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Should Volunteer Program Managers Be Volunteers, Too?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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One of the discussion threads last month on one of the volunteer management listservs revolved around the question of whether it was important for volunteer resources managers to do some sort of volunteering themselves – in essence, practicing what we preach.

This got me thinking.

It's rare to meet a colleague who does not have some history as a volunteer, somewhere, sometime. Like every other citizen, we care deeply about some cause or burn on some issue and step forward to do something about it. Like others, our children or spouses raise our hands for us to do committee work, or we multi-task by joining a food co-op (getting our own groceries while we work for the benefit of all members), or we expand what we like to do for fun by volunteering with the National Ski Patrol.

But it's also true that we experience all the same obstacles to finding time to give service that our prospective recruits use as excuses for not joining our agencies. The question, it seems to me, is whether we view *making* time to volunteer a professional development activity.

Philosophy, Ethics, and Education

Here are a few of the arguments for every volunteerism practitioner to engage in volunteer work personally each year. Which do you think have merit? What's missing? Do you disagree:

- Ethically, how can we ask people to give their time and talent without monetary remuneration if we do not do so ourselves? (Note that this means volunteering somewhere *other* than the organizations for which we coordinate volunteers.) Volunteering is a value as much as an

activity and we ought to hold it as such. Our own community service demonstrates our belief in volunteering and sets an example for both unpaid and paid staff.

- It's experiential learning. Knowing directly how it *feels* to volunteer elsewhere leads to more enlightened management practices you control. If you get frustrated at the way you're treated when volunteering in another agency, or if you love the welcome you get, you will have role models to avoid or emulate.
- It's a reality check. It's one thing to read about or espouse trends such as family volunteering or virtual service, but what happens when you try to do such things? Do you find other organizations open to experimentation? What unexpected problems crop up?
- One idea is to partner with one or more colleagues and agree to volunteer at each other's agencies (of course, only pick organizations that you truly want to support with your time!) – in any sort of volunteer role. The deal, of course, is that you regularly meet together and discuss your experiences. Such “undercover” service can benefit your agency as a form of quality control, highlighting what is being done really well and where improvements may be needed. For you personally, watching a colleague in action can be a form of apprenticeship, particularly if this manager is already involved in a program activity that you'd like to try yourself.
- You can expand your horizons by volunteering in a setting totally different from where you work and in a type of service completely unlike what you ask volunteers to do daily. It's easy to get into a rut and assume that all volunteer programs everywhere face the same challenges as you do or use similar procedures. Changing your perspective often elicits creative new solutions and approaches to your usual situation. It's also fascinating to see how the principles of frontline volunteer management apply to, say, serving on a board of directors or organizing a college alumni reunion.

Serving the Profession

As regular Energize Web site visitors know, one major crisis occupied my volunteer time last year: the demise of the Association for Volunteer Administration and subsequent efforts to pick up the pieces and form something new to fill the gap. Although this effort came during a particularly demanding time for my business, I contributed however many unpaid hours were required without counting them – as did others on the planning team. The urgency of the work seemed self-evident to all of us and the goal too important to our field. The Congress of Volunteer Administrator Associations held at the start of December passed the torch to a new group of volunteer leaders, all of whom knowingly accepted great responsibility on behalf of our profession.

Again, this makes me think.

Unfortunately, in many places, it has become harder and harder to recruit colleagues to take leadership roles, whether in a DOVIA or state association, on a conference planning committee, or for any project requiring intensive time. It is here that the argument, “every volunteer resources manager should be a volunteer,” resonates clearly.

Strengthening our field ultimately is a contribution to every worthwhile organization we touch, and is one of the most effective things we can do to support volunteers. So service on behalf of a professional association is a powerful act. Thriving networks of volunteer administrators increase the skills of their members and educate agency administrators and the public about the work we do. In turn, this leads to greater involvement of volunteers – more and innovative roles for a wider spectrum of citizens – which means additional attention paid to important causes.

Remember the two men hammering away at a rock pile: One explains he’s “cutting stone,” but the other says “I’m building a cathedral.” When you are approached to volunteer for a professional association you can look at it two ways, too:

What’s in it for me?	What’s in it for the field?
Not everything under discussion is relevant to me now.	Some day, when one of these issues ends up affecting me, I'll be in the know. I might even prevent a problem for my agency by acting now.
I am looking for help in <i>how</i> to do my job.	I am developing myself for a career in this field and want to know <i>why</i> things are done in certain ways.
I'm too busy to spare the time.	Making this network more effective will ultimately save me time through collaboration.
I feel that helping with a professional association is too much like my daily work and I'd rather help some social cause.	I believe so strongly in the importance of my daily work that I welcome the chance to strengthen this field (and I can take on a role that allows me to learn something new). It also ultimately affects every cause, since volunteers are everywhere.
My organization won't give me permission to do this on agency time.	I will do this on my own time because I will learn so much and contribute something valuable.
I can't afford the dues or any out-of-pocket expenses.	I can't afford NOT to participate and, besides, no one will buy me my career.
Someone else will do it.	I want to do it and I can do it.

