

[News and Hot Topics](#) » [Applied Futurism: Putting Trends to Work Today](#)

Applied Futurism: Putting Trends to Work Today

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

August

2004

Do you watch the national and world news and shake your head? Do you wonder if global and regional developments will end up affecting the volunteer program you run? You should.

Volunteering never occurs in a vacuum and so all the social, economic and cultural trends affecting many citizens will clearly affect many volunteers.

Sometimes current events provide opportunities to grab what's new or hot; other times they will set off warning bells to help you avoid negative impact. You can strengthen your volunteer program by becoming an effective forecaster, making sure you seize great trends while sidestepping the bad.

Why Is Forecasting Necessary?

First, keep in mind that futurists refer to what's-to-come in plural terms. They talk about futures, since at any given time there are an infinite number of paths we can take. In fact, they consider three different types of futures:

- *Possible* futures, which include anything and everything within the laws of the universe as known today, from utopian scenarios to hellish nightmares.
- *Probable* futures, which are a central slice of possible futures but represent a reasonable extrapolation of what is happening today into coming years if major changes (catastrophes, miracles) do not occur.
- *Preferable* futures, which are clearly subjective, as seen by the eye of the beholder.

Volunteering is all about preferable futures, since people only volunteer for the causes they believe must be supported for a positive outcome. But recognize that preferable is an opinion, so do some reality checking to make sure that your organization and the volunteers who work within it envision the same ends. For example, the enormous changes in American health care in the last decade have led to hospitals being very different places than when many long-time volunteers signed up, with even more changes predicted. If you took a poll of the priorities of hospital administrators today and compared their responses to those of volunteers asked the same question, do you think the two

groups would agree? What do you think new applicants for hospital volunteer positions envision when they project health care into the next decade?

On a practical level, this crystal ball gazing matters more than we may credit. If organization management (both paid administrators and the volunteer board) and the frontline paid and volunteer staff dream of futures that are not in sync, conflict is inevitable in such areas as budgeting, policy making, work design, marketing, evaluation, and recognition. Differences in vision between the officers and members of all-volunteer associations will similarly lead to tension.

The other practical reason that futurism is necessary for volunteerism practitioners is that it can be applied to volunteer program development. The more you know about what concerns people publicly and personally, the more effectively you can craft your recruitment messages. The more accurately you can recognize new client needs and surmise the services your organization will start offering to clients, the better you will be in creating volunteer assignments on the cutting edge proactively meeting those needs rather than reacting after-the-fact. A volunteer program that leads its agency into the best service provision is far more essential to mission than a program that waits to be dragged in new directions.

Becoming a Futurist

The first step in forecasting and then taking action on trends is to notice them! This means paying attention to the news and to commentaries on the news. It includes seeing recurring themes in fictional t.v. shows and movies, too. Thirty years ago all sit-coms concerned nuclear families of mother/father/sons/daughters. Today sit-coms offer mix-and-match families of single divorced parents, single never-married parents, couples without children, blended multiple married families, various sexual orientations, etc. If your organization serves children, for example, what do you, your colleagues, and volunteers picture as family and how does that mesh with what the children receiving services think?

Living in society with your eyes open, then, is a good first step to recognizing trends. But it takes conscious attention. Broaden your reading to include both the editorial and the op-ed pages of the newspaper. Skim through magazines geared to various audiences (teenagers, different professions, specific ethnic groups) and spot check what issues seem to be percolating (this is a great way to find value in the odd publications lying around doctors' offices and hair salons!). Attend a Chamber of Commerce meeting or a current events forum at a university or library. As you identify trends you want to follow, recruit volunteers to help you learn more about them, including surfing the Web for more facts and opinions.

Once you feel in-the-know about trends, enlist help in analyzing the issues from different perspectives. Once or twice a year, convene a Trends Think Tank in which you invite volunteers and staff to discuss social, economic and cultural issues they feel are in flux and to consider how any of

these might impact your organization. Ask volunteers to clip articles or refer you to useful Web sites whenever something catches their eye as a trend alert.

It's very important to look beyond the first wave of anticipated outcomes of any trend. Something that seems quite negative may, after the first turmoil fades, end up more positive in the long run. In the same way, something that looks wonderful at first glance may evolve more problems over time. A good strategy is to make yourself (and your Think Tank) identify both positive and negative possible outcomes for any trend, even if one list is longer than the other. Know yourself, too. If you tend to be an optimist or a pessimist, force yourself to see another side of the issue or get help doing so.

