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Volunteering and Employability: Cause or Effect?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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With the high unemployment rate, a lot of media attention in the last five years or so has been given to volunteering as a factor in successfully finding a job, but this is based more on common wisdom than hard data. Most of us in volunteer management support the observation that volunteering builds resumes, provides career exploration, and demonstrates each volunteer's abilities, but can we make the case that volunteering directly affects employability? And is that the point?

Research without Clear Results

The question is hot at the moment because governments in several countries have been examining the question. A year ago, the U.S. Department of Labor issued an Unemployment Insurance Program Letter (UIPL) "recognizing that volunteering can help expand opportunity for unemployed individuals by enabling them to develop and maintain skills, expand their network of contacts, and enhance their resumes, all while making a positive impact on their communities." Now a major new American research report from the Corporation for National and Community Service, *Volunteering as a Pathway to Employment: Does Volunteering Increase Odds of Finding a Job for the Out of Work?* (June 2013), finds evidence of strong *correlation* between volunteering and employment – while specifically acknowledging the inability to prove *causation*. Despite this clear caveat, officials are already using the report to promote volunteering as important to finding a job, based on its primary conclusion that:

We found that volunteering is associated with a 27% increase in odds of finding employment, highly statistically significant at the 99.9% confidence level. Volunteers without a high school degree and volunteers in rural areas have an even higher increase – 51% and 55%, respectively.

In the UK, a new study by the Third Sector Research Centre (*Does volunteering improve employability?*) finds that "volunteering can have a positive effect on the likelihood of some people getting a job – but this varies according to who you are and how often you volunteer." (Well, yes.) With similar hedging, the report's authors state:

We found that volunteering has a significant, but weak, effect on entry into work. However, this varies according to the frequency of volunteering and demographics. Overall, volunteering on a monthly basis had a positive effect on the likelihood of people gaining employment in the next year, but volunteering too frequently or too infrequently had a negative effect. Volunteering had a positive effect on moving into employment for those aged 45 – 60, and for those with caring responsibilities.

The evidence on job retention is weaker, and volunteering appears to have zero or even negative effects on wage progression.

In her soon-to-be published report on “Internet-mediated volunteering in the EU: history, prevalence, approaches & relation to employability & social inclusion,” Jayne Cravens quotes from a report by VERSO (Volunteers for European Employment) that notes: “Traditional volunteering can provide a pathway to new skills and eventually a paid job; civic society and volunteerism can also be instrumental in creating new types of social spaces capable of including or connecting with marginalised groups whose employment needs are not currently met by the established employment systems.” The VERSO Web site shares “best practise experiences with voluntary work to improve European employment” and includes studies on volunteering in seven EU countries: Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Spain and The Netherlands.

Assumptions

There are a number of issues at play here, all of which deserve consideration by leaders of volunteers. The assumptions include:

- that volunteering develops skills, or rather that volunteering develops *employable* skills for *available jobs*. Further,
- the effect is expected as a result of any and all volunteering, regardless of role, and
- employment is seemingly unaffected by the traits, skills, or personality of the person doing the service.

See the problems? Let’s try to separate fact from fiction.



Forever, we have said that volunteering looks great on a resume. Mainly, it shows such characteristics as: an interest in community, responsibility and dependability, ability to work within organizational culture, and interest in others. If the *project* to which the person contributed as a volunteer is skill-related, that activity can demonstrate a variety of employable experiences, including leadership, communication, planning, and other related project

management skills, plus specific things such as marketing, teaching, Web design, etc. However, volunteering can also be very general, low-level, and totally unconnected to the job market, particularly if people mainly do one-day service events. Nevertheless, putting volunteer work on a

resume impresses university admissions officers and possibly employers, more because it speaks to the character of the applicant than his or her concrete skills.

True, False or Maybe

- *True*: Volunteering is a low-risk way to explore new career fields and different work settings. Certainly this is important for young people and recent grads, who may not have much real-world experience outside of a classroom or unskilled, short-term jobs. But for adults, it depends on what they have been doing as employees. And on what they choose to do as a volunteer. If they are thinking about going into health care because their factory job ended, then volunteering in a hospital or nursing home is very sensible. But there is not always such a clear connection. [Note: A further complication of volunteering-as-career-exploration is the current debate about whether “unpaid internships” are exploitative of young people. See [“The Sparking Controversy about Volunteer Internships”](#) in the current issue of *e-Volunteerism*. The article is free access to all.]
- *True*: Volunteering is a way to hone skills a volunteer already has or apply them in new ways. No question that someone with specific expertise can find ways to offer those at no charge to a variety of organizations. The benefits can be: practice to improve them; keeping the skills alive if not otherwise being used at the moment (I have a friend who is an RN who goes on overseas medical missions because she is not currently doing nursing), or learning how those skills work in another setting (especially for-profit to non-profit).
- *Possibly true*: Volunteering (if in the right activity) will introduce the volunteer to new people (both employees of the organization and other volunteers, clients, visitors) who can be more leads in a job hunt. Expanding one’s circle of contacts could be helpful. But are there always opportunities to share that this volunteer is looking for a paid job? Sometimes not.
- *Questionable* (and this is the biggie): Volunteering helps make someone *employable*. The challenge is not to draw universal conclusions from very specific situations. Consider:
 - What skills does the person need to learn? Is there a volunteer assignment that will accomplish such training? It is rare for volunteer opportunities to be constructed as a job skill builders, mainly because most organizations seek volunteers already able to do more skilled work. Also, nonprofit and government agencies are generally white-collar work environments; whether someone from a blue-collar job can/wants to switch to an entirely different skill set is a genuine question.
 - Are the skills learned in a nonprofit or public agency translatable to the for-profit work world? Again, it depends on what the volunteer role is and what the person wants in a job. Budget cutting has hit nonprofits and government, too. So there are not necessarily job openings in these worlds for someone from industry or business to fill – especially when there are unemployed nonprofit workers looking, too.
 - What are the demographics of the unemployed people under discussion? It makes a huge difference if they are in their 20s or in their 50s, have college degrees or are high school drop-outs, came from jobs that no longer exist or in fields still hiring, etc., etc. Yet they are

