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Some Nagging Questions...

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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This month we've made changes and added features to the Website area we now call [Connecting to Others in the Field](#) (it used to be called "Educate Yourself"). This process made me consider some of the difficulties related to professional networking. So this month's "hot topic" is a potpourri of nagging questions --what do YOU think?

Nagging Question #1 - Why do so many people affiliate only with directors of volunteers within their own setting specialty and not also with the field at large?

When I ran the volunteer program for the Philadelphia Family Court, I belonged *both* to justice-related volunteerism groups and to generic, any-setting groups. Why? Because they met different needs. When I was with my justice colleagues, we could focus on specialized questions such as frustrations with probation officers, confidentiality about juvenile offenders, etc. But our frame of reference was narrow. In the general volunteerism associations I gained a broader understanding of why some challenges exist regardless of setting. I also gleaned lots of seed ideas from other types of facilities to adapt and apply in my setting.

When we compartmentalize ourselves by only attending setting-based training workshops or conferences, or only reading books and journals with our specialized vocabulary, we don't challenge ourselves. Hospital DVSs should occasionally read something written for volunteer programs in the cultural arts, and vice versa. Make it a point, at a conference, of speaking to someone whose name tag indicates a setting far different than your own.

Nagging Question #2 - Why don't we read and write more?

Some of you will head for the hills when you see this question! My reputation for nagging people to *WRITE* about what they do is probably unparalleled. But too many of us are so busy "doing" that we won't make time for reflection, new learning, and sharing with others. True professionals keep themselves informed. And career ladders are built by gaining recognition through published articles.

By the way--this includes my dismay at how many of you read the monthly hot topic (we know because the Website server gives us a daily count of "hits"), but how few of you *respond!* (Hint, hint -

go ahead and challenge me!)

Nagging Question #3 - Why aren't we using our networks for clout and advocacy, as well as for self-education?

As Marilyn MacKensie has said, we are "terminally nice." It isn't in the nature of many directors of volunteers to take a stand and fight. One value of a professional association is that it allows collective assertiveness while protecting the identity of individuals. We need more DOVIAs which do things like produce and distribute "position papers" on the value of a director of volunteers or protest if a volunteer management job is eliminated in their community. Some great groups are out there already--please multiply!

Nagging Question #4 - Why don't we involve volunteers who are leaders of other volunteers in our professional associations?

This is part of a longer, self-contained "hot topic" that I'll tackle some other time. But I fervently hope that we are past the days when we defined "professional" as "paid." Our professional associations ought to be about *function*, not salary. Anyone who is in a leadership position managing volunteers should be welcome. So why do we have so few association members or conference participants who are officer of all-volunteer civic clubs--or who are administrative volunteers in our own agencies?

Certainly at the local DOVIA level we should be able to welcome more people. If every one of us who is a member of a DOVIA enrolled just one key volunteer we'd double the DOVIA membership, give us a sounding board back home for ideas heard at meetings, and provide recognition and personal development for a volunteer leader. We also ought to schedule some workshop sessions on the weekends or in the evenings so that leadership volunteers with other day jobs can attend conferences. But we'll have to do some work to reach them and make them feel welcome.

Your turn....

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Submitted by Elliott Pitts, Program Director, Make-A-Wish Foundation of Maine, Maine

I promised myself that I would respond this month, although I had hoped it would not be this close to the wire.

#1 - Do so many people only affiliate within their own setting specialty? I use both groups equally and strongly believe that others in my DOVIA and within the Make-A-Wish family do the same. Hopefully we are not the exception to the rule. I have found both groups help for many of the reasons that you listed but a few more are:

- The DOVIA provides a great networking opportunity, shared resources, ideas and specific Maine State information (back ground checks, laws, etc.) That would never be discussed within

a Foundation countrywide meeting.

- Similarly, I enjoy meeting with Foundation DOVs to discuss specific topics that could not or would not apply to non-Make-A-Wish DOVs. I just attended an *amazing* Grief Training at a Grieving Children Center and was introduced to a whole new group of professionals that many of my responsibilities overlap with. Find a session that is different to feel like a special treat, but similar enough that you can justify your time to yourself and the Board. Take a volunteer leader with you too!

#4 - Is a great point and I certainly will invite my Regional Volunteer Captains to join the DOVIA meetings. As much as we wail about not getting respect and not being treated as professionals we (OK, definitely I) are in constant danger of doing the exact same to our volunteers in leadership positions. In summary - I'm sold! I will begin to join, read, write, recognize, and affirm. But... which bottomless, growing pile on my desk should I add this too? Can we discuss time management next?

