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# The Self-Directed Volunteer

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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On April 20th, I attended the “Lead – A Get HandsOn! Summit” in Washington, DC, sponsored by the HandsOn Network and the University of Phoenix and timed to help celebrate National Volunteer Week. The theme of the event was “Advancing the Service Movement through Innovation,” with plenaries and workshops spending most time on social media and something they called “self-directed volunteers.”

## Defining Self-Directed Volunteers

Needless to say, I was eager to learn what self-directed volunteering is all about. No one actually defined the term, but from the discussion and examples, here is what I think people mean. A self-directed (or self-led) volunteer is someone who:

- Sees a need or learns about a project (launched by an organization with some expertise in the subject);
- Gets resources (usually online) with instructions, suggestions, and other material to support taking action; and then
- Takes action to do the suggested activity on his or her own time, in his or her own way, for recipients she or he selects.

The role of the agency initiating a project is to publicize the need, provide clear and useful resources, and loosely monitor the impact (more on that in a moment). No one signs up as a volunteer nor is required to report anything. But, ideally, many people are helped as the idea spreads virally and increasing numbers of self-directed volunteers carry it out.

It's easier to understand the concept with a real example. One speaker explained a project led by AARP in several states this winter, called “Operation Energy Save” (see [Virginia's site](#)). AARP recognized that there were many seniors, as well as people with disabilities, who were having trouble meeting their rising fuel costs. Working with experts, they were able to identify a whole checklist of

no-cost/low-cost actions to conserve energy and lower heating bills. Many of the actions were very simple, if done by an able-bodied volunteer given clear instructions.

So each cooperating state AARP created a Web site with downloadable information, checklists, instruction sheets, and other suggestions about energy saving. To find volunteers as well as people in need of help, they started spreading the word to organizations in the community already engaged with seniors and people with disabilities. The message was to pay attention to the situation of friends and neighbors: *Can you do something important for someone you know?*

Quite quickly they began seeing the number of site visitors grow and hearing stories of what was happening through volunteer action. At the end of the winter, they were still receiving calls from agencies who had only heard about the project in the last weeks but wanted to be part of it if it repeats next year.

## The Pluses of the Self-Directed Volunteer Approach

There are many sorts of needs that can be tackled with this approach, largely the ones that – in the old days – would have been handled by relatives, friends, and neighbors. In fact, at the conference, several people referred to self-directed volunteering as “organized neighborliness.” The ripple effect of such activity can continue in all sorts of ways (including re-engaging some of those relatives, friends, and neighbors!). In the energy saving example, some volunteers discovered additional needs while locking down windows and caulking cracks. In a number of cases, individual volunteers called on other volunteers to do extra service for the person in need or made a referral to the appropriate public agency to get help.

Remember that the other theme of the conference was social media. Self-directed volunteering, as discussed here, is dependent on the amazing capacity of the Web to reach thousands of people (both those needing help and those willing to volunteer) quickly and at no cost, and to disseminate the necessary resources electronically, again at no cost. So, theoretically, the organization most comfortable online will be the most successful in mobilizing this corps of volunteers.

A key to this approach is working through organizations and institutions that already have established relationships both with the prospective volunteers and with the people most likely to need the service. In the energy saving example, this meant enlisting faith communities, agencies delivering other services to seniors, rehabilitation centers, and the like. The advice was to “look around and think about whom you already know who might benefit from this project.” In turn (and maybe in theory), this method affords a degree of protection to both the volunteer and the client, since they already know each other.

## The Concerns

Living in today’s litigious world, you can well imagine that conference participants had lots of questions about screening, legal liability, and risk management. And, of course, these are important

safety issues particularly for vulnerable populations. As just noted, proponents of self-directed volunteering feel strongly that the goal is to connect people who already know each other and therefore risk is diminished.

Because the volunteers do not register or sign up to “become volunteers” (and may never even use the word to describe their actions), the sponsoring agency has an “arm’s length transaction” that limits its liability – at least legally, if not morally. But this same distance means that the organization cannot require reporting back and so has no records on who is doing what. No records means no metrics on the level of activity initiated nor on impact and accomplishments. This makes it hard to assess effectiveness and even to get funding.

There is also the concern that the volunteering is being done properly. While the organization that adopts a self-directed project to mobilize its members to help one another might do some monitoring, the original sponsor loses all control. (Another way this idea is like social media, in which messages take on a life of their own).

