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*Ivan's Musings*

## Finding Our Profession

*Feature Articles*

By Ivan H. Scheier

One of our most significant problems as a profession is that we cannot find each other. It is difficult to speak to or for a constituency we can't always find. We don't always know where to throw our pearls of wisdom and we don't usually have the kind of numbers (of professionals, that is) that impress politicians, funding sources, the media, or others we

need to educate or to whom we need to advocate. Finally there are a lot more professionals out there to whom leadership could be listening or from whom leadership could be learning.

So how do we find ourselves and then mobilize our forces?

## Defining Whom We Are Counting

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Surveys of our field are valuable, but a census is impossible and has always been so, in my experience. It is impossible because we still have trouble agreeing on who it is that we want to count--who belongs in our profession and who doesn't. Even where we more or less agree on definition, we can't always locate actual or potential members of our profession. This is because they don't belong to a professional association, or else they belong to an association that is not well connected with other professional associations in our field.

### A Possible Definition

I am hoping the enormous communicating power of the web will substantially improve our chances of finding and mobilizing our profession. But before that, we should probably have another go or two at defining exactly who we are trying to count. Let me propose, as a starting point for further discussion, a general definition of our constituency:

*People who as a significant and serious part of their lives, work with people who are not paid, (or who receive only expense-reimbursement or a stipend) for what they do, offering their work on a voluntary basis.*

The only trouble with this is that it runs into the millions in most of the world, except in China and India where it might be close to a billion. This may sound a bit snobbish, but if our constituency is going to be just about everybody, it's hardly possible for it to also be about special somebodies.

Job titles are helpful but not conclusive, e.g. "coordinator," "director" or "manager" of volunteers. And what about the "Executive Director" in a small non-profit who works with volunteers and also performs a million other crucial tasks? Is she/he part of our constituency? And what about the "President" or "Chairperson" or other officer in an entirely volunteer group? Such groups are believed to number in the millions in North America.

Puzzled by this challenge, I hereby cordially invite anyone who knows of a more credible basis for a census than the above, or who can actually report one that has been done recently, to tell us about it. Please note that I said "census" not "survey." A survey cannot possibly be shown to be representative of the profession unless you have a census or some other way of defining the population.

### Letting Constituents Be Counted By Their Decision to Join a Professional Association

Meanwhile, let me suggest that we let the constituents define themselves by their own choices. That is, if they feel that they belong to the field, they will be inclined to go out and join a professional association identified with the field.

By the aforementioned criterion, AVA, the only general professional association in our field, recently celebrated its two thousandth member - a number I believe to be the largest in their history. Congratulations! -- but that's a long way from a billion. More realistically, as we'll argue later, we should be targeting to organize 100,000 to 150,000 individuals in North America, most but not all with the core job titles described earlier in this article ("Coordinator"/"Director"/"Manager" of Volunteers).

How do we bridge the gap between 2,000 and 150,000? In the first place, I said that the constituents would be "inclined" to join a professional association, but only if they saw it as worth their while. Rightly or wrongly, that means to me that they perceive the association as providing accessible, affordable, relevant resources for their work with volunteers. Most individuals seem to be more inclined to join a local or regional association. This especially appears to be the case where the person is doing a number of other things besides coordinating volunteers and is receiving minimal remuneration for any of these occupations. I'm not sure anymore what percentage of (very) part-time people fall within our professional ranks, but I'm sure that it is hefty. I also don't know that there is any percentage of time, however small, at which we have the right to say: "You don't belong." Indeed in many respects, part-timers need professional information and support even more than the full-timers.

In any case, I have estimated that, as of 1994, 45,000 people belonged to local professional associations in our field, largely or at least often independent of one another and any national organization. I did not create this estimate using

the wonders of modern computer technology. Instead I extrapolated the data from my 15 years of experience as the coordinator of a small network of local professional associations in our field, called "The National DOVIA Network." Over those years, I made periodic unscientific surveys, steadily accumulated files, paid about 100 visits to such associations and engaged in extensive correspondence.

