

Creating Careers for Volunteer Coordinators

Ivan H. Scheier, PhD

INTRODUCTION

The occupation of a volunteer coordinator, it has been said, has everything but a future. For most people, the upward mobility just isn't there within the profession, so they leave in frustration, suffer silently in place, or complain. A better response to an apparently bleak professional future is to create a better one. As Gregory Baum said: "Everyone is called upon to create their own future."

So is a profession. The future I ask you to begin creating here is an increase in viable career options for yourself as a career leader of volunteers. At present, there are basically two options for paid employment: volunteer coordinator/director in an agency, or trainer/consultant. The first is frequently underpaid, overworked and under-appreciated (often associated with that trapped feeling). The trainer/consultant track, on the other hand, conspicuously lacks sufficient markets for some richly experienced and talented people.

At least two benefits for careerists could result from expansion in career path choices: enhanced impact on agency/community and greater empowerment for the individual professional. More choice in work situations makes it more likely you'll find a best fit for your talents and experience and thus have more impact. Secondly, more choice in career tracks means less chance of being taken for granted or left without viable options in an unsatisfactory work situation.

THE MIX THAT MAKES A GOOD CAREER TRACK

There are at least three ingredients in work fulfillment—meaning, money and status—and each careerist needs to be clear and honest on their importance to her or him. All three are legitimate unless carried to extremes, and the mix or balance differs for each individual.

By *status* is meant position in a work hierarchy, if there is one, or prestige on any basis.

Money or more broadly, *financial security*, includes not-so-fringe benefits such as health insurance and protected pension benefits.

Meaning is the very same thing we try to give volunteers in *their* work. To what extent does the position tap into things you like to do and are pretty good at (avoiding things you hate)? To what extent are you challenged with a chance to learn and grow in some important areas? Above all, does the work itself (not just the rhetoric associated with it) connect clearly with core values you live by?

SIXTEEN TRACKS

Once you are clear and reasonably realistic on *your* best mix of meaning, money, and status, here are some career track possibilities. Roughly, they move from presently-existing ones, through currently plausible pathways, to those the daring might only imagine in some bright future. And yet, I believe this imagining of a possibility is a real first step to creating the actuality.

Ivan Scheier, PhD, is Dreamcatcher in Residence at the Madrid Retreat Center and founder of VOLUNTAS, the Center for Creative Community in Madrid, New Mexico, U.S.A. He has been a full-time volunteer for the last ten years. Dr. Scheier has also been a volunteer coordinator and director of a Voluntary Action Center. Most important of his activities, however, are a lot of learning, encouraging, training and dreaming.

A. HAPPENING NOW, OR BEGINNING TO (BUT SOME OF THESE COULD PROBABLY BE ENHANCED BY INCREASED AWARENESS . . .)

1. **In place as Volunteer Coordinator in your present agency.** Never forget that some people in some situations find satisfactory growth in their present workplace. Don't move just because conventional wisdom says that's the only way to move up.

2. **Moving to the Volunteer Coordinator role in another agency or organization.** Sometimes such opportunities do arise and represent real career advancement. It helps if your Volunteer Center and/or DOVIA have an effective job-opening clearinghouse. (DOVIA stands for Directors Of Volunteers In Agencies. It is the most frequent title used by local or regional associations of people with a career or other serious interest in leadership of volunteers.)

3. **Moving to a "Community Service Coordinator" role within your agency or another.** Here, along with more traditional community volunteers, you would work with interns, alternative service offenders, obliged youth community service, and other mandated service or "prescribed participants." You might also have responsibility for stipended or partly paid workers. In sum, your responsibility would include *everyone who provides service to the agency under any circumstances*, voluntary or mandated, unpaid or stipended, excepting only fully-paid staff and board.

This role expansion is actually happening with a significant number of careerists. Some of them still use titles such as "Director of Volunteer Services" or "Coordinator of Volunteers," when in fact their responsibility is the much broader coordination of community service. For them, it remains to acknowledge this wider responsibility, then *relate* to it in terms of new challenges presented and increased organizational support thereby justified.

