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## Volunteering Trend Watch: What Can We Learn from Looking Back?

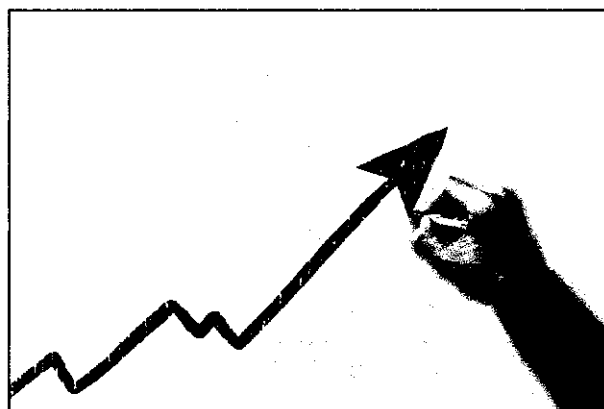
By Cara Thenot

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Up until 2002, Energize, Inc. released its annual *Volunteer Energy Resource Catalog* and each year included an introduction by our company's founder, Susan J. Ellis, entitled "Trend Watch: Are You Ready?" offering her perspectives on potentially important trends and their implications for the volunteer field. Of course, Susan had gained incredible insight as she traveled the world to consult or train all sorts of volunteer-involving organizations and saw first-hand what leaders of volunteer engagement were dealing with. She never claimed to have a crystal ball and always acknowledged she simply had the gumption to make predictions and put them in print.

Today, plenty of articles about volunteering trends are published on the Internet, many of them quite helpful when reflecting on how to improve or change ways to recruit, lead, supervise, and motivate volunteers. Here are just a few:

- Change in volunteering trends you should know in 2018 (stuff, NZ)
- Volunteering Trends You Should Know In 2018 (VolunteerMatch, US)
- 4 Top Trends in Volunteering (The Management Centre, UK)
- Fewer Americans are volunteering and giving than any time in the last two decades (Phys.org)



You'll notice some trends in the above articles that have been discussed for several years, not to discount the reality of these issues. This made us wonder how many of Susan's predictions still hold true today. And, if they did, wouldn't it be

worth reflecting on the same issues?

Take a look at Susan's predictions in 1999:

## 1. Globalization and the International Year of Volunteers 2001 (IYV2001)

### Susan said in 1999:

"Last year [in 1998], I highlighted the globalization of our field and our wonderful international network of colleagues continues to expand. The International Year of Volunteers 2001 (IYV2001) is one opportunity in which we will be able to connect further... We still need some international connecting link to bring the global volunteer community together for one year--getting past internal and international politics. The good news is that we don't have to wait for anyone. IYV2001 is a real thing and each of us can make as much of it as we choose...Every Volunteer Center, local DOVIA or state association, academic philanthropy program, and individual volunteer program manager can use IYV as leverage for visibility and recognition."

### Thoughts for today:

Some indicators of global collaboration among volunteer engagement professionals include the continuation of the International Volunteer Managers' Day campaign each year, active social media and online discussion groups including Thoughtful Thursdays (#ttvolmgrs) on Twitter, Volunteer Management Best Practices network on LinkedIn (<https://www.linkedin.com/groups/3980663/>), and our own [e-volunteerism.com](http://e-volunteerism.com), an international journal that takes in-depth look on volunteering issues in many countries around the world. While technology has made it easy to share information, issues, and ideas beyond borders, do we really think globally in our day-to-day work? In the current political mood, can we envision global collaboration and if so, how would it change our work?

## 2. Short-term or Episodic Commitments

### Susan said in 1999:

"I hereby officially proclaim that this is no longer a trend, but a fixed reality! Most new volunteers seek assignments with a clear beginning, middle and end. One-time-only volunteering opportunities, such as those coordinated by 'Hands On' or 'City Cares' organizations, continue to expand. The good news in all this is that, after people have gotten their feet wet in a successful volunteer effort, they often turn around and say: 'What can I do next?' So volunteer program managers might start thinking of retention in terms of an ongoing sequence of short-term assignments."

