

Management

Looking into the Millennium Some Thoughts on Volunteer Involvement in the 21st Century

As the millennium draws to a close, we thought we'd join the vast numbers of those who gaze into the crystal ball of the future and see what gazes back. You can mark what follows as a combination of summing up where we seem to be and predicting where things are going, and we can all look back in about five years to see how accurate we managed to be.

The Current Status of Volunteering

Let's start with a look at what is going on right now.

Overall, we are in what is clearly a Golden Age for volunteering. Volunteering is more popular, more spoken about, and more a part of American society than it has ever been in our history. The past decade has witnessed a prominence for volunteering in America that is unequalled in any other country in the world, although (as you'll see below) others are making fast progress.

Consider these facts:

- A 1998 survey by the UPS Foundation found that 53% of those responding thought volunteering was more important to participate in today than five years

ago. Only 10% thought it was less important. About 20% of respondents also reported that they had recently increased the amount of time they were volunteering, and 38% said they would welcome doing more volunteering. A survey by AARP reported that 60% of those not currently volunteering are at least somewhat interested in volunteering. A survey of some of the busiest Americans, those in Silicon Valley, found that more volunteers are increasing rather than decreasing their volunteer time, with 28% increasing their commitments over the past year and only 17% decreasing.

- A 1998 survey by Lutheran Brotherhood found that respondents thought that volunteering was more important than donating money by a ratio of 53% to 23%.

- A 1999 survey by TurboTax found that 34% of Americans planned to volunteer at some point during the 1999 Christmas holiday season.

This may explain why the overall rate of volunteering reached an all-time high in 1998, with 56% of US adults engaged, an increase of 13.7% since 1995, according to the 1999 Gallup Survey on Giving and Volunteering.

Some Continuing Trends

Some trends which have occurred during the last decade will also exert strong influence during the next ten years. These include:

1. Workplace Volunteering

The workplace is where the vast majority of American adults spend the preponderance of their time. It is the place where most people hear about opportunities for volunteering. And it is the locus around which many formal volunteer activities will be oriented, thanks to the strong growth in employee volunteer programs.



For many, the workplace has become the primary social unit, taking the place of the old service groups and clubs as a mechanism for both companionship and community involvement.

According to the 1999 Gallup Survey, 12% of those who volunteered were asked by someone at work, and 24% learned about their volunteer activity through their workplace or employer. A 1998 study by Charities@Work found that 72% of large businesses surveyed have programs to help employees find volunteer opportunities. A recent survey by the Points of Light Foundation indicates that 20% of companies with a workplace volunteer program report that more than half of their employees participate in the program.

While workplace volunteering began in large companies, it is rapidly spreading throughout the for-profit community. It is also starting to permeate governmental employers. The federal government recently released the first report on measures taken by federal agencies to comply with an executive order to expand opportunities for volunteer involvement. Rick Lynch and I are working with national wildlife refuges in the Southwest region to improve their relations with surrounding communities. Among the tactics are encouraging them to develop employee volunteer teams who participate in community service projects, including sponsoring local Little League teams. Several states have recently enacted provisions for state employees to engage in release-time volunteering, especially with local schools.

Oddly enough, the non-profit sector has lagged the most in organized efforts to encourage workplace volunteering.

2. Short-Term Volunteering

The day of the always-there long-term volunteer has clearly begun to pass. Today's volunteers are interested in smaller and more manageable commitments, and also want to test an organization before they become involved in significant tasks or projects. The 1999 Gallup Survey sums it up: 41% of those who volunteered did so for a sporadic or one-time activity, as opposed to 39% who wanted an on-going scheduled commitment. The average hours per week volunteered has decreased, to 3.5 in 1998, versus an average of 4.2 hours per week in 1995, the same as in 1993 and 1991.

As Susan Ellis puts it in an article in the *Wall Street Journal* (11/5/99): "The 'I'm here as long as you need me' type of volunteering is dead. People don't make commitments. They are stressed and don't want to do something that sucks time out of their lives."



Agencies will clearly need to concentrate on developing events or projects that will attract volunteers and then develop a system for cultivating the most interested and encouraging their continued involvement. This will require a greater variety of volunteer assignments with shorter time commitments and the development of a "career ladder" which can progressively lead volunteers into greater involvement. The name of the game will be retention and promotion, not recruitment.

