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Unskilled vs. Differently Skilled: Maximize Volunteer Differences

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Over the past several weeks I've heard or read repeated references to volunteers as unskilled workers. And I've reached my tolerance limit.

In almost all cases, when volunteers are referred to as “unskilled,” the speaker or writer actually means “differently skilled” --but only as compared to the credentials of the majority of the paid staff in that organization. We need to advocate for a better understanding of what volunteers bring to the work environment.

To the Department of Labor, “unskilled workers” means something quite specific. These are people with low educational levels, perhaps even illiterate, who have received no training in any vocational skill. They often have an erratic work history and tend to bounce from job to job doing manual or menial labor. They are certainly a group of citizens deserving jobs, but they have little in common with most volunteers.

The overwhelming majority of volunteers are literate, have advanced education, and lots of life--if not occupational--experience. They are not “un”skilled. But their credentials probably do not qualify them to be hired by the agency where they choose to volunteer because their expertise does not fall within the narrow job descriptions of the paid staff there.

Although there are many work situations in which specialized technical knowledge is a non-negotiable requirement such as surgery and teaching Russian literature, most jobs balance some activities requiring specific instruction or experience with some activities needing mainly intelligence, literacy, or other more generic skills. One of the major causes of employee/volunteer tension is confusion between the two sets of tasks.

Because most volunteer programs develop assignments for volunteers in order to “assist staff,” the stage is set for trouble. Being proud of their education and status, most employees cannot imagine

sharing their work with someone who offers a different set of skills. Does it not diminish the "professionalism" of a social worker, teacher, nurse, or curator if "just anyone" can do part of the same job?

I am finishing this hot topic as I participate in the Drucker Foundation Conference in Dallas, where 450 executives from business, government and nonprofits have gathered to examine "leadership" in the future. Several of the emerging themes have a direct connection to volunteering and this Hot Topic. Such as:

- The organizational structures our society has evolved over the centuries don't work any more.
- Boundaries between "sectors" and disciplines are increasingly arbitrary and becoming blurred.
- Unchanging "boxes" in which people do specific things in set ways have little meaning in a chaotic time of enormous change.

To me, the implications for volunteerism are clear:

1. Because volunteers bring skills different from the paid staff to problems already multi-dimensional, they force an "interdisciplinary" approach to finding solutions. While perhaps initially threatening, this can unleash the creativity of all workers in an organization.
2. Knowledge transfer and technological advances are moving so fast that people trained in "professional skills" years ago may be left in the dust. (That's why we're all recruiting teenagers to teach us about the Internet!)
3. Until everyone -- paid or unpaid -- recognizes that success can only come from new combinations of approaches and talents, we will spend too much time protecting "turf" and not enough energy on having an effect.

So, my questions to **you** are:

- How do we open employees to the value of volunteers *purposely* recruited to be differently-skilled?
- How do we facilitate volunteers within systems (including labor unions) resistant to change?
- How do we move from seeing volunteers as untrained staff assistants to catalysts for new ways of approaching old problems?

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Posted 12/2/00

Submitted by Dave Kneessi, Volunteer Coordinator, Children's Resource Center, Ohio, USA

I have read with great interest opinions posted about this topic. I wrote the first posted this month. I have to say one consistent theme I have read are statements that begin with phrases like "organizations must ..." and purport to have crystaline vision of how organizations should view and

value their volunteers. This seems to ignore the breadth of what we are talking about. It tends to suggest that someone who merely provides child care for a single mother so that the mother may meet with a therapist is not of value - to that volunteer, that mother, or that agency. This scenario and many like it happen daily in our agency and all are very much valued. If the child presents no major behavior problem there is no need for complex skills, just an interest in positive interaction with the child for a brief amount of time (and, of course, a clean background check). As you rewrite the conceptualization of volunteer roles please remember that some things traditional may not meet your vision of a new world order for volunteers, but still hold value for all parties in the transaction. I don't take exception with most of what I have read this month. But I do invite you all to remember that some people still volunteer in areas in which they have no skills yet help out where they can, simply because it feels good for them and it helps their community. This is still a valid and tremendously good thing even it does not meet the complex needs of other organizations.

Posted 11//22/00

Submitted by Trevor Marshall, Consultant, Royal and SunAlliance Insurance, Sussex, England

There is an organisation in the UK called Business in the Community that attempts to match not for profit organisations' needs to the volunteers put forward by the business community. They do this by asking for role definitions and project definitions and matching them to the skills on offer. Having been on both sides of the fence, the system works. I got a lot out of being match to an organisation that "wanted" my skills and when I look for volunteers now, I work with them to identify their unique skill set and see how we can use it. Volunteers should be used in a position that matches their skills and the needs of the organisation rather than matching a need to an "unskilled" body.

Posted 11/15/00

Submitted by Jayne Cravens, Virtual Volunteering Project, Texas

Susan wrote "Because volunteers bring skills different from the paid staff to problems already multidimensional, they force an 'interdisciplinary' approach to finding solutions." This statement is an important one, as it gets at the heart, IMO, of the REAL reason to involve volunteers. It's not to save money, it's not to help staff, it's to create a collaborative, "interdisciplinary" approach to meeting goals and objectives. And it's yet another area where nonprofits can be stronger than the for-profit sector in creating and sustaining positive effects in a community or an environment. A related aside: I work a lot with teachers in helping them involve volunteers in the classroom, and there is much resentment from them when a volunteer (usually a high-level professional from a corporation) wants to "help" in the classroom by actually teaching a subject instead of the teacher. Of course, this volunteer would never imagine of allowing a teacher to come in and do his or her job...

