

# **Community Engagement:**

## **A Study of Corporate Executives**

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# Community Engagement: A Study of Corporate Executives

*So what makes someone in the community engaged? In today's world, is it enough to simply be outstanding at your primary job? What is "Social Capital" and how do the best leaders connect?*

One of the most profound management and public policy concepts to take root in the past ten years is the idea of "social capital". Social capital is about social connectedness, the value of our networks and the benefits that accrue to both participants and society when we become actively engaged in the community. Leaders, through their actions, vision and persuasive abilities can develop social capital and contribute to the development of their organizations and their communities, which is key for maintaining competitiveness and for achieving organizational effectiveness. Developing and nurturing productive relationships, becoming engaged in positive networks, and building trust and reciprocity are hallmarks of strategic leadership of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Hence, a Corporate Engagement Study was undertaken jointly between the University of British Columbia, the University of Victoria and the Vancouver Board of Trade to explore the nature and level of engagement of individuals identified as being significantly engaged in the community. From January to May, 2007 eighteen interviews were conducted with individuals from the communities of Victoria and Vancouver, BC, in a semi-structured format and of one-hour in duration.

Of the participants interviewed, the majority perceived themselves to be highly engaged in the larger business community, either currently or in the past. Many traits were identified by these individuals as characteristics that describe one who is highly engaged (see Table 1), however the innate belief that one can make a difference, and that you one has something to contribute were

listed the most often by respondents. Other common traits from respondents included an unselfish, genuine concern for the well-being of others; the desire to contribute; a concern for the community; and a general sense of interest or curiosity. When questioned about what being highly engaged meant to the respondents, many stated that it means active involvement and the contribution of ideas and expertise in the community. In addition, responses also centered around the ability to lead by example while encouraging others to do the same, and the enjoyment of expanding one's network.

**Table 1 – Traits Displayed by Individuals Who Are Considered Highly Engaged**

Trait	Frequency
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Innate belief that you can make a difference, that you have something to contribute</li> </ul>	<b>12</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Unselfish, genuine concern for the well-being of others</li> </ul>	<b>9</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Desire to contribute</li> </ul>	<b>5</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Concern for the community</li> <li>•Interest, curiosity</li> </ul>	<b>4</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Passionate</li> <li>•Desire to influence/ change things</li> </ul>	<b>3</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Confident in self</li> <li>•Pride (in the community and where you live)</li> <li>•Motivated</li> </ul>	<b>2</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Caring</li> <li>•Directed</li> <li>•Ego</li> <li>•Empathetic</li> <li>•Hardworking</li> <li>•Integrity</li> <li>•Networking ability</li> <li>•Pleasers</li> <li>•Purposeful</li> <li>•Multi-taskers</li> <li>•Sense of obligation/responsibility</li> </ul>	<b>1</b>

When considering the benefits of being engaged, responses ranged from a gaining fulfillment, a sense of community, improved decision-making abilities due to different perspectives, accomplishment, and satisfaction (See Table 2). Interestingly, very few respondents listed

similar benefits. Conversely when asked what drives them to be so engaged, a majority stated that the feeling that they had something to contribute or give of value as important motivations. Additional reasons include satisfaction and becoming involved with issues of interest and importance.

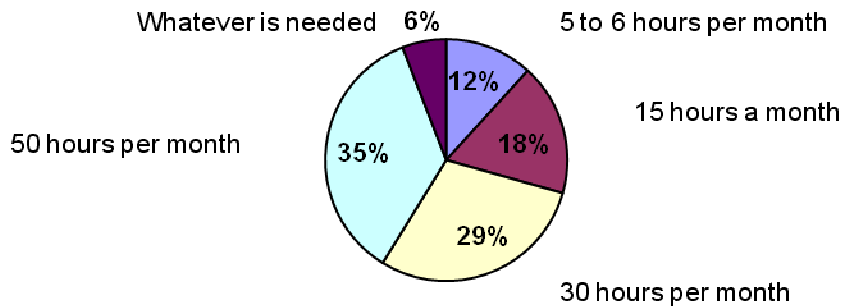
**Table 2 – Motivation for Becoming Engaged**

