

“Cisco Employees Volunteer with Purpose at Citizen Schools”



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By Gabriel McLarnan

Ecocenter, Palo Alto– Cisco is a powerhouse computer networking leader continually producing industry-leading services such as home networking, security, and wireless technology. With \$150B in market capital, Cisco not only provides lucrative shareholder return, but is also firmly committed to delivering social value to the global community. Corporate social responsibility is integral to Cisco’s mission as seen through their commitment to education, healthcare, and the environment. In education, [Cisco's CSR](#) efforts materialize through the nonprofit [Citizen Schools](#).



Photo Credit: <http://www.citizenschools.org/investors/investors/cisco/>

As part of the partnership between Cisco and Citizen Schools, employees join more than 120 other Cisco employees to serve as mentors and lead 10-week “apprenticeships” in communities with high dropout rates. During these project-based, mentorship model apprenticeships, employees share about their passions and professions, ranging from computer science, film-making, robotics, and marketing to inspire these students who might not otherwise have been exposed to these topics. In the process, the students are encouraged to stay

engaged in school and graduate on time. The impact of this type of volunteer work on low-income students is nothing short of life-changing, and more often than not has the same effect on the volunteers.



Photo Credit: <http://csr.cisco.com/casestudy/citizen-schools-impact>

One Cisco employee, software engineer Mahendra Samayra, provides a great anecdote about how his volunteer work at Citizen Schools had a significant effect on the local community and his own self-efficacy. Mahendra believes, “students from all walks of life are capable of doing great things, as long as they have opportunities.”¹ He expressed that “it would be an opportunity to help low-income students explore a new horizon.” Mahendra taught his apprenticeship at East Palo Alto’s Cesar Chavez Academy located in the Ravenswood School district, where 54% of student’s parents did not graduate high school.²

Using his skills as a software engineer, Mahendra wanted to teach something that would capture their attention, so he focused his lessons on how to create apps for mobile phones. “The students were very excited about the subject, as it was a completely new area for them,” Mahendra says. “It took them some time to become familiar with programming terminology, and initially they struggled, but slowly they came to understand what is involved in creating an app, by researching, designing, and then implementing it. I was most impressed with how we were

¹ <http://csr.cisco.com/casestudy/citizen-schools-impact>

² <http://ravenswoodef.org/about-ref/schools-and-demographics/>

able to pull it off as a team and create the app.” After volunteering through Citizen Schools Mahendra expressed his desire to serve again as a Citizen Teacher. “The experience enhanced my leadership and mentoring skills that I can apply to my work.”³



Photo Credit: <http://csr.cisco.com/casestudy/citizen-schools-impact>

Citizen Schools is a great example of a nonprofit that provides the type of volunteer experience where a significant impact is not only felt on the recipient’s end, but also through the skillset of the volunteer. In April 2016, the University of Vermont conducted a study that focused on evaluating whether nonprofits should be credited with providing skills for employee volunteers during their service experiences. Participants were employees from a wide range of tech companies, one of which included Cisco. Additionally, Citizen Schools was used as the method for the study, in particular the 10-week apprenticeship that Mahendra participated in as a Citizen Teacher. The employee volunteers completed online surveys before the start of their apprenticeship experience, and 6–8 weeks after its end.

According to the study by UVM, “Responses to the self-reported skill improvement items showed that compared to before they started their service apprenticeships, about 40–45% of the employee volunteers claimed some level of improvement in skills pertaining to leadership, mentorship, motivating others, project management, and public speaking and presenting”.⁴ Cisco software engineer Mahendra reinforces this claim when he stated the “leadership and

³ Ibid.,

⁴ <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4832585/>

mentoring skills” he gained from Citizen Schools can be directly applied to the workplace. For example, during the onboarding of a new engineer to his team or pursuing senior level positions within his department. The [UVM study](#) shows that Citizen Schools provides a measurable impact on volunteers.



Here at [the EV](#), we pride ourselves on being a volunteer centric organization. As such, the type of skill advancement experienced by volunteers through Citizen Schools strikes a chord with our work. In line with the results produced by the UVM study, volunteering at the EV follows a similar mold to Citizen Schools. Through our [school programs](#), a volunteer at the EV doesn't commit to a one and done experience. Rather, our school programs provide a long-term transformative experience by having our volunteers commit a minimum of 2 days per month for 1 year, though our volunteers often serve for as many as 10, 20, or even 40 years. Much like the Citizen Schools initiative, the impact of our volunteers on low-income students creates real change not only in these low income areas, but also in the volunteers themselves.

