

[News and Hot Topics](#) » Continuous Learning Is Not Optional

# Continuous Learning Is Not Optional

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

April

2017

One of the more head-shaking quotes from the new American president was his observation that: “Nobody knew that health care could be so complicated.” Most of us wish for leaders with a deeper and more educated understanding of the challenges and issues in our world today.

Unfortunately, we in volunteer management face such uneducated attitudes all the time. Who knew volunteer engagement was so complicated? We did. The question is: *Are we filling the knowledge gap?*

At one time, not so long ago, it was very difficult to access solid information about volunteer management. That’s not true anymore. Today the bigger challenge is separating the wheat from the chaff among a flood of resources offered. But I find myself wondering if most leaders of volunteers are even trying to find professional development information. And the most common excuse is: “I don’t have time.”

## New Hires with No Training

We all know that too many organizations do not know how to hire a director of volunteer services. They do not write strong job descriptions and seem clueless about where to find qualified people. New people come into our profession from all sorts of unrelated career paths, often taking the job of volunteer management purely as a stepping stone into a setting that appeals to them. And who in the organization has the skill set to train this novice in the work to be done?

New hires are generally left to their own devices to fill their knowledge gaps. Some immediately jump online and start Googling relevant phrases. They are rewarded with a lot of “hits” and can begin their self-education. But others don’t even think to look for resources that might help them get up to speed. I’ve never understood how someone can accept a job unknown to them and not desire to learn about it.

Most often there is no internal mentor within the organization for the total newbie because – as demonstrated by how the person has been hired – there is no one on staff who can guide the self-

education. Even more troubling is the absence of any *directive* to become skilled, which includes requiring reports on what someone is doing to learn how to engage volunteers. Even if the new hire finds resources, who is determining if what they are reading or hearing is inspired or discredited information?

One of my concerns is how often this problem occurs even within large regional and national organizations for whom volunteer participation is essential. At the local level, the individual leader of volunteers is not necessarily introduced to the vision, principles, and tools that supposedly define volunteering at the organization as a whole. Everyone is bobbing in the water individually, trying not to drown, without a way to collaborate with their counterparts treading water in other streams.

This is a strong argument for the value of professional networks, which I'll address in a moment.

## Moving Beyond Basic Understanding

At some point, whether by determination or finally getting enough experience, new volunteer resources managers come to understand the basics of their role. But the basics are not enough. With the pace of change today, and new technologies and political/social issues emerging all the time, competency in volunteer engagement requires staying a step ahead. Learning must be continuous to keep current.

Yet this is when we're likeliest to hear, "I cannot find the time or money to use for professional development."

There is a parable about a Catholic saint who was known for taking two hours a day for meditation and contemplation. His devotion was ultimately recognized by promotion to a large church leadership role. Someone commented to him, "Well, I suppose you will no longer be able to spend two hours a day in introspection." To which the new leader replied, "Quite right; I'll need to spend three hours now."

It is not optional to continue learning. Outdated methods limit volunteer engagement efforts and the causes we support deserve better. Personally, it is boring to repeat the same things over and over and exhausting to feel trapped without new ideas and ways to act on them. Examining how we work offers useful insight and learning new ideas can keep us from burnout.

If you spend 30 minutes a day on Facebook or in casual conversation with colleagues, you DO have time to expand your professional education. First you have to want to do so.

And if you are in a management position with authority over other paid staff, you can role model continuous learning. Make it an *expectation* of employment (and possibly of volunteering) to remain up-to-date and on the cutting edge.



# Ways to Grow as Professionals

Here is a starter set of ideas for how everyone can keep learning. Please leave comments about other things that have worked for you.

1. *Schedule time to learn.* Decide how much time each week you'd like to spend increasing your knowledge – even if it's 15 minutes. Then make it an appointment on your calendar. By scheduling it, you are more likely to actually do it.
2. *Keep a list of resources that interest you.* As you see things online or hear a colleague mention a reference, take note. Make it an actual file on your computer so that you never have to get to your weekly learning “appointment” without knowing what you might spend that time perusing.
3. *Form a study group.* It's more fun to learn with others and it tends to keep everyone accountable, too. While you'll continue your weekly learning time, you can either get together maybe once a month in person or, even less time-consuming, meet via Skype or Google Hangouts. There are all sorts of study group options:
  - Everyone prepares by reading the same thing and you discuss it.
  - You divide a subject or book and you each learn one part, then share what you learned with the others and vice versa.
  - Form a group of colleagues who work in similar settings or who work with similar volunteers. Or – even more interesting – make it a point to invite a group of volunteer resources managers from totally different settings, so that you gain from many perspectives.
  - End each session by posing a question or challenge to the group, committing to think about it, research it, and come to the next meeting with fresh ideas on it.
4. *Make this part of a volunteer advisory team agenda.* If you have some sort of advisory group or steering committee – or if you have leadership volunteers such as shift leaders or committee chairs – build continuous learning into its/their mandate. These are the people who help you engage volunteers and they should also become educated on the subject. Also, it's fun and motivating to be asked to learn something and then come prepared to analyze it in relation to actual planning needs. Select an issue and assign volunteers to do some research on it – whether through books, online resources, telephone interviews, or other means – and come prepared to the next meeting with new ideas and the information to back them up.
5. *Educate up.* When you find some piece of writing or a report or anything that you feel is genuinely relevant to your organization, share it with your immediate supervisor and ask to discuss it in your next one-to-one meeting. The more provocative the better! Not to mention selecting things that support ideas you'd like to start implementing.

