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Do Volunteers Want to “Talk Amongst Themselves”?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

March
2015

Ideas for my Hot Topics have popped up in different ways over the years. This month’s idea came in the form of an e-mail revisiting the subject of whether individuals involved with volunteering (of any kind) would be interested in an online forum community if they felt it could benefit them and be enjoyable. Does their shared identity as volunteers or common interest in volunteerism constitute a sufficiently strong bond to form the basis for meaningful exchange? Here’s what was in my in-box:

Hi Susan,

Allow me to introduce myself, very briefly: My name is Dan Berman and my mission is to promote volunteerism by building awareness of the link between volunteering and happiness.



As a writer, the specific way I seek to accomplish this is by telling the stories of people who have found happiness through volunteering.

I have been unable to find any significant online discussion forum oriented toward volunteers and volunteering. If such a forum exists, would you be able to tell me where it is? If such a forum does not exist, do you think there would be a demand for one?

Thank you for your time!

Dan

This was intriguing. I initially replied with basic information, including our A-Z Volunteer Management Library section on [Benefits of Volunteering \(for the volunteer individually\)](#), of which

happiness is one benefit. I also noted that our Blogs and Wikis list includes a number of forums by and for volunteers themselves, as well as for leaders of volunteers. Here was Dan's quick reply:

Susan,

What I see on the list you kindly sent me are *blogs* about volunteering and discussion forums for *managers* of projects and volunteers, as well as various specialized *websites* focusing on particular groups (e.g., AmeriCorps alums) or particular niches (e.g., humor and religious).

What I am not seeing so far is any significant general open online discussion forum (not a blog) oriented toward volunteers and volunteering (as opposed to forums for *managers* of programs and volunteers). Something for the general international community of volunteers to come together to discuss issues of interest and importance to them in the context of an online discussion forum, featuring whatever sub-forums for which there may be a demand, following the standard format of any such online discussion group.

It seems to me that this represents an unmet need that could make a substantial contribution. For this reason, I find myself on the verge of starting such a free online discussion forum myself. It's a big endeavor, I realize, but before I take the plunge, I am checking whether (1) I might have missed something somewhere and (2) there is any reason why starting such a forum may not be a good idea, some reason why it would not address an unmet need.

Hmmm. In my next response, I noted that many sites do engage their visitors in online exchanges spurred by initial posts or give members a forum to share individual reflections. But I also offered this perspective to Dan's second question:

Dan,

Here's what I see as the reason there is not a site already for "volunteers" as a general cohort. They are NOT a general cohort. Seriously, would you expect to find an online discussion aimed at all "employees"? What do they have in common other than getting paid for work? Well, in large measure, the same question applies to things done for all volunteers: What do they have in common other than doing something without pay?

We who spend time thinking about volunteerism could envision the possible discussion topics of issues (such as tax credits, replacing employees, client rights, etc., etc.), but I have rarely found on-the-ground volunteers who particularly care. Literacy volunteers want to spend their time on teaching reading; stream pollution monitors want to talk about

environmental issues; surgeons who give up their vacation time to do operations in Africa don't even see their volunteer work as disconnected from their jobs. And then there are nonprofit board members who do not see themselves as frontline volunteers, and students doing service-learning (where the host agency knows they are volunteers – or at least unpaid – but the student is doing this as a school assignment). Remember, too, that volunteers range in age from very young to very old and represent just about every demographic.

...I can definitely see lots of room to encourage all sorts of fields to *intentionally* include volunteers in the supposed “professional” discussion forums, both to give them a voice and to make sure the right people hear their opinions. Or, to encourage volunteers doing specific work to find each other online, cross-organization, to exchange ideas and experiences about volunteering for their *mutual* cause.

So I guess I've given you my ideas for why nothing like this exists, though I think there is room to engage certain types of volunteers in more exchange. But I am hard pressed to identify any “needs” volunteers have for this. If those needs do exist, it seems to me that someone would have tried to organize around them.

Having said all this, if you want to give it a try, your effort may turn out to be successful – and to show everyone what the needs actually are! I'm not flip-flopping here; it's just that I don't want to limit someone's passion!