Submitted by K. Ash, Coordinator of Volunteer Services, Catholic Charities, District of Columbia

Susan, I'm one of those who love a good challenge. Being a newbie, I've been reluctant to respond to anything, publicly. However, you and my other virtual mentors have helped me know that volunteer leadership begins with reflection and dedication (both of which I did many years ago as the "volunteers supervisor" -- with no program, of course). I feel an association with you/y'all through virtual meetings, support, networking, and information exchange like this site. Thank you for at least this degree of connectedness. You and the AVA have given me roots and Nan's listserv has given me wings. As an advocate by nature, I'm often in interesting conversations about volunteers in our organization. Most outstanding is the issue of volunteers and client/file confidentiality. Do others have this nagging obstacle/smoke screen (especially from social workers)?

Submitted by Christine Foster, Ramapo College of New Jersey, NJ

Well, you've find one volunteer leader of volunteers, who struggled, making every possible mistake, until I got involved in, and taught, organizational communication. Gradually I learned to transfer certain aspects of communicating with employees and, more importantly which DO NOT transfer. I have avidly been exploring this site, because I feel the topic of leading volunteers so important that I now spend one session teaching this in each organizational communication class at the undergraduate level. Seeking and including those who are not paid but do what you do is a great idea. Let me to be the first!

Submitted by Gayle Crossley, Volunteer Svcs. Manager, Interex, Sunnyvale, CA

I agree - we need to cross fertilize! I am a volunteer services manager in a not-for-profit and have found very few connections to other people in this profession. Where can I find more information in

order to network?

Submitted by *Melissa Eystad, World Spirit Consulting, Minnesota*

I fervently agree that we have "niched" ourselves almost to the point of irrelevance as a field! Yes, it is important to connect with others who work in similar work, in similar settings. But it continues to amaze me how many colleagues never seem to see the need to venture out into the wider world of volunteerism to learn from the diversity, complexity and wonderful similarities and contradictions of volunteering wherever it occurs. I have made it a personal goal to work toward bringing all the "kin" together here in my state so that we may one day speak with a single voice on behalf of our work and its great importance.

Submitted by *Liz Weaver, Volunteer Centre of Hamilton & District, Canada*

I agree with you...we need to read and write more about our field. An organization can be measured as successful by providing a continuous learning environment. As one who has never wanted to reinvent the wheel, I learn so much through the experiences of others. Let's learn to share the richness of our profession and to value the change that we make in the lives of others. But move beyond volunteer administration to organizational management and development. You can position yourself by knowing more about how and who and why organizational decisions are made.

Submitted by *Dawn Marks, President, DOVIA Orange County, CA*

Our DOVIA group in Orange County CA is sponsoring a 3-hour workshop this month on the topics of coaching and mentoring. One of our objectives is to help more and less experienced volunteer managers become "matched" in mentoring relationships. One of the issues that came up in our planning was is it important that the "matches" work in similar agencies. After some discussion, it was decided that mentoring across agencies was the better way to go. I was glad to see your article to know that we're on the right track. Perhaps someone has experience or reference articles about mentoring related topics that would help us? Our DOVIA web address is www.agoravista.com/dovia We appreciate any suggestions. Thank you!

Submitted by *Jackie Specken, Community Information and Volunteer Centre, Alberta, Canada*

Susan I love your hot topics! I offer a suggestion for groups looking to address nagging question #1. A few years ago when two professional associations of managers of volunteer programs merged in our area, we came up with the idea of Topical Interest Groups (or what we fondly refer to as TIG's). The idea came from the fact that one of the associations was focused specifically on healthcare and the other was more general. It was felt that there was great benefit from maintaining a group of people

discussing healthcare specific issues, as there would probably be for other specific interest groups, but that there was also benefit to having one unified association of professionals.

TIG's can take any of several different forms (and in fact have) and can be formal or informal. The concept has continued to evolve and seems to meet a variety of needs for the membership. Professionally, I benefit greatly from this approach and maybe other associations can as well. I also think we should consider networking outside of our sector. Secondly, I appreciate your challenge in nagging question #3 about involving leadership volunteers in professional associations. Our association has recently changed the membership structure to allow a discount for students and your challenge suggests to me that we make that available for leadership volunteers. I think it's a great way for the sector to recognize the efforts of these wonderful volunteers - and for us to learn from their successes and challenges as we do from other colleagues. Keep asking those great questions.

