with, to full-fledged programs spanning across multiple countries for which employees need to apply to in a competitive manner.

Identified by Bussell and Forbes (2008) as the fastest-growing area of volunteering in North America and Western Europe, corporate volunteering is being adopted more readily by organisations and their employees as it is often perceived as a more important form of corporate social responsibility (compared to philanthropic contributions for instance - JA Worldwide, 2009) (Paço & Nave, 2013; Pelosa, Hudson & Hassay, 2009).

Under ideal circumstances, corporate volunteering can create a win-win situation for all parties involved: “public welfare is achieved while the state is relieved; the image of a company is ameliorated while costs for personnel and organisational development are outsourced; employees improve their skills while being paid and valued by their employer” (Van Chie, Guentert & Wehner, 2011: 122). Additionally, employee volunteering has been linked both with increasing job meaningfulness, job absorption (Rodell, 2013), professional development (Green et al, 2012), and increased employee commitment to the organisation (Brammer, Millington & Rayton, 2007), as well as with being a practice that was credited by supervisors and co-workers alike when it was attributed to intrinsic motives (Rodell & Lynch, 2016).

Despite the growing investment and interest into corporate/employee volunteering, an integrated approach that links employee expectations of volunteering, with the organisations' volunteering/CSR objectives and integrates that insight into evaluation of the volunteering program both by employees and the organisation is currently missing. This paper aims to address this void by proposing a toolkit for effective evaluation of corporate volunteering programs using digital storytelling. The article is based on the implementation of a digital storytelling pilot study aimed to record the stories of people who have volunteered as part of corporate programs.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 CORPORATE VOLUNTEERING: GOING BEYOND EXPLORING MOTIVATIONS

Corporate volunteering programs are perceived as a more valuable and meaningful way to engage with corporate social responsibility (CSR). This is good news for CSR, showing that its image as an “an oxymoron and a contradiction in terms by the investment and business community” (Lee, 2008: 53) has long been replaced. As the focus on the impact of CSR on the bottom line expanded to include reputational impact and stakeholder relationships (Adi, Crowther & Grigore, 2015), the expectations that corporations and in particular multi-national corporations would engage in CSR and play an active role in this field grew (De Wolf, Mejri & Lamouchi, 2012). Consumer perceptions of CSR have shifted too, recent research suggesting that members of the public are more willing to put pressure on corporations to conform to societal expectations (Fitzpatrick, 2000) as they are more willing to “reward or punish companies based on evaluations of CSR initiatives” (Cone Communications, 2015 cited in Lee, 2017: 211). Likewise, employees are more attracted by socially responsible firms (Turban & Greening, 1997) and even more so by companies that have in place volunteering programs (Deloitte, 2007).

From the organization’s perspective, implementation of CSR programs, and especially skills-based volunteering has been determined to align with the four components of the business case for CSR, including the enhancement of company reputation, the reduction of costs and risk, the achievement of business strategy, and the creation of learning and partnership (McCallum, Schmid & Price, 2013).

From the employee’s perspective, there are significant correlations between organizational identification, volunteering, job satisfaction, and employee motivation to participate in CSR programs (Mozes, Josman & Yaniv, 2011) as well as employee's self-worth and organizational commitment (Brockner, Senior & Welch, 2010). These results are also echoed by Rodell (2013), Rodell and Lynch (2016) and De Oliveira, Madruga & De Sá (2013). The latter, investigating the motivations of employees of the Bank of Brazil to participate in corporate volunteering programs, found out that individual rewards were the top motivator of employees enlisting in volunteering programs run by their organization, followed by social improvement and contribution for social inclusion.

A presumption of positive outcomes of volunteering, fuelled by either intrinsic or extrinsic motives or both, thus emerges stating benefits for both employees and employers alike. As a result, most CSR research investigating creating value for stakeholders (employees arguably being one group) starts with this assumption and have an overly quantitative skew with a preference for experiments and surveys being shown (Peloza & Shang, 2011). These studies help demonstrate the specific outcomes and mediating processes between CSR activities and other business outcomes. However, what is still missing is a link (and more data) between what employees want or take out of their volunteering and what the employers seek to achieve with such programs.

