

‘A Volunteer By Any Other Name’

What’s *Your* Definition of Volunteering?

By Stephen H. McCurley

Ivan Scheier once “defined” volunteering as any activity involving all of the following characteristics:

1. The activity is relatively uncoerced.
2. The activity is intended to help.
3. The activity is done without primary or immediate thought of financial gain.
4. The activity is work, not play.

You may wish to read this definition again, and think about what it means and whether you agree with it, because we’re about to give you a quiz. If you don’t like Ivan’s definition, make up your own and use it to take the quiz.

At this point, stop reading and take the short quiz (see box). Simply follow the directions given, either answering each question by first impression, by a careful comparison with the definition above, or after lengthy philosophical debate and pondering. There are no “right” answers, so be as honest as you can, using whatever system or definition you feel most comfortable with. Please note that reading any further without taking the quiz constitutes “cheating.”

Now that you’ve taken the quiz, we’re going to discuss the quiz

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items by grouping them within four categories. As we discuss each category, you might find it interesting to compare the answers or ratings that you gave to each of the questions within that category, since each question simply represents a slightly different factual example of the same philosophical issue.

The Paid Volunteer

Questions 2, 4, 7 and 11 represent examples of "volunteers" who are actually paid for their volunteer work. In each instance, some financial gain influences volunteer participation—either by making it possible (as in Question #4) or by encouraging if not provoking it (Question #2). Another example not included in the quiz would be the employee who is granted an hour off the job to volunteer (while retaining full pay) in return for each hour the employee donates, a possible example of the "partial volunteer."

These are all interesting examples of the "third party payment" system that we are developing in the volunteer field. In each instance, the agency accepts individuals who are "volunteers" only in the sense that the agency doesn't pay for the person, *not* in the sense that the individual is not ultimately paid. An even more extreme case is the stipended volunteer (a Foster Grandparent, for example) who is, in fact, directly paid by the utilizing agency.

The Coerced Volunteer

Questions 1, 5, 8 and 9 represent examples of "volunteers" who are motivated to "donate" time by a source other than their own independent initiative. In each case, the motivation to volunteer is initiated and directed by an outside force, and in each case, it is likely that without that outside force the volunteering would not occur.

Of these examples, Question #1 may prove to be the most significant. The alternative sentencing volunteer "force" represents an enormously growing segment of the volunteer community. But are they volunteers? This may turn out to be a serious question, if only from the legal standpoint. For example, does an agency's insurance policy that covers "volunteers" automatically cover those people who are referred

through an alternative sentencing program? Fearing the worst-case answer to that question, the Consortium for Human Services has just developed a specialized insurance plan to specifically cover Alternative Sentencing. (Don't call me, call them: P.O. Box 1183, San Jose, CA 95108.)

The "Selfish" Volunteer

Questions 3, 5, 10 and 13 present examples of the "volunteer" who is donating time for a reason other than to help others. Although we have always recognized that self-interest probably plays some part in the generic motivation to volunteer, the cases represented in the quiz extend that non-altruistic motivation to more of an extreme than we usually see.

Questions 6 and 13, in fact, represent one aspect of volunteer motivation that organizations are increasingly capitalizing on in their volunteer recruitment efforts—stressing the "What's in it for me?" theme. A common, less extreme, example is the use of employment and training portfolios for volunteers.

Question #3 is intriguing as an example of another potential legal difficulty. The Internal Revenue Service allows deductions for charitable donations only if the donations are not primarily intended for the benefit of the individual making the donation or for that individual's family. It has refused charitable deductions (for driving expenses) in situations very similar to our example, on the theory that it is not really a "charitable donation." If you wouldn't call it a charitable donation of money because it actually is for the benefit of the individual, can you call it a charitable donation of time?

Question #10 is a good example of the "self-help" group phenomenon, and is interesting to consider in reverse. At what point does "self-help" start? Consider the following instances:

- Volunteering to help the world.
- Volunteering to help your country.
- Volunteering to help your city.
- Volunteering to help your neighborhood.
- Volunteering to safeguard your own home.

Or consider the following instances:

- Volunteering to help people in general.
- Volunteering to help people with a specific problem.
- Volunteering to help members of your peer group.
- Volunteering to help a member of your family.
- Volunteering to help yourself.

Where on the scale does "volunteering to help others" become "volunteering to help oneself?"

The "Unintentional" Volunteer

Question #12 poses the issue of the "unconscious" volunteer. Should one receive credit for doing good without knowing it and without intending it? If you categorized the infant in Question #12 as a volunteer, you might want to consider whether you would classify a shade tree in the same way: It is uncoerced, not financially rewarded, and has as much intent as the infant. (I'm a little bit lacking in whether growing leaves is work or play, and, in fact, would be interested in anyone who would like to come up with any intriguing examples of the difference between those two categories.)

Carrying the Debate Further

In many ways, this discussion represents pure abstract philosophical debate, vaguely reminiscent of the medieval debates over the numbers of angels who could fit on the head of a pin. In other ways, such as the legal issues mentioned above, or in the debates in various legislatures about giving a tax credit for volunteer time, the definitional and philosophical questions could have a real world impact.

If you're interested in pursuing this further, let me suggest two possibilities:

First, get a copy of Ivan Scheier's book, *Exploring Volunteer Space* (available from Volunteer Readership). It contains a delightful and thought-provoking examination of the areas above and adds even more confusion to the "Who Is a Volunteer?" question.

Second, send us a copy of your answers to the quiz. If we get enough responses, we'll report them in an upcoming issue and you can see how you compare to others. And be sure to include any further pseudo-volunteer examples you can think of.

WHO'S A VOLUNTEER?

Instruction: Read the descriptions below and then rate each example on the scale to the right as "Definitely a Volunteer" to "Not a Volunteer."

	Definitely a Volunteer		Not a Volunteer		
	1	2	3	4	5
1. An accountant charged with embezzling who accepts a sentence of 250 hours of community service work in lieu of prosecution.	1	2	3	4	5
2. A teenager enrolled in the City Volunteer Corps, a national youth service program in New York City, who receives an \$80 per week stipend.	1	2	3	4	5
3. A mother who becomes leader of a Girl Scout troop because of her daughter's desire to be a Scout. No one else will lead the troop, so the mother agrees to take over, but only as long as her daughter is involved.	1	2	3	4	5
4. An IBM executive who is granted a year of social service leave with pay to become a temporary staff person with a nonprofit organization.	1	2	3	4	5
5. A child who assists in setting up booths at a volunteer fair because one of her parents is a volunteer administrator and "asks" her to help.	1	2	3	4	5
6. A teenager who offers to program the computer at a nonprofit agency in order to establish an "employment" history. After three months, he intends to quit and apply for a job at McDonalds.	1	2	3	4	5
7. The CEO of a local corporation who is volunteer chairperson of the United Way campaign and who delegates all the work to his assistant.	1	2	3	4	5
8. The assistant to the CEO in Question #7.	1	2	3	4	5
9. The student who is doing a community service assignment as part of a high school graduation requirement.	1	2	3	4	5
10. The homeowner who helps create a crime watch group to safeguard his own neighborhood.	1	2	3	4	5
11. The paid staff person who serves on the board of a nonprofit group in a slot that is reserved for her agency.	1	2	3	4	5
12. The six-month-old baby who accompanies her parents to visit seniors at a nursing home.	1	2	3	4	5
13. The trainer who does a free workshop at a conference as a marketing device.	1	2	3	4	5