Submitted by Sarah H. Elliston , United Way Volunteer Resource Center , Cincinnati, Ohio/ USA

Well, I'm one of the people who does respond every month so you're probably tired of what I think but I'll share a few ideas anyway. When I coordinated volunteers in city government, there were only two of us in the state and we were able to develop some programs around Ohio and now there is a nice network of coordinators of municipal and government programs. And we got out of it just what you described. But I looked to the other organizations for new ideas, as you described you did too. I believe we have a need for both and I am intrigued with the suggestion to DOVIA members that each of us could bring a leader from an all-volunteer group to really fertilize the discussion. It's a great idea. What I have seen here in Cincinnati is that individuals who retire from a paid position to raise a family continue to be involved in our DOVIA because they want to stay involved with what's going on in the field. They get involved in other local causes and projects so they represent the group you mentioned. Course they started as paid staff - it's an interesting difference.

As for more writing in the field, first of all in the 16 years I've been in the field the number of books about volunteer management has gone from 2 to 2 zillion. Secondly, for myself, I'm not sure for whom to write - I guess one could write an article and then try to market it but frankly my time is so limited that I'd need to be asked to write in order to "get it done" - I am in the position now of having to read more of the literature than I used to have time for. But since I am working with volunteers who train and consult, now I need to really know their resources. So that's nice but it's new and I still have to remind myself that it's ok to take a few hours to read a professional journal, a book or watch a new video.

Submitted by Mary V. Merrill, President, Merrill Associates, Ohio at <http://www.merrillassoc.com>

Amen! I too find it disturbing that our profession tends to be somewhat exclusive. Several years ago I helped change the focus of our state conference to be more inclusive of all the facets such as volunteerism, service, service learning, corporate volunteer programs and philanthropy. The concept was to bring people who do not usually have a chance to be together to discuss our ideas, programs, needs, etc. and to build a collective voice for common issues.

The volunteer administrators have been the most difficult group. They complain that they "lost their conference." They see no need to "mingle" with others. Yet we now have teachers and educators and corporate people eager to learn more and come together and share. Sometimes I think our profession is very short sighted and unable to see the possibilities and the connections that are an increasing part of our world. We have so much to share and so much to gain from the cross sharing.

I have encouraged our DOVIA for several years to be proactive--doing exactly as you suggest, position papers and letters to editor and letter to organizations that eliminate volunteer administrator positions. I often feel like the lone voice in the night. As a whole we seem to be a profession that want to stay "invisible." Making ourselves know, collectively will only recognize us.

Wonderful questions, Susan. Thanks for an opportunity to add my two cents on subjects that have bugged me for some time.

Submitted by Tanya K. Refshauge, Region IX Director, Alpha Phi Omega, National Service Fraternity (collegiate, co-educational, community service organization), Minnesota

WOW! I just found this web site the other day while looking for resources at my graduate internship. I am impressed, and, Susan, just for you, "I'm writing!" I obviously am a volunteer here in my internship. I am a graduate student in a masters-level social work program, a social worker facilitating support groups for middle school youth, AND am a 'volunteer manager' in an all-volunteer organization... in my 'spare time.'

I currently am responsible to, and for, 23 volunteer 'staff' and over 600 volunteer college students in my geographical area. I also am a member of our National Board of Directors. Consequently, I bring a variety of experiences to my work and my volunteering. I believe both areas of my life inspire me to be more active in the other. In exploring your site, my curiosity was peaked when I stumbled across the DOVIA page. I wondered if this organization would (a) be open to me, and (b) be of use to me. After reading your "Hot Topic," I believe I have my answer. In addition to following up a number of additional resources from your site, I will definitely be contacting the DOVIA listed for Minnesota.

In closing, I'd like to make one point. As you stated in one of your comments, I too believe that those working with volunteers need to broaden their experiences and knowledge bases to encompass additional areas other than their own. I find many similarities in my work as a social worker, and my work as a volunteer manager of volunteers. In my profession, we are only as valuable as our skill set and knowledge base. The smaller either of those are, the more limited we are in facilitating others to

make changes in their lives. I can't help but see the same hold true in my experiences in working with, and being a, volunteer.

Submitted by *Georgan C. Johnson-Coffey, Manager of Volunteer Services, Indiana*

I think the issue of not networking with others outside one's particular field is especially true about Directors of Volunteer Services in hospitals. I know because I use to be one. I can remember saying and still hear from hospital colleagues that "no one can relate to what I do in a hospital". There was an elitist attitude that I feel is crippling.

I am still in volunteer leadership and two jobs away from the hospital. I have broaden my connections and grown professionally and personally. I am very thankful that I have changed. I myself, and the volunteer programs that I lead and have led have benefited greatly.

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