### **Determining Which Associations Count as Professional Associations in Our Field**

To devise this estimate, we first had to define which associations' members we would count as "professionals" in our field. Some judgments were obvious such as the fact that not all members of the local garden club qualify as coordinators of volunteers. Some judgments were less clear. For example, we pondered how to classify the members of a human services coalition with a section devoted to volunteerism. The definition offered in a 1994 profile was

*. . . a local or regional association of individuals with a career or other serious interest in leadership of volunteers and/or volunteerism.*

Further noted was that names of such associations varied widely but most often included "DOVIA" for Directors of Volunteers In Agencies, "DOVS" for Directors of Volunteer Services, or " \_\_\_\_AVA" where the blank was the location and "AVA" stood for Association for Volunteer Administration or Volunteer Administrators. But there were other names, too, such as "Roundtable," "Network," "Council," and "Society," usually preceded by the name of the town or region in which the association was located. (My favorite of these names was the acronym "LOVE" for Leaders of Volunteer Efforts.) From then on, the estimate depended heavily on our files for such associations. We had 325 such files as of 1994 and--here's a big assumption--on-site visits to such associations always seemed to reveal two or three times as many associations in that state or province than our files had indicated prior to the visit. So, we probably erred on the conservative side, and estimated there to be 650 such associations in North America. Our files further revealed average memberships of about 70 per local association (skewed upward by a relatively few large associations; the median being about 40).

The product of 650 associations times 70 members was approximately 45,000 such individuals in local professional associations in North America as of 1994. What do you think? Was this an overestimate? An underestimate? About right? And what changes might there have been in the six years since 1994?

Accessible, affordable and relevant though they may be, local professional associations do not attract all the people who might well profit from belonging. In the fifteen or so years that I was operating a "National DOVIA Network" for local or professional associations in our field, my typical impression from association officers, membership chairs, etc., was that they considered the potential for membership to be at least two or three times the actual membership. That would mean somewhere between 100,000 and 150,000 people in our field. If you add the people who work in places where there is no local professional association to join, the number might be as high as 200,000, again under the definition "people who might benefit from joining a professional association in the area of volunteer management/administration/ leadership."

### **Finding and Mobilizing Professionals Who Have Not Chosen to Join Associations**

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So, how do we get from here to there--from 2,000 AVA members and 45,000 scattered in local professional associations--to somewhere between 100,000 and 150,000 professionals organized and mobilized for maximum benefit to themselves and to our field?"

That is the question. Indeed, if you ask me, it has always been the question since the beginning of volunteer administration of some half-century ago. I see two main directions of possible positive response. First, AVA might increase its membership of individuals from 2,000 to something like a hundred and fifty thousand, and do this in the foreseeable future. Alternatively, we can work with and through local professional associations that already have an estimated 45,000 members collectively, by encouraging their growth and by coordinating between them. This latter option in turn breaks down into "vertical" and "horizontal" orientations. Of course, we can try both overall strategies at once, but the relative emphasis on one or the other is, to my mind, crucial.

### **Increasing Membership in the Association for Volunteer Administration (AVA) is One Option**

Let's take the AVA individual membership option first. Some may still think that the desired increase in membership--50 or 75-fold--can be achieved largely through improved marketing of AVA membership. I disagree. In thirty some years as

an AVA-watcher and participant, my definite impression has been that AVA's membership marketing has almost always been active and well-designed. More importantly, the best marketing in the world cannot change what is, in my view, the crucial reality of how significant the constituency of part-time individuals is represented in our membership. These part-timers are generally too financially challenged for international conferences, etc. and generally want--the mantra again --accessible, affordable, locally relevant resources. Moreover, some people especially value the informality, networking opportunities, and undemanding time requirements of membership in a local professional association. Finally, I think we've always lusted for a universality of knowledge that simply doesn't exist in our field. For example, recruiting volunteers in New York City is in fact, very different than recruiting volunteers in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico (believe me, I know!). Say the same for training, recognition, etc., etc. And once again, I don't believe the best national/international membership recruiting campaign in the world can make these realities go away. I do think AVA's efforts in recent years to lower fees and make them more flexible is a step in the right direction, but it does not yet take care of all the realities mentioned earlier in this article.

