

## OPPORTUNITY #32

What if paid social national service was standard?

# SERVICE AS A STANDARD

Paid social national service is legally available for everyone, resulting in changed views of working life, community, social and environmental engagement, allowing people to contribute to their community and society before embarking on a new career or transition to the next phase of their life.



**MEGATREND**  
Future Humanity

**TRENDS**  
Community Engagement & Volunteerism  
Future of Purpose & Work  
Longevity & Well-being

**SECTORS AFFECTED**

Education  
Health & Healthcare  
Travel & Tourism



---

## WHY IT MATTERS TODAY

Volunteerism is a way of expressing a sense of social responsibility. The benefits of volunteering have been shown to be extensive and studies have shown that individuals experience improved mental and social health and well-being, and a sense of satisfaction.<sup>579, 580</sup> Volunteering can also counteract caregiver stress<sup>581</sup> and be central to community identity.<sup>582</sup> Corporate volunteers may experience better working relationships.<sup>583</sup>

The International Labour Organization defines volunteer work as ‘any unpaid, non-compulsory activity to produce goods or provide services for others’.<sup>584</sup> It has been estimated based on surveys conducted in 2019–21 that globally almost 15% of the population aged 15 or over (862 million people) engage in volunteer activity each month. However, there are significant differences between the regions: while Asia and Africa are above the global average (17%), the Arab states are below it (9%). Most volunteer work is done informally.<sup>585</sup>

Motivations for volunteering differ, however. While studies have looked at demographic factors behind increased volunteering, more research is needed into other factors.<sup>586</sup> In older adults, the better the individual’s physical health and psychosocial well-being, the more likely they are to volunteer.<sup>587</sup> Motivations for environmental volunteering similarly differ ranging from the desire to gain new skills and knowledge to a wish to improve the environment and forming connections around a common purpose.<sup>588</sup>

Some countries already offer a form of social service. For example, in Sweden, the Right to Leave to Conduct a Business Operation Act offers full-time employees at least six months of unpaid sabbatical leave to start their own business. Additionally, they can take time off to study or care for a family member.<sup>589</sup>

France has a scheme that falls somewhere between mandatory and voluntary. The government announced in 2019 that, at age 16, everyone must commit a month to learning service skills, such as first aid, and applying them in real-world settings. After this, teenagers are encouraged to volunteer for three months to a year in an area such as tutoring or aiding environmental causes.<sup>590</sup>



---

## THE OPPORTUNITY

Programmes aligning personality types and skills to different areas of social service could give people a greater sense of purpose and contribute to a feeling of community spirit and solidarity. As lifespans lengthen and skills and work environments evolve, people can increasingly benefit from paid sabbaticals or obligatory periods of paid social national service. Such initiatives could allow people to step back and think – while contributing to their community and society – before embarking on a new career or the next phase of their life.

There is an abundance of social challenges to resolve around the world, from poverty and climate change to poor mental health and how best to care for the sick. Planned, systematic absences of a year or more could offer a means to smooth labour market fluctuations or to offset structural labour market changes. Those who are unemployed could find a productive way to generate some short-term income while also exploring new avenues for potential employment and stable income generation.

Linking social duty to paid schemes could make the experience more meaningful for individuals without a personal plan and those who are facing unemployment, as volunteering has been found to buffer the negative mental effects of unemployment, the pressures of family care and long-term illness.<sup>591</sup>

---

## BENEFITS

Greater self-optimisation and fulfilment for individuals, contributing to improved well-being. Opportunities for individuals to grow their skills in a new area. Greater cognitive diversity within the workplace when employees return having gained new experience. Opportunities for the unemployed to explore new work possibilities, providing hope for a better future.

## RISKS

Low uptake from the public or private sector or among employees or unemployed people. Poor-quality social service opportunities, meaning that they do not provide meaningful experiences or impact. Compassion fatigue among participants.



**ARAB STATES**  
are below the global average **9%**

**ASIA AND AFRICA**  
are above the global average **17%**

**15%**

Globally almost  
of the population engage  
in volunteer activity