There’s never been a better time to volunteer for a volunteer management network – and that’s true in a range of countries around the world, many of whom are nurturing embryo associations right now. Make it a new year’s resolution. It’s self-help through helping us all. Can you think of a better reason to give your time?

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Submitted anonymously 20 April 2007

I definitely think a professional volunteer coordinator needs to volunteer in his/her spare time. I feel it is important to do the job myself, if I ask someone else to do it. Volunteering needs to be lead by example. If I expect someone else to give their time and energy, I know I need to do the same. And I get so much out of giving.

Submitted 15 February 2007 by Julie VanderNoot, Manager, Volunteer Services, Bronson Methodist Hospital, Kalamazoo, Michigan, USA

When I was hired for this position, the hiring manager asked me about my own volunteer activities and involvement in the community. At the time I thought it was an interesting question. Truth is, it was a very good question. I have since added it to my list of questions for departments within the hospital that want volunteers in their department. I find the employees who have volunteer experience with other agencies relate better to the volunteers they supervise.

Posted on 26 January, 2007 by Kathleen Richardson, Southeast Steuben County Library, Volunteer Coordinator, Corning NY

After twenty-plus years of volunteering, I "stumbled" into this brand-new opening as Volunteer Coordinator at our local library. Having volunteered here years before they ever had the VC position, I remember how forgotten and unappreciated I felt. I always keep that in mind when dealing with our volunteers – let them know they are noticed and appreciated!

Thanks to Suellen Carlson of Jamestown NY for her idea of letting volunteers and community know what kind of volunteering staff has done. I'm interviewing staff here for the next issue of our volunteering newsletter.

It's practically impossible to believe that everyone hasn't helped out in some church, school, community or neighborhood effort for at least a day.

Posted on 26 January 2007 by anonymous

Can you direct me to what form of volunteering can take place within a non-profit organization? My hospital, of which I am forced to be part of a union, has many volunteers. Yet, when I try to volunteer by clocking out on time and then finishing a report or straightening my desk, I get flack from coworkers and supervisors. I figure the hour or so can be donated time to the organization. It seems I am not supposed to check out and finish my work.

I have worked with many volunteer organizations before without pay, but now that I am actually earning a salary, I am being told not to volunteer at my work. I am also being discouraged from volunteering within a "Special Committee" format which is made up of volunteers. Please could you tell me what laws I am violating and how to go about making change? I strongly believe the American Workplace is so focused on "I" and "self" that they can no longer understand a person who wishes to give of their time and I would like to see that change.

Response from Susan:

This question is asked often and, since I am recommending volunteer work here, I thought I'd give a quick answer.

The Fair Labor Standards Act does indeed prohibit employees from volunteering in the same organization in which they are employed, except within very defined ways. This is to protect the exploitation of workers who are "asked" to volunteer by the organization instead of being paid overtime for extra work -- in truth, it is coercion. Of course, as so often happens, this sometimes throws the baby out with the bath, since it doesn't allow for truly altruistic service by employees. The only way to allow employees to volunteer is to make sure the service is totally unrelated to their paid work. What you describe -- giving unpaid time to do exactly the same work you are paid to do -- is actually exactly what the law forbids. Sorry! I'd have to know more about the "Special Committee" you mentioned before commenting on that.

This is not an issue of American selfishness. Although there are clearly times when the law interferes with sincere desire to give more to a cause than an employee is paid to do, it is also a good idea to draw some lines between what is employee work and what is volunteer work. Further, it is healthier for everyone to cross-fertilize as much as possible. So, go across the street to another great organization and volunteer...and ask the employees from across the street to come volunteer for your setting! Everybody gets a break and each agency gets new energy.

Posted on 25 January 2007 by Adewumi Oluwadiya, Nigerian National Volunteer Service, Dr. Abuja, Federal Capital Territory Nigeria

As a Deputy Director in a national volunteer agency (I have two bosses), I have encountered a lot of questions like "What is Volunteerism?", "Why do I need to volunteer?" or "What can I get from volunteering?" I found that the best way to popularize volunteerism and promote the spirit of volunteering in Nigeria was for me to be a volunteer myself. "Do as I do and not as I say" is my slogan as a volunteer manager. So this past International Volunteer Day (December 5), I got permission from my bosses to organize a free workshop for teachers of English language in Abuja, my nation's capital city. The workshop was a huge success and classroom teachers who came to learn and also teach us are now "foot soldiers" in promoting this infectious endeavor- volunteering to serve. So, yes, managers of volunteer programmes need to be volunteers too. It takes one angel to guide another or others to serve - volunteers are angels of mercy and their managers ought to also serve.

