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The Missing Link: Where are Volunteers at the National Level?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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A few weeks ago I spoke at an "e-Philanthropy" conference on the subject of online volunteer recruitment. Since the rest of the 2-day event focused on raising money via the Internet, it was a coup simply to be invited to offer anything on volunteers. At one point, I was discussing the importance of an organization's own homepage (see "[If Not Your Home Page, Then Where?](#)") and asked: "If I visit your web site, will I see mention of volunteer involvement?"

One participant replied: "Well, I'm with our national office and we don't have any volunteers at headquarters. That's all done at the local level." I bounced back with: "Why *doesn't* your headquarters have volunteers working in it or for it?" To which she asked, "but what would volunteers *do*?"

Her mystification at how volunteers might be incorporated at the national level (apart from the board of directors) was hardly unusual. Finding money is a shared responsibility of all levels of an organization, but finding talented people is seen as done "at the bottom." I've often observed that in many institutions the powerful message to employees is: *If you work hard enough and are promoted high enough, some day you won't be asked to work with volunteers.* There's an invisible but real demarcation point beyond which department heads and other executives would never be expected to find ways for volunteers to contribute to their projects the way frontline employees must. The same holds true for national vs. local units of a large organization.

Leaving aside the obvious stereotyping of volunteers as nice but unskilled, can YOU think of things that *the right, qualified volunteer* might do at a national level? Here are just a few of my ideas to get you started:

- People who live near the physical location of the national office could work in just about any capacity, from highly skilled project work to competent clerical work.

- Virtual assignments could recruit volunteers anywhere in the world to offer technical assistance on any subject, writing and editing, translations, and online research.
- Individuals or teams in the field, working almost anywhere, could run focus groups, surveys, and evaluations.
- The national office could actively solicit volunteer applications for board and advisory council positions (at all levels), identify prospects with the right interests and credentials, and assign them to short-term "test" projects. If there were more ways for someone to help an organization at the national level *before* going onto the board, there might be fewer do-nothing board members around!

Volunteer Development at the National Level

There are two types of volunteer management staff who should be hired for a national headquarters (those who want to see a career ladder in our field, take note!).

First, if an organization wants to recruit and be effective with volunteers at headquarters (as suggested above), someone has to coordinate the effort. Yet how many national office volunteer program managers do you know? There are national office personnel chiefs, secretarial supervisors, and in-house training heads - but no one assigned to supporting volunteers in the building. If no one is in charge, there will be no volunteers; if there are no volunteers, national staff never learn to understand the issues about successful volunteer administration. And if no one understands - from first-hand experience - the advantages and disadvantages of working with volunteers, how can there be intelligent support for a volunteer management system at any level?

Note that the position I just described is different from another rare but critical assignment: someone tasked with oversight of volunteer involvement issues throughout the organization at all levels. The number of national organizations - and this is an international observation - with a volunteer department or even a single national director of volunteer development is stunningly small. What do you suppose the data is for national fundraising or promotion/marketing staff? If there is no one in-house charged with paying attention to volunteer matters for the organization as a whole, then it follows that volunteers fall between the cracks when it comes to policy making, budgeting, training, and even Web site space.

Last year we convened a "Summit" at the AVA International Conference on Volunteer Administration in Toronto for those individuals working at a national level to create volunteer management systems for their organizations. It was so successful that the group will meet again in October in Denver as a pre-conference 1 ½ day session.

And About those National Web Sites...

At the "e-Philanthropy" event, I did some more probing about whether it made sense to ignore

volunteers on a national Web site. I asked:

"Does your national site explain how to give money at either the national or the local level?" Answer: yes

"Do you give prospective clients information on where to go in their own communities to obtain services?" Answer: yes

"Doesn't your national office see its role as supporting the local level?" Answer: yes
The evident implication: "So why wouldn't you also consider it important to provide a national-to-local outreach effort for volunteers?" Again, if no one at the national level is charged with paying attention, volunteers remain invisible.