Right now many professional associations in volunteerism are floundering, especially local networks of volunteer resources managers. The ideas above may be a blueprint for revitalizing the value of spending time with colleagues. Also, note that local associations can stay alert to newcomers in the field (especially when a new hire replaces someone who was an association member) and offer mentorship in a more formal way than usually occurs. The benefits are two fold: The inexperienced leader of volunteers gets more useful education and the experienced colleague gets the chance to keep learning and stay fresh, too.

*How do you make sure you keep learning?*

Related Topics: [Training](#) | [Volunteer Resources Manager, Role of](#) | [Infrastructure to Support Volunteering](#) | [Profession of Volunteer Management](#)

## Comments from Readers

---

*Submitted on April 4th, 2017*

*Judy Elaine Davis, Assistant Development Director, Alzheimer's & Dementia Services of Memphis, Inc.,  
Memphis, Tennessee*

I am new to volunteer management, so I am grateful to have found this site.

---

*Submitted on April 7th, 2017*

*Anonymous, Scottsdale, United States*

Susan, all I can say is "Amen". Having taught volunteer management now for 20 years I am always amazed at the lack of formal training and the thought that it really isn't necessary.

---

*Submitted on April 4th, 2017*

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

Welcome to the field, Judy! So glad you found us and that, in turn will lead you to more resources and colleagues happy to be of help, too.

Has anyone told you that the national Alzheimer's Association is a member of our online training program, [Everyone Ready<sup>\(R\)</sup>](#)? You therefore can access all those volunteer management training materials, too.

---

*Submitted on April 7th, 2017*

*Linda Llewellyn, Founder, Celebrate Volunteers, Glendale, United States*

Thank you Susan for this article. The lack of understanding and value from executive management, limited formal training, limited mentoring, and an ever-revolving door of inexperienced volunteer managers has been an issue in the field of volunteer management for decades. I love your "Ways to Grow" suggestions. You have touched on key elements to being a successful volunteer manager; educate yourself, learn from and support peers, and educate colleagues and executives in your organization. All three aspects are essential and well worth the time.

---

*Submitted on April 14th, 2017*

*Winfield Scott Hall, volunteer coordinator, Greenfield Council on Aging, Greenfield Ma 01310, Franklin*

I have worked as volunteer coordinator for the last 18 years for several different non profits. I feel education is the key to a successful volunteer program. Thanks for all the great information on continuing education.

---

*Submitted on April 26th, 2017*

*Gerald (Jerry) ..., Presenter & Consultant , independent Contractor, New York, NY, USA*

Susan, you ask the right question, "How do you make sure you keep learning?"

After 20 plus years as a practitioner, I'm now focused on presentations and consulting. This allows me to do the "deep dive - research", which keeps that learning muscle toned and in shape. I find it enjoyable.

Schedule time to learn: I was fortunate that from the get go, after my career change, I was able to tap into local, state, national, etc. professional development events. When my agencies wouldn't pay - I paid since I was investing in ME. I wasn't nearly this aggressive with my first career of 20 plus years. I think that was because I was playing "catch up" with my second career. Later I was focused on simply "keeping up" as new folk were bringing new skill sets and times they were a changing.

Keep a list of resources that interest you: I probably "bookmark" and print (olde school) way too much - filed under "keep that for later reference".

Educate up: And might I add educate peers as well as new folk. I had mentors early on and I've volunteered as a mentor in acknowledgement of those who lifted me up.

---

*Submitted on April 26th, 2017*

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

Thanks as always for adding to the discussion, Jerry! I especially agree about paying for professional education yourself if your employer won't. Just about every consultant/trainer in our field has most often personally footed the bill for conference fees, association memberships, books and more.

## PRIVACY STATEMENT

Energize, a program of Adisa <https://adisagroup.com/>

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2025