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Inform, and WOW, Everyone about Volunteers

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

July

2016

A consistent (and persistent) theme for me since I began writing and giving presentations in the 1970s to today is the importance of recording and reporting *significant* information about volunteer service. Even though the first edition of our book [Proof Positive](#) detailed keeping records on volunteers using paper and pens (quaint notion, right?), the essence of our advice has been remarkably easy to keep current even if computers and online access to data have radically changed how we maintain those records. But for all the technical progress and available software, the sad fact is that most organizations are woefully under-informed about their volunteers and what they do.

What we do not measure, we do not value.

What we cannot describe, we do not understand.

What we never question or discuss becomes invisible.

These are strong statements but I believe they summarize all too well the way that volunteers are ignored by organizational leaders with the assistance of leaders of volunteer resources who only provide minimal information about volunteer engagement.

In the U.S., July 4th is Independence Day. It celebrates the end of a struggle for recognition and the start of a new way of looking at ourselves, topped off with wow-inspiring pyrotechnics. So this July Hot Topic is about creating fireworks through great reports about volunteers that capture delighted attention.

Here's how.

1. Don't Wait to Be Asked



Just because no one has requested information does not mean there's no responsibility to report it. The leader of volunteers is the only person who sees the full picture and has the facts about volunteers. Paid staff only know a little about the volunteers with whom they come in contact; volunteers only know what they see when they do their work (which really leaves those who work in the field or online out of the loop); and administrators may only chance upon volunteers in the hallway or once a year at a recognition event.

If you are not already providing monthly or quarterly reports, start now. If you have been asked to report only limited information (e.g., head count, hours served) keep giving that data but add more important stuff that will make your report POP.

2. Illuminate the Situation

Statistics need interpretation and that requires *context*, especially if the busy person reading your report is not fully aware of what volunteers are doing and really only wants to see quick facts. Avoid grand totals because they obscure what's important. OK. So you currently have 326 volunteers. What does that *mean*?

- Are they the same 326 that you reported a year ago? Assuming some turnover...
 - Did the best volunteers stay or go? For good reasons or bad?
 - Did you bring in new volunteers who strengthened the talent pool?
 - Are you still in contact with those who left so that they can continue to be your friends out in the community?
- Are the 326 volunteers interchangeable parts? Assuming not...
 - How many different roles or assignments do they fill?
 - How many and which departments, units or projects are they working with?
 - What departments, units or projects do not have volunteers working with them (and why)?
- Who are these people?
 - What diversity do they bring to the organization (age, gender, race, ethnicity, etc.)?
 - What professions, occupations, or special training do they bring?
 - From how many different parts of the community you serve?
 - How many different languages do they speak?

There are many more questions one could ask. I'm not suggesting that you give all this detail all the time, but try to provide meaning along with data. You could even set up your report so that each month the statistics page includes a highlighted box headed "Understand the Facts" or "Insight of the Month" in which you offer one or two extra pieces of information. Guess what will catch the reader's eye first?

3. Surprise and Wow People

Volunteers are not just unpaid staff. In fact, we minimize their contributions when we only report their work in assisting with what employees do. The beauty of volunteer involvement is that they are free to go beyond the ordinary and also to focus attention on little, but important things. So shine a light on the extra benefits of volunteer services:

- What was done by volunteers outside of business-as-usual activities? Did they decorate the reception area for Halloween? Give the visiting graduate students from Kenya a tour of the facility? Make sure every client who passed the GED exam received a personal congratulations note?
- How many volunteers gave money to the organization *in addition to* their time? What about donating goods or going out into the community to get things donated?
- What are ways that volunteer engagement has provided or generated positive publicity, effective public education, or expanded community outreach for your organization?
- How many volunteers are personally affected by your mission? Were they or someone close to them ever a client benefitting from your services? Still?
- Were volunteers able to respond to a need beyond what a paid staff member could do? Talk to a client in a different language? Accompany and support a client through a stressful situation?

It's also fair to report on the work of the volunteer office itself – and the ways in which it contributes to volunteer success. For example:

- The number of interviews of prospective volunteers (which should be higher than the number who actually come on board, because you do screening)
- Community relations activities – from recruitment outreach to attending neighborhood meetings – conducted by your office
- The number and type of special requests handled by volunteers
- Ways you consult with and even train paid staff to partner more successfully with volunteers

The fact that you screen adequately, represent the organization to the public, and assist many levels of staff, adds to the proof that volunteer services is an asset worth supporting.

4. Spark New Ideas

Reports are not just end-of-term report cards; they are documents to assess performance and then enable planning for what comes next. So use the facts to open new conversations.

