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Let's Commit to International Exchange

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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We have decided to continue July's hot topic into August for two reasons. First, we have only recently generated some responses from international colleagues and want to be sure everyone feels they have enough time to add their comments. Second, from August 23 to 27, IAVE is holding their World Volunteer Conference in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Susan and others are posting their comments to our [From IAVE](#) area. So check it out!

July's Hot Topic

Leaders of volunteers around the globe are making conscious efforts to connect with one another. The conferences and publications in our field are reflecting--and sometimes initiating--this broadened perspective. Because I now have the privilege of conducting about ten workshops a year overseas, I have committed Energize to the facilitation and nurturing of international networking. In past "hot topics" I've generally discussed this subject, but now I want to foster communication more actively.

The United Nations has declared the year 2001 as the "International Year of the Volunteer." While such events are often more show than substance, this is nevertheless a major development for a field that has rarely been visible. Most probably the Year will focus on the achievements of volunteers themselves, which is great. But we can take advantage of this pending event to create exchanges among the *leaders* of volunteer efforts, lasting longer than one year.

Too many Americans view "outreach" to people from other cultures as teaching the "right" ways to do volunteer administration. Certainly we in the United States have made enormous advances in developing the profession of working with volunteers--training, publishing, professional associations--and we should share this information. But the important question should be: "What can we learn from each other?"

I've been amazed at what I've learned. Almost from the start of my international work, I recognized that a powerful learning experience for me was the chance to examine my presentations from a fresh perspective. What do I believe most and feel comfortable in offering others outside of my own

culture? What has the potential to be universal and why? I also listen closely to what my seminar participants say and ask. Not only does this help me to help them more, but it is how I discover new ways of working that, in turn, I bring back to the U.S.

- [Some examples of what I've learned](#)

So, here are this month's questions to site visitors:

1. If you are from outside the U.S. (and we estimate that at least 15% of our visitors are), what do you think you do in your country that colleagues in other countries might see as unique? could replicate? could adapt? What are you particularly interested in learning from others?

2. If you are an American (and this probably goes for our Canadian friends, too), what have you learned from any interaction with colleagues outside of North America? What would you like to learn?

3. For anyone working with issues that have global effects (AIDS, the environment, aging), have you been able to apply volunteering strategies and techniques used in another country to your own work?

4. For everyone: How can we use the Web to encourage meaningful *exchange* among volunteerism practitioners? Can we collaborate on something focused on the United Nation's annual International Volunteer Day (December 5)? What might we do collectively for the International Year of the Volunteer in 2000?

If the responses this month seem to lead to ongoing dialogue, we will consider creating a special place for it on this Web site. For any of you attending the the IAVE World Volunteer Conference scheduled for Edmonton this August or Volonteurope in London in September, let's keep the discussion going in person, too! (See our [conference calendar](#) for more information on these and other international events.)

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Submitted by Dick Jensen, Chair, Task Force for Volunteers in the New Millennium, Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Santa Cruz, CA USA

International experiences with volunteers are sometimes mixed. A few years back my wife and I hosted a high school senior from Yugoslavia (Serbia) who wondered what I was doing when I was leaving for a volunteer meeting. She asked, "what is a volunteer?" When I described that role to her, she indicated she had not heard of it -- it was not a part of her culture, economy, or experience. It had never occurred to me that there were people who had not heard of volunteers. If that is prevalent in

other places, we may need to work at developing a vocabulary of volunteerism which fits in all countries and cultures.

Submitted by Marie Carole St. Louis, Information Systems Manager/International Monetary Fund, Germantown, MD USA

International networking is an absolutely great learning tool and, if all professionals truly commit themselves to it, can indeed be one of the leading tools of the next century. Exchanging ideas and sharing information empower people to learn and enhanced their skills.