Posted 11/14/00

Submitted by Tripp Hudgins, Volunteer Coordinator, The Children's Place Association, Illinois

I have to agree with the assessment of the misuse of the term "unskilled." It does damage to the volunteer-agency relationship...but not necessarily in the way one would think. I find that it inhibits more my ability to utilize my volunteers effectively than it inhibits their energy or skill sharing. My volunteers have been known to work through me, even in spite of me, to accomplish a goal. I have

learned to let go a bit in this process. It is easy to forget that I am not the only one with ownership in the agency. It may even be appropriate to say that in some cases that my volunteers have more ownership in the agency and its work than I do. I am the employee. I am not volunteering my time here. I am setting up a volunteer task force where my more active and informed volunteers get together to formulate creative solutions to current programming needs. I find that this gives them more freedom to do what they do best. I do MANAGE it, but the best managers hire people who are smarter and more skilled than they, right? It's a thought.

Posted 11/10/00

Submitted by Helen Rusich, Volunteer Services, Terra Association, Alberta, Canada

Regarding skilled vs. unskilled volunteers. I was fortunate to work with an international development agency that employed approximately 12 staff and 2000 volunteers. This tended to shift the balance of power and decision making onto the volunteers, in other words this organization was heavily focused and run by volunteers. The level of skill varied from one volunteer to another but the emphasis was on giving volunteers training and a safe place to practice their "roles."

Volunteers did everything; recruitment, screening, interviewing, training, ongoing support, evaluation and recognition of other volunteers. Whenever I worked with a new regional board chair, I felt it was my job to coach them into their two year position. As they began to understand and learn their roles, they then advised me as a staff as to how things would happen. I found this to be a great transition and worked with several highly skilled volunteers many of whom were professionals and gave of their time outside of their personal lives. The new recruits were people interested in living and working in Third World countries.

After such an experience they would return to Canada and assist with either the local chapter, regional, or national aspect of the organization. This model of leadership development has spoiled me because I believe volunteers can do anything. I find it difficult to now work in a more traditional volunteer-based organization.

Posted 11/9/00

Submitted by Marsha Riddle, Director of Volunteer Services, North Carolina USA

Volunteers and employees come in all descriptive packages. They are young and old, wealthy and economically disadvantaged, skilled in various ways, and have the ability to provide our organizations with a wide variety of expertise to meet the needs of the organization. As organizations and managers of volunteers, we must be able to identify the needs, create the jobs, specify the skill required to do the job, and recruit to task.

The doctors, pharmacists and nurses in our local Good Samaritan Clinic who volunteer to meet the needs of people who are sick, without insurance, off the street, or down and out and cannot afford medicine are certainly skilled and licensed professionals. The volunteer managers in that clinic have less training. Both are skilled in their jobs. We are obligated to advocate strongly to change any language or system which believes that the volunteer of today is unskilled. Volunteers, our unpaid

staff, and the paid staff of organization together meet the needs of the organization and the persons they serve.

Posted 11/8/00

Submitted by Yvonne Norton Leung, Principle, Risk & Change, Nebraska, USA

Time to look at the "new volunteer". Many are young and want to make a positive contribution to their community but even more are older and want to give back after years of high level professional work. They require no remuneration but want to deliver professional services and be respected for their knowledge. As people retire earlier and live longer, what are nonprofits doing to provide a positive climate for lawyers, accountants, nurses, teachers, CEO's and all the others who want to build society and impact their grandchildren's world. I would be interested in this focus. We have traditionally put such people on boards but are now understanding we need to grow young board leadership and future donors. Many older leaders want to contribute their services as well as money and see the difference in their community. These are not "report toos" or assistants. They are not just differently abled but overabled and overqualified and terrify many volunteer organizations.

Posted 11/7/00

Submitted by Karen-Denise Cyr, Manager, Volunteer Resource Development -Misericordia Health Centre, Winnipeg, Manitoba Canada

True involvement of "skilled" volunteers is possible. However, only when we as volunteer administrators believe this is possible and then are prepared to empower our colleagues to accept skilled volunteers into their work settings. I begin by listening to the needs that our paid staff have, and then encourage them to envision what their work day would be like with the assistance of a volunteer who's skills match their needs. We may not be able to recruit the volunteer immediately, but at least we have a goal to work towards. Because the staff have identified their own needs we have their buy-in to the process. To some staff, this is exercise "pie in the sky" thinking, and at first many don't believe that we could ever find a volunteer to help in these capacities. When targeted recruitment efforts are successful and we DO find that person, these placements are our most successful, and mutually beneficial. I challenge each of you to bravely face and unsurface the widely held perceptions that are held by staff in your organizations. No one else is going to change the situation for you. As the saying goes, the time has come for leadership...and you're it"!

Posted 11/1/00

Submitted by Dave Kneessi, Volunteer Coordinator, Children's Resource Center, Ohio - USA

Perhaps "entry level" might be a more acceptable term. I work in a children's community mental health agency. Many of our volunteers have some college and some kid experience but seldom any experience with our specific client population. Many use our agency to gain such experience. Or they seek to get an overview of how an agency such as ours operates because they aspire to work in a tangentially associated field in the future. To me to apply the term "unskilled" is not so objectionable. If they are volunteering to obtain skills or knowledge then they are at the time of engagement - unskilled. I understand some of the problem with semantics here but I don't think most would associate those traits, of illiteracy and incapability, when they hear "unskilled."

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