Dan had more to say in response to *that*:

Susan,

It may indeed be that the reason there is no online discussion forum oriented toward volunteers and volunteering is that there would be no demand for it. It may indeed be that volunteers are too diverse to feel a sense of community and too busy to have any practical questions they want to discuss. I'm certainly not bent on cluttering cyberspace with something that the world doesn't need. But before I set aside the idea of “VolunteerTalk.org,” let's please go another round.

I completely agree that a discussion group for “employees” would be absurd. I'm wondering, though, whether there isn't an important qualitative difference between employees and volunteers. Employees are people who get paid. But volunteers, it seems to me, are more than just people who don't get paid. I've been an employee and I've been a volunteer. When I meet someone else who has been an employee, I generally feel no special connection with that individual. But when I meet another volunteer, I always feel a special bond with that person, regardless of where she has volunteered.

What you say about lack of interest in philosophical discussions is something I can relate to entirely. What I have in mind is very practical in nature. Maybe the best way of illustrating what I have in mind is by describing ten “real-life” scenarios, off the top of my head:

Scenario One:

I’m a high school student (freshman or sophomore), thinking about doing some sort of volunteering. I’ve heard all kinds of rumors: *If you don’t volunteer at least x number of hours a week, you won’t get into a “top” school. If you’re having any sort of challenges academically, you’re better off not putting any time into volunteering. Some volunteer experiences can be really great but some can be terrible.*

I’d really like to find some place I could safely go to online at my convenience, to read what others are saying about these things and, when I feel comfortable enough doing more than just “lurking,” posting my questions anonymously. (There could be a sub-forum on volunteering for high school students.)

Scenario Two:

I’m a 40-year-old who has been volunteering several hours a week ever since I was a teen. My spouse has been increasingly critical of my volunteering, saying that “charity begins at home.” I find myself wondering whether there are others in my situation or who have been in my situation. I’d like to know how they are dealing or have dealt with this issue. The opportunity to feel this sense of community would mean a lot to me....

Read all 10 of these provocative scenarios in a separate PDF which you can download [here](#). Dan closed this e-mail by saying, “Just kicking the idea around in my head at this point, deeply appreciating the opportunity to discuss it with you.”

As you undoubtedly guessed, I continued the discussion, with this reply:

Dan,

Your scenarios are excellent and true. But while they highlight the fact that volunteers do have things to ask and share of a personal nature about volunteering, this also confirms my belief that invariably the discussions would need “sub-groups.” There are common threads, but would a 14-year-old wondering “will any organization let me do anything more than sort food or file papers?” want to discuss that with the active 90-year-old who fears that “no one will think I am still capable of tutoring high school physics”? (Actually, that age spread might work, but not a 20-something and a 50-something!)

So how do you reach the world with the invitation to join this discussion? Can you promise researchers a true focus group of volunteers representing all volunteers? How do you assure that someone continues posting and responding once his or her initial question (why they logged on in the first place) is resolved?

Again, I fully support your eagerness to try this out and very much like the clarity and easy-to-remember-ness of the name VolunteerTalk.org. I think the main challenge is publicizing this to a sufficiently large mass of volunteers.

By the way, of course I understand that employees and volunteers are different. But aren't there paid work issues that people have no place to discuss? Things about the unfairness of requiring formal degrees and not valuing life experience, age discrimination (in both directions), glass ceilings, horrid bosses, fear of taking a job abroad, etc. All of these are common to paid work, but I suspect people would search for a forum either by their type of occupation or their personal profile or the specific problem, not "EmployeeTalk." It's your search for *universality* that I think is the issue.

You are an articulate advocate for this idea and I think you just might carry it off when others couldn't!

At that point, I suggested we schedule a telephone call! Through that conversation, we developed a plan for moving forward:

1. Dan is eager to create the VolunteerTalk.org site (entirely as his own volunteer project, without seeking any outside financial support) *Editor's note- 5/2020: Website is no longer available.*
2. For this Hot Topic, I am opening the discussion with these initial questions:
 - What are your thoughts on the common bonds shared by all volunteers?
 - What do you think of what Dan is proposing and would you agree that it offers potential benefits?
 - Would you be willing to get the word out regarding this new forum to the volunteers you lead?
 - Speaking for yourself (possibly in terms of your own volunteering), would you post to the forum or at least have an interest in visiting it?
 - Do you have any advice to offer or specific suggestions to make to Dan with regard to developing the forum?
3. Please share the link to this Hot Topic with the volunteers you know. Or invite them to visit the beta site with [the invitation Dan has provided](#).