Submitted by Karen Nicolini, International Volunteer, Philadelphia, PA USA

I spent six months in Chile working with Hogar de Cristo, a national Jesuit organization in Chile that serves low income families, at-risk youth, the elderly, people with mental and physical challenges and people who are homeless. What I found unique, that is rarely portrayed in the US, is the idea of working internationally with other organizations and foundations. On many occasions I would hear about Chilean representatives going to other South American countries or to Europe, or about visitors arriving in Chile, to see and learn about local programming. They would not attend for the typical conference/meeting events, but would actually take part in the programming by living in different communities, talking with clients, spending 3 weeks or more to get a full-fledged experience of a successful program. The sharing of information seemed to be such a necessity (and so obvious) when programs and people worldwide have so much in common.

I tend to see the US as feeling that it is unique in its drug, financial and service problems, and we tend to try to treat ourselves by ourselves. Even if we are working on a local level with local problems, there is always the possibility that communities in other lands are discovering solutions. It seems to me if we can reach across this small planet to involve leaders and volunteers who bring fresh ideas, and tone-down the idea that the US has all the correct answers (because if we did, we wouldn't have so many problems), then we could begin to learn about new ways of solving difficult situations. The US clearly doesn't have all the answers, but if we connect with others in different cultures by visiting them, and by welcoming them into our environment, the solutions may come much easier.

At the same time, there are many international organizations and foundations who yearn for solutions and success stories just as we do--they may support our efforts much more (financially or otherwise) if we reach out to join in this worldwide effort.

Submitted by Mary V. Merrill, Merrill Associates, Columbus, Ohio, USA

I spent several days in Scotland last month visiting agencies and the Scotland Center for Volunteerism. I always find it interesting to see how similar our issues can be. Volunteer

Development Scotland has started a for-credit college program, but are facing a problem that exists here--will the degree be "recognized" and will it increase the employability or salary for those in the field? However, I was delighted to learn of the interest in professionalizing the field and to see the intense coursework that is required. I also spent time with an agency that has developed a very innovative volunteer training program that incorporated new thoughts about "distance learning" so as to cover a large geographic region. Lots of interesting things going on. In March I presented at the Latin American Regional Conference on Volunteerism, doing a session on Change Management. I found their organizational issues of staff acceptance and leadership development to be very similar to the issues we are dealing with. Our colleagues in Scotland commented on how much they enjoy the opportunity to network via the Internet. It is making the world a smaller place, allowing for the sharing of issues, problems, solutions and creative programs. I will be joining Susan at the biennial world conference. I look forward to continuing to expand the horizons of our field.

Submitted by Kathleen McCleskey, KM Consulting and Training Connection, Texas, USA

Do I dare put in a plug for the ICVA conference? The 1998 ICVA has a committee that is working tirelessly to assist international visitors at the conference to get the most from it. We have international presenters that I know will bring a fresh outlook on several topics. I think this form of exchange is vital. I hope it continues and grows in scope. Also CyberVPM offers an opportunity that is great to hear from people world wide on the topics near and dear to us all.

Submitted by Ellen O'Neill, Director of Volunteer Services, WICE, Paris, France

Thank you for creating this opportunity for volunteers living overseas to maintain contact with our peers in North America. The Energize, Inc. web site has helped me both operationally and psychologically by providing hands-on advice and professional support.

I am the Director of Volunteer Services for WICE, a volunteer-run organization dedicated to providing cultural and educational programs to the English-speaking community in Paris. Annually, we deliver approximately 350 programs (lectures, courses, special events, tours) to our 1000 members and numerous non-members. We have 2.5 full-time paid positions and around 75 volunteers.

Generally speaking, our position as an English-speaking organization in Paris makes us unique. Along with our quality programming, it is our status as an anglophone organization that attracts both clients and volunteers. For the purposes of this discussion, I will focus on the volunteers.

We are a multi-national group with English as our unifying characteristic. Roughly 35-40% of our volunteers are North American, while another 30-40% are from other English-speaking countries. The remaining 20% speak English as a second language, and within this group, French native speakers constitute the majority. Among the native English speakers, most are in France as temporary

expatriates who have left careers perhaps on a short-term basis to follow their partners/spouses on an overseas assignment. The ages of our volunteers range from 18 to 65 and most, though certainly not all of us are women.

