

[News and Hot Topics](#) » "You Get What You Pay For"

# "You Get What You Pay For"

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

April

2010

Society holds contradictory attitudes about money that affect volunteering in many ways. It's worth exploring some of the most common notions.

## #1 - Money Equals Seriousness; More Money Equals Better Quality

In the last month (and for different reasons), a number of my clients have offered training sessions at no cost to their community, though they did require pre-registration. As always happens when something is presented for free, despite having registered in advance, about 20% of the people did not show up (though some called to cancel). Not only was this disappointing to the organizers, but in one case it wasted the cost of extra lunches and meant that several people on a waiting list were cheated out of the chance to attend. In debriefing the experience, we all agreed that "few take an event seriously if they haven't paid even a token fee to reserve a spot."

What are the implications about how volunteers are perceived if value is assigned mainly when money is involved? The common wisdom of "you get what you pay for" also equates the highest cost with the best product – while denigrating less expensive and free items.

A variation on this theme is "if it's worth doing, it's worth paying for it," or the labor union position that any important work ought to be a paying job.

## #2 - "Free" Attracts

On the other hand, "free" is one of the most powerful words in the marketing lexicon. Advertisers use this four-letter word liberally as a way to get customer attention, prompt a response, and ultimately lead to sales. People love to get something for free.

But do they value it?

## #3 - Unpaid Workers Must Care More

Despite the developed world's love affair with making money, we also disdain mercenaries, "money-hungry" people, and those who "will do anything if the price is right." And we consider heroes and heroines to be those who do something important or risky for others, disregarding their own needs and costs. That's why everyone is eager to identify with the word "volunteer" during a natural disaster or other crisis: it labels the doer as acting selflessly.

Many years ago, before my career in volunteerism, I worked for a time as a social worker trainee in the family and child division of Philadelphia's human services department. One day I was handed a case of a 15-year-old who had run away. When I went to see her in the temporary shelter, she was very hostile and wouldn't look at or speak to me. Finally, in desperation, I asked, "What would it take for you to talk with me?" She smiled slyly, crossed her arms on her chest, and said, "show me I'm not just another case to you and come back after 5:00 PM." So I did, and it totally broke down the wall between us.

This powerful incident taught me a number of things. First, some recipients of service distrust paid workers as only being helpful because it's their job to be so. Second, the *appearance* of caring could be conveyed by doing something during unpaid time. I say *appearance* because my young client did not realize that I might have been earning overtime pay by coming back in the evening! (I did not, by the way.)

#### **#4 - Paid Workers Are Legit**

On the other side of the coin, however, introducing oneself as a volunteer can suddenly close doors. For years, we taught volunteers in my program at the Philadelphia Family Court to use their position titles when seeking information on the phone. Whenever a newcomer forgot and said, "I'm a volunteer with the Family Court and I'm trying to find out \_\_\_\_\_," invariably the person being contacted responded with something like "can you put that in writing for me?" When this happened, we told the volunteer to try again in a few hours, this time starting the call with, "hello, I'm a Resource Finder with the Court and \_\_\_\_\_." Almost 100% of the time, the second call obtained immediate results!

Why? Because "volunteer" conveys "no authority," while a title does. Think about it. When someone calls you and identifies him or herself with a title, have you ever thought to ask, "are you paid?" Once again, appearance over substance.

#### **#5 - Pay Has Limits and Money Taints**

Colleagues often extol the work of volunteers in their organizations with the praise, "You couldn't pay someone to do this." I suspect this represents a line of thought such as: this work is so sensitive, emotionally draining, or otherwise demanding that only someone who is motivated by caring would do it eagerly – and someone else would demand extraordinary pay to do it otherwise. This mission-over-money belief is also why many in the public believe that workers for nonprofit

organizations ought to accept low pay or at least not be highly concerned about wages. To seek no money at all is simply taking this reasoning to its logical conclusion. I'm not exactly sure whether this reasoning makes sense, but it is fraught with attitudes about both paid and unpaid workers, isn't it?