Among other things, motivating mandated workers might prove a lot harder than motivating volunteers—it is at least *different*. Then, in addition to staff-volunteer relations, the Community Service Coordinator will also have to deal with staff-mandated worker and volunteer-mandated worker relations.

4. **Moving to a larger "Community Resource Development" role within your agency or another.** We sometimes assume that time taken away from hands-on volunteer or community service leadership is a distraction or subtraction from our proper work. What if instead we looked at the possibility of this constituting "community resource development specialist" or "community relations coordinator"? Here, "as part of a seamless package . . ." we are ". . . bringing in, not only volunteers, but also materials, equipment, money, information, and general community support." The quote is from *Empowering a Profession* (see readings) and the evidence is that a number of careerists are in fact moving in this direction, sometimes quite deliberately. In other instances, acknowledgment of the wider responsibility lags the move, and careerists don't get sufficient credit for what is, in effect, a role expansion and upgrade.

Awareness and deliberate consideration are much to be preferred over "just slipping into" either the community service or community resource coordinator roles. One reason has just been indicated: the potential for capitalizing on the wider responsibilities of these roles for the benefit of the organization and the community as well as the careerist. Another reason is the need for more intensive, focused attention to *issues* raised by such role transition. Principal among these is the impact on volunteers. Will they be net gainers by virtue of association with a wider and presumably more powerful entity such as community service or community resources? Or will they be losers, the loss being that of attention and possibly iden-

tity itself within the larger whole? The issues may be analogous to that faced by a heretofore independent nation, on whether or not to join the European Common Market.

5. **Moving "laterally" in the same or in another organization.** to specialize in one of the wide array of functions involved in our "renaissance profession"; for example, training/education, motivation, communications, public relations, fundraising/resource development, organizational or program development, personnel management, work enrichment, etc. I consider this kind of lateral movement a branching of our career rather than an entirely new career. This is first of all because, as just noted, some volunteer coordinator functions transfer intact to the new role. Of even greater importance is an attitude which places priority on a humane workplace. This priority is value-based, but also believes such humanity is consistent with effectiveness.

6. **Moving "vertically" in the same or in another organization.** Often, transferring one or some of the volunteer coordinator functions to another job is more "upward" than "lateral" in an organization; for example, when the volunteer coordinator moves into a higher-level management position. The grounds for this as a *continuation* of the career, rather than an interruption of it, are the same as for moving "laterally." An exploratory interview study some years ago confirmed that many such alumnae of the profession still wanted to be connected to our field, but that we would probably have to take the initiative in making the connection. DOVIAs could have "homecoming" events once a year or so, and regularly use these graduates in trainer or other resource roles. Almost all the ex-coordinators are more powerful in their new position and could use that to empower us.

B. ROLES WHICH MAY BE EMERGING IN THE NEXT FEW YEARS (THERE IS AT LEAST A BEGINNING INTEREST IN DEVELOPING THEM)

7. **The "Volunteer Group Consultant."** I believe the most promising market for a new consulting career track is with entirely volunteer groups, an estimated six million of them in North America. Examples of such non-staffed organizations include self-help groups, service clubs, many religious, cultural, educational and recreational groups, some service programs in rural areas (e.g., the volunteer fire department), and, in a sense, many auxiliaries and boards. The "Volunteer Group Consultant" would be on retainer to, say, 20 to 25 such groups, much as an attorney is on retainer to corporate clients. Services would include occasional troubleshooting plus on-call expertise in organizational development. The consultant's experience with volunteers in staffed agencies would have some selective relevance. *There are, however, some crucial differences in emphasis*, which the prospective consultant would have to familiarize herself with, in working with entirely volunteer (non-staffed) groups. Again, the knowledge base is distinct from traditional volunteer management in agencies, though related to it in some respects.

Would this career line be sufficiently remunerative? I think so. Though all-volunteer groups almost always lack funds for hiring regular staff, many of them can afford up to \$1,000–1,500 or more per year for a consultant-on-retainer. Multiply that by 25, and the volunteer group consultant can anticipate a decent income.