Motivation	Frequency
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Feelings that I contribute, that I have something to give of value (e.g. mentoring).</li> </ul>	<b>10</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•I can become involved with issues of interest and importance, do I agree with the cause?</li> <li>•Satisfaction</li> </ul>	<b>4</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•I do it for the good/ betterment of the community at large.</li> <li>•To stay informed.</li> <li>•Passion.</li> <li>•Sense of fulfillment.</li> <li>•See causes that align themselves with aspects of your own self.</li> </ul>	<b>2</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•My Father: he said to me 'if you're successful in business then you should help the community'.</li> <li>•It's a benefit for my business, but it's not a key driver.</li> <li>•To stay involved.</li> <li>•Compassion.</li> <li>•Sense of accomplishment.</li> <li>•It expands opportunities.</li> <li>•I am gaining experience and wisdom.</li> <li>•I like charitable giving.</li> <li>•The reward - what I put in, in terms of my involvement, and my enthusiasm and my ability, I get back tenfold.</li> <li>•I like helping and connecting people.</li> </ul>	<b>1</b>

The eighteen business leaders interviewed for the study have current and past involvement in many different industries including: business, education, social service, transportation/infrastructure and empowerment/women. Many have been involved with the community for 10-15 years, with the majority contributing approximately 30-50 hours per month (See Chart 1). Roles of involvement include being a board or committee member, director,

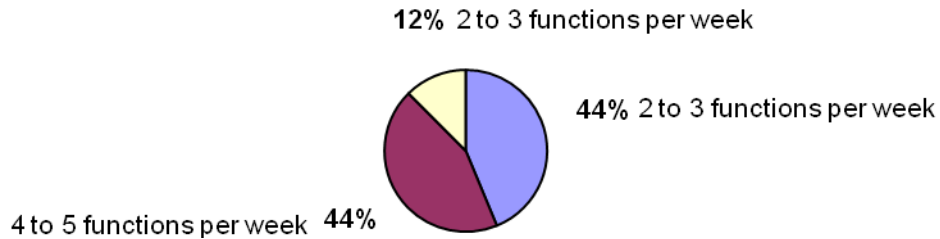
member and/or mentor and many different examples of accomplishments were given. For instance, fundraising, facility building or re-location, and policy change were all made possible through community engagement.

**Chart 1 - Amount of Time Contributed to Extra-Curricular Community Activities**

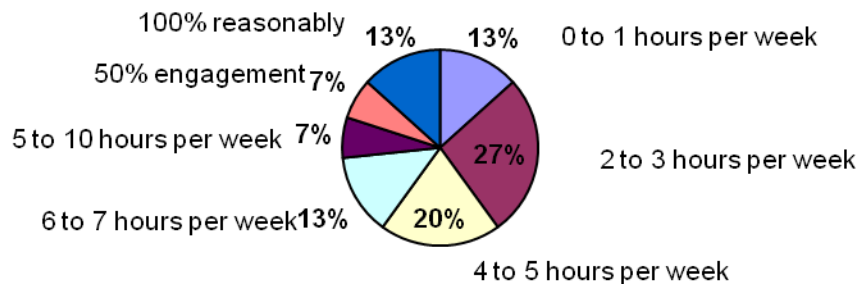


Actual involvement, based on the number of functions attended per week, ranged mostly from 2-3 and 4-5 functions (See Chart 2) and included committee meetings, charity events or meetings, and board meetings. Some are active and attend events almost every day while others stated that time of year, level of involvement and work-life balance affect the level and time of involvement. When asked what is a “reasonable” amount of time (per week) for people to engage in such activities a range of responses, from 1-7 hours per week to 50% of all you do, were given (See Chart 3). In order to manage their commitment, and “fit it all in”, a majority of respondents stated that support and understanding (i.e. from family and assistants) was key. In addition, strong organizational skills, better judgment in determining whether one can add value to a particular project, and less family commitments (i.e. older children) also help to balance commitments and time.