3. Youth Involvement

Youth once was an uninvolved segment of the volunteer community, but that has changed dramatically in the past ten years. According to a survey by Public Allies, 72% of young people volunteer with an organized group in their community. In the past three years:

- 6% volunteered just once
- 39% several times a year
- 16% once a month
- 16% several times a month
- 22% once a week or more

According to the National Association of Secretaries of State, most youth volunteer activities take the form of social service in a one-on-one setting, such as soup kitchens, hospitals and schools. Their study suggests that "this type of volunteer work is motivated by a young person's desire to help others in a personal way."

And, according to the Close Up Foundation, "The only form of community and government involvement that students value more than voting entails service to others - 63% of high school students say that they have a great deal or a fair amount of interest in 'volunteering for charitable causes.' This is the preferred form of involvement for young women (72%)."

Interestingly enough, we are seeing strong growth at

both of the extreme ends of the age segments. Youth volunteer programs are moving into elementary schools, while at the same time older seniors are increasing their involvement. According to the 1999 Gallup Survey, 43% of those 75 and older volunteered, an increase of eight percentage points since 1995. According to a study by Civic Ventures about volunteering by upcoming retirees, 33% listed volunteering as a "very important" part of their retirement, 17% said it will be fairly important, and 25% said it will be "somewhat important." Volunteering ranks only slightly behind travel in importance.

4. *Mandated Community Service*

The day of compulsory volunteering has arrived with a vengeance. What started as the alternative sentencing movement has rapidly grown and threatens to become the fastest growing producer of new "volunteers."

Consider these examples of new volunteering that doesn't quite match our image of altruistic concern for others:

- The senior citizen who is offered an income tax rebate by the town of Hartford in exchange for working a total of 50 hours for the local school system.
- The student suspended for three days from school who is given a choice between staying at home or working in a community organization in Norfolk.
- A Baltimore student who is volunteering 40 hours at a nonprofit organization to fulfill a high school graduation requirement.
- The laid-off auto worker who donates time to a local elementary school to qualify for benefits under a joint project of General Motors and the

United Auto Workers.

- The person who takes a volunteer position as part of his early retirement agreement with Southern Bell Telephone.
- The traffic offender in San Francisco who is working off a fine by doing community service work for a city government agency.

Perhaps the greatest single element in this is the strong movement toward compulsory service as an educational requirement. According to a survey by the National School Boards Association, 71% of school board members favor the concept.

5. *Minority Involvement*

Volunteering is continuing to move away from a traditional, white middle-class activity.

According to the 1999 Gallup Survey, 46% of Hispanics volunteered during 1998 (an increase of six percentage points since 1995), and 47% of African-Americans volunteered (a 12% increase).

Kamilat, an organization working on issues of Muslim women, found in a survey that 44% of Muslims are willing to volunteer to affect community change.

And, in perhaps the most comprehensive survey of a population sub-sector ever conducted, the Institute for Gay and Lesbian Studies determined the following about volunteering among Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals and Transsexuals:

- Average volunteer hours per month was 29, compared with an average of 18 for the typical US volunteer. The highest rate of volunteering was among African-Americans and Asian-Americans.
- Overall distribution of volunteer time was approximately 45% per month to GLBT organizations, 15% to HIV/AIDS organizations and 40% to non-GLBT organizations.
- "When comparing men and women with the same income and other characteristics, men volunteer almost two hours more per month and donate \$245 more than women to GLBT organizations."
- "People with lower incomes volunteer more hours than people with higher incomes."



Volunteering has moved out of the mainstream and become the entire river and its tributaries.

And Some New Trends

We'll just mention four areas:

1. *Computerized Volunteering*

The computer is affecting everything else, so there is no wonder that it will increasingly impact volunteer involvement. This will happen in two major ways:

First, more and more people will use the Internet as their way to find volunteer opportunities. Some of this will occur simply through visiting Web sites and examining programs and volunteer recruitment information, but more and more it will involve using the on-line brokers who have been set up to fulfill the functions that Volunteer Centers have traditionally performed at the local level. Currently, a number of organizations provide free volunteer matching via the Internet:

- SERVENet, www.servenet.org
- Community Action Network, www.getinvolved.net
- the Idealist, www.idealists.org/IS/vol_search.html
- Volunteer Web, www.epicbc.com/volunteer
- Volunteer Match, www.volunteermatch.org

According to the 1999 Gallup Survey, 1% of those who volunteered in 1998 learned about volunteering via the Internet. You can expect that number to grow significantly in the next five years.