Additionally, we expect members of a nonprofit board of directors to have an "arm's length" relationship from an organization's funds. While the stockholders of a business want to know that members of the for-profit board will share in the rewards or losses caused by their decisions, nonprofit board members are expected to be objective "trustees." By deriving no personal monetary gain, nonprofit boards assure the public and donors that the organization's mission is being upheld and its money properly spent.

## Perceptions Affect Our Work

I am certain that every Hot Topic reader has encountered all of the attitudes I've just described. Most people are not even aware of their contradictory beliefs about the power and consequences of money, nor of how such beliefs affect the way they think about or act toward volunteers. For example, if an executive feels that paying for something gives it worth, don't be surprised that s/he undervalues volunteers. At the same time, in the same agency, if clients sense that paid staff are providing service mainly as a job requirement, volunteers will quickly be more trusted.

As leaders of volunteer involvement, we are not going to change common wisdom, even if it is far from wise. However, we do need to recognize the many perspectives on unpaid work, whether these operate overtly or subliminally. The quicker we recognize a negative attitude, the more we will be able to counter it. But how?

Two approaches I have used are *diversion* (such as instructing the Family Court volunteers to use their titles and not mention the word "volunteer") and *education* (explaining that a paid staff member can be just as motivated by caring as a volunteer, while a volunteer can be just as professional as an employee). I also really try to avoid the word "free" in relation to volunteers, since there are costs on all sides (if you need an explanation, see the 2003 report by the Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service, "The Cost of a Volunteer").

Related Topics: [Employee/Volunteer Relations](#) | [Ethics](#) | [Definitions of "Volunteer"](#) | [History](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#) | [Philosophy](#)

**Submitted 26 April 2010 by Diane Klebanow, Volunteer Coordinator, Samaritan Care Hospice, Orlando, FL USA**

One thing I remember from my early years in the field is trying to \*gently\* correct volunteers who diminish their value by saying "I'm JUST a volunteer", and encouraging them to say "I'm SUCH a volunteer"...I don't recall where I got it from, but it has stuck with me.

Yes, it's just semantics, some say, but it also goes with having the word volunteer at the beginning of my title and still being asked after 20+ years in and out of this field if I get paid for my work. It really

does say something about how we look at volunteers/volunteerism from the outside of our world, does it not? That said, glad to be back in the field full time and a part of these discussions!

***Submitted 22 April 2010 by Harriet Bisson, Volunteer Manager, York Blind and Partially Sighted Society and Independent Trainer, North Yorkshire UK***

A friend who was made redundant after a very successful long term career in industry, has been persuaded (perhaps bamboozled) into getting engaged with the third sector and is now making a significant contribution. Despite himself I believe he is finding this challenging and interesting. He and I have sparred considerably about the relative merits and demerits of the two very different sectors - his (the plc world) and mine (the VCS). I think he has moved a long way towards my view that the third sector is vital to progressing a healthy and caring society and that could even be said to lead the way by pointing up where the need is for society to make changes. But despite all that he clearly still feels that the role he is playing in heading up an organisation in the position of honorary chair gives him no worthwhile status - the fact that he is not in receipt of a salary cheque for his efforts, in his eyes makes him a less valuable person. I suspect that he reflects a very wide view point - and although many people will make kindly noises towards those of us who devote our lives to the voluntary sector (whether in a paid or voluntary capacity) - most actually see us as the slightly sad poor relations.

***Submitted 14 April 2010 by Jo Ann Drueke, Volunteer Coordinator, Madonna Rehabilitation Hospital, Lincoln NE USA***

The other side of the two edged sword is the unspoken "If they give money, we cannot ask for their time." Our foundation does a tremendous job but seems so cut off from the volunteer sector. Currently I am working more and more with Foundation staff to develop a better working arrangement which hopefully will lead to more and more collaboration and reduce the notion by staff and volunteers that volunteer support is not as important as foundation support.

