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Find the Money for Priceless Conferencing

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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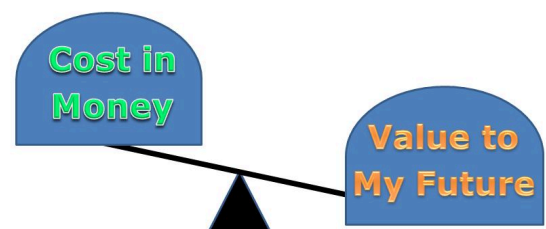
Two events are coming up soon in the United States that offer significant professional development opportunities if you have made a commitment to volunteer administration. The first is the [Conference on Volunteering and Service](#) (Seattle, WA, June 19-21), the annual event that is produced by Points of Light. The second is the 2017 National Summit on Volunteer Engagement Leadership (St. Paul, MN, July 26-28), a special conference designed specifically to convene colleagues who lead volunteer efforts in any kind of setting – both to share the most current trends in our field and to provide an opportunity to consider what we want, collectively, for our profession. Along with many other trainers, authors, and bloggers, I am part of the team planning and promoting the Summit in Minnesota. (Note: Despite its name, the Summit welcomes colleagues from anywhere in the world to register and join us!)

Are **you** attending either or both of these major events? Given how many people read this monthly posting, the answer is likely no. I'm sure you are interested in attending – maybe even dreaming of having the chance to go – but you've accepted some variation of "I can't go."

In this Hot Topic, I want to address two important subjects: the importance of valuing your career enough to spend money on it and how to make certain that, once you're at a conference (*any* conference), you make it priceless to you.

Spending Money on Yourself

Clearly I do not know the state of your bank account, the amount of your salary, or the financial demands of your family and simply living your life. So if you tell me, "I just cannot afford to go to a conference," I won't argue with you. But, consider this...



We all spend our money on our priorities – and that goes beyond rent and food. The question to ask yourself is: "Does my professional education mean enough to me to start budgeting for it?" So even if

flying to Minneapolis is not possible, could you spend far less money and time attending even half-day training sessions at a [local association](#) much closer to home?

Remember that you cannot get an advanced degree in volunteer management at a university. And most practitioners in our field already have at least a bachelor's degree. Academic credit courses, by the way, are very costly. At least most volunteerism conferences (certainly those not requiring much travel) are reasonably priced. How will you keep learning and growing in this career if you do not participate in training events offered?

I can hear you saying: "But my organization won't pay for it." First, have you actually *asked* (and made a good case for its benefits to the agency as well as to you)? Regardless, from my observation, most organizations are at least willing to allow you to take one to three days off with pay to go to a conference, if you are covering the expenses personally. You might also be able to negotiate a small contribution from them for part of your registration fee.

It's true that budgets for professional development opportunities are shrinking today, even in large institutions. Well, here is something that separates *job-skill learning* from *career development*: Your employer owes you the former, but not the latter. If you spend your own money on conferences, you are free to use them in any way you wish to grow professionally. You should note that almost every one of the people whose names you know as national trainers and authors all began by covering their own costs for their learning (and, for the upcoming Summit, they still are!).

Are you paying for your spouse to get an advanced degree? A son or daughter? Why not education for you? Put aside \$25-50 a month and you'll probably be able to attend at least one distant conference a year or every other year.

You can often cut costs in a variety of ways: go with several colleagues and car pool, share rooms (maybe not at the official conference hotel but at other lodging that's less expensive), etc. Check out if the conference has a scholarship program or whether you can volunteer or contribute in some way onsite in exchange for a discount on registration.

Once You're There, Make It Pay Off

Let's wave a magic wand and assume you've made it to a conference you want to attend. Having been at hundreds of these, it dismays me to watch attendees miss some amazing opportunities to learn more and make new connections. How? Here are some pointers.

Prepare

As with so many other things, come to the event prepared. Really think in advance what you most want to learn about, whom you'd like to meet, and what would make this event successful *for you*. (Note: Getting a mental break and recharging your batteries are great indicators of success, too.) Then review the conference program and plan ahead to use your time well. Recommendations:

- Find workshops and speakers offering something new to you, no matter what setting. Do not simply look for any session that has the word “hospital” or “seniors” in it because that’s where you work now. Good practices can be applied anywhere! And remember this is career development. Will you always be employed in your current field or might you coordinate volunteers somewhere else someday?
- ***Pick at least one intriguing session to attend that you think has nothing to do with your work now!*** You might discover some amazing new things simply by going for the unknown. And if you paid for the conference yourself, you don’t have to justify your workshop choices to anyone.
- Once you get to the site, read the materials you’re given at registration. If there’s an attendee list, look it over and get ready to find people interesting to you. But again, don’t limit yourself to searching only for attendees from the same kind of organization as yours. A great conversation starter is: “Judging from our nametags, our organizations do very different things. So, what trends are you experiencing (or what challenges do you face) in working with volunteers?” I promise you’ll find common ground, gain new perspectives, and widen your circle of friends. Extra points if the people you meet from different settings work within 50 miles of you! Often you’ll discover more nearby colleagues than you thought you had.
- Get some sleep! Seriously. Most volunteerism conferences cram things in at the crack of dawn and continue into the evening. You need energy!

Examine What You Experience

As the conference progresses, keep notes that answer the following three questions for *each time slot of each day*:

1. What did I hear to which I reacted: “*Ah, ha!*”?
2. What did I hear to which I reacted: “*That won’t work in my setting*”?
(Then ask whether you may have judged too quickly.)
3. What *ONE tangible suggestion or idea* can I take back home from this part of the conference?
Note: This might be a *question* you hadn’t asked before and want to explore.

