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MEETINGS AND CONVENTIONS

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It's the latest in the repertoire of activities for a corporate meeting: a company getaway that includes a community project.

For a small but growing number of corporations, community work-rehabilitating a house in a run-down neighborhood, for example-is becoming a routine part of company outings and industry gatherings.

"The satisfaction lasts a lot longer than the 10 minutes you debrief after the session is over. You know something positive is done," says John Anderson, manager of profitability and analysis for Ameritech Corp.'s pay phone service. The Chicago-based company arranges community service projects as a regular part of its management training program. "One thing you can't get out of a team-building exercise like rope climbing is that you've touched people's lives."

Last July, for example, a group of employees of the telecommunications firm helped put the finishing touches on a one-acre arboretum that houses native Illinois plants at Orchard Village, a residential development in Skokie that's home to people with mild to severe disabilities. The managers had help from Mary Jane Inc., a landscape company in Evanston, and worked hand-in-hand with Orchard Village residents.

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The arboretum was built in 12 three-hour sessions by roughly 60 Ameritech managers, 25 to 30 Orchard Village residents, and three supervisors over a two-year period. (It was started in September 1994.)

"In a typical employee-employer relationship, you have a job, and you get compensated," says Jack McAllister, executive director of Orchard Village. For Ameritech, "this is part of a strategic initiative. Building this arboretum allowed them to accomplish a training objective."

At Ameritech, community-oriented training sessions date back to 1993, when the company instituted its corporate leadership program. Before, initiation for Ameritech managers was limited to a one-day orientation.

Some companies are substituting such community projects for other forms of entertainment.

Marcia Glenn, vice-president of senior economics for Northfield-based Kraft Foods Inc., was a little uneasy when she decided to scrap her annual August golf outing for 25 employees in the dairy division and work with United Way to spruce up Wesley Daycare Center.

Ms. Glenn's fears turned out to be unfounded.

"It was an unbelievable success," Ms. Glenn says. "It was hot and sticky and lots of hard work. But our employees felt like they accomplished something."

The employees formed five teams, painted a mural of a rainbow and the sun on the back of a tool shed, planted shrubs, and cut the brush and trees in the playground while the center was empty.

"We weren't sure if people would enjoy it," says Paula Caminiti, senior administrator for Kraft and the project's coordinator. "But it was such an incredibly positive experience for everyone."

Such good works needn't be done only for local meetings.

At Abbott Laboratories, meetings for community projects date back to 1994, when 400 employees of the hospital laboratories division traveled to Fort Lauderdale, Fla., for a national sales conference. While there, they spruced up six residential homes in a low-income neighborhood and a poverty-level day care center.

Annual 'Outreach'

Deb Parry, sales support coordinator for North Chicago-based Abbott, started the project after tiring of the more traditional team-building exercises, such as relay races in the sand or building a boat.

The project has become an annual affair and is now called the "Outreach Program."

According to Ms. Parry, the meeting is "one way that we live up to our social and environmental responsibilities that are part of our mission statement."

Last year, the Abbott group divided their efforts: 400 employees worked on a boys' and girls' club in Scottsdale, Ariz. and 400 more worked on a boys' and girls' club in nearby Glendale.

Ms. Parry calls the meeting "organizational chaos." All the work is done in a five-hour flurry.

Organizing the massive undertaking involves choosing the project, taking a skills assessment, and assigning people to tasks. Ms. Parry says planning for the meeting inspires "months of waking up at 2 a.m. in a cold sweat. On a whole, it's probably two years' worth of labor. If you applied an hourly labor charge to the project, it would be close to \$200,000."

In some cases, community projects serve as mixers for clients and customers.

In 1992, Marriott International Inc. introduced the idea into an annual week-long sales conference with key customers and top sales people.

Seeing results

Last year, Marriott employees worked side-by-side with customers peeling paint and rehabilitating the inside of a St. Vincent de Paul homeless shelter in San Diego.

"So often in the business world, you don't actually see the results of your effort," says Karen Riha, national account executive for Marriott in Rosedale. "This really gives you a sense of accomplishment. You were sweating and you really loved it."

According to Mike Lupfer, the director of national sales administration for Marriott in Washington D.C., "There is a bond that you develop with the customer that is pretty tight. There is nothing like it. People work harder on those projects than they do on their houses, and that's the beauty of it."

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