Comments from Readers

Submitted on March 2nd, 2015

roger dewes, san mateo, ca, USA

I get a huge "lift" from reaching out to others as a volunteer--
but I don't often talk about my volunteer activities---
why not? I don't have an answer... but I strongly believe this:

Reaching out to share ourselves is one of the most fulfilling
human activities I can imagine-- let's open up to each other,
volunteers, and walk the "walk of life" in each other's shoes--

Wear the shoes thin and then re-sole (soul)!

Roger Dewes
San Mateo, CA

Submitted on March 4th, 2015

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

Lovely sentiments! Thanks.

Submitted on March 2nd, 2015

[Peter Falkenber...](#), Publisher, The Significato Journal, Portland, Maine, USA

I think that Dan's idea is great!

The more that volunteers have a chance to communicate, the better.

Kudos to Dan for a superb idea, and kudos to you, Ms. Ellis, for helping the process along.

Peter Brown

Submitted on March 4th, 2015

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

Appreciate the shout out, Peter. It will be fun to see what happens.

And please call me Susan :-)

Submitted on March 3rd, 2015

Alex Ropes, Volunteer Coordinator, Humane Society Tacoma & Pierce County, Tacoma, United States

Susan,

I work for an animal welfare organization, and our volunteers love to share on our closed group Facebook page. The idea of having a Facebook page for our volunteers was proposed by a volunteer, and has been a great resource for them to share happy stories, find out answers to general volunteering questions, promote programs, and more.

I strongly believe our volunteers share a bond by the work they do to help save animals, because they share a common goal. I don't know that I see the need for a general discussion board for volunteers in all different areas of work. Our online group succeeds because it is monitored so that volunteers can get the help they need, and the page doesn't digress too far from its original purpose.

I would have to review the site more thoroughly to offer any advice to Dan, though I wish him the best of luck, and I hope it proves to be a promising resource for current or potential volunteers and volunteer managers.

Thank you for sharing the exchange!

-Alex Ropes

Submitted on March 4th, 2015

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

So glad you shared this, Alex. Dan and I talked about such closed use of Facebook for volunteer exchange, but as these *are* private, unless someone explains how they are functioning, it's hard to know if they are successful. Great that yours is -- and I agree that one of the keys is monitoring/moderating it.

Submitted on March 3rd, 2015

kuliee@comcast.net, SE Michigan, USA

In researching the market for your on-line discussion, you have not mentioned the numerous Yahoo Groups (free) and Facebook pages (again free) where volunteers communicate

amongst themselves. This is not a new or unexplored niche market.

Submitted on March 4th, 2015

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

Glad that you pointed out how easy it is -- and free -- to open a discussion forum on Yahoo! Groups and similar resources -- and you can see above that Alex has already explained about a successful closed group on Facebook. Many of the resources in our Blogs and Wikis area on this site are housed on such platforms. However, Dan's point is that none of these are *generically* for *any* type of volunteer. So he's trying the VolunteerTalk approach to test out interest.

Submitted on March 4th, 2015

Jessica, Volunteer Coordinator, Bellingham, WA, USA

I would definitely be willing to share this with my organization's volunteers.

I think that one of the key things to do will be publicizing it. This hot topic is a good start!

Something that could help build initial interest in the site is giving the forums exciting, intriguing titles. Also, if there is a way to add a blurb on the top of the home page to let visitors know the main purpose, that would be helpful.

I like the idea!

Submitted on March 5th, 2015

Dan Berman, San Jose, CA, United States

Thank you for your positive feedback, Jessica, and your willingness to share the existence of the new forum with your volunteers.

You may wish to make use of the downloadable invitation in PDF form (item 3 at the end of the Hot Topic above.)

You are welcome to submit subforum titles (names) for consideration.

With regard to putting a blurb on the top of the home page, I am not seeing any option for that in the template software for vBulletin but I will try combining it into the verbiage describing Main Forum and see how that looks.

Your ideas and comments are most appreciated!

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