Second, more and more volunteering will happen on-line, as opposed to in-person. This "virtual volunteering" provides a convenient answer for some problems that have plagued volunteer management for some time:

- individuals with limited time availability (i.e., most people, and especially those who work)
- individuals with heavy travel schedules
- individuals in rural areas, particularly those with large geographic territories
- individuals who are home-bound through age or disability or inclination

Some cutting edge work on this area and its widespread applicability is being done at the Virtual Volunteering Project at the University of Texas (www.serviceleader.org), and it promises to become a substantial format for volunteering. The demographics of computer users make them an ideal volunteer recruitment target, which may explain a recent finding by AARP that those who



have used a computer at work, school, or at home during the past year are more likely to volunteer.

2. *Recreational Volunteering*

One explanation for volunteering is that it is "serious leisure." In the coming decade, we'll see more people take that definition very seriously indeed. Note these two approaches to volunteering:

• *Vacation volunteering*

Want to see the world and do good at the same time? Simple - take your vacation while working for a cause. You can help build homes in Central America, harvest turtle eggs in the Caribbean, excavate archeological digs in the Middle East or just about anything you want. There are even magazines devoted to advertising for these projects.

Or you can check at some options at VolunteerAmerica!, www.volunteeramerica.com.

• *Migratory volunteering*

Retired and want to see the country in a leisurely fashion? Simple - drive your RV from national wildlife refuge to national wildlife refuge and park for a few months on one of their trailer-pads while donating time. You can even set up a "migratory" pathway and follow the migrating bird or animal of your choice. And you can come back year after year after year...

While seemingly strange, these tactics simply conform to the needs and interests of the would-be volunteers, and are a novel way of dealing with time constraints and the desire to move around. With the impending population of healthy, active and wealthy baby-

boomer retirees, both of these types of volunteering will blossom.

3. *Affinity Group Volunteering*

People used to volunteer through affinity groups such as service clubs, religious congregations and neighborhood groups. We're about to go way beyond that.

There has been a huge explosion of volunteering by fan clubs of every celebrity you can think of. One of my favorites is Sword and Staff, the Xena fan club (www.swordandstaff.com). As they explain it: "Obviously our primary goal is to help others by channeling our Xena-inspired obsessiveness to charities and causes that need our talents. There very obviously is a vast desire by many fans to give something back. Sharing that experience with our fellow Xena nutballs seems like a natural progression for our maturing fandom and evolving friendships."

And, of course, there are the Goths, who, disturbed by the bad publicity they were getting after Columbine, decided to pitch in and help out the Red Cross - on a blood drive, naturally.

Add to that the X-Files fans, the Trekkies, the Elvis fans and a host of others and you've got a real movement. You can see a bewildering list of examples at www.serviceleader.org/vv/culture/fans.html, but it only begins to touch the surface.

Volunteering has always happened among those who felt themselves members of a group, but it is also increasing among those who would like to be a member of a group (or of something). Note the success of Single Volunteers of DC, which describes itself as "a volunteer group...with a twist." You can catch the drift from reading this paragraph from their volunteer agreement, which you must read before signing up for any volunteer project: "I also agree that SVDC holds no responsibility for the outcome of any relationship that may or may not form between myself and another person that I might meet through SVDC. In accepting a date or otherwise agreeing to meet with another member either within an SVDC-sponsored volunteer project or social, or on my own time, I take sole responsibility for any actions that might occur during that date or meeting, and agree to hold SVDC free from any liability."

4. *Family Volunteering*

At some point, nonprofit organizations decided that the right way to involve volunteers was one at a time.

No one is sure why this happened; some people are now trying to change the process. The most natural "unit" for volunteering may be the family.

According to a survey by AAL, half of American adults (51.4%) do volunteer work with family members "several times a year" or more frequently. Nearly one-fifth of Americans (19.5%) volunteer as a family "weekly or more often." All told, a majority of Americans (61.9%) report volunteering with family members at least occasionally. Among families with children under 12 who have never volunteered before, 65.9% said family volunteering was a good idea or were planning to do it.

