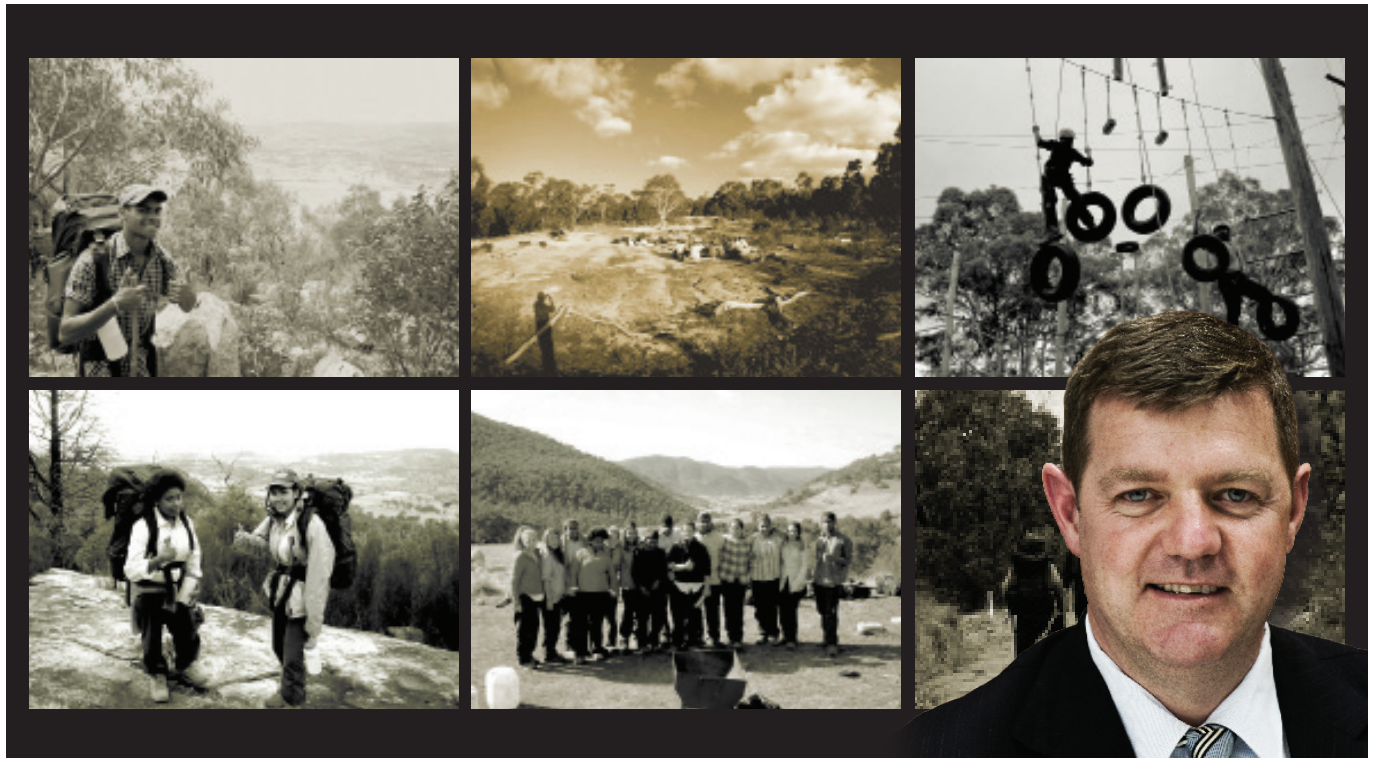


On a mission

Some say charity begins at home, but giving up your time for a good cause is not only rewarding, it may also boost your career. **Amy Birchall** reports



Stepping out of the office and into an unpaid role can be a satisfying and rewarding experience. It can also give you the skills you need to propel your management career.

Andrew Penfold (pictured) lost 12 of his closest friends in the 2002 Bali bombings. His mates were all on the same rugby team (Hong Kong Football Club), but Penfold couldn't make the trip because of a family holiday. The loss spurred him to take a lead role in a committee that provided support to widows and orphans of the victims.

"The fundraising committee happened out of necessity," says the former investment banker and finance lawyer.

He has since gone on to set up the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF), which has on its board luminaries such as Ray Martin and Ann Sherry and, as one of its patrons, Sir William Deane.

While not everyone can commit to not-for-profit work to the same extent as Penfold, an involvement can prove rewarding and provide exposure to

new skills and valuable contacts and networks.

"Off the back of that [tragedy and formation of the fundraising committee] I realised the skills I've acquired over the years readily lent themselves to giving back," Penfold says. For the next five years, he worked on a full-time voluntary basis at the St Joseph's College Indigenous Fund, before establishing the

MANY COMPANIES OFFER PAID LEAVE AS AN INCENTIVE TO PARTICIPATE

AIEF in 2007. The foundation provides scholarships so indigenous children can access quality education.

