

[News and Hot Topics](#) » If the Whole World is Changing, Can Volunteerism Stay the Same?

If the Whole World is Changing, Can Volunteerism Stay the Same?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

January
1999

It's 1999 and we have learned to live with a contradictory fact: the only constant is change. Everything seems to be in flux (some would say chaos) at once. The question for all of us professionally is: If the whole world is changing, how can volunteerism stay the same? Of course it can't. But are we prepared to make fundamental changes as well as cosmetic ones?

Many years ago the satirical cartoonist Jules Feiffer drew a comic strip that I posted on the bulletin board by my desk. It has eight frames, each one with the same image of an old women's wizened face. In the first frame she says: "When I was a child, we were poor." In the second frame she says: "Then the government came and told us we weren't poor, we were economically deprived." Third frame: "A few years later they said we weren't economically deprived, we were culturally disadvantaged." The strip continues in the same vein until the very last image, in which she says: "Now I'm 84. I'm still poor, but I have a great vocabulary."

Sometimes I wonder whether volunteerism isn't playing the same word game. I have done my part to urge all of us to embrace the many strands of service that have evolved over the last two decades: student community service; alternative sentencing; time dollars; welfare reform; and other programs--both mandated and voluntary--that bring new talents (and perspectives) to our organizations. I do feel that the word "volunteer" is being defined (redefined?) in ever-narrowing terms and that does a disservice to the contributions of the people we lead. But whether we call our work "volunteer program management" or "community resource mobilization," are we urging our organizations to re-examine their approach to integrating paid and non-paid workers?

The following questions need to be discussed openly at all levels:

1. Do we want volunteers because we genuinely think they add value to our service delivery or are volunteers a second choice when there are no funds to pay the employees we really want? Whatever

we call workers who are not on our payroll, do we think of them as "extra help" rather than full team members?

2. Why is it that "volunteers" and "volunteerism" is being pushed further and further down the totem pole? Why do students in service-learning get more attention than mature adult volunteers with proven skills to offer? Why do those calling for a "new civil society" seem unaware of the volunteerism field? Why are so many unconvinced that the skills of recruiting, screening, matching, training, supervising and recognizing "traditional" volunteers have direct relevance to working with any worker not on the payroll, coming from an outside source, and staying a short while?

3. When money is tight, do we maintain the current staff roles and unrealistically seek to "fill the gaps" with volunteers? Why don't we start by redefining the job descriptions of remaining employees? Overall, how often do we reexamine whether the paid staff is still doing the work that most needs to be done? After all, our clients and customers are experiencing rapid change, too.

4. Do we understand that too often funding drives programming? To obtain money we create projects to suit the funder's requirements. Volunteer involvement, on the other hand, is based on solely recognizing real needs and recruiting available talent to do something about it -- even if money is not available. So maybe, instead of always trying to seek funds first, we ought to do strategic planning based on needs assessment and experimenting with volunteer responses. Later, once volunteers have proven the approach to be effective, we can consider ways to hire paid staff to assume the roles volunteers have proven to be effective.

5. Why do executive directors, CEOs, and other top administrators understand that they must concern themselves both with raising money and with personnel policies (even if there are frontline staff in both those areas), but resist the notion that they ought to involve themselves occasionally in substantive oversight of volunteer involvement? What exactly is the obstacle here? I've spent at least twenty years trying to reach executive audiences with only modest success. Is it prejudice that volunteers aren't very important? Stereotypes about who volunteers and why? Is it the dirty little secret of our field that volunteers are not liked very much by our administrators?

All these questions involve broad philosophic principles. The answers reflect our attitudes about society and the meaning of work, both paid and unpaid. What I want to ask YOU is more strategic:

1. How do we initiate meaningful discussion of these and other questions in our own professional circles? Then,

2. How do we move from talking to the converted to opening dialogue with other fields? Especially, how do we reach executives in meaningful ways?

And, of course, if you have any responses to any of the questions I posed above--or want to add some of your own--please let us hear from you.

All of us at Energize wish all of you the very best, professionally and personally, for 1999.

Related Topics: [Ethics](#) | [Philosophy](#) | [Trends and Issues](#) | [Profession of Volunteer Management](#)

Submitted by Esther Zimmerman, Trainer BCM International, PA, USA

A related question--How do the changes in volunteerism effect the way we train our volunteers? I am

a graduate student at Penn State University completing my M.Ed. in training design and development. My thesis topic is essentially the above question. I would appreciate any thoughts you or others may have on the subject. Thanks for a great web site. It is the best compilation of resources I have located.

Submitted by Lucas Meijs, Erasmus University Rotterdam / Meys Consultancy, Capelle a.d. IJssel, The Netherlands

Susan, as always a nice question. How to get executives to understand the problems of volunteer management and involving volunteers. Just some points, based upon my limited observations:

1. That executives (and many boards) are not interested in the volunteer issue is also because of the behavior of many volunteer administrators. It seems to me that many volunteer administrators are just not willing to see the involvement of volunteers in a strategic perspective. Many volunteer administrators are managing on a day-to-day basis. They are not willing to formulate the policy-questions that have to be addressed on board and executive level.