***Submitted 13 April 2010 by [DJ Cronin](#), Manager Volunteer Services, Brisbane Australia***

Great points about money and worth Susan and I think that one can make a link to Volunteer Managers when it comes to some of their unique challenges and indeed to the mindset of the Volunteer Management profession itself. The link is self evident - lesser value placed on volunteers because they are not paid equally applying to volunteer managers because they manage an unpaid workforce. And don't get me started on the negative connotations that can come with the title "Volunteer Manager." Your response page won't have enough room! Thanks for continuing to articulate the issues that are relevant to volunteerism and as you so rightly say It's the discussion that moves our field forward.

***Submitted 13 April 2010 by H. Roberts, President, Blankie Depot - Project Linus NJ, Keyport/NJ USA***

How about the old adage, "time is money!" Volunteers provide time and talent; the resident time giver should not be undervalued. When I interview volunteers directly about their skills and past accomplishments they share their experience and VALUE with me. I ask them what they earned their last year on the job. I ask them what their time is worth. In other words, we value their time and

talents from the start. A volunteer comes to our organization with many expectations and a point of view about our mission. Their professional careers and life experiences still count and while volunteering with our charity may be a new jumping off point; a new chapter for them personally, it doesn't dismiss or ignore the talented people they are or the contributions they have made. Perhaps the misnomer is in believing you have to mold a volunteer from scratch. Perhaps more consideration should be given to the skills they bring to the table.

Those of us who work in the field should do far better to avoid perpetuating outdated slogans and industry myths. Nearly every national non profit began with a maverick, a visionary volunteer, whose focus attracted followers. Every year dozens of organizations count on volunteers to fundraise, ie: charity walks and runs, community events. Where would organizations be without hundreds of volunteers raising thousands of dollars by offering their time. Why are we still circle our wagons around incomplete and often inaccurate pictures of WHO volunteers are. VRM's have an obligation to speak up and correct the inaccuracies. If we, the privileged PAID employee, aren't capable of proudly defining the value of volunteers then perhaps we are the ones who need to re-examine our own value.

***Submitted 13 April 2010 by Maelor Himbury, Australian Conservation Foundation, Melbourne Australia***

I also find that staff are more inclined to advertise a paid position if they can because this involves a contract involving a commitment and a certain standard of performance. It is difficult when, in the middle of a task, a volunteers says, "Sorry but now I have a full-time job and I can't continue."

***Submitted 13 April 2010 by Margaret Pacheco***

I think this problem stems from how volunteers are often perceived as unskilled and therefore "blue collar, cheap" labor.

***Submitted 13 April 2010 by Sarah (Sam) Elliston, Trainer/Consultant Vol Mgmt, Cincinnati, OH USA***

Interesting column, Susan. I am not sure what I think - so I'll react in writing and maybe I will figure it out.

First, I find that some per cent of registrants often don't show up for a workshop, even when it is paid for. I don't know if it is 20 % but I believe others would agree with that.

And yes, you get what you pay for which is why I maintain that people need to know that volunteers cost money.

I don't find the valuing volunteers over paid staff to be productive and I encourage people to talk about how the impact of the volunteers is valuable rather than the fact they are volunteers. I discourage recognition that praises "Only a volunteer would do this" because it separates the volunteers from paid staff. It is a subtle put down, I think, of either the paid staff or the volunteers or both; although that is not intended.

I will share that when I worked for United Way here in Cincinnati, I used to have the tag line on my signature that volunteer wasn't a title, it spoke to a pay grade, or something like that - it was a quote from you, actually, and I may not have it exactly correct here. The reason I mention it is that I was asked to remove it from my work signature by the organization - I guess they didn't like thinking about volunteers that way.

Another thought I had is that a non profit board is supposed to represent the community's oversight of the organization - that's why they don't pay taxes, right? So, I am not clear on the comparison of for profit boards and not for profit boards. It feels like apples and oranges to me. The people on for profit boards are expecting to make money and hopefully keep profits coming but they don't in any way represent the community overseeing the organization.