**Chart 2 - Number of Functions Attended per Week**



**Chart 3 - Reasonable amount of time (per week) for people to spend in such activities**

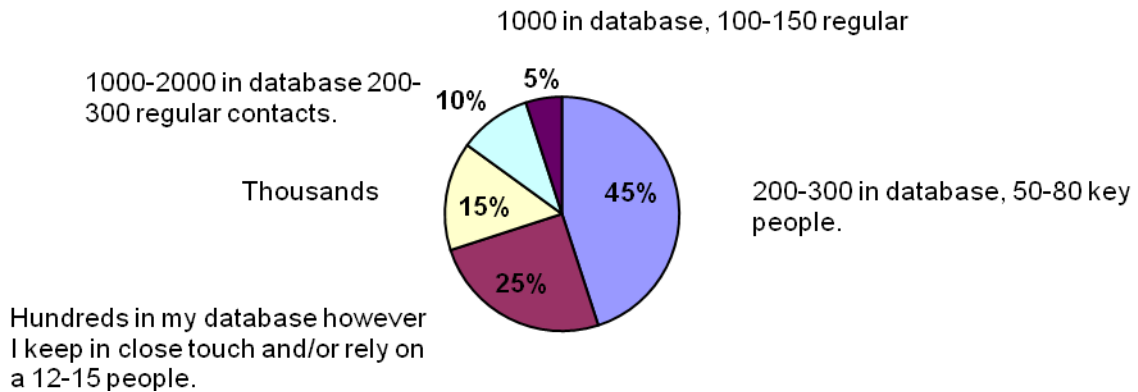


Another area of interest in the study was the balance between business and community engagement, and a wide range of answers were given. Some respondents stated that engagement becomes more personal with time, while others mentioned that they were more engaged if related to business because that is “where their head is”, however overall responses were mixed on this topic. Also, when considering their professional organization’s support of community engagement, many said that their organization is supportive, and in fact some do so as a matter of policy, while others believe that one cannot mandate or force involvement.

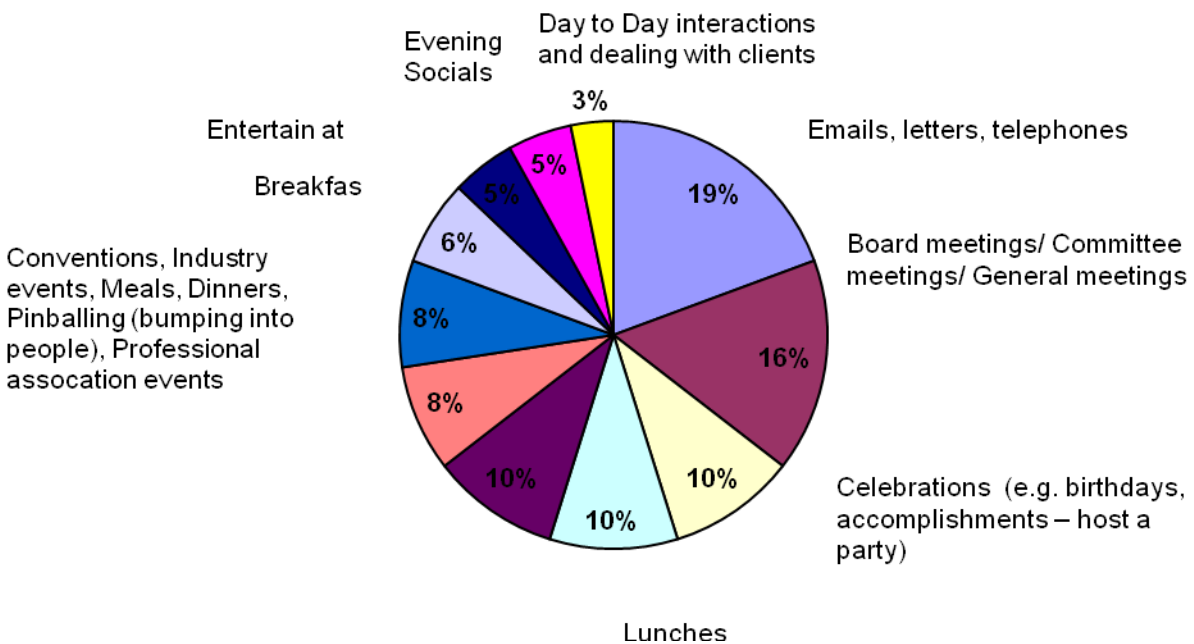
One of the results of high engagement is a large network. Most of those interviewed had hundreds of contacts in their database, with approximately 50-80 key people and 12-15 people

with whom they remain in close touch (See Chart 4). Meetings, meals, celebrations and events were cited as ways to remain in contact with one's network, with email, letters and the telephone being the most used contact method (See Chart 5). Contact with members of one's network ranged from every day, week and month, to being dependant on the current issue or the type of relationship (i.e. friend or community contact) (See Chart 6).