Are you part of a national or international organization at any level? What's been your experience? How can we "educate up"?

Appendix:

The Steering Committee for the 2002 Leadership Summit for National Level Managers of Volunteer Resources invites you to join them for an evening and a day of diverse and topical sessions immediately before the 2002 ICVA in Denver. Participants must work at a national level, responsible for volunteer involvement throughout an organizational system. (If you meet this qualification but cannot join us in Denver, please let us know if you are interested in ongoing contact with our newly-forming affinity group.)

On October 8-9, explore the trends and challenges related to volunteerism in current times and learn from Susan Ellis how to make trends work for all of us - now and in the future. Network with others, raise your challenges, share your solutions. Identify the roles of volunteer activists within your organization, and the challenges that their activities might present - internally and externally. And finally, listen to the always genuine inspirational comments from Marlene Wilson. Join us in Denver - recharge your batteries! [Contact information was removed since no longer applicable.]

Related Topics: [Pro Bono Service](#) | [Employee/Volunteer Relations](#) | [Executive Director, Role of](#) | [Volunteer Work Design](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#) | [Philosophy](#)

Submitted on 25Sept02 by Jayne Cravens, Online Volunteering Specialist, Germany

Not involving volunteers at a national office, but encouraging the involvement of volunteers at the local level, is hypocritical! If the national office is telling its affiliates that they should be involving volunteers, then it had better be doing it too! Here at UN Volunteers, we do just that! Our mantra lately is "Walk the Talk." We've also started an employee volunteer program -- how can we approach corporations and encourage them to allow their employees to volunteer if we don't have such a program ourselves? I'm really taken aback by the statements from some of the people on the response board here that say they would not involve volunteers at the national office. Saddened and

amazed. Hope they will all reconsider the reasons that involving volunteers are so important to an organization's credibility.

Submitted on 02Sept24 by Paul Bryant, retired Volunteer Manager

As a retired Volunteer Manager (and a current volunteer!) I must admit to some surprise at the debate on the use of volunteers. Mr Restall's opinion is certainly less hardline than the National Association of Volunteer Bureaux guidelines on job substitution. NAVB refuse to involve volunteers in their office at all. This goes beyond Mr Restall's rather tentative suggestion that there MAY be good reasons why SOME organisations choose not to involve volunteers. I don't think there's an easy line to be drawn here, but I think it is true that to not pay someone to do a job that the money's there to pay for means: 1 - effectively keeping someone out there unemployed, and 2 - exploiting the unpaid worker. Organisations wishing to help introduce people into the workplace should by all means set up work placements, but don't muddy the waters by calling it volunteering. And what about equal opportunities? When some organisations are attempting to involve asylum seekers, people with learning difficulties etc, how does this square with others seeking only to involve white collar graduates who can afford to devote the time these 'volunteer' roles demand? And of course there are the legal issues. Organisations blurring the lines between paid and unpaid workers face changing their volunteer's legal status. I couldn't demand the time commitments these 'volunteer' roles need from my volunteers for fear of making them employees. I imagine the danger's worse now that we have a minimum wage in force.

Posted on 18Sept02 by Udeni Salmon, Head of Volunteer Support, London, United Kingdom

In July 2002 I left a major consultancy to find my dream job in the voluntary sector. To test the waters, I was a volunteer for 2 months in the Head Office of a charity. I did a 4-week strategic consultancy project for them and produced a report. If they had hired me as a consultant, the report would have cost £50,000. OneWorld were pleased with my work and acted as a referee on my CV. I am now the Head of Volunteer Support at Leonard Cheshire, responsible for our 2000 volunteers nationally.

As my experience of strategic, national volunteering was so successful, I am introducing a volunteering program at Leonard Cheshire head office, whereby skilled professionals perform short-term, projects.