To capture this opportunity, Van Schie, Guentert & Wehner (2011) argue that corporate volunteering programs should be designed in goal-oriented ways with an awareness of their positive effects. In this

sense, expanding on the work of Clary et al. (1998) they suggest mapping out the six functions volunteering plays for individuals with specific organizational goals. For instance, individuals' desire to showcase their values through volunteering by being a good citizen and by experiences meaningfulness and a sense of purpose should be linked with the organization's CSR standards. Additionally, the individual's volunteering to enhance their growth and development should be facilitated by the organization through team and team-building events that enable employees to come together in an unfamiliar setting. Through their framework, the authors stress the importance of integrating employee opinions and needs into the development of corporate volunteering programs. This should be translated, they argue, into a "broad offer of volunteering activities that take into account multiple motives of employees and as such ensure a bottom-up anchoring in the corporate culture" (Van Schie, Guentert & Wehner, 2011: 129). While the framework provides valuable insight, further guidance into implementing it into practice, including into how to bridge between the individual's motivations and the outcomes of their volunteering activities with the organization is necessary. Our proposed methodology aims to bridge that gap by connecting the employees' motivations and expectations prior to their corporate volunteering experience with their reflections and lessons, both personal and for the organisation, post-volunteering.

## **2.2. STORYTELLING IN PR AND CSR**

Research investigating CSR, including corporate volunteering, has a strong preference for quantitative methods and especially for experiments and surveys (95 out of 177, respectively 68 out of 177 articles evaluated by Pelozo & Shang, 2011) and favor consumer samples over other stakeholders. There is therefore a need for research engaging other methods and other samples. Our current proposal aims to address this gap as well.

Storytelling is a staple of public relations/corporate communications (and CSR communication if one considers CSR activities part of the strategic spectrum of corporate communications), much like the assumption that engaging in CSR/CV is beneficial to employees and organizations. Research into storytelling in PR and/or CSR is particularly scarce. Hallahan (1999) for instance connects storytelling with framing and proceeds to identifying seven types of frames applicable to public relations. Kent (2015: 484) identifies 20 master plots – "the story equivalent of a premise in an argument" – and describes how they could be applied by PR practitioners. Dobers and Springett (2010) identify some studies where narrative as a linguistic perspective is used to identify how CSR is communicated. Gill (2011: 17) literature review on the uses of storytelling for internal communication argues that "corporate stories as an internal PR communication strategy can strengthen the likelihood of employees becoming reputation champions for their organisation". He also suggests that storytelling can also heighten the credibility of the organization's CSR efforts (Gill, 2015). Finally, Adi, Crişan & Dinca (2015a) use Jonah Sachs' "hero's journey" model to evaluate four video stories about women and empowerment shared by HSBC and Procter & Gamble.

Although often defined as "narrations of reality, and workplace talk in general <that> (sic) contribute to social group formation and enhance group ability to mark its boundaries and assert a distinct professional identity (Allen & 2001 cited in Shamir, 2005: 238), storytelling is presented as an integral tool to PR/corporate communications performed and created by communicators rather than curated and facilitated by them. Our perspective is different.

### 2.3. DIGITAL STORYTELLING

Digital storytelling (DS) as a method that equips individuals to tell their personal story as a two-minute film, stored and shared online and presented in a community setting originated in the mid-1990s in California. Joe Lambert, its author and pioneer, envisaged it as a seven-steps process that enables participants to express, comprehend and articulate experiences in the everyday world while also acquiring digital skills. The process takes participants from developing the story, to writing the script and sourcing images, to receiving feedback on their story from the group, to recording their own narration of the script and editing the video that includes their script, own audio narration and own images. Once the story is finalized, the digital story is shared with the other participants in a screening (Lambert, 2013). Gubrium (2009) extended the use of DS to investigate policy issues while Klaebe et al. (2007) combined it with oral history in order to capture a community's identity. Although of high potential, digital storytelling as a method of capturing employee voices, experiences and reflections has been used very little into corporate settings. Perhaps among the first ones to do so, are Crisan & Bortun (2017a) who asked compared how potential employees rate their interest into a company based on either their viewing of the online official company communications (website and Facebook) or their viewing of two digital stories produced by two employees of the company. Their research indicates participants' viewing the employee generated content related more positively to the company. In a different study linking advocacy with digital storytelling Crisan & Bortun (2017b) conclude that "single digital stories are a robust means of engagement but cannot elicit interest for public policies. However, a large number of personal stories on the same subject could produce sufficiently robust evidence to contribute effectively within an advocacy campaign".