Posted on January 23, 2007 by Nonnie Lyketsos, Alzheimer's Association, Volunteer Coordinator, Timonium, MD

I think that being a volunteer oneself is much more important than any kind of certificate in this field. In fact, I am against certification at all. The three most important factors in being a successful volunteer coordinator are warmth, organization, and a solid understanding of the volunteers' needs and desires. Of course, it's easiest to know the volunteers points of view when one has traveled a mile in their moccasins, so to speak.

Posted on January 23 2007 by Janet Pattison, Volunteer Coordinator, Hospice of the FL Suncoast, St. Petersburg, FL USA

As a volunteer manager at a large hospice, I felt that I was missing a connection to our patients, so I became a volunteer for another team in the agency. As a volunteer I had the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of what volunteers face in a variety of serious situations, that I wouldn't have otherwise learned. I found it tough to visit someone dying and in a lot of pain, who's my age, and has a couple weeks left to live. What do you say on that first visit to a terminally ill patient? What's it like to say the wrong thing? And how do you advocate for the patient that is in tremendous pain, and living in nursing home, ALF or hospital, and the staff don't want to be bothered? And how do you treat a stroke victim who's totally "with it", but grouped w/ dementia patients because he has lost the ability to speak? My experience as a volunteer gave me a realistic understanding of issues our volunteers face, and I hope it's made me a better teacher and volunteer manager.

Posted on January 19 2007 by Joan Schaffer, Director of Volunteers, American Red Cross, Grant Wood Area Chapter, Cedar Rapids, Iowa USA

I am fortunate that the executive director at our agency values volunteering so much that she allows us to volunteer four hours a month during the work day. After all, we are in the business of organizing volunteers. Most of us volunteer at other nonprofit agencies. As a breast cancer survivor, I visit newly diagnosed women in the hospital as part of the American Cancer Society's Reach for Recovery program. But I also feel like I am volunteering quite a bit of the time as part of my work duties, which is a great job benefit!

Posted on January 15 2007 by David Warshaw, Principal, Vistas Volunteer Management Systems, Ho-Ho-Kus, New Jersey, USA

This excellent article got me thinking of an extension to the concept. To wit: Should board members be volunteers, too? Of course most board membership is voluntary, but I'm suggesting volunteering beyond that -- and beyond the walls of the agency on whose board the person sits. Many of the advantages cited in the article would accrue to board members, too. Certainly they would gain greater understanding of how volunteers work in agencies, and be in a better position to provide oversight and advice on their own organization's volunteer program.

It may start simply by conducting an inventory of volunteer service already being done by board members, which is likely to be quite a bit. Then add some structured discussion around the quality (or not) of those experiences, with lessons learned applied to the home agency. Many nonprofits partner with others. An exchange of board members as volunteers in mission-driven program may be a great way to extend those partnerships. Who knows, we may get more board members educated on the challenges of volunteer management, and wouldn't that be a good thing?

Posted on January 8 2007 by Ilona Diessner, Coordinator, Albany & Regional Volunteer Service, Albany WA, Australia

Being a fairly new coordinator for a Volunteer Centre it was evident that being successful in getting

the job was my own past & current volunteering practice. I think it is important for us as coordinators to be partaking in the practice of volunteering within our communities.

Posted on January 7 2007 by Carol Bloemer, RSVP Director, Volunteer Center of East Central Wisconsin, Appleton, Wisconsin, USA

I would not hire someone in this field if they had no experience in volunteering. I feel strongly that you need to be active in the field you are working in. That applies to serving in some capacity to further the field whether it be on a committee to plan a conference or being involved in your local volunteer management organization. I have worked in other fields and I felt the same way at that time. Believe in what you do and show it or it isn't worth doing.

Posted on January 6 2007 by Miriam Leslie, Volunteer Development Coordinator, The Mustard Seed, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

Nice to see so many responses! I belong to a service club that provides a variety of volunteer opportunities. I enjoy the adventures. It's also a learning experience each time. I also love having an outlet--something that has nothing to do with work. It's that classic wonderful feeling of giving of self to edify others. Nothing beats it!

Posted on January 6 2007 by Sandi Lyle, Board Member, past COV, volunteer, Red Cross, Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

For 20 years I have been a volunteer Chairman of Volunteers. I worked full time plus. I was fortunate to have the backing of my family and my organization, the American Red Cross. Many of those years I worked with a staff member. We worked as a team. I feel it was beneficial to work with volunteers as a volunteer. It made me more approachable for them, when they knew I also was a volunteer.

Posted on January 6 2007 by Penny Stanley, Volunteer Program Director, Denver Kids, Inc., Denver, Colorado, USA

This is certainly eye-opening for me...I've been in the field more years than I care to count(!) and I've certainly volunteered with various agencies - either those I've worked with, or others. However, the arguments "for the field" push me to get back to it! Thanks!

