Bridging the
Goodness Gap

How expert-curated content influences altruistic behavior

Introduction

Data about a variety of giving habits tells us that people aren't actually as generous as they'd like to be with their time, attention and money. As an example, while Americans think they should be giving 6% of their income to support worthy causes, research says they're actually only **giving 3%[1].** The resulting disconnect between people's intention and action has created a $291 billion Goodness gap, which represents a significant opportunity to make a meaningful social impact. And it's not just nonprofits and their beneficiaries who miss out when we don't give back as much as we intend.

Humans are hardwired to do good, so when we don't do it, we miss out on the **oxytocin boost** and the sense of purpose we get when we work toward making the world a better place. And with data that proves that engaging employees in Goodness can **reduce turnover by up to 57%,** along with society's ever-increasing expectations of corporations to be a force for good, it's clear that there are tangible business benefits to investing in helping people become more of who they want to be.

How do we explain the gap and begin to close it?

There are several theories that could explain why this gap exists. One theory is that navigating a space crowded with nonprofits who are dedicated to the same cause — but that don't necessarily offer the same impact — is confusing. Those looking to help where they can, may simply not know where to start. But with some meaningful guidance, would-be do-gooders may do more and potentially even support more impactful organizations.

The gap could also be attributed to:

Limited attention

We lead busy lives and it can be challenging to make decisions about how and where to give of ourselves when so much else competes for our attention. Because of this, we miss out on important information about relevant opportunities. In a workplace setting, employees can be especially consumed with more urgent tasks or looming deadlines, which just exacerbate the issue. This is especially true when major events shift our attention to real-time needs within an altered environment of increased uncertainty for ourselves and our peers.

A lack of social cues

While we may have a desire to do good, we're not always sure what's the most effective and appropriate way to get involved or take action. In other aspects of our lives, we have the social cues we need to tell us what's expected and appropriate, but in the case of charitable behavior we're often left on our own to figure out how, when or where to give.

Regret avoidance

When people decide to give their time, talent or hard-earned money to a nonprofit, they want to know it will be used appropriately. But it takes time for nonprofits to earn a donor's trust and confidence, and conflicting messages in the media about how organizations are run can be anxiety provoking. Those looking to get engaged with a cause fear they'll regret who they choose to support, so some of them avoid taking any action at all.

The disconnect between people's intention and action has created a

$291
billion

Goodness gap

The test: Would giving behavior change if meaningful guidance came from an expert?
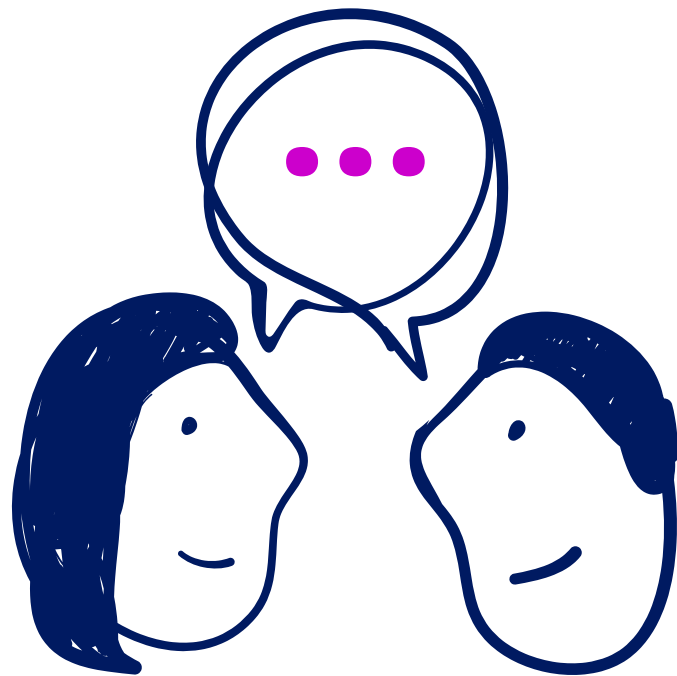
Benevity, the global leader in corporate purpose software, partnered with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as well as a large, global technology client company and ideas42, a research and design nonprofit specializing in behavioral science, to conduct an experiment. The group tested whether the expert curation of "GiveLists" (curated lists of nonprofit organizations) would influence engagement, donation rates and donation volume. It was designed for U.S.-based employees at the company who use the Benevity platform. The test was an opportunity to examine ways companies can help people become more emotionally connected to and invested in the opportunity to do good, bridge the gap between intention and action and, ultimately, amplify the overall effects of corporate purpose programs. This test was part of a broader two-year study of GiveLists run by the Gates Foundation and ideas42.