2 A nice strategy to get boards and executives to give real attention to the volunteer issue is using funders as leverage. I know that many funder (government and private) at this moment is concerned about the (old fashioned) way that organizations employ volunteers. Projects aimed at improving the way that the organization works with volunteers will become projects that can be funded easily the next years.

3 Currently we are introducing the concept of volunteer management into areas of large (paid staff) part-time workforces in organizations where (non-profit) emotion matters. An example: A dutch major paid-soccer organization will introduce instruments of volunteer management to change its security-stewards into more service-oriented stewards. The board of the soccer organization at this moment is not content with the unemotional way that stewards work. They seem not to care for which soccer-team they are stewarding. They define this 'club-love' as part of the quality of being a steward and hope by introducing volunteer management instruments to get the emotion back.

4 Last year I did a course for business administration students on what profit-companies can learn from large volunteer organizations. That was a big surprise for the would-be managers!

Submitted by Julie Gillis, Assistant Director of Community Relations, Austin State Hospital, Austin, Tx

Many times non-profits will utilize volunteers in lieu of paid staff and in this case I think staff does see them as "second best". Our society is run by money, our greatest achievement in our culture is to have money. It must be very hard then, to understand a person who willingly works for no money. The paid employee who has bought into the cultural imperative to earn must feel a mix of emotions when working with a volunteer. Feelings could include; envy and irritation at the volunteer's "free time". The employee might feel guilt for not volunteering. Having a volunteer in the office might remind staff that they are understaffed and therefore bring up resentment about the organization.

Hierarchy in an organizational system is still structured on your power position and quite often the power position is based on salary. For example, in most non-profits I have worked in, there has been a "senior leadership team" that distributed information down the line to their staff. Usually, administrative staff members were not allowed at those meetings. The higher up staff rose on the ladder, the more privacy, perks and inner knowledge. If you follow that model than it makes sense that a volunteer (who isn't paid at all) would not be considered an equal.

To answer another separate question, I think one reason the "volunteers" are not given the same respect as "service learning" is a political one. You can corporatize and politicize a program like Americorps or CityYear. It gets great media, and politicians love being a part of it. While they call for a new Civil Society, they are, in my mind, glossing over all the symptoms while not really working on the causative factors that have given us an "Uncivil Society". Glossy programs motivate public interest while alleviating the public from having to get down and dirty.

Submitted by Thomas Juring, Executive Director, The RACORSE Network, Oakland, CA

Here are some possible ways individuals could gain valuable insight about volunteer labor

1. Define the job and the performance standards as they would any other job within the organization.
2. Place a dollar value to each hour of work performed.
3. Issue "Volunteer Dollars" to that individual on a regular basis where the amount shown would be what the individual would be paid if that individual wasn't volunteering his or her time and talent. The hourly rate should be defined from the combination of local labor market rate and any differentials that organization might apply for any of its workers.
4. Recognize that the "Volunteer Dollar" amount for the individual is a donation to the organization by that volunteer, albeit not tax deductible, but a donation none the less. And, at least, treat that volunteer as well as they would a donor at that level of giving. Although this approach does not address the multitude of other issues concurrent the responsibilities an employer has towards its volunteer staff, it may help form a framework for the respect and dignity due those who volunteer their efforts for a mission the volunteer supports in such a dedicated way.

Submitted by Liz Weaver , Executive Director, Volunteer Centre of Hamilton & District , Hamilton, Ontario Canada

Perhaps added to your list of questions might be this one. How can we get board of directors volunteers involved in discussing these questions? While it is critical to engage staff and volunteers in addressing these issues, leadership volunteers are important and should not be excluded.

Submitted by Anne-marie Greathead, Community Events Coordinator, Student Community Involvement Program, Volunteering NSW, Sydney, NSW, Australia

"Alternative sentencing"- it sounds like people being sentenced to do "community service" rather than a jail term, is this the correct meaning in the USA? If it is, then although it is great to embrace the

"many strands of service" it is important to remember that if a program is mandatory it is not volunteering. The article states that volunteerism is being pushed further down the totem pole. What does this refer to? The totem pole of what?- funding? participation? value in society? How do we measure where volunteerism is on the totem pole? Do we know that it is or is this assumed? Is the rate of volunteering declining in the USA?

Question two of the article includes "why do students in service-learning get more attention than mature adult volunteers" More attention from whom? How do they get more attention? In the media?, Funding? At volunteering NSW there is a program for students and a program for mature adult volunteers and students do not get more attention.

I thoroughly agree that "Volunteer involvement is based on recognizing real needs and recruiting available talent to do something about it - even if money is not available. When people work in structured nonprofit organizations it is easy to forget the great work that volunteers do on a less structured basis. For example, I know of a community that saw the need for more facilities for young people and then went about getting funding. The article refers to executive directors and CEOs - does this refer to not-for-profit organizations, profit organizations or both? Has there been research which explored the attitudes of executives and showed that they "resist the notion that they ought to involve themselves in oversight of volunteer involvement?" Has there been research undertaken with executives about what are the obstacles and how could they be overcome? Regarding the question of how do we reach executives in meaningful ways. In Australia several banks actively encourage staff to volunteer and one bank funds national awards recognizing the work.