### **Expanding the Membership in Local Association Is More Promising**

A second major way in which we can expand and organize the constituency of our field, for improved communication and possible joint action, is by taking local professional associations as the basic unit of organization. This is the strategic emphasis I find most promising. For one thing, we start with as many as 45,000 professionals already "organized." Secondly, I think the prospects for increased membership recruitment are better for local professional associations--this because of the realities of the situation in which many of the professionals in our field find themselves, as described earlier in this article.

For these reasons, I'm delighted to learn that a comprehensive directory of local professional associations is being redeveloped at <http://energizeinc.com/prof/dovia.html>, and am equally pleased to learn that AVA and this journal's *DOVIA Keyboard Roundtable* each have new ongoing efforts that concentrate on such associations.

To repeat and summarize my position, local professional associations are not only the best outreach to professionals we have today; they are also the most promising way of expanding that outreach. More specifically, an overall strategy to increase the quantity and quality of intercommunication and coordination in our field should 1) start new local professional associations in towns and regions not now covered by them; 2) help and support all local associations in their efforts to recruit new members and to hold their present ones; and 3) improve vastly the communications between the local associations themselves. This last-named item may need a bit more explanation.

### **Improving Communications Between the Local Associations**

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As early as the 1960's, individuals were effectively being organized into local professional associations in our field. The "natural" next step would have been to organize these local associations themselves into a national or international network or coalition. But in forty years, to my knowledge, that has not yet occurred.

Indeed, as coordinator of The National DOVIA Network, I finally got over being astonished when a local association asked us if there were any other such associations in their own state or province. Even more astonishing was the fact that often there was such an association as close as the next city or town!

And as for the National DOVIA Network, its own track record doesn't seem to offer much promise for the prospect of solidly connecting all 600-650 local professional associations in North America; we never had more than 60 such associations in our Network. The problem, however, may have been largely lack of time and resources devoted to the challenge. I myself "staffed" the network with only about 10-15% of my time. My efforts were further inhibited by the fact that outside funding resources were not available to support the development and maintenance of the network. Indeed, there has never been significant outside funding for the development of local professional associations either for them individually or to connect them. The fact that they have "just grown" so vigorously and spontaneously in spite of that, is a real tribute to the fundamental nature of the need they have filled in our field.

Another good omen for the prospect of a strong international coalition of local professional associations is the fact that within at least a few states and provinces, such networks have already occurred. (I apologize that I no longer have the information on which states and provinces were included on this list. Should others have this information, I would welcome them to share.)

Finally, computer technology in the hands of Nan Hawthorne and others now makes possible far better connectedness than in the 1980's with The National DOVIA Network, especially given its computer-illiterate coordinator, namely me.

### **Organizing For and Achieving "Connectedness" Among Associations: Vertical and Horizontal Options**

So, I believe a solid national/international connectedness of local professional associations can occur and, indeed is probably finally beginning to build seriously at the present time. The main issue, I think, is how this connectedness will be organized and achieved. Roughly speaking, the options are "vertical" and "horizontal" in emphasis.

In the "vertical" or pyramidal emphasis, local associations are treated as if they were individual members; services are packaged and delivered to these association/members, and they have a "vote" in the nature of these services and in the governance of the overall organization. This vote, however, does not fully weight the numbers and accordingly the interests and needs of the individual members of the local professional associations. Decisions are largely made "from above" with efforts to be sensitive to and to "represent" the needs of the local professional associations much as a business would attempt to cater to the needs of its clientele or customers. If you want to attract more "customers" you do try to be more sensitive to their needs, insofar as this is consistent with the aim of preserving the integrity and the goals of the "parent" organization.