Hypothesis

We hypothesized that the expert curation of nonprofits would increase individuals' generosity and their likelihood to offer support.

It was our expectation that leveraging a trusted and respected expert would help validate a person's decision to get involved, helping to relieve doubt about which nonprofits to support and avoid regret over making the wrong choice. Because the expert curation was presented online through a workplace giving platform, and not in person, there was no explicit social pressure of face-to-face solicitation, which can lead to avoidance behavior and feelings of guilt. And while the expert is well known, there's likely no personal relationship, meaning the participant feels less pressure to act.

Definitions

GiveLists

GiveLists provide guidance by presenting expert-curated sets of nonprofits within a specific cause area or theme (such as climate change or hurricane relief). They include the following:

- **List topic:** typically a cause area.
- **Expert curator:** person, foundation or general expert.
- **Limited number of nonprofits:** between three and eight.

Experts

Experts are a subset of influencers, who may also include celebrities, executives, peers and other advocates. Expert influencers can be anyone in the company who cares about any cause. In this context, they were defined as people or foundations with expert knowledge of a list topic. The degree to which experts can influence target audiences is typically correlated with their proven authority, education, experience and established trust.

Cause tile

Cause tiles are the buttons that employees (users) see on the Explore Causes page within their workplace giving platform (see visual on page 4). Each contains a high-level cause category, such as education or homelessness. In this experiment there were two versions of the cause tiles: some that included an expert curation and some that did not. Users had the option to click on the cause tiles to view the associated GiveList curated by an expert.

The company

A large, global technology company that conducted the experiment with U.S.-based employees who use the Benevity platform.

Methodology

The research team created two versions of the Explore Causes page that were shown through the company's employee engagement program for U.S. employees. Employees could access the page from the homepage of the platform.

The pages were identical, except the treatment version included an expert listed below the cause on the cause tile.

The redesigned treatment page incorporated eight expert-curated GiveLists, displayed to half of U.S.-based users (the treatment group). The remaining users (the control group) saw the same GiveLists, with the same causes and number of nonprofits, but without any attribution to the expert. Users in both test groups could click through each list to read a short description of the organizations chosen by the expert and then make a donation. Those in the treatment group also saw a brief description of the expert when they clicked through to view a list.

The test was launched during the company's official Giving Campaign in October 2018, and data was collected between October 2018 and January 2019 for all U.S.-based employees visiting their workplace giving platform. The anonymized and aggregated data was then analyzed.

