

[News and Hot Topics](#) » Differentiating between Volunteering and Working for Pay

Differentiating between Volunteering and Working for Pay

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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My professional wish for the new year is that everyone (and especially decision-makers, the news media, and funders) open their eyes to the important things that make employees and volunteers different.

Much of volunteer management today focuses on the similarities of volunteers and employees – how both groups are recruited and supported to be successful in working toward the same mission. As a practical matter, this is appropriate. But it is also limiting. It tends to push volunteers into uniformity rather than celebrating their potential to act with far fewer boundaries.

In our desire to gain acceptance for volunteers within agencies, we work to reassure colleagues that volunteers are just “like” employees. Is this really the goal? Think of what we might accomplish if volunteers had free rein to make the most of what distinguishes them from a paid work force: flexibility, the luxury of focus, short bursts of energy, and multiplicity of perspectives.

The distinctions between the two groups are vital because we need both for different reasons. In this Hot Topic, I will focus on three main differences:

- The Work Available to Them
- The Hours They Work
- The Reasons They Work

The Work Available to Them

Employers establish criteria for the paid workforce they will hire based on two main factors:

1. The amount of money available to pay salaries. No more money, no more paid jobs until additional funds can be generated.

2. Labor laws – which keep the majority of employees between the ages of 18 to 67, dictate the maximum number of hours to be worked without further compensation, restrict some activities because of safety factors, and more.

Because of the finite number of paid jobs in any organization, each employer seeks workers who best match the qualifications and requirements of each job description. Education, experience, and being available when the organization is open for operation all matter a great deal. The result is a relatively homogenous workforce with a core of consistency in approach; diversity is added by variety in gender, race, and other external characteristics.

In contrast, a volunteer workforce has no boundaries and unlimited diversity. Labor laws do not specifically apply to unpaid workers, so someone can volunteer at age 5 or 105. Every possible talent or skill can potentially be donated. Volunteers can experiment with new service ideas before anyone even attempts to raise money for staff to continue the approach.

The number of volunteer opportunities is actually *limitless*. While some organizations may reach a point of not accepting new volunteers, there is nothing stopping individuals from going elsewhere, acting independently, or even starting a new organization – because, at least initially, money is not needed to act. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way” could be the universal volunteer mantra.

No one has tried to count, but I estimate that there are *minimally* twenty times as many volunteer roles available as paid jobs. Have we ever spoken about “unemployment” in volunteering? Just think about your own organization. What’s the ratio of volunteers to employees? And is it your ultimate goal to assign one volunteer to each student, patient or resident that you serve? In our world, the challenge is finding ever more people to volunteer, even if there is not a single opening on the paid staff.

The Hours They Work

There is variety in the hours employees or consultants work for pay, since there are hourly wages, seasonal work, and even 24-hour positions (e.g., the military). But the vast majority of wage earners work between 20 and 40 hours a week and, for any individual organization, mainly on a schedule determined by when a physical location is open. The very term “business hours” refers to the generally accepted Monday to Friday, 9:00 to 5:00 timeframe for paid work – even though there are many exceptions to this rule.

The point about volunteers, however, is that there are no rules. Certain volunteer assignments do require the person to go on-site and donate their services on the same schedule as paid workers. But many volunteers have far more flexibility than that. They can also be immersed in service 24 hours a day (e.g., the Peace Corps) or give the equivalent of full-time jobs, but most volunteers give far fewer hours per week than employees do. In fact, at the moment we are pushing the time bar lower and

lower, from single days of service to a few minutes of volunteering via cell phone – time so short that no one would create a paid job for it.

Further, volunteers can give their time at *any* time. Often, especially in all-volunteer associations, what makes volunteers burn out is the lack of boundaries. An employee can say, “I’ll be reachable tomorrow from 10:00 to 3:00,” but volunteers call each other at night, on weekends, and at all hours. For some organizations, it is only volunteers available to clients at midnight or on weekends.

The Reasons They Work

Despite our dislike of negative stereotypes about volunteers, we tend to accept blanket statements about employees. Recognition events that praise volunteers as “the heart and soul” of the organization insult employees by implying that somehow getting paid reduces compassion. Dedication, enthusiasm, and caring are personality characteristics that can be demonstrated by *both* paid and unpaid workers. Devotion is not what separates the two groups; money is.

Most people need to earn a living and so the decision to get a paying job is mainly a necessity, not a choice. Going after or selecting a *specific* job is influenced by many variables, but the first critical step to employment is an employer with a job opening or money to pay for service.

Volunteering is not a substitute for paying work (except perhaps, for the very rich); it is most often done in addition to earning a living. But because it is not due to financial pressure, volunteer service allows the doer to follow *any* interest, cause, or passion. As Ivan Scheier observed, volunteers are “dream chasers” (making those who lead volunteers *dream catchers*). They can support established organizations or protest against them. No one is paid to start a revolution.

What Do You Think?

We need to value paid staff for their training, intensity of time, continuity and consistency of service. And we need to value volunteers for all of the different ways they can bring the widest spectrum of support to our work.

- What else do you see as differences between paid and unpaid work?
- How are you putting these differences into action with what volunteers do for your organization?

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Submitted 15 September 2010 by Nancy Libbey, American Red Cross - Union County Chapter Volunteer Services Director, Lewisburg, PA USA

As a retired paid program coordinator who now volunteers as a volunteer administrator (within the same organization), I can tell you that flexibility, lack of organizationally imposed limits, and the

ability to "make my own job" have added greatly to my enjoyment of my volunteer role. I feel like I've seen both sides of the picture, and certainly agree that it is disrespectful to applaud volunteer contributions while downplaying the hard work of paid staff, who may not have the choices that volunteers enjoy!