Posted on 15Sept02 by Lou Culafoy, Manager LBP Volunteer Centre, West Yorkshire, United Kingdom

Having worked in an agency placing volunteers in organisations, I would agree with Mark Restall (below). National offices often seem to involve volunteers for the sake of it rather than because they really need to or because there are really appropriate volunteering opportunities. I have found that in a lot of cases volunteers placed in national offices of organisations find themselves in ill-thought out, un motivating roles with little support - most, often they seem to be used as office dogsbodies. Of course there are exceptions, of which RNIB may well be one, but I would argue that organisations should involve volunteers because of a genuine need and commitment to volunteer support rather than as a cosmetic exercise.

Submitted on 23Aug02 by Miriam Leslie, Volunteer Coordinator, Kids Kottage Foundation, Alberta, Canada

Thank you for this article. While my organization is locally based, I can relate to your insight that people misconstrue the role of working with volunteers. It is not a "bottom of the ladder" position at all. What a privilege to meet people with generous hearts who donate their skills with excellence to our causes. How can we help correct this myth? I'd love to hear other responses.

Submitted on 23Aug02 by Mark Rollé, Human Resources Development Manager - Oxfam GB

In response to the hot topic I would say that my organisation actively seeks volunteers to work in our Head Office, as well as throughout the organization. They are a vital part of the network and support systems which could not be funded by means of paid employees. As far as what can they do.. well they can do anything you want them to - or they often come prepared with 'an offer'. I think that the 'V' word can be often misconstrued as meaning that an individual is perhaps 'Less functional or committed' than their paid counterpart. My experience is that often volunteers provide the 'icing on the cake' in terms of solutions that the paid part of the organisation is struggling with. They do not leave their brains at the door when they come to volunteer - as some people seem to perceive. We do have a Volunteering Manager as well!

Submitted on 23Aug02 by John Urban, Volunteer Coordinator / Americorps National Service Member, Prescott, AZ

I do believe that volunteering on the national level is important, not only for work support, but to set precedence for the "local" chapters. (Otherwise known as the bottom feeders) If our national programs don't use volunteers and use excuses like "we have nothing for them to do" then they have simply sold out to the typical corporate attitude. It comes down to staff training and volunteer training. If your paid staff is afraid of losing their jobs, train and orientate them to the idea of using volunteers. This is not a 'one size fits all' comment, (there are always exceptions) but in general you do not recruit volunteers you create them. It takes time, effort, (and YES) sometimes money to train a quality volunteer. I think that national organizations want something for nothing if they use the excuses I heard in Mr. Restall's article (see [below](#)) . Volunteers are not free, they cost.

When it comes down to it, volunteers are there to help. They want to give you their service (whatever it may be) for FREE. I bet national organizations could always find room in their budgets for a little FREE money. Why then would you not find room for a volunteer?

Submitted on 26Aug02 by Rob Jackson, Volunteering Development Manager, RNIB, London, England

Just so people don't think Mark Restall's opinion (see [below](#)) reflects practice across England I want to outline the roles volunteers are involved with at the national office of the Royal National Institute of the Blind here in London.

In my part of the organisation (External Relations) we have volunteers editing an internal staff newsletter on community fundraising and leading on a project to promote the contribution of

volunteers to our agency's work. In the past we have had researchers, administration staff and envelope stuffers who have been volunteers too.

We have also recently engaged a volunteer in writing our organisation's corporate publishing strategy - oh and our trustees are volunteers as well and they meet and work here at the national office too.

Submitted on 23Aug02 by Jean Strating, Volunteer Program Specialist, Library District, Florida, USA

I just read the response by Mr. Restall (see the response [below](#)) and it was rather discouraging. National offices do many of the same tasks as regional and local offices do, and use volunteers, so why not have volunteers working in a national office? His reasoning had no logic but did have excuses. Any good business plan should have the number of employees needed and the same for volunteers. Employees should be assured that their position would not be replaced by a volunteer position and the volunteer should feel equally valuable if they are stuffing envelopes or planning an annual event.

