



Breakout Session 4: Community Outreach and Skills-based Volunteering

By Ann Mak

Background

The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) and the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) held the inaugural International Conference on Societies of Opportunity on 29 and 30 April 2025. The conference is a platform for international policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to exchange ideas on creating access to opportunities and fostering social mobility.

The fourth breakout session of the conference featured Ms Lisa Gainer, the Chief Executive Officer at TalentTrust; and Ms Sarah Ng, General Manager (Corporate Communications, Investor Relations and Sustainability) at UOL Group Ltd. The session was moderated by Dr Justin Lee, Senior Research Fellow at IPS.



Caption for photo: (From right to left) Discussion among Dr Justin Lee, Ms Sarah Ng and Ms Lisa Gainer.

Skills-based Volunteering for Engaged Businesses, Stronger Non-profits and Thriving Communities

In her presentation, Ms Gainer showcased how TalentTrust builds both social capital and human capital by bringing non-profit organisations and businesses together. TalentTrust is a registered charity that bridges the skills gaps in non-profit organisations by leveraging the business expertise of corporate volunteers to help solve their most pressing strategic challenges. They provide end-to-end project management, focused on upskilling and building organisational capabilities. Its overarching vision is to create a nation of active, skilled volunteers sharing their talent to uplift and deepen the impact of non-profit organisations.

Ms Gainer first explained why skills-based volunteering is particularly valuable for non-profit organisations. Besides lacking the resources to hire specific expertise, such as in human resources and digitalisation, non-profit organisations often struggle to retain their manpower, especially during their first three years of joining the sector. The role of non-profit leaders is also becoming increasingly complex, with leaders having to drive digitalisation efforts and navigate new regulatory and governance standards.

TalentTrust's partners are typically smaller non-profit organisations in their early or growth phase and with a limited revenue pool. As such, skills-based volunteering plays a vital role in helping them develop capabilities in areas where they are critically lacking. The most common areas are strategic planning, branding and marketing, digitalisation, human resources, operational planning and processes, and fundraising and revenue generation. Capability building in these areas allow the non-profit to bring their operations to a higher level, hence more effectively and efficiently work towards their mission.

TalentTrust offers two main programmes to help build the capacity of non-profits and their leaders. TalentTrust Accelerator is the organisation's flagship programme, where a team of senior business leader volunteers are selected to match the strategic challenge of the non-profits. The volunteer team journeys with the non-profit leaders for six to nine months in a structured and collaborative setting, facilitating the transfer of critical skills, insights and practical tools to the non-profit. Ms Gainer gave the example of the STAR Programme Accelerator project, where TalentTrust assisted SHINE Community Services in developing a communication strategy for its new programme. After engaging a team of brand, communications and marketing corporate volunteers, the non-profit walked away with a comprehensive audience messaging, clear engagement strategies, and a pitch deck.

TalentTrust also offers Masterclasses, which are bite-size learning programmes where senior business leaders and seasoned non-profit leaders collaborate to deliver interactive workshops. The shared facilitation promotes a richer learning experience from which non-profit organisations can glean a wealth of skills and knowledge.

Ms Gainer shared how skills-based volunteering strengthens the social capital of non-profit organisations. Firstly, it bridges sectoral silos by creating rare opportunities for cross-sector collaboration between non-profit leaders and senior business leaders, promoting cross-learning, mutual understanding and innovation. Corporate volunteers also frequently provide non-profit leaders with access to influential networks that would otherwise be out of reach, opening the doors to fresh partnerships and funding resources. Skills-based volunteering also provides non-profit leaders with an intentional space where they can engage in strategic thinking rather than focusing solely on day-to-day challenges. For instance, the talentTrust Accelerate programme involves regular meetings between the corporate volunteers and non-profit leader. These meetings provide a safe and collaborative space for non-profit leaders to co-create and test strategies, without funding or board reporting dynamics coming into play.

Besides supporting non-profit organisations, skills-based volunteering also helps build the human capital of businesses. Skills-based volunteering provides corporate volunteers with valuable opportunities to strengthen soft skills such as empathy, active listening, and agile and adaptive leadership. Numerous businesses have tapped on TalentTrust's programmes to strategically stretch the future leaders of their organisations. By immersing these employees in an unfamiliar environment with significant resource constraints, this broadens their leadership perspectives and enhances their problem-solving abilities.

To date, TalentTrust has engaged more than 280 non-profit partners and 500 corporate volunteers, with highly positive reviews. Every non-profit leader TalentTrust has worked with

indicated that skills-based volunteering provided them with greater access to a community of support and external skills to help achieve their organisational mission. Most corporate volunteers also felt that their listening and mentoring skills have improved, and that they were able to adapt their skills to solve problems.