### Thoughts for today:

Many articles on volunteering today *still* list short-term volunteering as a trend! Some sneakily re-label it as micro-volunteering (even shorter bursts of service). Including short term or one-time opportunities for people to volunteer, with some being designed as a "step" toward more commitment opportunities, should simply be considered a "best practice."

## 3. Singles as a Target Audience

### Susan said in 1999:

"Connected to the popularity of one-day volunteer projects, there's a new awareness of an old fact: people who volunteer make friends with other volunteers who share their interests. In a world in which young people delay marriage and in which divorce hits half the couples in the U.S., it isn't surprising that volunteering is being adopted

as part of the singles scene. In fact, the tongue-in-cheek recruitment pitch that 'volunteering is safer than a singles bar' really resonates today! An increasing number of programs are targeting single volunteers, either as their only participants or for specially designated work shifts."

#### **Thoughts for today:**

Volunteering continues to be seen as an opportunity for single people to meet other singles. Meetup.com, an online platform for finding and building local communities, hosts 62 "volunteering with other singles" groups with over 22,000 members signed up. And Single Volunteers, Inc. was established to "*provide singles with a productive way to meet other singles by organizing volunteer activities which groups of singles then perform.*" Have you considered designing and marketing certain roles specifically for community members wanting to meet other people?!!

## **4. Welfare Reform**

#### **Susan said in 1999:**

"This is an issue with an inconsistent effect on volunteer programs because each state handles it differently--as do a number of other countries around the world. As public assistance rolls are decreased by requiring able-bodied people to get a job or go to school, the question of where volunteering fits into the picture is raised. In many states, volunteering is a legally approved alternative to a paying job or training, allowing someone to keep welfare benefits if s/he logs a certain number of community service hours (which are viewed as benefiting the public). But, in other areas, the opposite reasoning applies: if someone is volunteering, then they can't be seriously looking for a paying job, so community service is not allowed. The jury is not yet in on any of this."

#### **Thoughts for today:**

Volunteering as a legally approved alternative is still a regional issue. In the United States, it's decided state by state. For example, the Missouri Department of Labor writes: "Under Employment Security law, you must be able to work and available for full-time work. While volunteering you must continue to make an active and earnest search for work." According to the U.S. Corporation for National and Community Service, in April 2012, the Department of Labor issued policy guidance in the form of an Unemployment Insurance Program Letter (UIPL) encouraging state workforce agencies to promote volunteering to individuals receiving unemployment compensation. If you market volunteer opportunities as stepping-stones to employment, be sure candidates are informed about how volunteering could affect their unemployment benefits.

## **5. Internet-based Distance Learning**

#### **Susan said in 1999:**

I've mentioned some new development in cyberspace for the past several years in this trend watch, and technology continues to open new virtual doors. The number and quality of Web sites, listservs and newsgroups offering resources for volunteer program leaders continue to grow. Look for the addition of several exciting uses of this electronic medium, including complete books available at no charge online (look out for books online on the Website soon!), increasing use of audio, and the introduction of streaming video for distance learning options, such that being piloted by The Learning Institute for Nonprofit Organizations. We are also seeing complete online courses in volunteer management, some even giving academic credit. Now the challenge is to see how volunteer program managers can adapt the technology to train and update active volunteers.

#### **Thoughts for today:**

With the rise of online training sites such as Lynda.com (now LinkedIn Learning), Webinars and online seminars are now the norm for learning just about anything. Leaders of volunteer engagement can easily find professional development options online via ALIVE, VolunteerMatch, VolunteerPro, and our own *Everyone Ready*® online volunteer management training program. Volunteer resources managers should certainly explore options for creating online training to provide orientation and train new volunteers. Look to Techsmith.com for how to create a simple training video, or better yet, start designing a volunteer position to work with you on creating one!

**Please share with us your thoughts about these trends from 1999 in the comments below!**

*Do you see evidence of these trends in your organization?*

*Any new trends that have arisen in the last 5 years that we didn't expect?*

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