Submitted on 13Aug02 by Sheri Wilensky, Director, Volunteer Management & Learning, American Lung Association, New York, NY

Thanks, Susan for highlighting what I've already learned firsthand! My position here at the American Lung Association was newly created almost 6 years ago. In addition to having the primary responsibility for our volunteer program nationwide, I do recruit volunteers and coordinate the volunteer program here at our national office but before I came on board there were no volunteers, other than leadership level volunteers working with the national office.

I attended the summit in Toronto last year and will be at the summit in Denver as well. I, like you, was surprised last year when I realized that we are one of the few national offices that have volunteers helping us out here in the office as well as virtually.

Before coming to the American Lung Association, I worked for the local chapter in New York for Volunteers of America. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that there was no national director of volunteers at that organization. Denny Barnett, who is now the President of AVA, had pulled together a network of the local volunteer directors at VOA so we could share ideas and communicate with one another.

Maybe I'm just too idealistic but I really do not know how anyone working in a non-profit organization -- be it a national or a field office -- can say that there are no roles for volunteers at their offices.

Submitted on 12Aug02 by Mark Restall, Information Officer, National Centre for Volunteering, London, England

I think there can be good reasons why national offices have less volunteers. National offices often do not have roles that are appropriate for volunteers. Most tasks in

such offices can and should be paid for. It's fair enough for organisations not to use volunteers if they wish to avoid job substitution or 'envelope stuffing syndrome'.

Blurring the boundaries between paid work and volunteering can be ethically tricky, cause paid workers to fear for their jobs, create friction between paid and unpaid staff and even resentment amongst volunteers (hang on, why aren't you paying me for this work?!).

Another reason for not involving volunteers could be a lack of resources - space, money, time, management personnel.

Submitted on 10Aug02 by Jan Masaoka, CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, California, USA

Absolutely right on all counts, as usual.

Submitted on 9Aug02 by Sarah Elliston, Sr. Volunteer Resource Associate, United Way Volunteer Center, (Cincinnati) Ohio, USA

Susan has been able to speak to the right group, for sure. I hope they heard. Excellent article.

A new approach that I have taken in talking about volunteer involvement at all levels of an organization is to say, "Volunteers are NOT temporary employees." I think sometimes we have done a disservice to volunteers in our effort to have them treated like paid staff, and they have been considered and treated like temporary staff. I ask my audience what projects they have that require professional skills and then describe how a volunteer with those skills could assist them. If I know of a situation where a volunteer team has done the work somewhere, I cite that story. If not, I ask the group to imagine a team of professionals who are willing to help for 4 hours, and then I ask the group to design a project that would assist them in their jobs.

Sometimes it is the suggestion that a professional will donate time that opens up the eyes of paid staff to the idea that volunteers have skills and can help at all levels.

Submitted on 7Aug02 by Margo Ashmore, Consultant, several organizations, Minnesota, USA

I exclaimed "yes!" upon reading Susan's logic that if there were more ways to volunteer at the policy /national level there would be fewer do-nothing board members. Friends and I have noticed that on some boards, people applied because they want to learn something about (whatever field); they don't always get elected, but many do. Those who volunteer doing the day-to-day work often don't have leftover energy to do policy work. We have opinions and answers, but we're put off by the realization that we would have to also educate these newcomers and keep them from hurting things. The stewardship requirements of being a board member make this a dicey use of time.

It takes special effort to convince people who are expert enough to get paid, to volunteer - but it can and should be done. Find people who don't want a full-time job, or to be distracted by office politics, and it will happen.

Submitted on 2Aug02 by anonymous

I just received a notice to read this article. Yes, it is a very important message, a well written article and a forum to explore how to reach the top levels of organizations.

People either see a place for most to fit in and volunteer or they don't want even the most talented and capable person working unpaid next to them. Is it fear? I was once told that a volunteer wasn't needed in their department because they only have experts. They went on to say that it would look bad to have someone 'walk in off the street' and work beside them. Obviously, they did not understand the screening process which matches abilities. A match is also important with the paid staff working directly with the volunteers. The process of good volunteer management is too lengthy for this note.

What are others' thoughts?

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