Ms Gainer concluded by highlighting the importance of intentionally designed skills-based volunteering programmes to create lasting impact for non-profits and businesses. These programmes must be well-structured and provide corporate volunteers with sufficient guidance, in order to shift volunteering from a once-off, transactional interaction, into a transformative experience for both parties.

Building a Sustainable CSR Model for Good: Assets, Volunteering and Partnerships

Ms Ng spoke about the corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts of UOL Group Ltd, a leading property and hospitality group in Singapore. One key aspect of UOL's CSR philosophy is "Building Good" by empowering people and communities, and Ms Ng shared how the group incorporates sustainability and CSR into its business operations in order to sustain these efforts.

UOL works towards influencing and multiplying social impact through assets, volunteering and partnerships. Firstly, as a property and hospitality group, UOL is able to harness its assets, such as malls, hotels and condominiums, as venues to organise activities like art exhibitions for artists with disabilities. UOL also seeks to nurture a culture of giving and volunteerism among its employees, which has provided the group with a pool of volunteers they can tap on for their activities. Lastly, UOL also tries to encourage its partners, such as mall tenants, to join in on their CSR efforts. Their CSR efforts are channelled to the community through four key focus areas: (i) inclusive arts for PwD artists, (ii) children & youth from underprivileged families, (iii) education for underprivileged students, and (iv) people in terms of hiring PwD employees.

One example is the UOL-PPHG Community Uplift programme, which seeks to enhance stability, self-reliance and social mobility among children and youths living in public rental housing. In partnership with MSF, UOL provides these children and youths with enrichment and learning opportunities that support their development and exposure, such as coding classes and rock-climbing activities. The programme also includes career mentoring opportunities, where some youths have been exposed to potential career paths in the hospitality industry, such as roles in concierge, HR, and F&B. For instance, UOL has organised regular culinary classes for 20 youths at its hotels, conducted by its chef volunteers. Such opportunities give these youths a first taste of the corporate world, provide them with role models they can aspire towards, and thereby building their self-confidence.

UOL has also actively supported the inclusive arts scene since 2014, organising exhibitions and showcases to boost visibility and public patronage. One example is the UOL X ART:DIS, Singapore's first comprehensive art prize that recognises all stages of artistic practice by artists with disabilities. The first edition in 2023 received more than 300 entries, with 28 winning

pieces. Through such initiatives, UOL hopes to provide artists with disabilities with a special platform for them to gain recognition, and springboard them to further opportunities.

Since 2019, UOL has also been a pioneer in inclusive hiring within Singapore's hospitality sector. The group has hired 28 PwDs in roles ranging from F&B Guest Service Ambassadors, Front Office staff and HR, and has created a more supportive environment for these staff through work practices like flexible work schedules and tailored training. While Ms Ng acknowledged that hiring PwDs may require greater patience and a willingness to journey with them, she emphasised that UOL's inclusive hiring practices have greatly benefitted the group. Besides providing a pool of highly responsible and committed staff, Ms Ng expressed that hiring PwDs has changed the company culture for the better by sparking new perspectives, and instilling greater compassion and patience among its employees.

Question-and-Answer Session

Q1: Drawing on Ms Gainer's comment that programmes can be intentionally designed to have a longer-lasting, transformative impact, do the speakers have their own benchmarks to determine what makes their projects meaningful?

A1: Ms Gainer answered that the non-profit is always at the heart of TalentTrust's work, and being able to build their organisational capability and meet their remit would be the key benchmark TalentTrust uses. The non-profit leader would have successfully transferred the necessary skills into their organisation, and have the capabilities to move forward and advance their organisational mission.

Ms Ng shared that its benchmark would be if UOL's programmes can support the livelihoods of its beneficiaries, such as being able to retain their PwD staff or advance the careers of artists with disabilities. She said that private companies such as UOL expect their CSR efforts to produce concrete results, such as helping their beneficiaries to earn a living.

Q2: Regarding skills-based volunteering and corporate volunteering in general, how can we balance between leveraging corporate expertise while also preserving and respecting the existing strengths, values and self-determination of the community? As an outsider, we may have the tendency to impose our own values and solutions onto these communities.

A2: Ms Gainer highlighted the importance of programme managers in helping TalentTrust to navigate this tension. TalentTrust conducts a comprehensive induction with each corporate volunteer and encourages them to approach the project from a place of humility, open-mindedness, and a fundamental desire to help the non-profit serve its community better. Should a corporate volunteer behave in an overly prescriptive manner, the project's programme manager will engage them in a frank discussion about the goals of the project and guide them on how they can reframe their questions. Such measures prompt corporate volunteers to practise active listening, so they can better understand the context and community that the non-profit operates in, rather than immediately recommending solutions which may be of little relevance.