Considering the limited number of sources investigating corporate volunteering using qualitative methods or investigating employees' reflections of their corporate volunteering experiences, our study aimed to fill this void. In doing so, our study aimed to show how reflective storytelling contributes to the employees' personal transformative journey, influences their perceived relationships and loyalty with their employer and shapes perception of their organization's CSR programs.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

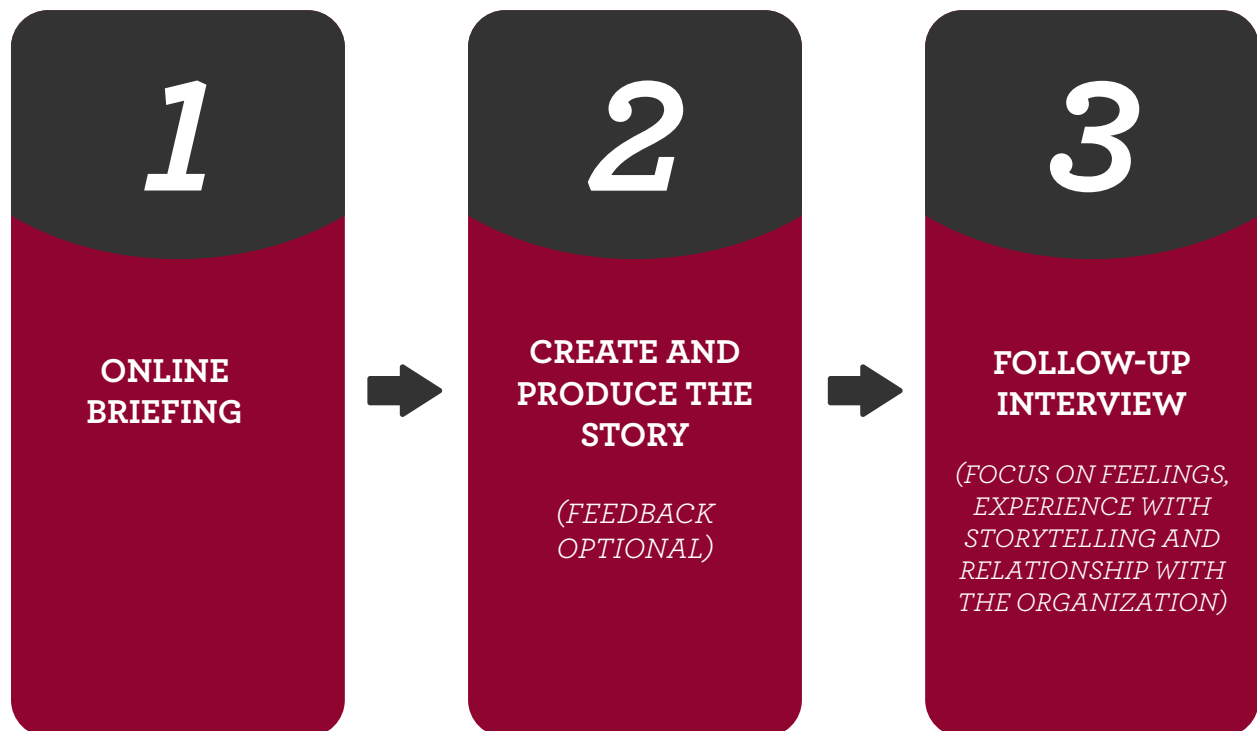
The research questions addressed by our project were:

- RQ1: When asked to reflect on their past corporate volunteering experience, what are the stories former corporate volunteers deem important and representative of their experience?
- RQ2: What feelings do their volunteering experience evoke?
- RQ3: How does reflective, digital storytelling contribute to the employees' personal transformative journey?
- RQ4: How do participants describe their relationship with the organization after completing the corporate volunteering program?
- RQ5: How do participants perceive their organization and its CSR programs after completing the corporate volunteering program?

In order to answer them, we used digital storytelling as a method to engage with the participants and collect the data. An open call for participants targeting employees who have participated in a corporate

volunteering program has been launched at the European Communication Summit in Brussels in June 2015 and then published online a few days later in the Communication Director Magazine (Adi & Crisan, 2015).

The project was conducted solely online during October 2015 – February 2016 (initially announced as October-December 2015, then extended) and consisted of three interrelated phases, all voluntary, which all took place online:



In this sense, we have moved away from the traditional model of digital storytelling as promoted by Lambert (2013) by replacing the story circle with one-on-one briefings and by enabling participants to create their stories at their own pace while receiving the full support from the research team.

In preparation for the briefing, participants were sent the consent form for the study and a list of preparatory items. This included asking for their availability for the study, sharing contact details of the research members, identifying their proficiency with editing software (text, audio and video for either Windows or Mac) and identifying some images and photos they might use as prompts for the discussion. The consent form was comprehensive and clarified each step of the process. Participants were given the opportunity to decide how they wanted to be identified (by their real name, initials of their name or pseudonym), the data section of the consent form also identifying the type of data that could be made public:

“(…) domain of the company I work for, my age, gender, country where I work, country where I volunteered and purpose of the volunteering program I took part into but this should not lead to my being clearly identified without my consent”.

