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Philanthropists

The Treasure Trove of Knowledge Philanthropists

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

February

2013

This month our colleagues at [Vantage Point](#) in Vancouver, BC, Canada are releasing a new book, *The Abundant Not-for-Profit* by Colleen Kelly and Lynda Gerty. Inspirational and practical, the book argues for a transformation in thinking about volunteers. The book introduces the concept of *knowledge philanthropists*: time donors “who volunteer primarily with their head, by contributing what they know.” (This reminds me of another term I recently heard and like, “skill-anthropist,” which emphasizes how the giving of talent should be elevated to the equivalent of the giving of money.)

Kelly and Gerty map out the steps for how organizations (particularly small and mid-sized ones) can recruit and engage volunteers with any and all professional skills, thereby vastly increasing their capacity to accomplish goals, even in a poor economy. Key to the process is the direct involvement of the top executive, particularly in holding every paid staff member to the standard of reaching out to the community for needed talents and ideas. This strategy — “knowledge philanthropists are everyone’s responsibility” — adds the missing ingredient to current discussions of pro bono service and other “highly skilled” volunteer initiatives.

Expertise as Well as Help

It’s been obvious for a long time that many organizations look to volunteers for help, not necessarily for expert (or outside) input. The symbols of volunteering are hearts and hands – why not also brains?

There is no question that many community needs have to be addressed by rolling up sleeves and pitching in, from disaster relief to building playgrounds. And huge numbers of volunteers, no matter what their level of education or employment, love doing those sorts of projects. The highly successful Martin Luther King Day of Service in the United States last month was all about lots and



lots of donated labor. The trouble is that such high visibility days are more about energy than ideas. By necessity, they alleviate symptoms without tackling root causes or solutions.

But in order to seek and involve knowledge philanthropists, agencies first must truly *want* their expertise and their different perspectives. The sad fact is that too many organizations do not. They prefer to raise money to hire more staff and rarely think of volunteers as capable of doing any of what they really want employees to do.

For example, these days the goal is for a nonprofit board of directors to focus on “governance,” not “management,” resulting in a high wall between board volunteers and any of the daily work of the organization. While the board should have a strategic leadership role, this distinction is short-sighted. Many organizations no longer look at board volunteers – most often recruited in the first place for their status and clout in the community – as individual talent pools or entrée points to more donated expertise. What missed opportunities!

The current popularity of “pro bono service” projects is heading in the right direction, but the assistance provided tends to be limited to business skills offered by volunteers working in for-profit corporations, rather than initiated by the needs of the organization in any and all areas of work. Knowledge philanthropists can be recruited from a limitless variety of professions and avocations.

Attracting the Best and Brightest

The concept of knowledge philanthropists can only gain acceptance if organization leaders and staff truly believe in the premise that smart, talented people will want to donate their skills and will follow through on their volunteered commitments. Unfortunately, right now there is more skepticism and suspicion than high expectations. Too many simply cannot believe volunteers are capable of top-level contributions, which leads to limiting what we ask volunteers to do from the start. The spiral then continues downwards: when we do not challenge the best and the brightest with the opportunity to do important things, we only attract less talented volunteers.

Recently I’ve seen a concerning increase in questions about “paying” volunteers. This may be expressed as “we want to offer a stipend” or “can we give something expensive as a recognition gift,” but the common denominator is a fundamental belief that money (or expensive things) motivate or thank better than anything else. Certainly the business world rewards success with high salaries and dubiously thinks the wage scales provided by nonprofits and government will never be able to attract workers with great ability. How insulting!

Perhaps the most important contribution of *The Abundant Not-for-Profit* is its strong stand that it is one of the greatest *strengths* of nonprofits to recognize that money is not the only way people can be paid. What motivates knowledge philanthropists and other volunteers? Kelly and Gerty advocate:

Pay them with the intangible benefits that motivated their contribution to the organization in the first place. Those include an opportunity to make an investment in their community, a

*chance to learn, a way to be part of an excellent organization, a venue to meet new people and an opportunity to have their own unique role. **Pay them with meaning.***

Meaning. How simple yet profound as a recruiting pitch. How clear a measure of designing roles and work projects for volunteers.