By contrast, we can help local professional associations organize with a "horizontal" emphasis. In this approach the goal is to facilitate and to maintain connections between the local associations rather than to focus "upward" towards a single overall association. This was the intended emphasis of The National DOVIA Network and my experiences there convinced me to favor the "horizontal" approach. The local professional associations participating in the Network had so much to learn from one another and, in my opinion, had far more to teach a national/international presence than they had to learn from it.

I'm actually optimistic that the horizontal approach/emphasis is beginning to take a stronger hold. Bless this e-journal and AVA for devoting efforts in this direction. Congratulations all, and keep it up. Indeed, four or five years ago, several of us suggested to AVA, a role in which it could serve largely as the facilitator of network connections between local professional associations.

I do not necessarily believe that the horizontal emphasis that we now require will always be needed to the same degree. It could be a first stage in our constituency development, after which, having learned what we still need to learn, we can integrate vertical and horizontal emphases in a more balanced way.

#### **Footnotes:**

1 Please note that I said "census" not "survey." A survey cannot possibly be shown to be representative of the profession unless you have a census or some other way of defining the population.

2 My favorite of these names was the acronym "LOVE" for Leaders of Volunteer Efforts.

#### **Add new comment**

### **COMMENTS**

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#### **Sarah Jane Rehnberg, Ph.D., Consultant on Volunteerism and Community Service, LBJ School of Public Affairs, Univ. of Texas at Austin**

November 7th, 2000, 7:05pm

This is a thoughtful analysis of the perpetual problem of bringing this field together in some meaningful way. Although I have no answers to the many issues and challenges that Ivan poses, I do have a couple of thoughts.

1. The field has always had a forest/trees problems -- our trees focus keeps us from finding, caring for, naming or adequately understanding the forest. The land grant institutions of higher education found their success in helping

the individual farmer through the 4-H extension system. What can we learn from their experience (both + and -) and does it have any application for us?

2. In the movie Field of Dreams, the focus was on building the field and the assertion the players would arrive (from multiple dimensions) -- I know corny but stay with me -- I have to wonder about the "fields" that we have built. National association meetings and gathering look pretty much the same today as they did 25 years ago when I started attending, sure numbers of attendees have changed, but not much else really (and Ivan, you have been wrestling with these problems this long, in fact longer as well.) I think we need to examine our playing field and consider other options. For ideas I would probably examine publications like this one, UTNE Reader, books like Wheatley's Leadership and the New Science and Hock's Birth of the Chaordic Age.

And finally #3. I think this field needs to hold firmly to paradox. I suspect that almost any answers we find will have more to do with "both/and" than to "either/or." Thank you Ivan for bringing into focus this concern.

**reply**

**Rob Jackson, Royal National Institute for the Blind, Volunteer Development Officer, London, England**

October 10th, 2000, 8:04pm

The distinctions drawn between horizontal and vertical emphasis are interesting and I can certainly see value in both. To my mind they are best suited to achieve slightly different ends. As Ivan points out, the horizontal emphasis seems strongest in facilitating learning within & across our professions. By contrast, the vertical emphasis seems best suited to facilitating learning amongst those outside our profession. Local associations focus "upward" towards a single overall association, the "parent" organisation, that promotes and educates the media, politicians, funders and others about volunteer management, providing a one-stop shop for those outside our profession. A key is to ensure the right amount of accountability in this "parent" organisation to the local associations.

**reply**

**Amy L. McAden, The Kingston Hospital, Director Volunteer Services, Kingston, NY, USA**

December 30th, 2000, 7:03pm

Wow...did you ever strike a chord! I have been in the field of Volunteer Administration for twenty+ years and have had nearly as many different titles. I couldn't agree with you more about staying connected to accessible, affordable and local resources. AVA/Points of Light memberships are cost prohibited, especially when we are already paying local/regional fees...usually out-of-pocket. Part of what makes our profession so much fun is the very fact that we are so diverse. If you place twenty DVS' in a room I'm sure you would have twenty different educational, cultural, and work experience backgrounds. I'd also like to add that we are probably the lowest paid group of professionals for the very reasons that we have been discussing. So what's the solution?

**reply**