#### 4. METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

Twenty-one people and five organization representatives (mostly CSR managers) have contacted the research team after the call for participants out of which nine participants completed the briefing, five the script writing and only four completed the entire process.

While the fully digital process has its advantages – flexibility, personalization, low-cost - the biggest disadvantage for the team was ensuring that the participants did engage with the research project and delivered the agreed materials in time.

The step from the writing of the script to its transformation into the digital story (a video including a photo slide show) has also proven to be difficult either because the participants had no experience with audio and video editing software and would have thus needed more time and support or because it required more time, effort and confidence to complete. This means that out of the five completed scripts, only one would truly qualify as a completed digital story (the video with the images and narration of the author) the others being at various stages of “production”- from having submitted the images and audio file separately to submitting just a PowerPoint presentation with images and some text.

We wanted to make the project and prospect of digital storytelling available to a wider audience (geographically, professionally, generationally, culturally, and linguistically) with which we had no prior contact. While the participants that contacted us were intrigued, fascinated or challenged by the process, the following elements might have supported them to complete the process:

- the existence of video tutorials and free, easy-to-use resources to complete their stories; for instance, PowerPoint now has a feature enabling recording of narration turning the presentation automatically into a video
- the existence of a project supporter/sponsor, known and close to the participant (perhaps a participant in the same program or an organizational sponsor, such as the line manager)
- the existence of a perceived added benefit of the experience (beyond volunteering their time and information to a research project or learning a skill that they had no immediate and direct perceived benefit)

Our conclusion so far is that in the absence of either of the elements above, it is still more efficient to have digital storytelling projects run like workshops and story circles during which participants learn the process and apply it. This ensures that participants complete their stories and that the researchers get access to the data they so much need in order to share the results of their research.



The contact with the organizational representatives was disappointing. After reading the call for participants, CSR managers requested the research team to share an extended presentation of the project together with the consent forms and examples of other digital stories. Despite the full transparency of the project organization, presentation of the methodology and its steps, the extended information presented and the lack of any requirements from the organization (space, financial or otherwise) and the reassurance that the project was focused on the employees' experiences and reflection and not the organizations (in fact identifying the organizations by name was never the aim for the project) all CSR managers remained skeptical.

On the one hand, CSR managers raised numerous questions about the risk factor reflective and deeply personal stories could mean for the company and wanted guarantees that negative content will not be made public online. On the other hand, without the identification of the organization they didn't see the any benefit for their involvement.

To address both these concerns, a proposal was made by the researchers to alter the methodology and move closer to Lambert's (2013) story circle and organize a pilot study at each organization's premises. The researchers however stressed that the stories created during the project would belong to the participants and could not be altered by a communications specialist or company representative without the author's consent, nor that they could be published selectively; however, provided that the researchers could use the anonymized material to inform academic papers, publication of the employees' digital stories could be made on each company's intranet. To avoid pressure and bias, the researchers suggested that CSR managers would not be present at the training and digital storytelling sessions, but they could participate to the viewing should the participants agreed. While this was clearly a compromise with regards to the availability of the digital stories – Lambert advocates for the online publication – this would have ensured that the participants complete the entire process and experience the collaborative and shared experience which our initial design did not permit. Additionally, the stories would have met the requirements of digital stories even if their availability was not to the general public but only a closed group.

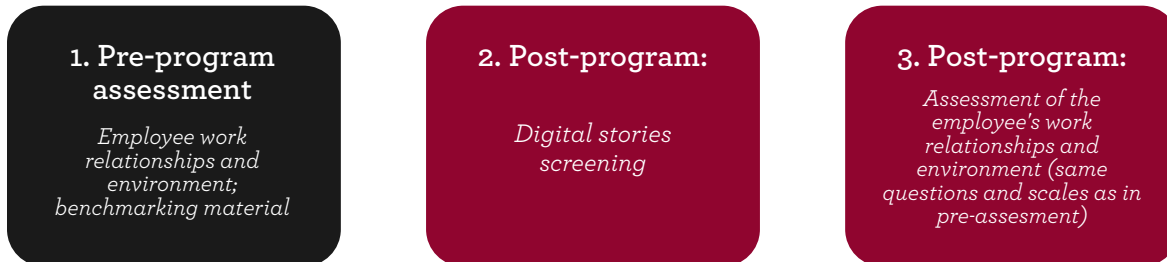
Unfortunately, despite all these measures and proposals, the research was never shared with the employees within the organizations whose CSR managers contacted the research team. We feel that this self-serving, risk averse attitude to our research is perhaps the main cause of the lack of employee voices into research: be it about corporate volunteering, as our literature review has revealed, or internal communications. This rejection of endorsement and support, together with the other challenges faced, has led us to conceptualize the following toolkit for assessment of corporate volunteering through digital storytelling in a manner that we believe could provide value to both employees and employers including CSR managers.