Finally, this “offer the idea and they will come and use it” approach means that self-directed volunteers are not thanked and may not be invited to serve in other ways. So while this has the potential to generate lots of service, other opportunities may be missed.

Another variation on self-led volunteering was called “flexible volunteering” by Janica Fisher in her 2008 article in *e-Volunteerism*, [“Flexible Volunteering: One Size Fits All.”](#) All these ideas are meant to mobilize service as people are able to do it.

## Volunteer Management Principles

This method of accomplishing a project does not seem to need a lot of paid staff or volunteer leadership time. That’s because the expectation is that each volunteer will only give service to a limited number of people that she or he already knows, and then stop. On the other hand, creating and maintaining relationships with the other community organizations, communicating with them as the project progresses, and providing the necessary resources to the volunteers requires quite a bit of skilled attention.

It remains to be seen how many different kinds of volunteering might be enabled under the self-directed method, but it would seem that the most successful projects would meet these criteria:

- Address a widespread, evident need.
- Suggest a helpful activity that is clearly doable without special training or that can be accomplished by following instructions as provided.
- Match volunteers to the people needing the service through already-established relationships.

Interestingly, the basics of volunteer management still apply: offering defined work that has meaning, providing the tools necessary, reaching out to diverse people with the potential to accomplish the

goals. But self-directed volunteering also asks us to suspend many of the “best practices” we ordinarily think are necessary and instead trust individuals to do the right thing.

It is possible to offer optional ways to give feedback to those volunteers who want to share their experiences, whether by Web site postings, or e-mail reports, or even video records. “Telling the story” in such anecdotal ways may not make statisticians happy, but can have a profound effect. And anyone who wishes to be part of the communication exchange can be thanked and kept informed of new projects to come.

- *What do you think of this self-directed volunteer idea?*
- *Are you already providing services in this way? Please tell us about it.*
- *What do you see as the role of leaders of volunteer involvement in designing and running this kind of volunteer service?*

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***Submitted 9 May 2010 by Maelor Himbury, Volunteer Coordinator, Australian Conservation Foundation, Melbourne Australia***

I have been a self-directed volunteer for many years. I started off as a Library volunteer with the Australian Conservation Foundation filing newspaper clippings. I thought it would be good to provide an email service with a summary of the more significant research findings. Later this morphed into a daily environment news digest which continues to this day. All it requires is an idea and general support from the organisation.

***Submitted 7 May 2010 by Lora Silver, Oakland, CA USA***

Self-directed volunteering sounds a lot like community organizing to me. An inherent trust in people and strengths-based assumption that people simply need access to the resources and networks necessary to get the job done - rather than a supervisor who directs their every move. I think the name 'self-directed volunteering' sounds appealing because it sounds like less investment or infrastructure MAY be required. I'm concerned about the lack of output or outcome reporting of any kind. I understand the self-directed volunteering portals that are internet-based are rather decentralized... but there are creative ways to incentivize these volunteers to come back and report what they did. OR maybe the evaluation is simply the place where most investment is needed when it comes to self-directed volunteering. Maybe staff invest relatively little time or resources upfront to enable the project to begin, but their investment comes at the time of measuring impact, in the form of administering surveys, forms, anything. Either way, it's another reminder that volunteer engagement requires resources and thoughtful planning. If it's not already there, I think we can add 'community organizing' and 'resource mobilization' to the volunteer manager skill set!

And thanks Susan for keeping us updated on this latest trend.

## Comments from Readers

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*Submitted on July 16th, 2018*

*Edward Feder, self directed community antagonist/volunteer, Chicago, IL, USA*

I am one of a select few individuals who are not Black and live in the Southside of Chicago for about 8 years. I live with my partner who is of similar age and she is Black, and has lived in the same home for 63 years. Have not worked since 2002 and have no assets to speak of. I have spend a lot of my time helping people in the community and it has been an "out of the box" type experience that is too hard to describe. For most of the years I lived here I found myself taking action to help people and non-profits because I saw so many obvious opportunities where I knew I could add value or contribute that is was at first exciting to have my because I felt motivated thinking I would make friends and be appreciated if I offered what I knew. After countless rejections, even threats of bodily I found myself finally starting to give up and then decided to push back more and more. How I did this is for another day. Now, I am overwhelmed with people knocking on the house door where I live asking for help vause so and so said to talk to the white fella living over there. I was so happy to come across your web site - never realized volunteering had become a big thing.

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