Submitted by Laurie Torrez, Coordinator of Student Volunteers, Pomona Valley Hospital Medical Center, Pomona, California, USA

I do believe that administrators need to be involved in their Volunteer Services Department. When we send out reports of hours, etc., we need to send a copy to our direct administrator. If we have an event, we need to invite our administrator(s). If you're a manager or director, you should make sure that you're included in management meetings, conversing with other department managers as well as administration. I believe that "communication" is the key to any effective relationship. The Volunteer Svcs. Dept. I work in has over 800 active volunteers, and administration includes us in on nearly everything. I guess we're really blessed.

Submitted by Anonymous

You seem to be sending your message only to those agencies which have a volunteer program among their other programs. I run an agency which has one full-time staff person and two part-time staff people. The rest of the 100 people are volunteers. We do not run a program that the volunteers "help out" with. The volunteers, staffing distress lines, and the people who call, ARE the program. Staff energies are used to train volunteers, support and supervise them in their role and raise funds to recruit and train more volunteers. I appreciate your words, but I find them limiting. I think the questions you urge us to consider would have to be slightly different for an agency like mine to take

seriously. However I should add that people like yourself are a valuable resource for me in my work and thank you for speaking on such a timely issue.

Submitted by Noel Hyde, Illinois, USA

How many administrators don't like volunteers because they cannot exert control over them?
Paychecks = control.

Submitted by Rick Devich, Director, Community Development, Senior Resources, Minnesota, USA

Susan, excellent questions. Since this format defines brief remarks, let me offer the following: Volunteerism suffers from "isms" -- sexism, ageism, capitalism, racism. Volunteers care/nurture -- women's work. Old people are useless in a youth valuing society. If you don't get paid for it, it is valueless. "Helping out" is a broadly held and highly active characteristic in communities of color -- "volunteerism" is not because it is what guilty white people do. Successful volunteer programs threaten jobs and the sometimes questionable thesis under which an organization operates. Non-profit organizations, by legal requirement and definition, are volunteer organizations. Staff are hired to supplement and/or actualize the mission of the founding volunteers. Too often, staff have become the experts and, again because their jobs depend on it, enable a milieu that demands the continued engagement of "experts" to achieve purpose, devaluing volunteers. Most who talk of "civil society" are men.

Volunteerism is still primarily women, both in terms of staff and volunteers. In the old days, execs were typically those who had been there the longest and were generally from a "helping " field. Their view was scientific, medical model with consequent loss of significance for "volunteers". Current execs are likely to have MBAs or Marketing backgrounds with high value on "bottom line" or results based evaluation. While there is movement on impact evaluation, notably through United Way and Corporation for National Service, more often than not, the impact of volunteers is immeasurable within the short timeframes of evaluation, usually a year. We are too often a short range society suffering from immediacy gratification and addiction, compounded by an inability to recognize and nurture the human ecology called community.

Submitted by Sal Alaimo, Member Services Manager / NW GA Girl Scouts, Georgia USA

Susan, you raise excellent points. So far, I have only experienced volunteer administrators talk among ourselves about how important it is to show outcomes of our programs. What I would like to see is for us to actually take the time and do it. Using your example on the philosophy of funding, we have to remind everyone that our volunteer programs are revenue generators. Just because the actual money is not coming in doesn't mean there is not a value to our volunteers' efforts.

This information should be conveyed in our organizations' annual reports just like our fund development folks' pie charts do. I always preach to the Council Of Volunteer Administrators (COVA) here in Atlanta the importance of carrying out these tasks. If we don't do it, no one else will. Society is still too slow in realizing the true value of volunteerism. I still have people say to me "You mean you work for the Girl Scouts and you get paid?" What an insult. Maybe we can look positively on your

comments on Service Learning in that it is the start of people realizing the value of volunteerism and a good sign of future philosophies. These students will be the future corporate, government and nonprofit executives. They can help spread the word. Thanks for stimulating my brain today. Good to see you in Dallas this past October.

Submitted by Reva Cooper, Consultant, Volunteer Program Development, Ontario, Canada

Susan, you raised some really good questions in the Hot Topic. Perhaps we, as a society, only give lip service to volunteers as important. Even within our own organizations, volunteers may be seen as "do gooders" who we should have around but who we do not really support or enable in ways that truly build community. That may explain why Executives and other staff do not allocate adequate time or energy towards the volunteer program.

This week in Kitchener, Canada, a lot of media attention was focused on comments from the Volunteer Action Centre about the tremendous demand for volunteers and the effect of cutbacks and social structure changes on the need for volunteers. Our national news station, CBC, picked up on the story two mornings in a row with interviews. What seemed obvious to those of us in the field is new to the broad population and therefore "newsworthy". Are we doing a good enough job of promoting volunteerism and the value of volunteers? Are people really listening? Just adding a few more questions on the table for people to consider.

Sign up for our Newsletter

PRIVACY STATEMENT

Energize, a program of Adisa <https://adisagroup.com/>

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2025