

‘When I was young, they got people doing community service to clear up the slag-heap next to East Ham Park. Why can’t we get people doing community service or people in prison working on big projects for the good of the community?’

Henry, 52

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**What if businesses *really* worked with community groups?
What if they were convinced that they could benefit from
forming long-term partnerships with organisations like
Community Links?**

Imagine a day in the life of an organisation like Community Links – let's call it Can-Do – in the not-too-distant future. Can-Do is a Trust which serves a tough, inner-city neighbourhood, and runs a range of facilities for children, teenagers, parents, pensioners and disabled people. There are art workshops, English-as-a-foreign-language classes; a benefits advice service; counselling groups; a toy library and a café.

Can-Do's flagship activity, though, is its new '**Learning for Life**' centre, aimed at people of all ages who want to take on some form of education at their own pace, using a range of media – CD ROMs, the Internet, and so on. The 'Learning for Life' centre is a **social franchise**, part of a national network for which the organisation has the local licence (having found that it was easier and more effective to take on an established franchise, than to try and invent a similar programme from scratch).

This morning, Janet, the co-director of Can-Do, is preparing for the next board meeting of one of the major banks – of which she has recently become a director (she remains the only **community entrepreneur** on the board, but the bank is considering taking on another one).

In the conference room, her co-director, John, is busy preparing for the annual '**Ten(d) to Zero**' meeting with the Trust's main corporate partner. Every year the two organisations sit down together and evaluate each key aspect of their partnership: 'aspects which are very poor score a 10. Those which are excellent score a zero – hence the objective to move from 'Ten(d) to zero'.

Upstairs, a group of volunteers are undergoing **staff coaching** in **mentoring skills** for a new outreach programme with at-risk teenagers. One volunteer, Guy – a young corporate financier – is plugged in via an Internet chat room, having had to go off to see a key corporate client in Frankfurt unexpectedly the night before. Another, Jill, has been acting as an **'absentee volunteer'** over the Internet for the last six months, ever since her law firm transferred her to the Shanghai office.

After lunch, a project team of **volunteers and paid staff** meet to discuss the results of the latest **social audit** which the Trust has undertaken – and, in particular, how well they are communicating the work and services of the Trust to their different stakeholders.

Later, the board of the Trust grab an hour to watch a long-awaited programme on the **Community Television Channel**.

And finally, last thing at night when most of the building has emptied, staff from another local voluntary organisation come in to make use of Can-Do's IT facilities – to **surf the Internet** and swap information and ideas with a fellow group of organisations working with HIV+ and Aids issues in California.

This vision of mutually beneficial partnership between a community group and the business sector may sound a bold one. But it is actually an increasingly realisable one. All the technological innovations I have described above are already available in Britain. One of the most exciting challenges now is to identify successful business expertise and models which can be sensitively and appropriately adapted for application in community organisations. Let me go through those cited in the vision above, piece by piece:

Learning for Life Centre

All of us, whatever our backgrounds and previous qualifications,

are now going to have to get used to learning and re-learning throughout our lives. The problem which must be addressed, though, is how to make this learning and re-learning accessible to the 'getting nowhere' generation – and not just in conventional educational centres. Take the Cyberskills Workshop, first begun in Bristol and now being promoted by ICL across the country (and indeed internationally). These workshops can be very liberating, in terms of inter-generation contacts, and can overcome people's fear of the new information and communications technologies and be a gateway to a whole range of new learning opportunities.

Social franchise

The Cyberskills Workshop is effectively a social franchise. Community organisations are increasingly borrowing techniques like 'franchising' from business. Just as franchising has proved a safe halfway house for many people wanting to run their own businesses with the security of following a proven model, so now there are successful community programmes which can be 'franchised'. With a social franchise you get the best of both worlds – both the cafetière (top-down) and the percolator (bottom-up) approach to community regeneration.

