

## Taproot Helps Employees Put the Hammer Down

**The Taproot Foundation allows Microsoft employees to contribute their skills—rather than their brawn or pocketbooks—to local nonprofit organizations. The charities reap rewards, while donors gain experience and connections.**

By Fred Albert  
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Mykola Konrad, a senior business program manager, has worked on several Taproot projects. He feels that lending his expertise can have a bigger impact on a nonprofit's success than just money or labor alone.

A few years ago, Mykola Konrad hoisted a hammer and wielded a saw building houses for [Habitat for Humanity](#). Although the senior business program manager felt good helping others who were less fortunate, he couldn't shake the feeling that his time would be better spent utilizing the skills which he excelled at.

Then Konrad heard about the [Taproot Foundation](#). Taproot fields requests for specialized help from charitable organizations and assigns those projects to teams of business professionals, who donate their services to the effort. Since its founding seven years ago, the organization has provided the equivalent of \$25 million of assistance to nonprofit groups across America.

"It's a great way to leverage the skills that you have or that you've built here at Microsoft...to really make a big impact in the outside world," Konrad said. He helped create an annual report for one Taproot client and currently is developing a positioning statement for another.

Taproot was started in San Francisco by Aaron Hurst, whose grandfather developed the original blueprint for the Peace Corps. Hurst wanted Taproot to serve as the business equivalent, using teams of professionals with experience in information technology, marketing, human resources, or strategy management to fulfill what the foundation calls "service grants"—projects that might include anything from creating a Web site or brochure to assembling a database.

"Our larger mission is to instill this pro bono ethic into the business community, the same way that the legal profession has embraced it," said April Kelley, program manager for Taproot's Seattle office. The nonprofit also has branches in San Francisco, Chicago, New York, Boston, and Washington DC, and a Los Angeles division is in the works.

Microsoft first partnered with the organization in 2005, when Taproot advised the company on the design of its Leaders In Service pilot program. When Taproot opened its Seattle office last year, Microsoft was one of the first local companies to lend its support. Jennifer Werdell, program manager for Microsoft Community Affairs, considers the relationship mutually beneficial. "We want to take advantage of the tremendous business and technical skills that our employees have to offer and share them with the community," she said.

Volunteering for Taproot isn't like lending a hand at the neighborhood soup kitchen. Volunteers are carefully screened. Fewer than one-half of all applicants are accepted, and each individual must go through training before starting work on a project.



Tammy Widmyer, a program manager with Community Affairs, volunteered for Taproot to help disadvantaged children and to get some experience in the nonprofit sector.

"It's not the easiest volunteer organization to get involved with," Kelley acknowledged with a laugh. "We want to make sure that the skills the volunteer has match the skills that we need."

Each project is overseen by a team of about five volunteers from different companies assembled by an account director. The group spends up to six weeks meeting with the client before it starts the assignment, then spends another four or five months executing the project. Each team member usually ends up contributing about 100 hours of work, which Microsoft will match at \$17 per hour, as long as the beneficiary meets Microsoft's nonprofit guidelines.

Tammy Widmyer volunteered for Taproot, in part, to gain experience with nonprofits in advance of a possible career change. The program manager in Community Affairs assembled a team creating collateral materials for Big Brothers Big Sisters. Since wrapping that project last November, she's helped another charity prepare a grant application for Taproot. "Outside of gaining experience working with a nonprofit," Widmyer said, "there's the personal satisfaction that you get knowing that your time and effort is making a difference to hundreds of children throughout the community."

A newcomer to Seattle, Konrad credits his Taproot assignment with a nonprofit organization focused on public lands with teaching him about regional parks and allowing him to network with local business leaders. He also picked up some techniques that he can apply to his work. "Some of the practices that Taproot has are very good practices that I've brought back to my job here at Microsoft," he said.

Widmyer admits it can be challenging finding an extra two to four hours a week to volunteer, but says the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. "The people that you get to work with and meet and the impact that you make in the community is worth the effort," Widmyer said. "At the end of the day, the people who are giving often find that they are more rewarded than the people who are the recipients."

Currently, around two dozen Microsoft employees are active volunteers with Taproot in Seattle, while another half dozen or so volunteer for one of Taproot's other offices. Representatives from the organization conduct information sessions quarterly on the Redmond campus. Write to [MVP@microsoft.com](mailto:MVP@microsoft.com) for details on the next presentation. To volunteer for Taproot, contact [April Kelley](#) or apply online at [taprootfoundation.org](http://taprootfoundation.org).