Posted on January 6 2007 by Erica Weick, Coordinator of Volunteer Programs, Ridgely, Maryland, USA

I agree with all your points and firmly believe that volunteering is an essential tool for a volunteer manager. My question is this, though: As a non-staff consulting volunteer manager I am paid for 1/2 time and choose to volunteer the other half in volunteer management in order to complete the work. I have been told there are no funds for a full time position and my decision to volunteer is based on my commitment to our cause. Should I report my own substantial hours, participate in the development of award programs, wear two hats, etc.? Do you see a possible conflict of interest? I do not, but these questions have been recently raised. Comments appreciated. Thanks, Erica

Posted on January 5 2007 by Suellen Carlson, Director of Volunteers, Lutheran Social Services, Jamestown, NY USA

For International Volunteer Day, I did a full page in our local paper (pictures and copy) about where our staff members volunteer in the community. It is important for folks who volunteer for this agency to know that the supervisors that they volunteer for are also sharing their time and talent with other not-for-profit programs. I wasn't able to feature all of the staff members because of the size of our facility but we had a representative sample who volunteered for a diverse range of programs. My mentor always told me that it is important to pay rent to your community. I believe that for myself, my family, the volunteers who choose this program, and the individuals who request volunteers.

Posted on 5 January 2007 by DJ Cronin, President, Australasian Association of Volunteer Administrators, Brisbane, Australia

Great topic -- and as incoming President of the Australasian Association of Volunteer Administrators (AAVA), I particularly liked your "what's in it for me/the field" columns. It should be put on all brochures printed by associations seeking to recruit members and it transcends all international borders! When I first began volunteering for AAVA, it gave me added pride in what I did for a living, as well as the satisfaction in knowing that we were working together to make our sector stronger. Hopefully the countries that are nurturing embryo associations right now will give birth to united and strong entities. Thanks, Susan, for being a leader in the field who continuously advocates for strong and vibrant professional associations.

Posted on 5 January 2007 by Jayne Cravens, consultant, Bonn, Germany

"...partner with one or more colleagues and agree to volunteer at each other's agencies" -- that is *such* a great idea. When I started promoting online volunteering, I had several volunteer managers at other organizations try it out for themselves by signing up to volunteer in my ov program. What a learning experience for all of us! And last year, I published a page on my own web site listing everywhere I volunteer, and what I do, in an effort to "walk the talk." How can I promote volunteering if I'm not doing it myself?

Posted on 3 January 2007 by Penny Grellier, Catholic Community Services, Program Manager, Tacoma, WA USA

I agree with the points brought up in this article. In the for-profit world, business leaders often "test" others in their sector: visiting competitors to get new ideas, doing market research to find out why a certain brand or company is preferred. Why shouldn't we as volunteer leaders find out what other agencies do, or learn about current trends? And going "undercover" as a volunteer is sure to provide the most useful information. I choose to volunteer at an agency very different from the one I work for, because of the variety, but I gather ideas about how to run my program better each time I serve my volunteer shift or receive recognition. I'd wager we all entered into volunteer management because we believe in the value of volunteerism; it makes sense to make the time to become even more well-versed in all aspects of it!

Posted on 2 January 2007 by Hillary Roberts, PLNJ Inc., President Keyport/NJ USA

You are so right! It is important to be more than an armchair quarterback! Your perspective on why we should volunteer, what knowledge, skill sets and experiences we ultimately glean (including

professional growth) are all valid. Speaking for the agency I represent, every individual that sits on our Board maintains a personal volunteer schedule of no less than two assignments each year in addition to their support of PLNJ. Every year our first meeting begins with placing community volunteer needs into a large black top hat. The hat is passed from member to member at each meeting (4 times a year) to randomly select an activity. Why do we practice this field assignment? For many of the reasons you highlight in this month's Hot Topic. We should never get too comfortable with what we think we know as professionals. We should always remember that the front line IS where the missions matter. From where we stand, any VPM that doesn't have time to learn a few new lessons has no business recruiting volunteers and coordinating charity programs. Field experience is credential!

With regard to supporting the profession, I also agree forward thinking is imperative. What I hope to see more of in 2007 are specifics. Two Volunteer Resource Management Associations have sprung from AVA's closing. Will they work together? Or offer different benefits? Will these initiatives connect on a national level beyond the communication tool called "Internet" to find their members? It would be difficult to offer support or share with colleagues what is needed without additional information. I look to the men and women who have come forward already to enlighten me and my colleagues in NJ.

No one would argue that a professional organization that does practice what it preaches benefits everyone working in it. A few of us, new to this historical debate and discussion, don't wish to remain clueless. Mentor your fellow comrades, and support will follow.

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