- Look at how new volunteers first make contact: through online volunteer opportunity sites? Corporate volunteer programs? Schools? Civic groups? What types of community partnerships have been formed (such as liaison with a nearby church youth group or the local bank branch)? Does this open any doors to other types of collaboration opportunities?
- Has anything occurred that reflects a new trend or issue being seen in the volunteer world beyond your organization? What might this mean and how can you capitalize on it?
- Refer to strategic plans being made for the organization, whether new service proposals or increased funding in some areas and suggest ways volunteers might be integrated into the work plan as early as possible.

Openly admit problems (which itself will surprise people) you are facing in building the volunteer corps or in supporting them throughout the organization. Explain what the problems are and outline your proposed plan of attack to solve them. What help or resources do you need?

Finally, don't just report "up." Fireworks are a community event and lots of stakeholders can help to celebrate volunteers and offer even more new ideas. So share all reports with:

- The volunteers themselves (After all, it's their report!)
- All department heads – those who already have volunteers working in their programs and those who do not
- Partnering community organizations that provide volunteers
- Funding sources whose money supports volunteers

Information is power – if used well. Reports can accomplish a lot if you are willing to cause a little noise and look up!

How have *you* used reports to educate others and gain more support for volunteers?

Related Topics: [Recognition](#) | [Recordkeeping and Reporting](#) | [Volunteer Resources Manager, Role of](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#)

Comments from Readers

Submitted on July 6th, 2016

Kristina Morris, Unit Coordinator, Southwest Virginia Medical Reserve Corps, Bristol, VA, USA

Thank you! This was shared with me by another volunteer coordinator and it is just what I needed today.

Submitted on July 6th, 2016

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

Wonderful, Kristina -- always glad when the timing is good!

Submitted on July 7th, 2016

Cynthia Selling, Volunteer Coordinator, Providence Life Services, Tinley Park, IL, USA

I've been feeling a bit under valued and see the need for reporting so this immensely helped my mindset. I only work part time and am doing my best with limited resources and not enough time to implement programs the organization desires. Writing the report made me see just how much I've accomplished over a short period of time. Thank you!!

Submitted on July 7th, 2016

Marty ODell, CVA, Volunteer Program Manager, Goodwill Easter Seals Miami Valley, Dayton OH, USA

Thanks Susan, I have really been struggling with what to report because I get the feeling that new management truly does not understand anything but numbers. You have given me new ideas to reach out to and continue to prove our worth. Even though it aggravates me that I need to do that I will continue to call it job security. Smile.

Submitted on July 7th, 2016

Kirsten Blyth, Volunteer Coordinator, CEAP, Minneapolis, United States

Can't wait to share this with my staff! Thanks, Susan!

Submitted on July 8th, 2016

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

To Cynthia, Marty, and Kirsten -- Very happy that you're out sending up fireworks! :-)

-Susan

Submitted on July 8th, 2016

Laura Kinder, Director of Volunteer Services and Spiritual Care Services, Longmont United Hospital/Centura Health, Longmont/CO, USA

I just started tracking the number of conversions of volunteers to employees and the number of employees to volunteer as a workforce data point. I know this may not work for all volunteer services, but it is meaningful for hospital.

Submitted on July 8th, 2016

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

Hi, Laura -- You are quite correct in figuring out what data is meaningful in your setting and to your administration. Just be careful with this metric because it correlates volunteers with hospital employees, sort of as interchangeable parts. This is fine, but it's only a small part of the story, since volunteers offer skill sets and abilities *by design* different from employees. So be sure to also highlight the things volunteers do that employees would not or cannot -- that is the real value-added of volunteer services. But you get credit for having a reporting strategy and being creative.

- Susan

Submitted on July 16th, 2016

Mary Ella Dougl..., Managing Partner, Make It Happen Now, LLC, Virginia Beach, VA, USA

Great topic, Susan, as always! You inspired me to start writing better reports and I continue to beat the drum to all who will hear me that without them, our volunteers and services they provide are invisible. Love the fireworks analogy! Reports that pop get read!

Submitted on July 28th, 2016

LaToya Hyler, Volunteer & Community Engagement Manager, Habitat for Humanity South Hampton Roads, Norfolk, VA, USA

This was right on time. I just started in my position last month and am working hard to elevate the volunteer program. Highlighting the volunteer impact is so important because most of the time people have no idea how much the volunteers are doing, even others within your organization.

Submitted on July 28th, 2016

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

Hi, Mary Ella and LaToya -- glad that my cheerleading on report writing motivated both a veteran and a newcomer to our field!

- Susan

Submitted on March 13th, 2018

LaToya Hyler, Volunteer Resources Manager, Nauticus, Norfolk, USA

Thank you Ms. Ellis for your response! I am not new to the field, have been a volunteer administrator for almost 15 years now, have my CVA and MPA. I was new to that position and have moved on to another. One thing that is very important to me is sharing the stories and impacts of volunteers because their work is truly priceless!

Submitted on August 18th, 2016

Cheryl Heine, gardens manager, Longleaf Botanical Gardens, anniston, al, usa

Love the tips

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