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Money is No Object

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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It's an interesting thing about money. It's important and everyone needs it, but it can also be a hindrance. For organizations and even individuals, money brings obligations such as the need for stewardship and fiscal responsibility, or accountability to the source of the funds. Money can also set limits. Once you've promised how you are going to use the money, you may have little flexibility in changing your course or methods. We all know the problems that arise when, in trying to get money, an organization develops a project simply to attract a funder rather than doing what is most necessary and finding a funder to support that.

Perhaps the most unique thing about working with volunteers is our perspective on cash. We don't need it, or at least we don't need as much of it as other departments do. Of course we know that there are costs for and to volunteers but there isn't the same level of spending that is seen in other parts of an organization. This financial freedom allows us a different approach to the subject of funding. Let me explain.

- We are the only department with the ability to see something that needs to be done, think of a way to deal with it, and implement the idea--as long as we can find volunteers willing and able to do it. It's not that we "save" money or that volunteers are "free," it's that we are able to *bypass* money by taking an alternate route. That's a remarkable thing.
- "'Time is money" is correct. There is a monetary value to the time volunteers contribute (to them and to our organizations). So why shouldn't people be able to choose which form(s) of contribution they wish to make? We unconditionally accept cash--why do we have so many concerns about accepting time? Furthermore, isn't it wonderful that volunteering allows everyone to support your cause, not just the wealthy?
- Rather than looking for funds on the basis of an idea, it is safer to test it first. Maybe our original proposal has weaknesses, or is missing something. Maybe we are not asking for enough money.

Volunteers ought to be seen consciously as the organization's experimental lab. Pilot an idea and see how it works. Engage these volunteers in assessing and refining the concepts. Then go ahead and find money to offer the service fully.

- It takes time to find money. What if the need is immediate? We can recruit volunteers who recognize the crisis and are willing to start the work now.
- Money follows success, not the other way around. Passion, commitment and hard work start action. If the results are visible, funders will jump on the bandwagon. Who better to act passionately than volunteers? *If you want to consider this idea, read Ivan Scheier's new book, [Making Dreams Come True without Money, Might or Miracles](#) -you'll find it very inspiring.*

I believe that reluctance to involve volunteers often stems from a fear that, if volunteers are successful, future funders will conclude that the organization does not require money. We need to battle that misconception. We know that, historically, it is volunteers who act on needs before anyone else. Over and over again we see the pattern of successful pioneering by volunteers leading eventually to solicitation of funds and the hiring of paid staff. Further, volunteers themselves are the most vocal advocates for needing volunteers *and* money. They understand why consistent staff time and attention are necessary to success-and they are happy to tell prospective funders what they think.

So this month I'd like to learn about YOUR experiences in by-passing funding with volunteers.

- What project did you start or accomplish with volunteers specifically as an alternative to waiting for money?
- Have you asked volunteers to experiment with any new ideas prior to launching a full service?
- What were you able to do without money that surprised you?
- What were you able to do without money of which you are most proud?

It may be worth noting that our mindset regarding alternatives to cash ought to extend to other aspects of our work as well. We ought to be the people who see opportunities for barter, in-kind services, collaboration for multiple effects, and ways to get things for free. It's a perspective that says: "If we remove money from the equation, how would we get it done?" That's why the Internet ought to excite volunteer project leaders!

Instead of apologizing for how much we can get done with volunteers even in the absence of money, we ought to be celebrating this special resource.

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Management

Posted 5/9/01

Submitted by Helen Rusich, Terra Association, Edmonton, AB, Canada

We began a labour support program for pregnant youth without money. We had applied for a grant but did not get it. So we simply started the program by doing what we always do recruiting labour support volunteers; through the doula assc., nursing students, midwifery assc. etc. Women came to us in supportive numbers. We extended the interview process somewhat to compensate. Staff provided the training and orientation. Manuals were made. A limited amount of resources were provided; binders. The program was very successful, so for the second year we bought a birthing ball, and birth bag (includes an instamatic camera, towels, magazines (donated), candy, wash cloth), bag was donated, bought film. So for under \$200 we are in our second year of operation. The volunteers have not asked for funds for hospital parking or other expenses buy these are now available should the need arise. I agree that a great deal can be done without money. People only need to live in the third world or in places where there is few economic resources to realize how much can be done without money.

