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Volunteered Time

# Celebrate Collective Accomplishments, Not Volunteered Time

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

April  
2011

It's April and National Volunteer Week arrives in the United States and Canada, to be followed by [similar events in other countries](#) in May and June. Exactly ten years ago, I wrote a Hot Topic, "[National Volunteer Week: Does Anyone Care?](#)," which unfortunately remains relevant. In June of 2000, I wrote "[Enough Formal Banquets! Let's Transform Recognition Events](#)," which also continues to resonate today.

Why yet another Hot Topic on this subject? First, to bring the earlier essays back into circulation for those who didn't see them a decade ago. Second, because I believe volunteer recognition is a powerful tool for leaders of volunteers that remains largely underutilized.

## Strategic Recognition Events

Think about the windmills at which you tilt throughout the year; maybe these include lack of resources to support volunteer involvement, resistance from employees to developing more creative volunteer roles, tension between long-time and new volunteers, or unreasonable requests of the volunteer office. Despite such obstacles, we tend to plan volunteer recognition events in a bubble of happiness. One day a year the executive director shows up and says glowing things. Everyone applauds while volunteers are praised for logging in hours. Etc., etc. And then the event ends and things go back to normal.

What happens during a recognition event is almost always in the total control of the leader of volunteer involvement. So let's approach it strategically. Set some real goals. For example, decide that, when the event is over, participants will be able to:

- Articulate at least 10 ways volunteers have contributed to the organization over the last year
- Describe, with some specificity, key work done by volunteers in at least 25% of the agency's departments or units (in a small agency, aim for a higher percentage)

- Give a summary of who volunteers are in your organization – their education, occupations, ages, and anything else that describes their diversity
- Name those staff members who are the most successful in partnering with volunteers
- Identify 3 activities or services that were initiated by volunteers
- Explain how volunteer involvement has grown or improved in the last 12 months
- Re-commit with enthusiasm to the next year's efforts

Once you have expressed what you want to achieve, you can then structure the event to assure that these things are presented and learned. This affects what you say in any presentation during the event, from introducing speakers to the way you give out awards. It also will help you select the right presenters and brief them on what you most want them to stress in their talk. You can develop printed take-aways with relevant information (and then post them online) – way beyond a relatively meaningless list of names and hours. It might also give you ideas for exhibits along the wall of the room, or a slide show that runs while people gather.

By the way, it is very important to communicate what participants learned at the recognition event to those not in attendance, which includes absent volunteers, paid staff at all levels, clients, and funders. Perhaps distribute a special memo to each on-site participant, asking everyone to pass it on to someone not present. Or videotape part of the party and post it online (even to YouTube), then invite non-attendees to watch. Before you all go home, discuss this challenge with the group to get their ideas on how to include the others.

## Thank the Paid Staff, Too

It's interesting how many people think that a pay check is a thank you. It isn't, of course, since we must pay people even for the week in which they are fired. In fact, in my experience, staff in nonprofit and public agencies rarely hear expressions of appreciation for their devotion and service. So is it any wonder that employees sometimes feel jealous of the party and mugs we give to volunteers?

Perhaps the most meaningful thing we can do is transform an event to thank volunteers into an event to celebrate *everyone's* accomplishments in working together. After all, it's *collective* action that produces the best services to your consumers and so this a great way to show volunteers that they are part of a team that has been successful. This will also give you the halo effect of making the paid staff feel recognized, too.

Ideally, you can plan the event with your executives or human resources staff, but even if you proceed on your own, no one can argue with you researching what employees have done during the year and expressing appreciation for it while also thanking volunteers. At a minimum, acknowledge by name (and maybe with a similar certificate) each staff member who supported a set of volunteers who are being thanked for a specific activity.

This probably means you will have to forgo an expensive meal in order to invite everyone to an event. Don't worry. It's hardly the food that brings people out to a party! Stick to a potluck supper or an ice cream social and focus instead on the sharing of what has gone well throughout the year. Encourage everyone to share stories (funny ones are especially welcome!) of memorable things that occurred, including mention of volunteers and employees who were there at the time.

Don't limit yourself to thinking about the past year; also look toward the future. As a group activity, ask both volunteers and employees to brainstorm some things they want to see happen in the next year. Then discuss how you might all work together to get them done.

Think of how this sort of party could impact volunteer/employee relations. It has never been written in stone that we must thank volunteers in isolation from anyone else. If we pay attention to accomplishments instead of time logged or money earned, we put both the paid and unpaid workers on the same level and everyone goes home feeling good.

## Use National and International Events to Your Advantage

Generally, very few individual organizations make use of National Volunteer Week, International Volunteer Day (December 5th) or other external commemorations. Often the dates of such events do not coincide with when a particular agency wants to schedule a thank-you activity. On the other hand, many government officials issue proclamations and volunteer centers provide special publicity about volunteers during such designated weeks and days. So why not take advantage of the opportunity?

At a minimum, promote the national or international celebration in-house by posting notices, using the logos and slogans most often available online to anyone, free of charge. Put an article about the special dates into the organization's newsletter. There's nothing wrong with an "extra" thank you at another time of year, is there? Besides, it is very important to help volunteers see themselves as part of a larger cohort of other citizens active in their communities – which also educates staff about the scope of volunteered service.