Submitted 27 January 2010 by Nazia Hossain, Islamic Relief USA, Alexandria, VA

Thanks, Susan. It is important to be flexible with volunteers which allows them to continue to volunteer, retention. We have to offer opportunities outside of the 9 to 5 hours. Most volunteers are either students or professionals.

Submitted 13 January 2010 by Robert Leigh, Verbier, Switzerland

Susan, much appreciate your selecting this as a hot topic. Regarding the first of the three main differences between paid workers and (unpaid) volunteers - work available - my feeling is that the position of employers is more nuanced than suggested. You state money available and labour laws as being the two main criteria applied by employers for hiring paid labour - and by extension not for recruiting volunteers. With respect to funding, care needs to be taken not to reinforce perceptions that volunteers are a free resource. Financial considerations should enter into the calculation of any employer considering involving volunteers (volunteer management, training, stipends, recognition etc). You also state that because of the finite number of paid jobs, employers seek workers who best match job requirements, implying that this criterion should not apply equally to volunteers. I am not sure all your readers would agree. With respect to labour laws in the US and elsewhere, there are indeed often provisions for unpaid workers which can impact on the decision to involve volunteers. A more constructive (and possibly controversial) discussion item would be whether the nature of work assigned to volunteers should differ from that undertaken by paid workers - or are they interchangeable? Possibly another hot topic!

Submitted 6 January 2010 by Brenda Greenberg, Northern Services Group Director of Volunteer Services, Spring Valley, NY USA

I find more lately that people are volunteering to test out a new kind of job to see if they like it. Others are trying to get experience to put on a resume so they can get a job.

Submitted 6 January 2010 by Christine Nardecchia, City of Dublin, Ohio Volunteer Services Administrator, Ohio USA

A great and timely article for me. Am working with some staff on establishing some volunteer roles in our municipality as career path inspiration for future public servants...of any age or life stage. But the truth is - the passion has to be behind it from all sides. The passion I've witnessed here in our local government is the spirit of one community. Volunteers often tell us that the pleasure of "working along side those who serve them" is the greatest reward. It's also awesome to see the learning from both staff and volunteers. Think about a receptionist, for example, in a streets department on a winter day. Do you think s/he gets good calls from citizens? Do you think that leads to a great impression of the citizens they work with every day? For that staff member to meet positive, giving-minded citizens and work with them toward one goal changes the employee's perception of the city

they serve. Or, think about the connections for outreach created by a few volunteers in a recreation department who add value to programming because of what staff learns from the citizens' needs/perspective. Further, watching volunteer learning take place about their own local government is phenomenal - and the passion and pride grows. You don't hear too often from an employee, "I want to work here to learn about government services and really get to know this community." Thanks, as always for the article, Susan.

Submitted 6 January 2010 by Laura Rapp, RN, MSN, Winston-Salem, NC USA

This article is extremely timely as I work with nurses in a health ministry capacity in congregations and other agencies. I particularly like using the term Unpaid as opposed to Volunteer as the nurses and their expertise should be paid, but the congregations cannot afford it. The value added in using the term Unpaid is subtle but means more than Volunteer in my case.

Comments from Readers

Submitted on February 5th, 2017

RoseAnne Munson, Contract labor, Child Safety Group, Miami Oklahoma, USA

There are many companies that require service work in the community as a condition of employment. The employees provide the service" on company time" .

I do not consider them volunteers. They are getting paid during their work hours to provide the service.

A volunteer : a person that gives of their free time to provide service for an organization or cause.

Is there a name for a person that provides service to local organizations and causes during their work hours?

Submitted on February 5th, 2017

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

Hi, RoseAnne -- Let me suggest another way of thinking about this question of "labels." It depends on your perspective. Right now you are defining the work-release employee as NOT a volunteer because the person is paid by his or her employer and therefore not working for you "for free." Fine. But:

- Did the employee have a choice about whether or not to leave the office and come to you for the activity? Did the employee get paid for every moment of what time it took to work with you (time to get to and from your site, for example)? Did the person happily work until the project was finished or leave because the allotted

hours were "up"? In some situations, it may even be fair to ask whether the employee felt obligated to somehow "make up" the work lost back at the office, possibly through some uncompensated overtime? And what if the person's boss is irritated at the lost work hours -- no matter how "accepted" the employee's community service is by the company? You see, there may be more "pure"volunteering going on than at first glance. I'm a lot more concerned over whether business employee volunteer programs are truly *voluntary* than if the worker gets paid. By the way, when corporate **executives** serve on nonprofit boards of directors, they are considered volunteers -- but you can be sure they leave the office in the middle of the day to go to meetings and yet no one challenges *their* "civic mindedness."

[Note, however, that if an employee in the art department is asked to design a brochure for you, at his/her desk, in the middle of the work day, then the COMPANY has *donated* the design to you, but the designer is not your "volunteer." Of course, you should still thank him or her!]

- Here's another perspective: That of your *organization*. You can also legitimately define a "volunteer" as someone your organization does not have to pay. So, since the corporate employee helps you without direct financial recompense *from you*, s/he becomes a volunteer *for you*. After all, s/he is not an employee of your org. And don't you have to do the exact same management tasks for that business worker? Interview, screen, orient, train, assign work, etc. And -- one hopes -- thank him or her for their contribution!

While philosophically we can debate forever about the nuances of "volunteer," in the last analysis our job is to tap the community for donated skills and time. That's why work-release (paid) employees, students getting academic credit, offenders assigned to restorative services, and more can legitimately and positively be welcomed onto the team.

Hope this helps you to do more thinking. Thanks!

- Susan

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