CONTROL
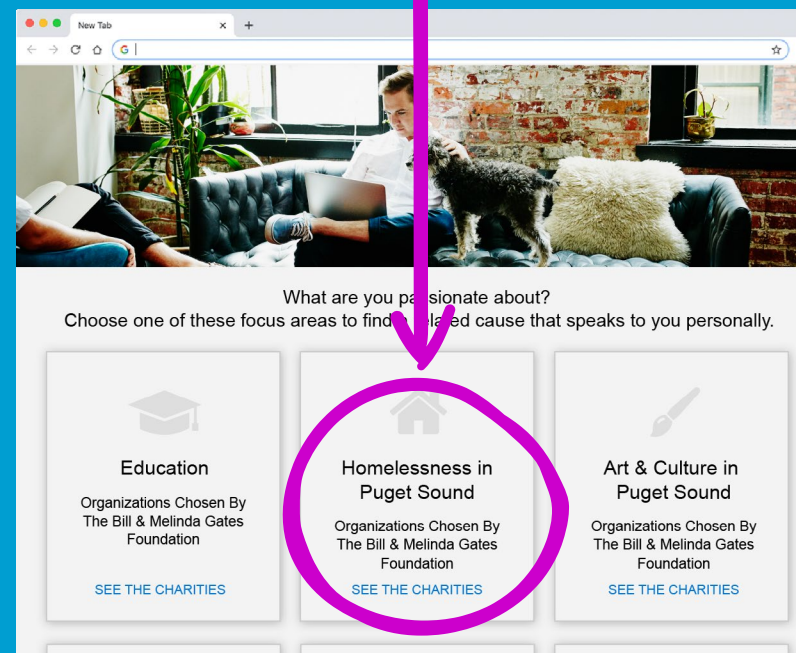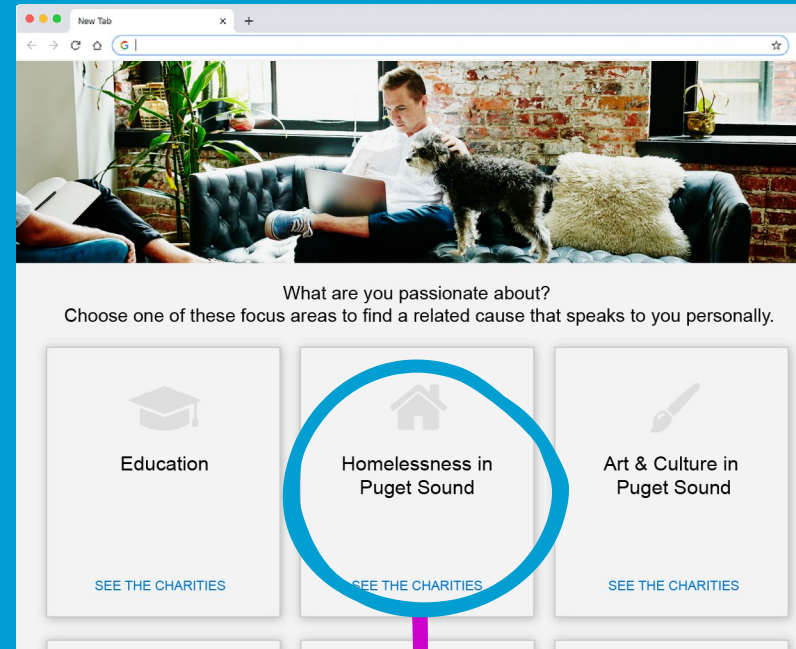
TREATMENT

The Test Examined:

Engagement

Whether a user on the Explore Causes page within the company's workplace giving platform clicked on a cause tile in any session within the experiment time frame.

Donation rate

Whether a user made a donation to one or more of the nonprofits presented on the GiveLists or the broader range of causes available on the workplace giving platform.
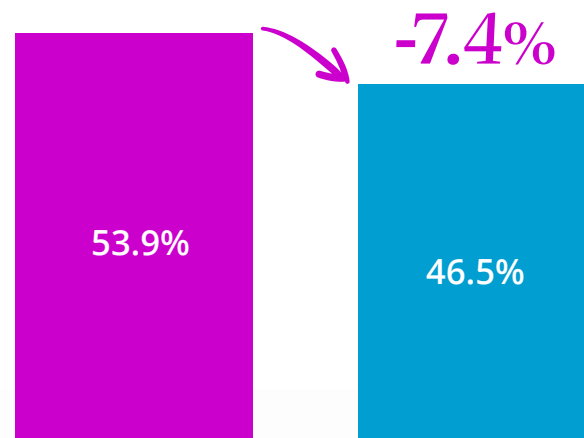
Donation amount

Average dollars donated per participant to any particular nonprofit in the experiment as well as across the entire range of causes available in the Benevity platform.

Findings

**Conversion Rate** (% of Users)

-7.4%

53.9%   46.5%

Engagement

Click-through rates were slightly lower for expert-curated causes

Surprisingly, users who saw the expert curation on the Explore Causes page had a **7.4-percentage-point lower conversion rate** (click-through rate) on a cause tile. Those in the treatment group clicked through 46.5% of the time, while users in the control group clicked through 53.9% of the time.
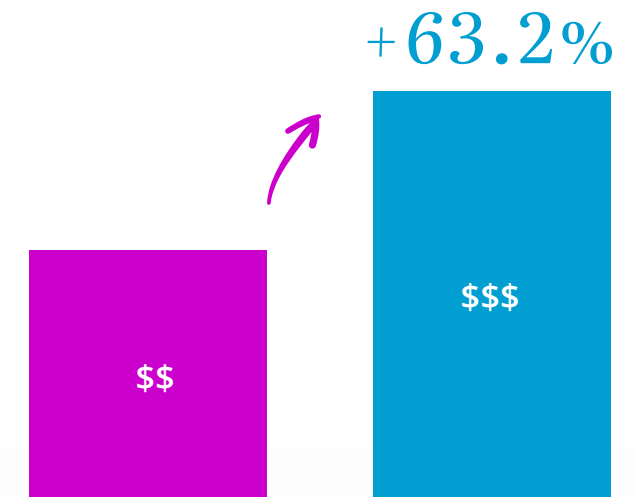
Donations per Donor