A Lutheran Brotherhood survey also looked at people who volunteer together with others on projects:

- 34% had volunteered with a spouse during the last year
- 30% had volunteered with a friend
- 24% had volunteered with their children

Those most likely to volunteer with a spouse are ages 35-49, while Gen X's are more likely to volunteer with a friend or with their children. Parents overwhelmingly want their children to volunteer, with 78% saying they encourage their children to volunteer.

Encouraging children to volunteer with their parents is one of the surest ways to create a lifelong value of volunteering. The 1999 Gallup survey found that among those who reported that one or both of their parents had set an example and volunteered while they were young, 69% reported volunteering as adults and 75% reported having made a charitable contribution. Statistics Canada reports that: "Early life experiences bear some relationship to the likelihood of volunteering in adult years. Compared with the volunteer rate for all Canadians (31.4%), the volunteer rate was substantially higher among people with specific life experiences during their youth: 43% for those whose parents were volunteers and 40% for those who did some kind of volunteer work. These findings demonstrate how,



for many, the roots of volunteering are put down early in life and how an interest in contributing as a youth is likely to be maintained in adulthood."

Besides instilling good habits into a future generation of volunteers, family volunteering also offers the surest and quickest method for changing the demographic patterns of a volunteer organization. It could offer the best method for revitalizing organizations whose volunteer cadre is facing significant aging.

And A Few Management Implications

Here a few conclusions and comments about What This All Means:

1. Good volunteer management is becoming more important than ever.

Along with all the demographic information cited above, we are beginning to gather concrete evidence that volunteer management actually makes a tremendous difference in successful volunteer involvement. Probably the most thorough job of this was done by the UPS Foundation, whose survey should be a vital part of the library of every volunteer manager.

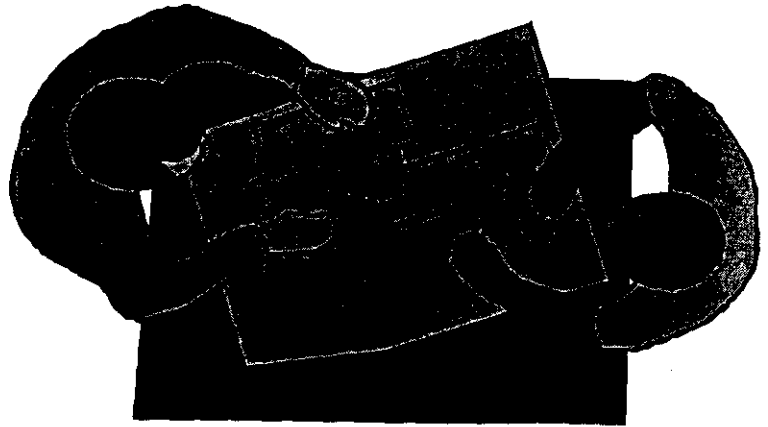
Here are some of its key points:

Overall, two out of five volunteers have stopped volunteering for an organization at some time because of one or more poor volunteer management practices. These include:

- charity was not well managed: 26%
- charity did not use volunteer's time well: 23%
- charity did not use volunteer's talents well: 18%
- volunteer's tasks were not well defined: 16%
- volunteers were not thanked: 9%

"Making 'better use of talents, skills or expertise' appears to be a bit less important to attracting volunteers than making good use of time. Half say that, given available time, they would volunteer more to this type of organization. People do not always volunteer for activities that use their job skills. Habitat for Humanity uses many unskilled 'carpenters.' The people who volunteer at concession stands are not necessarily using high-level expertise or talents. The expectation of efficiency is not as high for talents as it is for time."

"Poor volunteer management practices result in more lost volunteers than people losing interest because of



changing personal or family needs. The best way for volunteer organizations to receive more hours of volunteer service is to be careful managers of the time already being volunteering by people of all ages and from all strata of our volunteer society."

Gary Lee, executive director of the UPS Foundation, said "Managing volunteers effectively has become increasingly important for organizations, and has never really been addressed in a significant way."

Volunteers today are critically examining the management practices of those with whom they connect and they are not at all hesitant about abandoning those who take them for granted. The agency might not realize how valuable their time is, but the volunteers do.

