



Business, Economics & Social Trends

A Planning Service for Management

Community Relations
& Volunteerism

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Volunteerism: The Corporate/Community Connection

The author of the following report, Susan J. Ellis, is a nationally-known consultant and educator in volunteerism. At present, Ms. Ellis is the Director of ENERGIZE, a training and consulting firm she founded to design and administer effective citizen participation programs. As is obvious in this report, Ms. Ellis has a strong commitment to the value of volunteer involvement and to increasing the effectiveness of the volunteer community.

Her discussion in this report offers a different perspective on the subject of volunteerism, one with more of a community rather than corporate orientation. We think this discussion is an interesting one and may help subscribers better understand the nature and impact of effective volunteer programs.

For many years the nonprofit community has approached the corporation as a vital financial resource. But recently, the not-for-profit community, particularly the voluntary sector, has begun to look seriously at the business world not only as a source of money, but also as a vast pool of employee volunteer talent. There has been a visible upsurge in articles, workshops and conferences centering on the theme of recruiting and retaining volunteers "from the workplace."

There are several key reasons for this outreach to business:

- o Since the early 1970s a perceptible change has occurred in attitudes about corporations among volunteer groups, largely in recognition of actual changes occurring within businesses. Stereotypes about profit-hungry corporations employing people with no interest in their communities have been softened considerably as social responsibility programs demonstrate that employees—like any other group of citizens—care about improving the quality of life in their communities.
- o Economic factors have severely limited the amount of financial aid many companies can offer to a community, regardless of the cause. But volunteer groups which request the aid of employee time and expertise have found a willing response simply because it costs less for the company to still be of substantial help.

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- o As more women enter the salaried workforce, organizations needing daytime volunteers must begin by looking where people are during the day: at work. This also means a new emphasis on shift workers, or on anyone not employed between 9:00 AM and 5:00 PM, Monday to Friday.
- o Men have always volunteered, though they were often confined to the narrow scope of "coach, trustee, or fireman." Today volunteer groups are actively recruiting men as volunteers in a broad variety of roles, and the business world is where one can find men.
- o Volunteer assignments are increasing in sophistication and complexity, and many businesspeople are uniquely qualified to fill these roles.

Countless Options

The field of volunteerism is limitless. There is no aspect of American life that does not have citizen participation. Most of the institutions and careers we have today we their roots to volunteer involvement in the past. Many unfair stereotypes have sometimes served to limit people's thinking about volunteering to social work and medical settings. But even a short sample list highlights the incredible diversity of areas involving volunteers:

- o ham radio/c.b. radio emergency road assistance
- o block beautification programs
- o National Ski Patrol
- o adult literacy programs
- o Special Olympics
- o public-access television
- o reading to the blind
- o architectural planning aid for community groups
- o prison visitation
- o consumer education
- o neighborhood crime watch programs
- o teenage parenting classes

In addition to the above areas of concern broader approaches can be developed which offer an interesting array of opportunities for volunteer work. These might include:

- o Helping an entire neighborhood or community, under the coordination of a coalition of agencies; as in civic associations and public/private coalitions.
- o Helping a particular organization with a project developed especially for the company and designated solely for employee volunteers.

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- o Helping a particular organization by providing employee volunteers to be integrated into ongoing projects already involving other citizen volunteers.

In any of these options, there are three ways employee time might be given: employees volunteer on their own time; employees are given "release time" as a company donation to the community; or a "shared time" arrangement is developed where, perhaps, the employee gives one hour and the company releases him or her for one hour. This latter is often done at the start or end of a work day, or during the lunch period.

Community Representatives

While volunteering has been part of the American social fabric since colonial days, it is only in the past twenty years or so that volunteer "programs" have become formalized. This new structuring of citizen participation has included the rise of a new profession: volunteer administration. Increasingly, company volunteer coordinators will find themselves dealing with someone in the community called a "Director of Volunteers." It is very likely that the person recruiting volunteers from a corporation will be such a director of volunteers.

The actual titles assigned vary enormously, but the function of a director of volunteers remains constant: the recruitment, screening, assignment, orientation, supervision, and recognition of volunteers within an agency or organization. Directors of volunteers are employing more and more sophisticated skills to accomplish their work, and many have received some training in how to approach the corporate world. On the other hand, some directors of volunteers have little experience with the unique demands of company life and would welcome the advice of the corporation as to how to best utilize employee time.

A community director of volunteers can be a tremendous asset because he or she will work with a company in determining the most effective roles for employee volunteers, often matching employee skills and interests to newly-created projects or assignments. Most directors of volunteers develop written volunteer "job descriptions" that pinpoint exactly what will be accomplished. Further, directors of volunteers are concerned about recognizing the achievements of volunteers and will see to it that employee volunteers receive the appreciation they have earned. This generally includes a sensitivity to the public relations needs of the company as well.

