

CREDITING VOLUNTEER WORK

by Stephen McCurley

Volunteers acquire valuable skills which, if remunerated, would no doubt be immediately marketable. But the unjust irony of volunteer work lies in our quickness to measure contributions and skills by the amount of money expended to secure them. We have overlooked and underrated the value of the contributions made and the skills developed by those dedicated enough to work for little or no pay. -- Senate Concurrent Resolution 21 submitted by Senator Alan Cranston

The notion of providing employment credit for volunteer service is based upon two concepts. The first is philosophical, an argument that equal recognition should be given for equal work. Volunteers performing the same tasks as paid employees should receive equal credit both on the job and when applying for other positions.

The second concept is pragmatic. For many--particularly youth just entering the job market, or displaced homemakers attempting reentry--experience acquired while volunteering provides the only indicator of employable skills. Acceptance of such experience can make the difference between employment and nonemployment, or between a position of greater or lesser responsibility.

The Trend Toward Recognition

Giving employment credit for volunteer work has been supported by the National Governors Conference, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the National Association of Counties, the International Personnel Management Association, and the American Bankers Association. Supporting resolutions have been passed by many national voluntary organizations.

Increasing numbers of employers now accept volunteer experience in evaluating applicants. The U.S. Civil Service Commission has recognized volunteer experience for several years. Thirty-six state civil service commissions also accept work experience acquired through volunteering.

Many private employers credit volunteer work experience, including companies such as AT&T, Coca Cola USA, Xerox, United Airlines, Gulf Oil, Neiman Marcus and Atlantic Richfield. Unfortunately, some companies, particularly smaller ones, have not adopted this policy yet. A survey by the Minnesota Governor's Office of Volunteer Services found that only three of 52 responding Minnesota companies requested information about a prospective employee's volunteer experience. Most respondents, however, expressed interest about the idea and indicated a willingness to accept such experience if other companies were doing so.

Further support for acceptance of experience gained while volunteering is now being considered by the U.S. Congress. Senator Cranston and Representative James Corman, both of California, have introduced resolutions recommending that volunteer experience be taken into account by all levels of government, charitable and service organizations, and private employers. Such a resolution does not force employers to accept volunteer experience, but it would possess strong moral force as an expression of the sense of Congress. It is unlikely, however, that these resolutions will pass without a definite show of support from the volunteer community.

Expanding Acceptance of Volunteer Experience

Full expansion of the acceptance of volunteer experience for employment purposes will require a coordinated effort among employers, agencies utilizing volunteers and volunteers.

Employers. Acceptance by prospective employers is an obvious necessity. The form of that acceptance is also critical. A full expression of acceptance would involve the following elements:

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- Listing a policy of accepting volunteer experience on all job announcement forms.
- Requesting relevant volunteer experience on all employment application forms.
- Inquiring about volunteer experience in employment interviews.
- Evaluating volunteer experience in job evaluation and promotion decisions. Often an employee can gain valuable experience managing a volunteer program which qualifies him or her for a more responsible position.

In essence, employers must treat volunteer experience exactly as paid employment, accepting it where relevant to evaluating qualifications for any new job.

Volunteer Agencies. Volunteer-utilizing agencies can play a significant part in gaining acceptance of volunteer experience. Listings of past employment history (whether paid or unpaid) on employment application forms are examined by personnel managers for purposes of verification (whether the applicant really worked at the listed position) and validation (whether the skills utilized are relevant to the position sought). Agencies utilizing volunteers can convince more employers of the worth of volunteer experience by:

- Creating job descriptions that list all tasks, qualifications, and responsibilities for each volunteer's position.
- Maintaining records of volunteer time commitments.
- Assisting volunteers in keeping career portfolio records of their training and skills.
- Making honest evaluations of volunteers.
- Writing letters of recommendation and job histories for departing volunteers.
- Developing employment counseling programs for interested volunteers.

The above actions require additional effort by volunteer agencies. But in the long run they will benefit both the agency and its volunteers through increased recognition of the worth of volunteer effort and increased incentives for recruitment.

In addition, volunteer agencies can conduct informational and educational programs to convince local employers to recognize volunteer experience, starting with companies represented on the agency's own board of directors or through local business associations.

Volunteers. Volunteers can improve the chance of acceptance of their volunteer experience in two ways. First, they can maintain records of their experience, training and responsibilities. Such records provide a convenient guide both for personnel managers and for volunteers attempting to formulate descriptions of their own skills. Second, volunteers can become more assertive in seeking recognition of their volunteer experience. Many companies with no clear policy in this area will accept volunteer experience if confronted by a determined and articulate volunteer.

Employment credit for volunteer experience is an idea whose time has come. The extent of its growth is limited only by the enthusiasm of its proponents; those few who oppose it do so more easily with questions than with definite objections. As the U.S. Civil Service Commission noted recently: "If paid experience provides evidence of necessary job qualifications, why shouldn't unpaid experience be considered as well? There is no valid reason for not considering it."

Over the past years, Ruth March of Los Angeles, California, has selflessly donated her time and talent to a one-person campaign to persuade employers to accept volunteer experience. Much of the information and most of the accomplishments outlined in this article are hers.

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The following states credit volunteer experience for state civil service positions:

Alaska	Illinois	Missouri	Oklahoma
Arizona	Indiana	Montana	Oregon
Arkansas	Iowa	Nevada	Pennsylvania
California	Kansas	New Hampshire	South Carolina
Connecticut	Kentucky	New Jersey	Utah
Delaware	Maine	New Mexico	Vermont
Florida	Maryland	New York	Virginia
Georgia	Massachusetts	North Carolina	Washington
Hawaii	Minnesota	North Dakota	West Virginia

To indicate your support for Senate Concurrent Resolution 21 (S.C.R. 21) and H.C.R. 11, which would give Congressional approval for crediting volunteer work experience, write to the following:

Hon. Abraham Ribicoff
Committee on Governmental Affairs
3306 Dirksen Senate Office Building
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Hon. Patricia Schroeder
Subcom. on Employee Ethics and Utilization
Post Office and Civil Service Committee
1507 Longworth House Office Building
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Hon. Augustus Hawkins
Subcom. on Employment Opportunities
Education and Labor Committee
2350 Rayburn House Office Building
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Hon. Ike Andrews
Subcom. on Economic Opportunity
Education and Labor Committee
320 Cannon House Office Building
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

In addition, write your own members of Congress.

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