all lumped together in much of the research being done. Here are just two caveats from the American *Pathway to Employment* report that illustrate this problem:

- *The measure of volunteering has two limitations. First, it does not differentiate individuals that volunteer from individuals that perform unpaid labor, such as interns, or individuals participating in specific government-sponsored programs that require service. It is not clear whether either of these groups would classify themselves as volunteers. These groups may be more or less likely than volunteers to secure employment through their service, which may confound our ability to identify a relationship between volunteering and employment...*
- *Second, there is the risk that volunteers differ from non-volunteers on certain factors that we could not measure, such as self-motivation, and that these factors can lead to employment but they are not derived from the volunteer experience. Future research should examine the causal mechanisms between volunteering and employment to further strengthen the findings presented in this report.*

Despite all the research and news reports, it is just not possible to draw the conclusion that [any type] of volunteering + [any type] of unemployed person = increased ability to find a paying job.

Paid Employment as the Ultimate Goal

The majority of people examining the connection between volunteering and employability seem to share the bias that finding a paid job is always a success story and, further, that when the unemployed volunteer gets hired, s/he will stop volunteering. We ought to question this.

Yes, volunteering is a way to cover the gap of time on a resume between being laid off and finding work. It says, "I've been looking for a new job, but haven't just stayed in my bathrobe on the couch." But the volunteering does *not* have to end when the person finds a job! It is not just "filler" for unproductive time – or shouldn't be. Volunteering can be and should remain important in and of itself. It is never paid work vs. volunteer work; ideally everyone (who wants to) should engage in *both*. Using – and I mean that negative word – volunteering merely as a job hunting tactic implies insincere commitment and lack of respect for the organizations and clients needing quality service. Especially if getting a job means: "Whew, I can finally stop all this free stuff!"

Finally, in all the concern for job seekers, who is asking whether nonprofits and government agencies are prepared to be employment counselors? Their priority is their mission and service to their clientele – and they expect volunteers to share that focus. It's wonderful if the job seeker can do volunteer work that furthers the organization's mission and, as a by-product, also gains employable experience. But useful service is the priority. This challenges volunteer resources managers to tap into the talent pool of available unemployed people and develop mutually beneficial volunteer opportunities. Part of the process is also to discuss how the new volunteers might continue their service (perhaps in more time-limited ways) even after landing a paid job.

Here are my questions of you:

- Have you intentionally created volunteer positions in order to accommodate job seekers? What types of activities do they do? Has it worked for these volunteers in finding new jobs? Do they continue to volunteer for you after becoming employed?
- Have you seen benefits to making sure volunteers are active at all levels of the organization?
- Have you encountered any resistance from your organization to intentionally recruiting unemployed people as volunteers? Based on what?
- What research would you like to see conducted on this subject?

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Submitted on 20 August 2013 by Jeff, Worcester, MA USA

Is there an exception to the Fair Labor Standards Act in regards to healthcare facilities? if not, then this discussion is a moot point -- it is against the law for for-profit companies to use volunteers (note interns are not volunteers - they are students in a qualified educational program and there is a 6 prong test DOL uses to determine whether or not they should be paid minimum wage for their work). Just sayin'....

Response from Susan J. Ellis

Thank you for raising this question, but the situation is not anywhere near as cut-and-dried as you make it sound. I actually dealt with this in a Hot Topic back in 2000, "[Volunteering in For-Profit Settings: Exploitation or Value Added?](#)", and nothing has changed legally since that time. The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) is often misquoted. It does not prevent any employer from involving nonpaid help (which is a relief to the thousands of small family businesses out there, I might note.) It also does not mention the involvement of volunteers in any way, with this single exception: it prohibits employers from asking employees (those already receiving wages) from working any additional time without financial recompense. In other words, it tries to stop an employer from "strongly suggesting" a worker spend a day at the fundraising carnival without pay. Otherwise this is not the legislation that prevents anything in terms of volunteer engagement.

