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Feb. 04, 2014



Elise Saur is a self-described Type A personality who typically takes few breaks during the workday. So among the biggest adjustments she made during a seven-week fellowship in Brazil last fall were leaving the office to eat lunch with colleagues and joining them again at 4 p.m. for a daily snack.

“In South America, you have to build relationships before you can get business done,” said Saur, 29, an assistant director, knowledge-strategic initiatives, in accounting-consulting firm EY’s Pittsburgh office.

She was among a group of employees tapped by EY last year to work at small, entrepreneurial ventures in Latin America as part of the firm’s Corporate Responsibility Fellows program.

EY — formerly known as Ernst & Young — pays the fellows their normal salary and

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As businesses emerge from the global economic crisis, programs like the EY Fellows — widely known as “paid release time” or “paid time away” — are ways companies can remain committed to charitable causes even as many of them cope with smaller staffs and tighter budgets.

A report from the Committee Encouraging Corporate Philanthropy said 70 percent of companies in its database offered paid-release-time employee volunteer programs in 2012, up from 53 percent in 2007 before the economy crashed.

The report was based on a survey of 240 businesses, including 60 ranked among the top 100 of the Fortune 500. Among the participants were Pittsburgh-based PNC Financial Services, and companies with major operations here including Alcoa, BNY Mellon, Citizens Financial Group, Eaton and FedEx.

“During the recession a lot of things happened to impact the number of people that were available to go out and do big volunteer projects,” said Christy Stuber, director of volunteer initiatives at United Way of Allegheny County. “Staffs were leaner ... you saw mergers of companies. So there were less people available, even if the intention and desire was there.”

The local United Way was among the first to promote a single, annual “Day of Caring” for businesses to participate in community volunteerism in 1991, said Stuber. But the program has since evolved into “Days of Caring” so that businesses can target community volunteer projects when it works best for them, she said.

“Companies can send out smaller teams over multiple days. And they can create their own days ... it's a change in the way companies are doing business.”

At Pittsburgh Cares, a Lawrenceville nonprofit that matches companies and individuals with nonprofit projects that need volunteers, there's been an “influx of

interest” since the financial crisis from businesses “interested in giving back,” said

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At EY, the number of employees selected for the corporate fellows program held steady during the first couple years of the recession, but has grown since 2011 to 15 participants last year, said Michele Vana, an EY spokeswoman in New York. EY launched the fellows program in 2005 in partnership with Endeavor Global, a nonprofit that attempts to match high-potential startups in emerging markets with experienced business people who can help them grow their enterprises through some capital investment and guidance.

For Saur, being selected as a fellow was a personal goal from the time she joined EY in Boston in 2006, she said.

As an accounting major at Boston College, the Somerset, Pa., native had spent time studying in Argentina, and was intrigued by the chance to return to South America.

She also was raised with a strong sense of volunteerism and community service that came from her parents, she said. Her father, Matthew Melvin, is a lawyer in Somerset, and her mother, Eileen Melvin, is president of UMF Medical in Richland Township, Cambria County, and the former chair of the Republican State Committee.

“Growing up in Somerset, I volunteered at church, helped with a tornado cleanup ... and mentored at-risk youth when I was in high school,” said Saur. “Both my mother's and my father's passion for serving the community and active community involvement was instilled in me and my three siblings at a young age.”

As an EY fellow, Saur was assigned to work at Tecverde, a firm in Curitiba, Brazil, that designs and manufactures eco-friendly, wood-framed modular homes. The company was founded about five years ago and posted its first sale in 2012, said Saur. It now has about 40 employees, though she declined to disclose specific financials about the business.

During the time she spent there in October and November, her job was to help the

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ability to shape a project ... and have an impact with young entrepreneurs. That's just as important as any infusion of money.”

Corporate volunteer programs such as EY's fellows can also do more than burnish the company's image. They're now seen as a recruiting tool especially for companies that want to attract and retain so-called “millennials” — the post-boomer generation that includes workers born in the 1980s and 1990s.

“Millennials are looking to work for companies that have an opportunity for them to give back,” said Malika Harrison, community engagement manager for New York-based Alcoa, which sponsors volunteer programs focused mainly in education and the environment. Of the aluminum maker's 60,000 employees worldwide, 62 percent participate in projects held during the company's annual month of service each October, she said.

Last month, social networking site LinkedIn launched a “volunteer marketplace” to connect its members with nonprofits that need help. In his introduction to the feature, LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman said he believes prospective volunteers “want to hone or leverage their skills while also making a positive impact on the world.”

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