There is also some plausible precedent for full-blown emergence of this role. This includes somewhat more attention given to all-volunteer groups on the part of agency volunteer program people. Two years ago, for example, the Pennsylvania Association for Volunteerism, made all-volunteer groups a major theme of their

state conference. Moreover, some volunteer centers have always provided technical assistance to selected entirely volunteer groups. Finally, some "national consultants" work with staffed headquarters of organizations, whose local chapters are typically non-staffed, e.g. national Girl Scouts, Kiwanis, 4-H, etc.

8. The "Producer" or "Community Caterer." The Volunteer Group Consultant gives advice on tasks such as volunteer training, membership development, quality newsletter production, etc. By contrast, the Producer actually does the training, newsletter, association management or other functions. She usually does this under contract for that particular function, over a designated time period; for example, "to plan and conduct a staff orientation for volunteers, scheduled for October 15-16." Like the Volunteer Group Consultant the Producer works with a number of organizations on a contract basis. But, as noted, the Producer actually conducts the work, rather than just giving advice on how best to do it. Also, the Producer or Community Caterer will usually be hired on an occasional "as needed" basis rather than an ongoing retainer. Finally, the Producer's clients can include staffed organizations as well as all-volunteer groups.

9. "Internship Placement Counselor" (National/International). Volunteer Centers and RSVPs help people find meaningful volunteer or internship placements primarily within their own communities. Career counselors (in colleges or consulting firms) mainly help individuals find appropriate fully-paid employment.

But who helps people choose the most meaningful non-local internship or volunteer experience? The Madrid (NM) VOLUNTAS residence often encounters seekers-after-national-involvement; we have yet to find any resource person for them in this search. To be sure, the national headquarters of a particular internship/voluntary program will usually be glad to

provide information—if you can find the headquarters, or get enough background on it even to decide whether you want more information from them.

On my desk are two international directories of internships and voluntary involvement. They total nearly 500 packed pages, some two thousand involvement opportunities in all. There could be at least as many more not listed in the directories. The recent VOLUNTAS resident, who read both directories cover to cover, is to be commended for her courage. But she didn't get much out of it for lack of a knowledgeable person (1) to put flesh on the occasional promising paragraph (possibly exposing some warts), or (2) perhaps know someone connected to the program, or (3) be aware of some opportunities not in any published directory.

The very existence of the directories confirms a basic need for this non-local internship-placement information. No doubt, too, the sponsoring organizations (see footnote) respond to requests for further information on directory listings, and are, in that sense, Internship Placement Counselors. And, usually, what organizations can do as consultants, individuals can do as well.

10. "Work Enrichment Consultant." to corporations or businesses. The core idea is that the best way to ensure motivated and effective employees is to pay them a decent salary then forget you're paying them and treat them like volunteers. (Guess who knows most about volunteers, e.g., motivating people without money?) Very recently, several volunteer coordinators have expressed interest in this career track possibility, but we may not get too far with it until business takes our profession more seriously. Or perhaps, the first step is to take ourselves more seriously. Sometimes, it almost seems as if we don't think a thing is worth doing unless it can be copied from a corporation! But, who knows, maybe the business people will take the initiative in assisting our self-confidence.

INTERLUDE

Some might see the previous alternatives not as diversifying the profession so much as abandoning it. My response again is that the core of the career is methods and strategies which implement certain values on how people should be treated in the workplace, whether they happen to be paid, stipended, unpaid, voluntary or mandated in their service.

C. DEFINITELY FUTURISTIC (AND DEFINITELY POSSIBLE)

Today, the following may seem little more than fantasy. But, remember, a thing has to be imagined before it can ever happen. And, as Harriet Naylor said, "We need imaginative inspiration to dream of what could be and all the implications of what is now."

11. The "Community Connector" or "Neighborhood Enabler." This is a full-time facilitator of win-win connections between individuals or organizations. *Meanwhile Back at the Neighborhood* describes this networker role, its background, and a precedent or two. Of course, we all know individuals who somehow leave people more connected than they ever were before. Nor would this be the first time a more formalized position evolved from informal practice. However, it's not clear who would hire the Community Connector. A neighborhood organization? City government? A Realtor's association?