Apart from the *content* of plenary sessions and workshops, pay attention to the way in which the presenter is *delivering the material*. Are you enjoying the session? Can you learn any group techniques you can use when you speak to groups?

Be sure to listen to what *the other participants* ask or say. This isn’t school, where you are pupils in front of a teacher. Every person in the room is a colleague and how wonderful if someone interests you enough at the session to spend time at the upcoming coffee break in an individual conversation.

Eavesdrop!

If people are talking in public spaces, it's proper conference etiquette to listen and even to join in! How else will you meet new people? Some places/times to eavesdrop:

- At breaks
- In the restroom
- In the elevator and hotel halls
- On the buffet line
- In the exhibit area
- During special events and outings

Often the most learning you'll get at a conference is from such informal interaction, but don't expect to complete most conversations at the conference – there's never enough time. Instead, be prepared to exchange business cards. Be sure to make a note on each card about what you talked about with this person!

Visit the Exhibit Area

At least take a slow walk around the room and look at what's on display. Talk to the vendors. They actually know things! Many of them offer professional resources that they themselves lacked while working or volunteering in the field. They genuinely want to hear about your needs and to answer questions about their products.

The area is also a chance to create your own learning. If there's a bookstore, browse through the books – even if you don't buy anything. Meet the people who congregate at the same exhibits that interest you and talk with them. In case you need permission: It's OK to consider the exhibit area as *an alternative* to a workshop.

Reflect

Allow yourself time to think about the conference as soon as possible after it ends. Make some notes about the following:

- What surprised you here at the conference?
- With whom would you like to stay in touch? (Is there anyone you did not get a chance to meet and might want to contact later anyway?)
- What issues did you hear discussed that will bear watching over the next year?
- Were you confirmed about what you're doing *right* already and so feel empowered to continue and expand your activities (maybe even to share what you do with others)?

- Which of your colleagues – paid and volunteer – attended this event with you and how can you help one another maintain your enthusiasm when you get home?
- Which of your colleagues (in your agency and otherwise) could not attend and how will you share your experience and learning with them?
- How will you engage the volunteers you lead in reflecting on your new learning?
- What and how will you report to your top executives what was valuable about attending this event – even if they didn't pay for it?

I hope my ideas expand your notion of conferencing and enable you to have greater learning and more fun as you grow your professional expertise. If I see you at the Summit in July, feel free to eavesdrop and to join in any conversation I'm having!

– *What are your thoughts on paying for your professional development?*

– *What recommendations do you have for making a conference priceless?*

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

Comments from Readers

Submitted on June 7th, 2017

Dianne Vierling, Volunteer Coordinator, FamilyMeans, Stillwater, MN, USA

Thanks for your great work.

Submitted on June 8th, 2017

Betty Stallings, Author, Consultant, Trainer Volunteer Engagement, Board Leadership and Fund Development, CA, USA

Thank you, Susan! I personally believe that this conference/Summit may well be the most significant way you can advance professionally and personally. The future of our profession may ride on the outcomes of this important gathering in Minnesota in July. I am coming out of "retirement" to work as a volunteer to make this happen and am tremendously excited about the fact that funders will also be participating in the discussions to partner in advancing this

profession. Don't miss it!!!! I would be happy to share my enthusiasm. You can contact me at Bettystall925@gmail.com. See you there!!!

Submitted on June 30th, 2017

Gerald (Jerry) ..., Presenter, Consultant, and Blogger, Independent Contractor, New York, NY, United States

Susan, I'm on the same page as you when it comes to investing in one's personal professional development. I'll be attending the Summit! Your suggestion for folk to also look into local options is spot on.

A couple of years ago I was asked to sit on a panel to share personal professional development experiences. I took a look at my history involving both my first career and my second career in volunteer resource management where I had to be more proactive – as you mentioned there aren't traditional college programs. I realized I had an established pattern of seeking out new skills and ideas. It was great when my organizations would pay! When they wouldn't, I decided to cover costs as a personal career investment. Sometimes I would use vacation days when attending professional development events. Your tip on setting aside funds on a monthly basis is a good one.

Those who have attended my workshops often hear me use the term “portable talent” – something I came up with back in 2005 when then talking to a 30 something office mate (I was 56 at the time). No matter who pays, the talent belongs to you and “travels” with you!

I enjoyed reading your tips for preparing for the upcoming Summit – always learn something from your Hot Topics!

Submitted on July 17th, 2017

Sally Kutyla, Volunteer Services Manager, Longwood Gardens, Kennett Square PA, US

Susan

Thank you for taking the time and care to write this. Very helpful tips on making the most of a conference! These are great opportunities to take a break from your everyday circumstances and look at your work from a fresh perspective. Approach it with an open mind and see what happens. Sometimes it's a self-affirmation (Yes! we are doing things right!)

Sometimes there's an opportunity to learn from a colleague who's doing things differently. (hmmm, maybe this is something we could try...?)

I always come away with energizing ideas to bring back to our team. Looking forward to St Paul. See you there!

Sally Kutyla, Volunteer Services Manager, Longwood Gardens

Submitted on July 17th, 2017

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

Hi, Sally -- thanks for posting a response! Yes -- really looking forward to seeing you and everyone next week at the Summit!

- Susan

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