Companies active in the community are frequently complaining that they are inundated with requests from community organisations to support their 'unique' project or programme, when actually theirs is very similar to many other projects that business is already supporting. Social franchises would cut down this problem; enable business and community to get 'more bangs for the bucks' and spread good practice further and faster. So if, for example, Lloyds TSB are supporting an innovative project to help people with learning disabilities in the North East, and it is successful, they might turn this into a social franchise. Then, when, say, Whitbread's get asked to support something similar

in, for example, Portsmouth, they might – instead – help the Portsmouth group to become the local franchisee of the north-eastern organisation.

A Community Entrepreneur on the Board

Big companies are used to having non-executives from other companies, as well as academics and politicians, on their boards, but I don't know of a single FT100 company in the UK which has yet appointed someone from a community organisation as a board member. Undoubtedly, big companies are losing out here. The skills which voluntary organisations have are increasingly relevant to corporate boards – how to manage diversity, for example, or how to gain early warning of changes in social perceptions of business.

After Shell's Brent Spar and Nigeria debacles, Cor Herkströtter, the then worldwide boss of Shell, concluded: 'We have to admit that we have made mistakes, we have not handled some of the new challenges as well as we could have... I am talking about a series of faulty assessments, misreadings of the situation which have led us to take poor management decisions... Why do they come about? I think that the fundamental answer lies in our failure to fully recognise the social and technological changes... Simply put, the institutions of global society are being reinvented, as technology redefines relations between individuals and organisations.'

Having access to different perspectives in the boardroom is going to become more and more important.

The 'Ten(d) to Zero' Model

Ten(d) to Zero is a system developed by the auto-parts firm, Unipart, as a means of monitoring its long-term relationships with suppliers. But it could just as easily be used between a community organisation and its business partner. Every voluntary organisation

should have at least one substantial, long-term, two-way relationship with a business. The Ten(d) to Zero type model is a way of making this sort of relationship work.

Volunteer Staff Coaching

Just as in business life nowadays employees expect regular opportunities to acquire new skills and update their learning (indeed having such opportunities is an important factor for many in choosing a job); so the best volunteers will expect to be able to undergo specialist training in the voluntary organisations they are working for, in order to have the most impact possible.

Mentoring skills

Mentoring is a valuable way of developing people's potential. Business in the Community (of which I am a director) has developed a series of mentoring programmes under which business people act as mentors (advisors, facilitators, inspirers) to trainees and potential new recruits. Our 'Roots and Wings' programme has been particularly targeted at 'at-risk' young people.

The Absentee Volunteer

If voluntary organisations are going to attract and retain the services of some of the burgeoning numbers of highly mobile 'global cosmopolitans' that now inhabit cities like London and New York, they are going to have to be able to respond to these people's lifestyles and work commitments. New York City Cares is one organisation which is particularly geared up for efficient communication with its network of New York volunteers. They run hour-long induction sessions – on three evenings per week. They also hold in-company orientation seminars and run an Internet site. Volunteers receive a monthly magazine, listing all volunteering opportunities each day with precise times and descriptions.

Additionally, there is a last-minute volunteering hotline which is updated once a week with volunteering opportunities that are still open for the following weekend. Because of the substantial investment they have made in IT, the staff at City Cares know which volunteer has done what and can generate thank-you notes for extra service. Business in the Community is now working with a group of companies, as well as the Home Office and several voluntary organisations, to adapt this concept for the UK under the umbrella of 'Cares Incorporated'.

Volunteers and Paid Staff

It is going to become increasingly difficult to tell these two apart. My friend Geoff makes his money as a masseur and as an aromatherapist, but when he goes into the offices of a campaigning organisation where he volunteers, he talks about 'going into work'.

Social Audits

In the future, voluntary organisations are going to have to deal with the same sort of increased scrutiny and pressure from vigilante consumers of their services as government and business have already had to face. A new generation of more articulate and assertive disabled people, for example, is demanding much greater control over organisations that serve disabled people: the move is from organisations *for* disabled people to organisations *of* disabled people. This is going to be a general trend – hence the new enthusiasm for social auditing. The New Economies Foundation – a leading pioneer of social audits – has developed an auditing methodology specifically adapted for non-profit-making organisations. I believe that companies and other supporters are increasingly going to want to know more about the effectiveness of prospective community partners, and the social audit is the ideal

way of gaining such knowledge. It could become part of a major company's standard 'due diligence' investigations. And maybe vice versa too.