TalenTrust also engages the non-profit leader by organising regular check-ins with them after each meeting with the corporate volunteers. During these check-ins, non-profit leaders are asked to provide honest feedback, such as whether the strategies generated during the meeting will actually be suitable and effective for their organisation.

Ms Ng drew on UOL's participation in ComLink+ to illustrate how the group manages this tension. Firstly, UOL ensures that its programmes are actually desired and useful for the beneficiaries of ComLink+ through repeated rounds of discussions with MSF officers. UOL staff are also under no compulsion to volunteer; they are instead informed about the programmes UOL will be organising and can volunteer for those which interest them. Guidelines are also provided to staff who volunteer, such as what they can share to inspire the beneficiaries and make their volunteering journey more meaningful.

Q3: At times, the logic of the business world seems to conflict with that of the social world. For instance, an organisation called Community Circles in the United Kingdom made its Intellectual Property (IP) publicly accessible and free to use. What seems like a poor business model is actually a good social model. What do the speakers think of this specific example, and what would they do in such a situation?

A3: Ms Gainer agreed that there is a constant tension between revenue and sustainability, in contrast with the interests of the community. The need to balance between these competing objectives applies to TalentTrust as well. While Ms Gainer is personally supportive of other organisations adapting TalentTrust's model and impacting their own communities, she acknowledged that her board members would likely disapprove of the lack of a monetisation strategy.

Ms Ng explained that as a private company which engages in corporate volunteering, UOL needs to be accountable to their shareholders. This imperative guides UOL in conducting CSR efforts in ways that naturally extend from its business, such as adapting their malls into learning malls which cater to children and youths, or organising art jams between UOL's staffs and artists with disabilities. Ensuring that UOL's CSR efforts are a natural extension of their business helps to make these efforts more acceptable to shareholders. Ms Ng also noted that several competitors have adopted UOL's CSR model, which the group views positively as it serves to amplify their social impact.

Q4: UOL appears to be highly adept at doing the good that they are uniquely positioned to do. How does UOL identify and scope its community investment strategies, and what are the parameters that influence its decision-making?

A4: Ms Ng said that UOL does not have a prescribed model or formula; instead, its community investment strategies are guided primarily by considerations of what would be the most natural extension of its business. This provides an intuitive narrative that can be more easily accepted by shareholders and board members.

For instance, UOL's decision to hire PwDs has been highly beneficial given that it operates in the manpower-scarce hospitality industry. While there were initially naysayers who felt that

the hiring and retaining PwDs would be inordinately tedious or challenging, attitudes have changed overtime as these staff have proven themselves.

The group also strives to sustain its partnership with its beneficiaries, such as by collaborating with ART:DIS for over a decade. Journeying with its beneficiaries allows UOL to deepen their relationships overtime and enhance their CSR efforts. This narrative of creating a sustainable relationships with beneficiaries has also received the support of UOL's board and shareholders.

Q5: TalentTrust has completed many interesting projects in the role of matchmaker. How does the organisation gain an understanding of both the non-profit and corporate volunteer, and facilitate collaboration between them?

A5: Ms Gainer emphasised the importance of understanding both sides deeply, which begins by building a close relationship with the non-profit organisation. This involves gaining an understanding of the non-profit's needs and goals and helping them to narrow the scope of their project. It is also important to engage with the non-profit's executive director, to gain insights into their personality and the types of teams they would work better in. For the corporate volunteers, TalentTrust's most important consideration is to ensure they possess the core skills which are required by the non-profit. Another key consideration is team dynamics — whether the corporate volunteers and the executive director possess sufficiently complementary skillsets and personalities in order to collaborate effectively.

Q6: To end off, what is one takeaway message that the speakers want to leave with the corporates and non-profit organisations?

A6: Addressing the corporate audience, Ms Ng emphasised the importance of understanding one's company, business and staff, which will enable them to be more intentional in their choice of organisations and to sustain these efforts.

Ms Gainer shared that private companies should reflect on their motivations for engaging in CSR, and do not need to be afraid to start small. She also affirmed the value of non-profit organisations, and encouraged those interested to reach out to TalentTrust for assistance.

Q7: How does one join a project by TalentTrust as a corporate volunteer or staff?

A7: Ms Gainer encouraged anyone interested to volunteer with TalentTrust, as it contributes towards the organisation's goal of creating a nation of active, skilled volunteers. TalentTrust has a dedicated volunteer manager who meets with each new volunteer to share more about TalentTrust's programmes and operations, as well as to gain a better understanding of the volunteer.

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