Posted 5/7/01
Submitted by Gail Barrera, Volunteer Coordinator, Catholic Charities Northern, Ft. Collins, CO

Good article! How can we get directors to see the value of volunteers as a financial resource when they are resistant?

Posted 5/7/01

Submitted by Maureen Crawford Hentz, Volunteer Programs, New England Aquarium, Boston, MA 02110

It's true--there is so much we can do by by-passing money. I do have some mixed feelings about the time is money analogy. While certainly I agree that time is money, sometimes organizations DO turn down money-- from companies or individuals with missions different from or counter to the organization's mission. So, too do organizations turn down money with too dramatic "fulfillment" requirements (ie: I'll give you \$5000 if you let me fish in your giant ocean exhibit) or from grantees whose grant parameters don't quite fit current plans. I think it's important that as a professional group, we continue to acknowledge and support that having a successful volunteer program ONLY works if we are judicious about those whose time WE accept. Not every individual who wants to volunteer is or can be a good fit with our organization(s). In order to maintain a program's high standards, it is very important to hold applicants to program requirements in order to participate. Failing to do so (stated another way: taking everybody who walks through the door) robs a program of its integrity.

Posted 5/7/01

Submitted by Shelley Thoen-Chaykoski, Leisure Services Director, Saskatchewan, Canada

Interesting points on managing without money-I manage a leisure services department in a small rural community and from my experience have found that our volunteers operated at their best when they did not have money (or a lot of it to work with!!) We went through a period when there were large amounts of government grants available and this abundance of funds led to a 'protectionist' type attitude between various volunteer groups, but when no grants were available-volunteer groups were much more creative and willing to work together towards a common goal. People look at me like I'm crazy when I say the best times are when we do not have a bunch of grants available-----but I have found with volunteers this to be true!!-Go Figure?

Posted 5/7/01

Submitted by Lisa Coble, Volunteer Manager/Newport Hospital, Newport, RI

Interesting "hot topic" about people raising vs. fund raising.

Posted 5/7/01

Submitted by Ivory, Inner Wheel Club of Meenambakkam, Madras, Tamil Nadu, South India

Thanks for the lovely hot topic you dealt with. I whole heartedly support your idea of accomplishing volunteering work without the need for money. But the question is how effective can our volunteer be if we do not have enough money to run some of our programmes and projects for the poor and down trodden people in India.

Basically, though I work for a non for profit NGO, all my spare time is used for volunteering work. Hence, I joined the Inner Wheel Club where I am able to render my services for the welfare of the poor here in India. Even here in the club, we members find it very difficult to cope up without any financial commitments. What I want to say is that our projects are related to certain important issues such as education, health, environment, orphans, old age, the blind and disabled, empowering the women and of course helping with the children who are suffering from cancer.

We are based in Madras, South India and in each Inner Wheel club (30 clubs) we have volunteers ranging from 25 to 80 members in each of the 30 clubs. However much the clubs try to help out in reaching to the poorest of the poor communities, we found that we did not have enough funds to really do some worth while projects related to the above issues. For instance this year as President of the Inner Wheel Club of Meenambakkam, I have decided to 'reach out to the unreached' in the rural areas. But sometime I do feel frustrated because I do have to raise some funds even if I have to do volunteering work. It is not that we do the work because we want to attract the funders. Our main aim is to serve the suffering humanity. Besides this, I feel that it is better to go out and render our services to the poor rural women who face many problems and need our help. Well Susan, I hope you understand the type of problems we face out here. All the same I fully agree with your write up.

Posted 5/7/01

Submitted by Charla Doughty, Events/Volunteer Coordinator, Texas, USA

My position at the Kingsville Convention and Visitors Bureau resulted in a call I made to volunteer to help with the first Wildlife and Birding Festival in Nov of 2000. to . When a staff position came

available a few months later, I eagerly accepted not realizing that planning festivals was only a small part of the job. As Volunteer Coordinator, I learned how a thriving visitors center is operated on as little money as possible. We have a group of 23 volunteers who staff our center 7 days a week. Their loyalty, goodwill and genuine concern for the travelers who come through our city is constant source of admiration and respect. Currently, all of our volunteers are seniors but we are recruiting throughout the community. We look for ways to recognize their contributions and this month will be celebrating with a bar-b-que, complete with gifts of aprons and framed award certificates to thank them for their years of service. The staff never take our volunteers for granted realizing that they are here because they want to be...its certainly not the money!

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