Finally, recruit expert volunteers as advisors on the future. A wealth of knowledge is available in every community and someone does not have to work on site as a volunteer to provide insight to you and key decision-makers. As volunteer program manager, you can ask all sorts of people to give a few hours a year to a meeting, a phone call, or a long e-mail to answer to specific questions from their trained perspectives. Such advisors can be political figures, funders, media reporters, university faculty, or any type of civic leader. Here are sample questions you might pose:

- Given your area of expertise, what do you think is the most critical trend that our organization ought to prepare for in the next 3 years? The next 20 years?
- Given your understanding of our client group, what three issues do you feel will have the most impact on them, and how, in the next five years?
- Given your understanding of our local community, what changes do you envision occurring here in the next 3 years? The next 20 years?

These types of questions should elicit raw data that your Think Tank can then take and analyze from the perspective of *your* organization.

While you're imagining the future, can you picture an organization that looks to the volunteer services department for its visionary thinking? That asks you to be on the strategic planning team? That uses the unique ability of volunteers to respond quickly to new circumstances by testing innovative projects through volunteer action? Wow.

How do you keep informed about trends and issues?

How do you apply what you learn from trends?

How do you/could you help your organization develop future strategies?

Related Topics: [Program Assessment](#) | [Volunteer Resources Manager, Role of](#) | [Trends and Issues](#)

Submitted on 2 September 2004 by Hillary Roberts, Project Linus NJ Inc., Pres. , Keyport/NJ USA

I see "Differences in vision between the officers and members of all-volunteer associations will similarly lead to tension" as the greatest road block that exists for me. Officers and members with the

greatest amount of experience who are reluctant to mentor newcomers, pass the gauntlet or encourage the next evolution of association growth, need to check their professional egos at the door! This sadly common behavior can cause the single largest drop in association membership and participation. Often stalling even the smallest procedural changes.

Please share best practice that associations can adopt to discourage tensions and encourage futurism.

Submitted on 5 August 2004 by Marjorie Moore, Minds Eye Information Service, Belleville, IL USA

Really great topic! I recently started an email digest for our volunteers and I always try to include something to think about at the end. I'm definitely posing some of these questions to my volunteers. Not only will it get them thinking about what exactly they are doing here, but also their responses will cause me to think in a different way.

Sometimes people get stuck in their ruts, but we're a part of an ever changing society. Thanks for reminding us!

Submitted on 4 August 2004 by Elizabeth Lowenger, Ontario Veterinary College Alumni Affairs, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario Canada

As a resource, I think demographic trends and information can be very useful. New immigrant populations do not always make the "news" and they often have their own sources of information. Here in Canada we have [StatCan](#) which has a great website offering demographic profiling of different communities and how it has changed over the years.

Submitted on 4 August 2004 by Cissy Seibel, United Rehabilitation Services, Dayton, OH USA

Read? Watch trends? Talk to your clients? Yes, that is exactly what business has done for years...successful businesses anyway. But alas, we are our own worse enemies as we continue to think in the past. Stuck in our own time warp believing: 1) everyone SHOULD volunteer; 2) as people get older and retire, surely they will volunteer for my cause; 3) parents and schools should teach volunteerism by making kids volunteer. And other damaging, self-limiting beliefs. Rise up and get out VMs! Read, hold focus groups, talk to every small or big group you can. Teach the people and they will come. Don't let the 'wave of the future' sink your agency. Use the tools of today like market research studies in your area, changing trends in demographics, school trends, DIVERSITY, focus groups, and more. Use these tools of today to recruit the volunteers of tomorrow. Be on top of the wave!

Submitted on 3 August 2004 by Fran Cook, Calvary Lutheran Church, West Chester, PA USA

Trends lots of times turn into the future! I work at a church and we are studying a report produced by the National YMCA on trends. They have identified ten issues that are effecting not just the Y but

also families/communities/programs.

Being proactive and planning your future – the think tank idea is an excellent one to keep your organization vibrant. We are doing just that.

Submitted on 2 August 2004 by Larnie Fox, 23five inc., San Francisco, California, USA

The term "Futurism" applies to an early 20th century art movement, mainly Italian. Look it up in Google. I'm not sure what you should call the movement you're talking about, but calling it Futurism will confuse the heck out of artists and art historians.

Susan replies: Well, live and learn. You are right that one use of this term is in art history (which I didn't know and find interesting). However, keep scrolling in that Google search and you'll find quite a number of uses of the word "futurism" to refer to studies of the future, which of course was my meaning here.

Submitted on 2 August 2004 by Randi Abrams-Gonzalez, Cabrillo Marine Aquarium, San Pedro, California, USA

Once again a thought provoking article. I would suggest, though, that instead of using the phrase "sexual preferences" that you use sexual orientation. As gay marriage and other such issues are discussed in the media, we need to be sensitive to this volunteer audience and, indeed, volunteer coordinators!

Susan replies: You're absolutely right, Randi, and I've made the change. Thanks for noticing and commenting.

PRIVACY STATEMENT

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

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2025