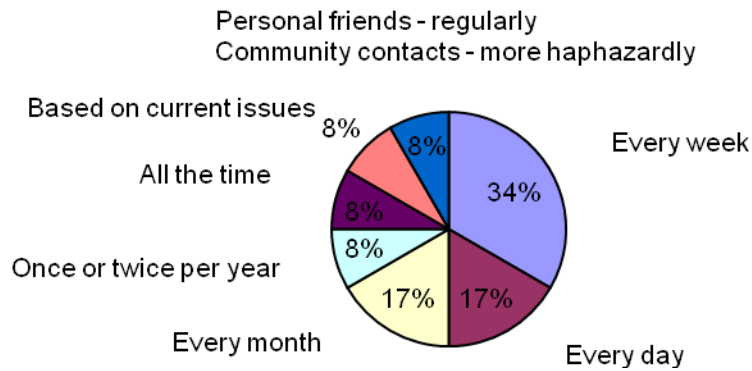
**Chart 4 - Number of Contacts**



**Chart 5 - How To Stay In Touch**



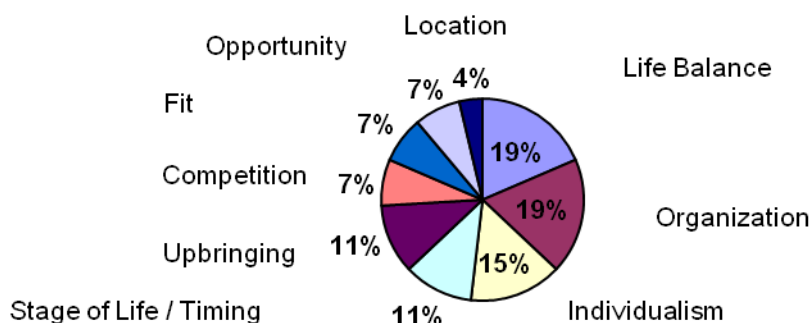
**Chart 6 - Frequency of Contact**



The relationship between satisfaction and engagement was also considered in this research. Results showed that the relationship between time expenditure and satisfaction were mixed, with answers varying between no direct correlation, a direct correlation and an “ebb and flow” relationship. The organizations that provide respondents with the most satisfaction also vary between arts, healthcare, educational and athletic organizations.

Research into engagement also points to the fact that there is a strong trend toward massive disengagement, and that 7% of the people do 70% of the volunteering, hence interviewees were questioned why they think this is occurring (See Chart 7). The greatest number of responses was within the areas of Organization, Life Balance and Individualism. With respect to Organization, reasons include core groups of people who do most of the volunteering, volunteer burnout and the lack of approaching potential candidates. In addition, life appears to have sped up and people are overwhelmed, or people have become either more selfish or are only volunteering for organizations with which they are directly related (personal interest) rather than for the greater community. Other reasons also include a person’s stage in life or timing of the engagement, and also upbringing and that fewer things (i.e. religion, family) bind us together as a community. Interestingly though, responses were split when questioned if people were more selfish with their time. It is also important to note that several respondents did not get the sense that people were becoming less engaged, but that engagement might be changing forms through the use of technology.

**Chart 7 - Reasons for Dis-Engagement**



Another interesting fact that surfaced during the research is that eight of the respondents grew up in a family that was highly engaged in the community while ten grew up in families that were *not* highly engaged, suggesting that a trend does not exist. Some respondents had strong parental role models while others either had outside influence (i.e. community role model or company expectation) or discovered the value of engagement later on in life.

Finally, interviewees were questioned about what they would like people to say about them at the end of the day, and if there was any advice they'd like to give. The trend of answers is again diverse, but positive, and represent the wealth of knowledge and experience of the business leaders interviewed. Responses varied from individuals having a desire to stand on their own and be recognized for their own accomplishments to folks who wanted to be seen by the community who raised significant sums of money. A general theme that emerged was a wish to be viewed as someone who set a positive example and acted as a good role model not only to the community at large, but also to friends and family. When asked if the respondent had any additional comments or advice to give, an interesting array of responses was given. A need to find a way to get more people at younger ages engaged was a common response, as was the value in the consistent giver over someone who writes one large cheque and gets all the credit. The concept of making engagement become a consistent part of one's life was a theme that came into sight and there was an expressed need for this to come about as a result of people being self-

motivated by intrinsic rewards. Engagement appears to be pursued by those who include in their conceptualization of success, an element of 'giving back'.

As individuals and organizations, we need to realize that success is measured not just with narrow economic focus. For success to be sustainable, strong social groups are required within our companies and between our companies and the societies in which we live. The irony is that financial success is possible in the short-run through a singular focus on economic variables, but long-run corporate success is the result of engaging people emotionally and socially as well as economically.