## **5. THE PROPOSED TOOLKIT**

Organizations that want to include digital storytelling into the evaluation of their corporate volunteering program should consider embedding it into the deliverables of the program and therefore set time aside to train their employees into using the method. However, should they want to assess the volunteering experience, the participants work relationships and attitudes towards the organization, its volunteering program should be assessed prior and post-volunteering, the method of assessment (whether qualitative,

quantitative or mixed) depending on the resources – personnel, time and financial – available within the organization.

Therefore, our toolkit features three steps:



Our recommendation is that the same the pre and post assessment of the participant's work relationships and environment should use the same items. These could include:

- Assessing relationships with colleagues
- Dealing with discomfoting situations
- Assessing company rules (in general and specific to the volunteering program)
- Likelihood of promoting the organization (both internally and externally)
- Assessing innovation in the organization (whether linked to communicating change, investment in innovation, approach to "getting things done" depends on the specific case of each organization)
- Assessment of personal involvement in the organization's governance (governance can be discussed in terms of monitoring and measurement in general and of the programme)
- Assessment of future competencies in relation to the organization

These items are, in effect, an expansion of the values, understanding, enhancement, career, social, protective functions of volunteering proposed by Clary et al. (1998) and Van Schie, Guentert & Wehner (2011) as well as in line with the manifestation of the organizational citizenship behaviour proposed by Organ, Podsakoff and MacKenzie (2006). For instance, asking participants to assess their future competencies addresses both the understanding and career functions. Equally, questions about dealing with discomfoting situations link well with protective and enhancement functions.

In running the assessment pre and post-volunteering, the organizations have the possibility to identify the program's influence and effect on the participant, but also link it with a wider reflection of their relationship with the organization (hence the questions of likelihood of recommending the organization, the program or the likelihood of engaging with governance initiatives). When corroborated with the digital story submitted, this insight helps organizations identify the qualitative and deeply personal effect of their initiative (going beyond CSR and/or recruitment/retention strategies). Used consistently, these pre and post-volunteering assessments will also provide organisations with a longitudinal view of their volunteers.

There are two possibilities for the organization of the digital storytelling training: either as an entire day of

post-volunteering briefing where Lambert's story circle would be replicated (the stories written and given feedback from the other participants, the images sourced, the voice-over recorded and the rough draft of the video edited) or as a two-parts event, where the technical training is included into the pre-volunteering preparation sessions and the showcasing of the digital stories is included into a post-volunteering screening.

In either form, the digital stories once created will provide the organization valuable, authentic, reflective, first-person testimonials of their volunteering. Used internally, these stories play a dual role: they showcase the result of the volunteering program and they help recruit the future generations of volunteers. Digital storytelling as an add-on to volunteer programs thus can become a tool to increase organizational loyalty. If used externally, these stories have a positive image and reputation potential for the organization. In displaying those same authentic voices, the organization becomes the facilitator of its employees' journey (and not only), something that Adi et al (2015a) and Adi & Crisan (2015b) have also pointed to.

The digital storytelling workshop and screening also addresses the values, enhancement and career functions. Reflecting about the meaning and lessons learned from their volunteering experience, participants not only revisit and state their values but can link them with the organisation and its CSR/CV program objectives. The experience in itself of creating and screening their digital stories allows employees to come together in a potentially unfamiliar setting, emphasizing the importance of feedback and social contracts. This serves the enhancement function. Finally, the screening is also a form of rewarding officially the volunteers by providing them a wider platform to share their stories. This supports the career function.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

This article has presented the methodology of a study using digital storytelling reflecting the experiences of corporate volunteers, discussing its setup and its limitations. In criticizing the self-serving and risk-averse reception of the study among corporate CSR managers and reflecting over the high drop-out rate of the online-only study, the authors propose a toolkit for the assessment of corporate volunteering experiences going beyond the use of digital storytelling. The toolkit includes the assessment of the participant's attitudes and expectations of the program as well as their reflection of their work relationships administered pre and post-volunteering side by side with the use of digital storytelling.

Digital storytelling as a creative and reflective toolkit however, can be used beyond corporate volunteering with potential applications extending to internal communication, employee branding, stakeholder engagement just to name a few. In itself, digital storytelling could be an opportunity to expand of a group's digital skills and literacies or as a teambuilding project. Interested readers in testing the toolkit should contact the authors.

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