I am not sure if this speaks to your point - I have always maintained that our culture has a love/hate relationship with the word volunteer. Notice the national organizations that are set up by the government all are about service, and not volunteering whereas in Canada and Great Britain, they come right out and call them the national volunteering organizations (Volunteer Canada).

So, what do I do? I encourage people to talk about paid and unpaid staff, I invite them to have titles for their volunteer positions that don't include the word volunteer (the paid staff titles don't include paid staff) and I notice the irony that volunteers in churches are asked to do "service" rather than volunteer.

***Submitted 13 April 2010 by Michael Fliess, Director Volunteer Resources, Toronto Grace Health Centre, Ontario Canada***

Thanks Susan for another thought provoking topic. Your examples speak to the point that there is no easy answer to the perceptions and attitudes people have about paid and unpaid (or free as some people may say) work. There is a cost to everything, including volunteer engagement. When we focus on what we hope to accomplish (our mission and goals), I believe that our perceptions toward the paid or unpaid worker become less relevant, and what becomes important is that we have the right people, who are talented, committed and fully engaged in their contribution to an organization or the community. When we begin with this focus I believe we are in a better place to advocate for resources (financial, education and other) that we need to work towards achieving our goals.

***Submitted 12 April 2010 by Jayne Cravens, Consultant, Portland, Oregon USA***

Great topic! When I worked at the headquarters of United Nations Volunteers and would be with colleagues who introduced themselves to someone outside UNV, and that outsider responded with, "Oh, so you are a volunteer?" my colleagues would immediately tense up and say, "No no, I'm a UN staff member, I'm not a \*volunteer\*." To me, it was a sign of what so many UNV staff members \*really\* thought of the more than 5000 serving UNVs at any given time. I decided to craft a different answer; when someone said to me, "Oh, so you are a volunteer?" I said, "No, I don't think I'm qualified to be a UN Volunteer; I'm just a staff person at head quarters." Colleagues were stunned at the response!

But whomever I was talking to was immediately intrigued and wanted to know more about UNVs, their qualifications, etc. On the other hand, I was miffed more than a few times at UNV HQ staff saying that "UNVs care more/have more passion than paid staff people." I've heard this often about volunteers vs. paid staff, and as someone who chose a career in nonprofits (and, therefore, I probably forwent a more lucrative career in the private sector), I resent the implication. Indeed, we need to recognize the many perspectives on unpaid work, to think about the consequences of those perspectives, and to think about how to address those perspectives as we encounter them.

***Submitted 12 April 2010 by Colleen Kelly, Executive Director, Vantage Point, Vancouver, BC Canada***

Hi Susan - and thanks for addressing this very interesting dichotomy. We continue to struggle with this on a daily basis in our area of skills-based volunteer engagement. We know we can access those very expensive skills with out paying a fee to the specialist, as people are happy to provide their expertise to a cause. We have experienced it repeatedly. Yet there is a wide-spread notion it is not "professional" if we don't pay for it. That mindset is one we fight every day.

On the other hand we are reluctant to offer a training course at no charge because then we have no-shows. People will often skip it if they dont pay money for it. That is annoying to us and our facilitators/trainers who have contributed their time and talent.

Such a double edged sword - this idea of "FREE"!

***Submitted 12 April 2010 by Betty Stallings, President, Building Better Skills, Pleasanton, CA USA***

"They (volunteers) give their time. We can't ask them for money."

Another one, Susan, that many Directors of Volunteer Programs struggle with.

Time and money are not the same thing. Both have their value but to decide if one either volunteers or gives a financial donation he/she therefore should not be approached to consider the other seems very short-sided.

I believe this problem stems from finding it easier to ask for time than for money.

Recommendation: If people are giving their time to an organization, they are the MOST LIKELY to want to contribute money if they are able and are given the opportunity/invitation to consider whether they wish to give or not.

---

PRIVACY STATEMENT

Energize, a program of Adisa <https://adisagroup.com/>

Follow us   