On a broader community level, many cities and counties across the country have a "Voluntary Action Center" (VAC) or a "Volunteer Bureau." Such an agency's main purpose is to promote volunteerism and to act as a clearinghouse of information about volunteer opportunities in the area. Most VACs would jump at the chance to advise a company about available volunteer assignments. Such assistance can save many hours of unnecessary duplication of effort spent by a company in locating volunteer slots.

One word of caution, however. Many VACs are funded by United Ways or have limited financial resources. Therefore, they tend toward the more "traditional" sort of volunteer program such as those in hospitals, schools, the Red Cross, etc. Grassroots, neighborhood-oriented volunteer causes are not always listed by a VAC though such organizations also need corporate help. Possible sources of knowledge about these

volunteer projects include mayors' offices, associations of neighborhood groups, citizen councils, etc.

More Choices: Assignment Options

Leaders of volunteers offer potential recruits a wide variety of choices as to type of assignment. Sometimes a person is being recruited because of a skill or talent he or she already possesses. Other times the volunteering will be a "change of pace." Volunteering should always be fun, and individuals are encouraged to look for assignments that teach new skills, offer personal growth, or even give the opportunity to act out a fantasy.

Volunteer programs can no longer rely on just one or two types of volunteer assignments. People are most effectively utilized if they can select the manner of volunteering best suited to their available time. As a result, the following options have been developed—and creative directors of volunteers are working on others:

"One-Shot" Assignments: These can be offered to groups or individuals; usually involve helping with a specific event such as a block party, bazaar, marathon, Special Olympics; and can also be a single-session consultation or a speaking engagement of some sort.

Pros—high, immediate satisfaction for volunteers because the assignments are usually hands-on and concrete . . . a good way for the group to involve numbers of people without concern for specific skills . . . allows people to "sample" volunteer involvement as a step toward more intensive commitment.

Cons—many one-shots cause logistical headaches for scheduling, recruiting, and record keeping . . . volunteers used for collective energy rather than for ideas or input . . . little feeling of personal involvement.

"Short-Term" Assignments: Here the timeframe is determined from the beginning to last no more than perhaps three months. Within the "term" of the work, however, volunteers might be asked to give an intensive amount of time. Such assignments include technical assistance in planning as well as implementing a new project, setting up procedures or systems for a new program, summer activities of all sorts, and helping during a special "season" such as income tax time.

Pros—high satisfaction because assignments usually have concrete goals to meet . . . opportunity for volunteer to become personally involved with people being helped . . . chance to use skills in a new context.

Cons—few, except that short-term assignments need to be planned carefully, with clear and feasible goals . . . volunteer must be willing to work intensively for a short duration.

"Long-Term" Assignments: These involve volunteer jobs requiring a commitment of some duration, possibly from six months to two or more years. They may actually demand less hours per week than the "short-term" option, but it is the longevity of the commitment that is important. Such slots include serving on a Board, becoming a Big Brother or Big Sister, and advising a minority-owned business through the hurdles of the first year.

Pros—volunteer develops identity with the assignment and it becomes a part of his or her life . . . can bring emotional attachment . . . the volunteer community is in real need of this type of long-term commitment and so the service offered is highly valued.

Cons—satisfaction comes from small milestones along the way, often interspersed with frustration for the volunteer . . . commitment must be taken seriously and the volunteer will be carefully trained and assigned.

"Consultancies": In recognition of the time demands on many employed people, many volunteer programs are developing "skills banks," listing people who are willing to be tapped for special needs requiring skills and expertise they already possess. Skills banks may be formed by a VAC or by a collaborative effort by several agencies, and so a volunteer might be called on by any of the participating groups. Volunteers often in demand include typists, artists, instructors, speakers, and accountants. Some volunteers might be "activated" several times a year; others might not be utilized at all.

Pros—allows the community to tap a wide range of skills . . . allows each person to serve in a focused way in a minimum amount of time.

Cons—requires updating, scheduling and other logistical maintenance . . . it focuses on existing skills, rather than on developing assignments to match the potential of the volunteers and their personalities.

All of the above allow for people-contact assignments and for idea- or thing-oriented assignments. Communities need both types.

In Return

The volunteer community is sincerely interested in working with the business world to identify the best ways to utilize employee volunteers. A well-managed volunteer program, often with a salaried director of volunteers, can offer the following important support services to involved citizens:

1. A personal interview before "placement," during which expectations can be discussed and an individualized job description can be developed.
2. An orientation to the facility or organization.
3. A training period adapted to the needs of the volunteer and the job to be done.
4. Supervision—meaning accessible co-workers who can assign tasks, answer questions, and provide feedback.
5. Opportunity for input—a way to have suggestions and ideas heard by those in charge.
6. Periodic evaluation, both of the volunteer's progress and of the assistance given by the organization.

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7. Records on hours served, work accomplished, and expenses, so that the volunteer can have future references or backup support for IRS deductions.
8. Recognition of achievements, both with public praise and by increased responsibility within the organization.

Volunteers should look for these elements as they select the best work site for them, and today's volunteer programs are increasingly able to offer such support.

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