"It was irreconcilable to me that we're forcing our kids into Third World schools. Disadvantaged kids ought to be able to access the same schools that I would want to send my kids to," he says.

AIEF's scholarship program has since grown to a \$40 million joint

venture between Australian business, the philanthropic community and the Federal Government.

BOARD EXPERIENCE

Even the best managers risk being overlooked for promotion if they don't have the necessary experience to operate at a higher level.

Kerryn Newton, managing director of Directors Australia, says volunteering on not-for-profit boards can help managers develop skills they may not get to hone on a regular basis, but which are required in many executive-level roles. Strategic thinking is one such skill.

"Managers are usually used to implementing strategy, but opportunities to develop their own strategic thinking abilities can be limited," she says.

"Volunteering on a not-for-profit board can be great experience for someone looking to further develop those skills."

Leigh White, co-founder and president of suicide bereavement group WINGS of Hope, knows the benefits not-for-profit board experience can bring.

Working on the board of WINGS of Hope has improved her people management skills, which is invaluable in her professional role as principal of Sydney-based marketing agency White Marketing.

“Several of my clients are in the not-for-profit sector, among other sectors. Being on a board of a registered harm prevention charity, my personal approach to my professional work is now empathetic and I have unique insights into some of the challenges my clients face,” she says. “There is some cross pollination of information and connections that comes in handy too.”

Because there are many not-for-profit companies and board members are not usually paid, it is easier to find a position on a not-for-profit board than a corporate board. But Directors Australia’s Newton stresses this doesn’t mean not-for-profit boards are “second rate”.

“The role of the board is the same whether it’s a not-for-profit board or the board of BHP.”

STAFF RETENTION

National Australia Bank Employee Volunteer Program manager Natalie Howard says volunteering has “dual benefits”. She says encouraging staff to volunteer improves professional skills, and also increases employee engagement and retention.

“There are benefits for the community, but our employees are also developing themselves and our organisation by participating,” she says.

Since introducing its volunteer program in 1998, NAB has partnered with more than 400 organisations nationwide, including Camp Quality, Mission Australia, Anglicare and the Black Dog Institute.

“We’ve found employees who are actively engaged in corporate social responsibility activities, such as



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Kerryn Newton, managing director, Directors Australia

employer-led volunteering, record a 10 per cent higher employee engagement score. On top of that, two out of four of our employees will stay with NAB because of how active we are in the community,” she says

In light of figures such as these, many of Australia’s largest organisations have developed employee volunteer programs. Many offer paid leave as an incentive to participate.

As part of NAB’s volunteer program, business bankers help small businesses in disadvantaged communities. This fosters cultural understanding and gives them an opportunity to develop their knowledge about small business management.

Other volunteers travel to the Kimberly to act as intermediaries between indigenous communities and corporate organisations, which builds interpersonal and negotiating skills in a real-world context.

For those without employee volunteer programs at work, organisations such as the Australian Business Arts Foundation introduce business advisers and skilled workers to arts organisations in need of expertise.

VOLUNTEERING ABROAD

Regular typhoons, floods and landslides weren’t enough to deter Matt Allen from a 12-month volunteer trip to the Philippines. The senior manager at the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) is working with the Philippines Red Cross to strengthen its HR systems and organisational development.

Allen’s employer, DSE deputy secretary Adam Fennessy, encouraged Allen to take leave to volunteer. He says the opportunity for employees to gain new and varied experiences is important for professional and personal growth.

“I anticipate Matt will have a professionally challenging time in Manila. The benefits and rewards of volunteering are a package that Matt will bring back to the DSE from this assignment,” he says.

Organisations such as the Australian Red Cross, in conjunction with the Australian Volunteers for International Development program, support skilled Australians such as Allen to contribute to overseas aid efforts for up to 12 months.

The trips are a form of professional development, providing volunteers with experiences and skills they may not be able to access in their current roles.

Speaking from his Manila office, Allen says his work with the Philippines Red Cross has made him more adaptable.

He hopes to return to his regular job in Australia with “enhanced interpersonal and communication skills, as a more well-rounded person”.

“Back home it’s easy to get caught up in the same way of thinking, but you can’t do that here,” he says.

“We’re responding to disasters with almost no systems in place [compared with Australia]. Working in this type of environment means I’ve developed better people management skills, business management skills ... that I wouldn’t have had an opportunity to develop in Australia.” **Mt**

VOLUNTEERING: WHERE TO START

➤ **Skilled volunteering:** The Australian Business Arts Foundation lets you build your professional skills in a creative environment while sharing your business knowledge to help build a sustainable and dynamic arts organisation or practice. (abaf.org.au).

➤ **Volunteering overseas:** The Australian Red Cross works with Australian Volunteers

for International Development to send skilled Australians overseas to help with aid efforts (redcross.org.au/volunteer-overseas).

➤ **Not for profit boards:** Our Community is an online portal where you can learn how to build a better board, be a better board member and find or advertise board positions (ourcommunity.com.au/boards).