People volunteer at WICE for highly personal reasons, which I believe is common among most volunteers worldwide. Their primary motivations are to find companionship among other English speakers. Equally important for most is the opportunity to maintain or enrich professional skills. What I think is unique is that at least at the outset, most volunteers do not join WICE to serve the cause of the organization. Over time, those who remain volunteers (and retention is a challenge) do become more overtly committed to WICE and its mission.

In other words, recruiting volunteers is not difficult, especially among those who are new to Paris, do not speak French, and have few social contacts. Once these people establish themselves socially, they often move on to other commitments, leaving WICE behind. Those who remain do so for three main reasons: 1)they continue to enjoy the companionship and cultural exchange within the organization, 2)they appreciate the opportunity to work in a quasi-professional environment, and 3)they become committed to the organization--its people and its goals.

These volunteers form the backbone our our 20 year-old organization. They account for our durability within an otherwise transitional expatriate community. They bring professionalism, energy, and innovative programming ideas. Still, we are a highly transitional volunteer corps, for example, I am entering my fourth and last year in France. While this changing workforce offers an infinite source of new ideas, it also produces inconsistencies, administrative gaps, and a fragile system of accountability.

From this brief outline, I hope there are areas where readers can identify strategies to replicate strengths of our organization. For example, can domestic, that is, local volunteer organizations in North American cities create a volunteer atmosphere that has one strong unifying characteristic within an otherwise diverse population? (religious organizations come to mind). Do minority ethnic volunteer organizations in the U.S. experience similar recruitment and retention challenges, or are these endemic to an organization serving an expatriate community?

These are just a few of my initial questions and comments for your discussion. I look forward to exchanging additional thoughts and learning more about other international volunteer organizations that serve expatriate communities.

Submitted by Deborah Witmer, Care Coordinator, Chicken Soup Brigade, Seattle, Washington USA

As a "volunteer manager" (by function if not by title!) in the USA, I am especially interested in hearing from countries which are NOT based on the same capitalist economy that we have here. I find that this capitalism informs and shapes our attitudes, values, and morals in general - as well as around volunteering. So hearing from a more socialist country (for example) gives me a fresh perspective. As

one of those idealists who would like to largely do away with our capitalist system, I keep hoping that we will listen to - and learn from - other systems. I TOLD you I was an idealist!! I do social work in the HIV/AIDS community for a non-profit service organization. I am always intrigued to hear of (in my opinion) more enlightened attitudes around sex education, drug policies, and needle-exchanges. These are areas where I believe that USA's citizens' attitudes are hurting us rather than helping us - and contributing to the deaths from HIV/AIDS as well as increased STD rates among our young people. Other countries willing to take a more "liberal" attitude seem to have made inroads in these areas, where we have not. Let's keep the dialogue going!

Submitted by Lucas Meijs, The Netherlands

What a difficult and challenging question! Just a short reaction. There is a lot to be learned from international exchange. There is so much creativity around the world. Every problem that seems to be new, seems to be solved somewhere. Everything that seems impossible to be done by volunteers, somewhere is done by volunteers. We should tell each other many stories!

Personally I have the impression that volunteer management in agencies/ service delivery organizations is very well developed in the USA compared to the Netherlands. Until about ten/fifteen years ago, volunteers in hospitals and other care/cure institutes were volunteers of all-volunteer groups outside the organization and just did what they wanted to do. The last few years, paid staff within the hospitals and institutes were introduced to help to organize (or take over) these volunteer programs.

The profession of volunteer manager is now developing I am not sure, but maybe the way that we organize sport is a bit different from the US situation. Local sport associations are one of the largest volunteer opportunities in the Netherlands. It is a very "you are a member so you should participate" kind of organization. Sometimes they face big problems in this new time of individualism and consumerism, but in many cases they are very strong. Once people decide to put the energy they put into their sport, to solve an organizational problem, everything is possible (hobby-energy).




Being a volunteer manager in a mutual support organization such as a sports association differs from being a volunteer manager in a paid staff dominated service delivery organization. In mutual support organizations, people don't accept the 'power' of a manager or chair, because essentially he/she is one of them too.

The Dutch Olympic committee and national sports federation are developing a 'volunteers in sport' support system. I think this will offer many new insights in volunteer management!

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