2.4x   3.1x
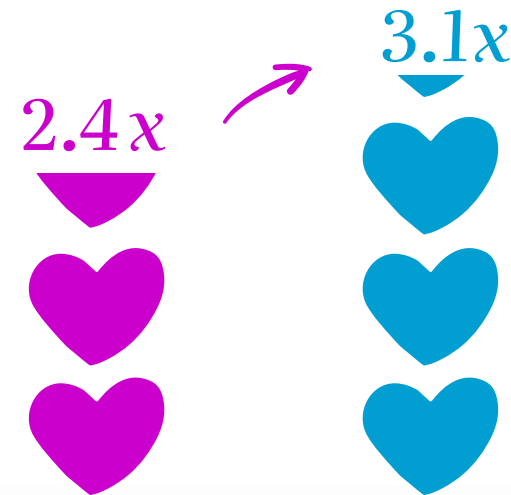
Donation rate

Donors gave more frequently to expert-curated causes

Of those who clicked on a cause tile, both groups were equally likely to make at least one donation; however, donors in the treatment group made more donations on average. Donors in the control group made an average of 2.4 donations per donor, while donors in the treatment group made an average of 3.1 donations per donor.

Average Donation Amount

+63.2%

$$ $$$

Donation amount

Donors gave higher donation amounts to expert-curated causes

Those who saw the curated list gave 63% more dollars on average. Although the treatment group had lower engagement rates, they made more donations overall. There was a 37.5% difference between the total donation amount for the treatment group and the donation amount for the control group.

Conclusion

The results of the test showing that initial engagement was lower were slightly surprising. One theory to explain the marginally lower engagement is that expert curation, in this context, created an additional step for the would-be donor, which is cognitively taxing and perhaps impeded a split-second decision. Another theory is that employees already expect the featured content they see in their giving platform to be curated by experts — whether or not a name is attached — because of their company's established connections to nonprofits or the stances it has taken on social issues.

Nonetheless, expert curation does offer greater opportunity for impact because it led to people giving more often and more generously. This tells us that expert curation can play a role in modifying people's behavior, influencing how you design your corporate purpose programs. Specifically, these insights provide you with another way to have more impact on the causes your people care about the most, while also helping your people align their actions with their intentions when it comes to doing good.

Putting the data to work to power your giving program

The results of the test open up some exciting possibilities for integrating expert curation into your company's corporate purpose program.

Before you explore expert-curated content, consider whether your employee giving program enables people to:

- Easily access giving and volunteering opportunities
- Choose which causes to support
- View and support expert-curated GiveLists

The Potential of Peer Influence

There is an opportunity for companies to deliver on the increasing expectation for brands to take action on societal issues (and engender more trust) by empowering employees to create and champion opportunities for their peers to join them in doing good.

Social influence from peers, who also act as experts and passionate advocates, can create a halo effect that entices others to take action — think about the power of peer reviews in making purchasing decisions or peer recommendations for your next TV series to watch. By empowering employees to curate their own personal cause lists and share with their peers, companies can proactively address some of the barriers causing the Goodness gap (limited attention, lack of social cues, regret avoidance) while building a corporate culture that fosters trust, empathy, connection and purpose. Employees also benefit from the opportunity to increase their personal and social impact in their own unique way, as well as fulfill an innate desire to do good in the world.

Peer Matching

To amplify the impact of donations, your peers are offering their own money as a match.

$3520 MATCHED   **$6,575** PEER MATCH POOL
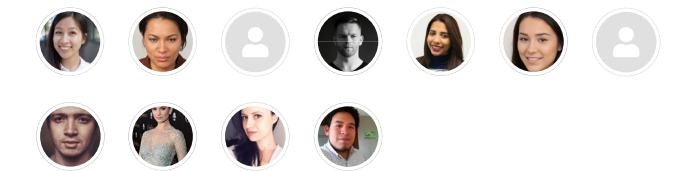
11 Peer Matchers

Add Your Match ❯

Did You Know?