2. The most serious problem in volunteer management is badly designed volunteer positions.

A lot of agencies talk about creative use of volunteers, but most of them are still thinking in the straitjacket of the traditional long-termer. Consider these comments from a variety of recent studies:

- Do Something
29% of those who volunteer said that nonprofits did not take advantage of all they had to offer. "Fully one-half of young people who say they were given important responsibilities, compared with a fifth who say they were not, rate their experience with community organizations as excellent."

Young people would be more willing to get involved if charities made better use of their time: 29% of those who already volunteer said that nonprofit organizations did not take advantage of all they had to offer. One-half of young people who say they were given important responsibilities, compared



with a fifth who say they were not, rate their experience as excellent.

Almost half (46%) of young people who say they were able to see the results of their work rated their experience as excellent, compared to only 15% of those who did not. 84% of organizations that give volunteers "a lot" or "some" input into what they actually spend their time doing keep their volunteers for two or more years on average, compared with only 50% of those that offer volunteers little or no input.

- Statistics Canada
"In 1997, more Canadians volunteered than ten years earlier, but they did so for shorter periods of time. This suggests that voluntary groups may want to consider restructuring their volunteer opportunities differently. This could mean shorter, more task-oriented assignments, or, perhaps, changing the nature of the placements so as to include other family members. Family volunteering can stretch the precious time of volunteers if tasks are designed so that the entire family can take part."
- Institute for Volunteering Research, UK
"Flexibility is given top priority by young people, especially in respect of flexible work and working times for volunteering. The young have many pressures and demands on them and find it hard to make the time and commitment. They have a sizable number of other outlets for their free time and volunteering has to compete with this. Much of their lives are controlled by others and it is important to them to have an element of choice and spontaneity in volunteering."

"Over a half of organisations have a lower age limit

on volunteers and of these organisations 40 per cent would not allow anyone under 18 to volunteer. This pattern is reflected across all types of organisations."

- League of Women Voters
"Organizations can deal with concerns about time by allowing people to schedule activities at their convenience (90% important for an organization to do; 86% more likely to get involved), work on volunteer activities from home (82% important; 84% more likely), work for an hour or two at a time (87% important; 81% more likely), and allowing them to get out of their commitment if they need to (83% important; 76% more likely)."

If you're still looking for volunteers to fit the shapes, sizes and positions that you were ten years ago, then you have to start thinking and recruiting out of the box. And don't bother to be upset by this - sure, it means that the volunteers want to do it their way, but volunteers have always wanted to do it their way. And why not?

3. *We're all in this together.*

Finally, it is becoming clear that volunteer management is not something that just happens within that tiny windowless office inside the organization. It is, instead, a community of people who are increasingly sharing their hard-won information and experience, and sharing it around the world.

You can find a huge amount of sophisticated information on volunteer involvement on the Internet. My favorite sites are:

- www.energizeinc.com (Susan Ellis)
- www.serviceleader.org (the Virtual Volunteering project site, but there's a lot of other stuff there as well)
- www.cybervpm.com (Nan Hawthorne and the CyberVPM listserv which every volunteer manager ought to belong to)
- www.casnet.org (the library for the National Court Appointed Special Advocates Association)
- www.volunteering.org.uk (the National Centre for Volunteering, UK)
- www.charityvillage.com (ah, those Canadians!)

You can find all the answers and even more of the opinions simply by looking around.

You can look even further than you imagine.

Volunteering is now truly international, and some of the most innovative things are being done in countries outside the US, sometimes using materials that started here. As a personal example, the book *Volunteer Management* that Rick Lynch and I wrote several years ago has now been translated (in total or in parts) into British English, Ukrainian, Rumanian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Chinese.

And, just in case you ever need it, here's the Polish description for Susan Ellis' *The Volunteer Recruitment Book*:

"Prakticka a uzitocna prirucka o nabore dobrovolnikov pre pracu v tretom sektore. Obsahuje kreativne napady a lahko realizovatelne postupy pre hladanie a ziskavanie dobrovolnikov ako aj organizaciu a hodnotenie ich prace. Doplne indexom a bibliografiou."

At least we think it's Polish.

The upcoming Millennium promises to be a splendid place for those involved in volunteering, one in which the successes of the past century will continue to blossom and continue to offer satisfaction both to those who do and those who manage the good work.

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