

VOLUNTEERISM

supporting the community

LE Group has set up an employee community involvement programme known as Helping Hands. This is benefiting the communities within which the company operates. It is also helping to build customer loyalty in the increasingly competitive energy market by enhancing the company's reputation

Two years ago Bruno Lescoeur, then chairman and chief executive of LE Group, visited a run-down housing estate off the Old Kent Road in south London as part of Business in the Community's (BitC) Seeing is Believing programme. BitC, which encourages companies to become more involved in the communities in which they operate, was hoping the visit would encourage Lescoeur to deepen LE Group's involvement in the community.

The plan worked. In May 2001, the energy company announced a significant expansion to its community activity, which is now being built upon by the group's new chief executive, Vincent de Rivaz. The vehicle for that expansion, a project called Helping Hands, has grown quickly to become one of the most dynamic staff volunteer programmes in the UK.

Helping Hands is designed to appeal to all LE Group staff. Since its launch, the number taking part has risen tenfold and the majority (90 per cent) say that

community involvement has only recently begun to be linked to the company's business objectives

they have a much stronger link with the company as a result.

LE Group offers lots of ways in which staff can become involved. They can, for example, work with one of the company's designated charities – Age Concern, Centrepoint and Marie Curie Cancer Care – get involved in a charity of their own choosing, or mentor schoolchildren. Employees can take two paid working days off a year for voluntary work on the understanding that they match this with an equivalent amount of their own time.

Helping Hands has also been built into the internal structure of the company. Community involvement is raised in one-to-one staff appraisal meetings and with new recruits.

LE Group, which previously operated only in the capital as London Electricity, has now expanded into the south-west, where it owns the electricity business SWEB, and the north-east, where it employs over 1000 staff at a customer service centre. To co-ordinate employee community involvement throughout the group, it has a dedicated intranet area and a network of 14 business unit co-ordinators reporting to the employee community involvement co-ordinator, Isabel Brown. The most striking aspect of Helping Hands is the choice it offers staff – they can

■ senior LE Group executives take part in Helping Hands. Angus Norman, (rear left) the managing director of LE Group subsidiary London Power Company, has become a governor of the Michael Faraday School in south London and is seen here with pupils and the headmaster



do anything from running in the London Marathon to supporting a conservation charity in Durham. For those short of time, the company offers a give-as-you-earn scheme. In the first six months after launch, 474 staff (one in eight of the workforce) took part in Helping Hands, so the company is well on the way to meeting its target of involving one in five of its staff during the first year.

Of the 474, some 350 employees, or one in 11 of the workforce, now volunteer in work time, compared with just 38 prior to Helping Hands. Staff last year raised more than £140,000 and payroll giving was up.

'One of the places it's really taken off is in our customer service centres', says Brown. 'A quarter of the staff at the Sunderland centre have taken the two paid days for volunteering in the local community and are involved in an incredible range of activities.' They raised around £50,000 for charity last year and have won a regional newspaper award for their community work for the last two years running. Seven of the call centre staff are helping young offenders aged between 10 and 17 stay out of trouble as part of a government scheme. Outside London, Helping Hands is strengthening the company's existing links with schools by sending volunteer readers into primary schools each week – work singled out by the government inspection body Ofsted as 'having a tremendous impact on standards of attainment'.

Senior managers are also taking part. Angus Norman, managing director of one of the London subsidiaries, is a governor at the Michael Faraday school in the part of south London first visited by LE Group executives.

'There's always been a culture within the electricity industry of investing in the community,' says Brown. 'But this sort of activity has only recently begun to be linked to commercial objectives. Employee volunteering doesn't just benefit the recipient – it benefits the company too, by developing skills, boosting morale and team-building. That means positive press coverage and a more positive attitude on the part of staff and interviewees, who these days increasingly ask about policies in this area.'

Brown argues that the business case for CSR in the utilities sector focuses on customer satisfaction levels. 'These are much more important than when the industry was effectively a monopoly,' she says. 'By enhancing LE Group's reputation among existing and potential customers, Helping Hands is itself helping us to maintain and, arguably, to build market share.'

'Because we sell commodities, it's hard to compete solely on price. Community involvement helps us to retain our customers and can help to win new ones. It's become an integral part of our business, which now has three basic elements – price, service and involvement in the community. You can't win on any one of these alone and you have to get the business fundamentals right – but nowadays in our sector you need all three.'

■ Further information: Isabel Brown, employee community involvement co-ordinator at isabel_brown@le-group.co.uk



the company

LE Group supplies and distributes electricity to 2.9 million customers, including 380,000 customers it supplies with gas. A subsidiary of Electricite de France, one of the world's largest utility companies, in 2000 it had operating profits of £177million on turnover of £1.98billion. It:

- helps employees to get involved in the Cares employee volunteering programme run by Business in the Community. In recent months 135 volunteers have helped to clear rubbish from 20 miles (32km) of London's foreshore and to improve school playgrounds in London schools
- has for five years run the London Electricity School Grounds Awards, which give grants of up to £2500
- has for two years held regular cultural diversity workshops to help its staff better understand the needs of customers from different cultural backgrounds. The workshops last year won the Arts, Business and Employee category of the FT/Arts & Business Awards ceremony
- in 1999 launched a scheme in partnership with the London Jazz Festival to provide subsidized tickets and free transport for over 1000 young people from deprived communities
- sponsors a wide range of other community initiatives in the areas where it operates.

■ LE Group staff regularly visit Sebright primary school in Hackney, east London to read with the children. Since the launch of Helping Hands, the number of the company's staff choosing to visit the school as volunteers has risen from four to 10

ibe comment LE GROUP

This is a good example of successful culture change in an organization. A monopoly worries primarily about the regulator. When there is consumer choice, a supplier has also to be concerned with price, service and public opinion. LE Group realized that a comprehensive staff volunteering policy could produce mutual benefits for both the company and the community. The company's Helping Hands programme provided the means. The take-up of the scheme is impressive.

Outstanding features include:

- Leadership from the top
- Company and employee time is offered
- The company intranet helps spread the message
- Annual appraisals are used to publicize the programme
- The scheme would be straightforward for another organization to adopt.

SIMON WEBLEY, INSTITUTE OF BUSINESS ETHICS