You are correct that the FLSA includes a 6-prong "test" of whether an internship is employment or volunteering. In my opinion, it is incredibly narrow minded about the role of volunteers, particularly in nonprofit and public organizations. Nevertheless, the test is still open to interpretation and, in a lawsuit, the outcome would depend on the quality of the defense.

For-profit hospitals – which have now been around for several decades in the U.S. – generally do not place volunteers into administrative offices (except, of course, when some vocational high schooler needs a work exploration opportunity!). But that does not mean that the patients

should be deprived of the kind of extra attention volunteers often give in ways no one on the paid staff is expected to do. That's what I talk about in the earlier Hot Topic.

Any debate about volunteering has to account for several perspectives, each of which may reach very different conclusions. What does this mean:

- *for the person being served by the agency or volunteer?*
- *for the organization coordinating the service?*
- *for the person choosing to donate volunteer time?*
- *for the paid workers also involved?*
- *for the community as a whole?*

The debate continues!

Submitted on 03 August 2013 by Patty Wright, Director, Volunteer Services, WMHS, Cumberland, MD, US

Well, Susan, it seems as if this Hot Topic is indeed HOT based on the comments already posted here and the fact that I am writing one as well. I have done some limited research on this topic and have found peer reviewed scholarly findings. Yes, data can be manipulated to mean anything one wants it to, but it is less likely in academia (my opinion only). So, some of my findings include an article from the Third Sector (2009) that asked 261 employed people if volunteering helped them obtain a paid position. 90% responded positively. On the HR side of the equation, a Deloit survey found the following: Human resource executives said that the experience a candidate has obtained through skilled volunteering is taken into consideration (81%), makes a candidate more desirable (76%), makes a college graduate more desirable (81%) and makes a serviceperson more desirable (78%). Hearing from job seekers and hiring managers that volunteering enhances one's ability to be hired should be a wake-up call for those seeking paid employment.

Since this Hot Topic is about what we, as Volunteer Managers/Directors, can do about this, which is the HOT part of the question. Do I personally design more positions based on the skills needed in the workforce? No! Instead, I use the beauty of the English language to explain how my current openings will enhance skills for current needs in the local market. I am in healthcare, so I hold sessions for volunteers that detail current paid openings, the education and skills required for those openings, and the approximate salary ranges. I advertise all teen volunteer positions as "career exploration" and help them begin to write a resume. Lately, I've been coaching teens on how to leave a clear, understandable voice mail message and how to write grammatically correct emails. Just one more service I provide as Volunteer expert in my organization.

Thanks for breaching the subject and allowing me to comment.

Submitted on 01 August 2013 by Ann Bridges, Village Vans Coordinator, Intercity Transit, Olympia, WA, USA

Intercity Transit's innovative Village Vans Program provides free, door-to-door transportation for low income job seekers or workers to employment support sites. The service is delivered solely with eligible volunteer job seekers while enrolled in the Customized Job Skills Training Program. Three primary activities include continued job search with a personal job search coach, individually designed skill strengthening or building instruction, and current work experience driving a van with passengers. A key to the success of this program lies in the synthesized integration of all skill building among all areas of instruction and within all activities.

The structure of the program establishes interconnections with every area of the volunteers professional development, primarily through experiential learning. This approach to learning in context relies on relating to life experience, applying how learning can be used, experiencing by doing, transferring what is already known into reaching goals, and cooperative learning by sharing, helping and communicating with others. Job skills gained and improved during this course are transferable to most any career area.

More than 90% of all fully participating Village Vans volunteers have found higher than minimum wage employment while in the program or shortly after exiting in a variety of work areas. This unique formula for performing a critical service while reaching employment goals can be duplicated in most organizations. The remarkable success of passengers and drivers moving toward economic independence contributes to all areas of our community including Intercity Transit's mission to provide and promote transportation choices.

Submitted on 01 August 2013 by Arlene Kraft, Manager, Volunteer Services & Gift Shop, Legacy Salmon Creek Medical Center, Vancouver, WA 98686, USA

Since our hospital opened eight years ago, we have hired 93 volunteers in over 15 different departments. We have volunteers serving in Nursing Administration and Housekeeping--and many departments in-between. Our hospital administrator follows the guidelines of Susan's book, "[From The Top Down](#)", and has reinforced a culture of respect for the volunteers that welcomes their talents and skills. Our entire staff recognize these abilities and it is reflected in their successful applications for employment. When the volunteers are hired, we gain another employee advocate for this dynamic program, and an employee who knows and embraces our unique culture.

Submitted on 01 August 2013 by John, Director, UWSM, Gulfport, USA

Very thought provoking and honest approach to a "ploy" many Volunteer Agencies use without thinking this deeply. It might be applicable more to people seeking a position with a charity where a skill will cross over and the person may have a better chance of being "a" listed for the position based on relationship and a demonstration of their ability.

Studies are great and serve a purpose, but really findings in many are related to brief periods of observations and research. Data is like clay, it can be shaped to fit any purpose by someone who

knows what they are doing.

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