Benevity's employee engagement platform, Spark, enables anyone from within the company to run a peer-led giving opportunity for a cause they care about and inspire colleagues to get involved by personally matching their donations — for any amount, big or small.

Data shows that Peer Matching encourages 52% of people to participate in their corporate purpose programs for the first time.

Actionable Ideas

Start by identifying your expert(s)

Explore who the experts could be for your company. An expert isn't just a well-known philanthropist or even your CEO — it could be an employee within your company who is known to be an authority or familiar with a cause because of a personal or public connection or mission. Caring about a cause can often be enough to position someone as "expert" within your company, and their recommendation could come through quite simply from a Peer Matching campaign that they may set up for a cause or set of causes.

No matter who you choose, tell the story of why they're associated with a specific GiveList in a clear, compelling and succinct way. Or, better yet, let them tell the story themselves by allowing them to publish communications related to their GiveList or peer match. Using simple text, a powerful statement or even a short and impactful video will go a long way in engaging people in the story and the cause. Be sure to offer links to information that will offer more details about the expert and bolster their credibility. Keep in mind that experts won't resonate with everyone, but by empowering more people to act as experts, you will increase the likelihood of resonating with various groups within your employee population.

Try running an A/B test using the tools at your disposal

To best understand how curation can impact the behaviors of your people, you'll need to segment your target audience into at least two groups. Do your best to select two random groups from within your company (we recommend using a program like Excel to remove personal bias). After you've chosen your two groups, you'll need to expose one group to the expert-curated content that provides specific ways for people to give, volunteer or take other positive actions (treatment group) and the second group to the same opportunities, with no expert association (control group). Communicating the opportunity to the two distinct groups can be done via email or other internal communication channels.

When it comes time to analyze the data, get as specific as you'd like, depending on your level of interest and statistical skills. For example, you may seek to understand the percentage of people who participated in the campaign, or if the level of participation varied. If you're able to layer in demographic data, you could also examine how people supported the cause differently according to job type, tenure, level, department, gender identity, seniority or age. The more detailed you are with your analysis, the more you'll be able to make data-driven decisions that could improve your results and help to inform future engagement strategies.

Experiment with targeted curation

To establish trends that will allow you to tailor your expert-curated giving opportunities to different subgroups, you may need to run a series of A/B tests.

Once you have identified one or more subgroups who are interested in certain types of content, you can create giving or volunteering opportunities that are relevant to them. The goal of this approach is to increase the amount of support for nonprofits that you know people care about (based on data) without running the risk of reducing overall engagement. You could also try refining the message around the expert and their curated GiveList or peer match to see if it helps generate an even greater response.

Hungry for more research-driven insights?

Check out Benevity Labs to read our latest studies and research into the subject of corporate Goodness.

About ideas42

ideas42's mission is to use the power of behavioral science to design scalable solutions to some of society's most difficult problems. ideas42 grew out of research programs in psychology and economics at top academic institutions, and its work draws on decades of experimental scientific research. ideas42 uses these insights to design scalable ways to improve programs, policies and products in the real world. ideas42 works with a wide range of partners, from leading foundations and nonprofit organizations to government bodies and businesses. In short, anyone who wants to make a positive difference to people's lives.

About the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation works to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. In developing countries, it focuses on improving people's health and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the United States, it seeks to ensure that all people — especially those with the fewest resources — have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. Based in Seattle, Washington, the foundation is led by CEO Mark Suzman and Co-chair William H. Gates Sr., under the direction of Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett. For further information please visit **www.gatesfoundation.org.**

Benevity, a certified B Corporation, is a leader in global corporate purpose software, providing the only integrated suite of community investment and employee, customer and nonprofit engagement solutions. A finalist in Fast Company's 2020 World Changing Ideas Awards, many iconic brands rely on Benevity's cloud solutions to power their purpose in ways that better attract, retain and engage today's diverse workforce, embed social action into their customer experiences and positively impact their communities. With software that is available in 20 languages, Benevity has processed more than 7 billion dollars in donations and 38 million hours of volunteering time, facilitated 340,000 positive actions and awarded over 1 million grants to 303,000 nonprofits worldwide. For more information, visit benevity.com

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