If there is a public event in your community to commemorate National Volunteer Week, be sure to send official representatives from your organization and publicize their attendance. They will contribute to the local event on your behalf, but afterwards ask them to report back, sharing what they experienced with both volunteers and employees who could not attend.

Collaborate with other volunteer-involving organizations and do something visible to the public. For example, hang banners along a main street where a number of you have offices, proclaiming: "It's National Volunteer Week and we thank the many volunteers who serve right *here!*" I'll bet all sorts of ideas might be generated along these lines.

- *Will you be doing anything specific for National Volunteer Week (no matter when it occurs in your country)? Please share.*

- *Do you feel you have a unique way of saying thank you to volunteers? Again, let the rest of us know.*
- *What's your response to the idea of recognizing volunteers and employees together?*

Related Topics: [Employee/Volunteer Relations](#) | [Recognition](#) | [Volunteer Resources Manager, Role of](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#) | [Profession of Volunteer Management](#)

## Submitted on 06 April 2011 by Anonymous, WA, USA

I think the ideas in here are excellent. I have been trying to move staff and leadership away from their preoccupation with numbers of volunteers and hours served, and get them more focused on understanding the volunteer's actual impact in the community. These suggestions will go a long way towards helping that to happen.

That having been said, I usually completely miss doing much of anything at all during National Volunteer Week, as it usually sneaks up to me during a time when I am frantically busy...trying to coordinate volunteers for the numerous events we have going on. Ah, the irony.

**Submitted on 04 April 2011 by Bob Horton, CEO, Sustainable Opportunities and Solutions, Fort Worth, Texas, USA**

Agreed! Agreed! Agreed! And...Agreed!

## Let's Hear What You Think

### Comments from Readers

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*Submitted on April 7th, 2015*

[Amanda Fulcher](#), Volunteer Coordinator, AseraCare Hospice, Winterville, NC, US

Just found this website and am feeling more energized myself! Excited to have another tool in my tool belt for managing volunteers. Love the idea of recognizing staff as well as volunteers.

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*Submitted on February 27th, 2016*

[Alma Pohler](#), Volunteer Specialist, Fort Worth Independent School District, Fort Worth, U.S.A.

I read your article last year and I am reading again this year in preparation for my organization's volunteer appreciation celebration. I find your concepts most relevant and meaningful. I had the same thoughts as you expressed in your writing but I was not confident in their validity until I read your article. Thank you!

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*Submitted on March 2nd, 2016*

*Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, United States*

Alma -- thanks for posting and for affirming that so much of these pointers stand the test of time -- and are relevant to many settings.

- Susan

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*Submitted on November 18th, 2016*

*Anonymous, Leighton Buzzard, United Kingdom*

I still find these points relevant five years after you posted this Susan! It's helped me generate some seedlings of ideas I hope to develop for next year's celebrations and combine these with efforts to increase communications and connections between staff and volunteers.

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*Submitted on November 18th, 2016*

*Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA*

Happy to hear this -- thanks.

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*Submitted on December 12th, 2016*

*Randy Leisey, Spiritual Counselor/ Volunteer Coordinator, Spirit Mountain Hospice, Cody, WY, USA*

Thank you for your thoughtful ideas found on line

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*Submitted on December 23rd, 2016*

*RB Roberts, National Spokesman, HGRBS, Seattle, United States*

Hi Susan!

Great presentation! Riveting! It's already passed 12 Midnight but I'm sort of having sleeping delays since Volunteer Match is so informatively and progressively immense! Whoa!

I would take another "station break" but, it's like, "Okay ... .. after this ... .." Hasn't happened yet. Maybe in a few more minutes since I'm well through this amazingly written and presented expose' of quite a bit of POWERFUL STUFF! This is really amazing! Here I am, at the wire, but I'm sort of delaying the crossing!

Susan, this is truly an amazing article. I agree with everything! Employees, Volunteers, and Hours are all comparably significant to any operation. Each day is a gala. Everyone and all the

time invested and literally shared are literally and collectively of profound value (in one sense), then of awesome "invaluability" in yet another.

For sure, I'm in TOTAL AGREEMENT! / Swooosh!

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*Submitted on August 14th, 2017*

*Eric Pizana, Volunteer Services and Community Outreach Director, Care and Share Food Bank, Colorado Springs, CO, United States*

Susan,

I enjoyed this article and will be thinking about how to further recognition beyond time/hours, and to consider making it an accomplishments event to acknowledge and thank staff.

We don't host our Volunteer Appreciation event during Volunteer Appreciation Week because it just doesn't make sense with what else we have going on. However, we strategically host our events the same day the boards meet to encourage more board attendance participation.

It was important for anyone who attends to feel welcome, special and to have a great time that I've included a dance party at the Volunteer Appreciation event. Everyone has a great time!

Thanks!

With Great Respect,  
Eric

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*Submitted on August 14th, 2017*

*Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia PA, United States*

Sounds lovely, Eric -- boogie on! And you'll find lots of interesting recognition ideas in our A-Z library under "[Recognition](#)." Be sure to check out the "tips from colleagues" tab.

- Susan

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