12. Volunteerism curriculum consultant or teaching specialist in junior and senior high schools. Relevant history here is the Kellogg High School Project on Volunteering and Community Leadership. In the mid-seventies, this project developed a community volunteering course and installed it in fifth U.S. high schools. This time around, my guess is the volunteerism material is more likely to be "stranded" through other subjects, e.g., history, social studies, rather than presented as a separate course.

13. and 14. Teaching Faculty or Researcher at a University of Volunteerism. The idea of such a university provoked considerable merriment seven or eight years ago, but seems to be taken more seriously today. Indeed, I believe the recent *Volunteer Leadership Institute* is a real-life predecessor of this university. The functions of such a university are needed today or soon; for example, preparation of students for up to 15 to 20 career tracks in volunteerism or spin-off areas as described in the present essay; a center for continuing education in the same areas; a center for practitioner-oriented research and development; and—not lightly to be dismissed—the status that goes with having our own university. Founding a college seems surprisingly do-able, according to my reading of the Handbook of Accreditation. You don't need huge sums or fancy facilities; you don't even need a football team. A small flock of PhDs will help, but we can certainly manage that.

15. Curator at a National Museum of Volunteerism. The museum idea has been seriously proposed several times in the past few years, and much longer ago by Judge Keith Leenhouts. We have even gotten as far as having a planning grant turned down!

16. Reporter and/or columnist on a weekly newspaper for volunteers. (regional, national or international). Precedents here include *Voluntary Action News* published in the 1970s, and numerous local program newsletters for volunteers.

17. Your Dream Here: _____

MAKING DREAMS COME TRUE

1. Say it again: imagining something as possible is the first step toward making it possible. So keep on imagining. More than that, talk obsessively about possible careers to anyone who will listen. Get the idea out there in the universe and see who it strikes sparks with. . . .

2. Don't freeze the profession. I once heard a respected colleague argue for

certification by saying "It's a time to put a fence around the field." My own view is to keep the fences down until we finish exploring the vast territory of volunteerism. (I think a lot of certification advocates would agree with that.) We're still a young profession, so let's keep growing and diversifying.

3. Keep looking for precedent, especially for newer, apparently more futuristic career paths. I've provided a few precedents but I am sure there are many more. People are out there actually *doing* these things, or something like them, without consciously *labeling* them as I have here. *Indeed, a main purpose of this article is to ask your help in building a better base of precedent.*

4. Raising awareness of precedent should raise confidence in actually testing out new career options. So, please volunteer; volunteer, that is, actually to try out one of the newer career tracks, then share experience with the rest of us. The risk of financial suicide is not required. For example, you might keep a full-time or nearly-full-time job as a volunteer coordinator, while testing the waters with a few groups as Volunteer Group Consultant and/or Producer.

I volunteer to act as clearinghouse for all this experience, and report back in a year or so.

As Antonio Machado said: "We make the path by walking." Shall we then walk (do not run) to the nearest exit from current career frustration?

BACKGROUND READING

Edited or authored by Ivan Scheier.

Going Up? A Look at your Upward Mobility Potential. (Spring 1980). *Volunteer Administration*.

Moving Along: Case Studies of Career Paths for Volunteer Coordinators. (Winter 1985-86). *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*.

The Part-Time Profession: Percent and Nature of Time Investment in the Volunteer Leadership Career. *Eight-page pamphlet, 1987, now out of general print; individual copies by arrangement.*

Empowering a Profession: What's in Our Name? (Summer 1988). *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*.

Meanwhile Back at the Neighborhood. (1984). *Booklet currently distributed by Energize, Philadelphia, PA.*

Other sources:

The DOVIA Exchange regularly publishes career-related material. In 1993, this newsletter will become a section in VM Systems' Grapevine.

The National Directory of Internships (1989), Raleigh, NC, The National Society for Internships and Experiential Education and *Volunteer! The Comprehensive Guide to Voluntary Service in the U.S. and Abroad* (1990-91), New York City: The Commission on Voluntary Service and Action.

Naylor, H. (1986). *Beyond Managing Volunteers*. Yellowfire Press: Boulder, CO.

Winemiller, K., Kugler, J., et al. (1990). *Making Employees Happy Can Make Everyone Happy*. Unpublished. Available in VOLLUNTAS library, Madrid, NM.