Community TV Channel

Businesses and other organisations on both sides of the Atlantic are increasingly using dedicated business TV channels for two-way communication, training and briefings. The costs are plummeting. And now this business model is being adopted by the voluntary sector. The Media Trust, a British charity, is currently mobilising communications industry support for the establishment of a Community TV channel in Britain. This is a good example of a particular business sector being inspired to work on a specific community problem relevant to that industry. There are many other examples of this sort of partnership: the food retailing sector is now being encouraged to help transfer purchasing expertise, etc, to community-owned supermarkets; the utility companies are helping to form community mutual societies which can buy energy for their members more cheaply; and banks are supporting financial literacy programmes.

Surfing the Net

When I visited the original Cyberskills Workshop in Bristol, its organisers told me of a Women's Refuge in Swindon which had gone on the Internet and come across a similar centre in Seattle. The two organisations are now communicating regularly with each other, exchanging ideas and techniques.

So, what of all this? The benefits to community organisations of going into partnership with business are fairly clear. They stand to gain:

- **technical expertise**

- **firepower/clout: the ability to open doors**
- **credibility: the possibility of being taken more seriously**
- **contacts**
- **an ability to focus on making things happen and to get results**
- **a better understanding of customer-focus**
- **financial discipline**

As for the benefits to business, some of these are already widely accepted. Community involvement can build up and expand the skills of volunteer-employees, as well as the loyalty of the company's workforce generally; it can also boost a company's long-term corporate reputation and be an investment in the 'goodwill bank' among the stakeholders of the company. Working with particularly innovative groups like Community Links can help an entire business to learn new skills of networking and creative thinking.

But, if these sorts of partnership are really going to work, many community organisations are going to have to be more pro-active and self-confident in asserting what they can contribute. Taskforce 2002 (sponsored by Business in the Community and the National Council of Voluntary Organisations), which a few years ago brought together leaders from large and small firms, together with representatives from national charities and frontline community groups, identified some of the benefits which non-profit-making players can offer business, such as early warning of society's concerns; 'innocence by association' (i.e. gaining a share of the positive, worthy image which tends to be associated with voluntary organisations); and acquiring skills in motivating an increasingly mobile cosmopolitan workforce. In their report, published in 1998, Taskforce 2002 articulated a vision of a 'Two-way Street' – mutually beneficial relationships between business and non-profit-making players. We saw this as being healthier to both sides, far

more sustainable in tough times, and more replicable.

Creating and sustaining cross-sectoral partnerships is no easy task. It may come naturally to a few visionaries. Most of us, though, would benefit from learning from what has worked already. Why, for instance, have some communities had a long track record of good partnerships? What is in the air or the water in those areas? Are there some critical success factors like taking the time to build up trust between the partners, the time to develop a clear vision and strategy – with an agreed action plan to deliver definite accountabilities and timescales – and active communications to ensure that the wider partnership is kept up to speed and engaged?

If the business world, the Government and community groups are serious about wanting to work more in partnership, perhaps they ought to join together in setting up a ‘School for Partnerships’. This would harness the expertise of organisations like Community Links and particular business partners, and offer modules on courses run by existing groups like Common Purpose, the Civil Service Top Management Programme and the various business schools – as well as offer its own courses.

Just imagine if, over the next two to three years, we could train up several thousand rising-star civil servants, business people and community entrepreneurs – then the ambition which many of us have had for a long time now to clone Community Links could be realised.

David Grayson CBE is a director of Business in the Community and chairman of the National Disability Council. He was chairman of Taskforce 2002 and was co-founder, in 1980, of Project North East



Cartoon by Steve Bell