Expanding Knowledge Philanthropy

We are talking about changing attitudes and organizational culture, perhaps one executive at a time. This does not happen overnight. But it can move forward in increments. For example, if you are currently the person designated as responsible for volunteers you can:

- Recruit top-notch volunteers to be part of the management team for volunteer involvement. In other words, be a role model by finding a wide range of talented individuals and entrusting them with assignments that expand the effectiveness of your office.
- Profile current volunteers (and board members, if possible) to assess what skills or expertise they possess that you have never asked them to share in their service with you. Look for ways they might expand their roles to use those talents.
- Interview every executive and middle manager in your organization to identify one area of expertise that they do not have but which would give them the opportunity to turn a wish into reality. Then do everything in your power to recruit a volunteer with the ability and interest in doing that role. Be prepared to give some one-on-one coaching to the exec in *how* to work with the knowledge philanthropist to make it successful. (Take a look at the written position descriptions or “terms of reference” recommended in *The Abundant Not-for-Profit*, such as the Volunteer Letter of Agreement Vantage Point provides on their Web site.)
- Read the *Points of View* essay Rob Jackson and I wrote in the current issue of *e-Volunteerism*, “[Philanthropy and Giving Are Not Just about Money](#)” (free to all). One of things we recommend is to expand your vocabulary in recruitment, training, recognition, and reports you write about volunteer contributions. Actively use synonyms for volunteer, such as knowledge philanthropist, time donor, or skill-anthropist. Talk about how volunteers are “paid in meaning” – an invaluable benefit only available in exchange for putting skills to use on behalf of an important cause.
- Stop reporting on hours served by volunteers and focus instead on goals reached, activities completed, ideas brought to life, and other results directly attributable to volunteers.

In [From the Top Down: The Executive Role in Successful Volunteer Involvement](#), I note that one of the unique aspects of being a leader of volunteer involvement is:

*The director of volunteer involvement is the only person who **has the mandate to dream** about new projects and creative approaches to existing ones without immediately having to limit such inspiration with the thought, “How will we pay for this?” Though volunteers are not free, they can test new ideas initially without much cash flow. This is a very special role for the volunteer office.*

Kelly and Gerty take this thought to the next level. They want the executive to dream in this way, too. They also don't want to stop at engaging volunteers to test new ideas, but to make them an ongoing, integral part of an organization's work force.

- How have you brought abundance into your organization?
- What will it take to educate organization leaders to tap the treasure trove of knowledge philanthropists?

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Submitted on 27 March 2013 by Sheryl Luebke, Coordinator of Volunteer Resources, Jewish Family Services, Richmond, VA, USA

We are fortunate to have a top notch school of social work in Richmond. One retired professor brought in several of her colleagues as they retired. We have tapped their expertise in survey analysis and summarization, wordsmithing, program management, recruitment and interviewing, to name a few areas. A member of our agency board was a corporate trainer and reviewed my training plan. A statistical analyst volunteered to review our volunteer and client survey scripts.

Your article has inspired me to search for more ways to use the brain wealth all around us!

Submitted on 12 February 2013 by Janet Thorne, CEO, Reach Volunteering, London, UK

Thanks - an excellent piece on increasing skills based volunteering. This is very much in tune with the message we are pushing in the UK - raising expectations about the contribution that volunteers donating their skills can make - and raising expectations on how charities should engage with such volunteers.

Intrinsic motivation can be much more powerful than money - I know of many charities whose experience of volunteer consultants has been much positive than that of paid consultants.

Submitted on 07 February 2013 by Alexis, Community Programs Coordinator, Friends of the Phoenix Public Library, Phoenix, AZ, USA

How timely ... I just returned from a workshop facilitated by Experience Matters (az.org) that addresses this very topic, only with specific respect to the Boomer generation. I left feeling like, aside from the one-time project days or events, this might represent a significant change in volunteerism (meaning NPOs, especially smaller ones, are going to have to take a comprehensive, strategic look at how they engage time donors). Of course, keep in mind that I'm technically a Millennial, so I tend to dramatize ideas like this. ;-) (Exciting, nonetheless.)

**Submitted on 06 February 2013 by Christine Martin, Manager, Volunteer Development,
Evergreen, Toronto, Canada**

This article is bang on! Thanks for keeping the conversation going.

**Submitted on 04 February 2013 by Marg Rose, Director of Grants, Victoria Foundation, Victoria,
BC, Canada**

Fascinating and true. We've recruited pro bono consultants who act as Community Advisors to non profits as a "more than money" service from our Community Foundation. Depicting them so robustly was inspiring. I'll send them this article to show how vital their role is!

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