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Don't Forget Volunteers as Part of the Solution to 2017 Nonprofit Challenges

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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In early January, *The NonProfit Times* published an article called "[Nonprofit Workplace Challenges Predicted for 2017](#)." We at Energize immediately noticed the absence of volunteers in the discussion, even though time donors will most certainly be affected by changes in the nonprofit workplace. They are *working*, are they not?! And even more important, volunteers can be part of any organization's reaction to the anticipated changes – but only if they are integrated from the beginning into strategic planning.

So, in this Hot Topic I want to share my perspective on the role of volunteers in shifting times. First, I'll outline some philosophic principles that should be kept in mind always when involving volunteers. Then, I'll suggest how volunteers are affected by changes and can be part of the responses to the challenges predicted by the *NPTimes*.

Philosophic Principles

Volunteers Are Affected by Change and Poised to Address It

The *NPTimes* article opens with this sentence: "Staffing, workflow, finance and fundraising will be the trends to watch in nonprofit operations during 2017 when it comes to charities and associations." All of which center on money and paid staff – no surprise. Yet we know volunteers are donors, fundraisers, and workers, so why are they not automatically part of the equation?

I believe it's because volunteers continue to be thought of mainly as "helpers." The Hot Topic I wrote a few months ago, "[The Limitations of Seeing Volunteers Only as Unpaid Staff](#)," addresses this very issue. Organizations set goals and objectives for everything



and only then (if we're lucky) ask themselves "how might community members assist us?" So, when times are tough, planning constricts to clear priorities – and volunteers are seen as ancillary, not central.

How short-sighted! Drop the word "volunteer" and instead think about time donors this way. They are:

- People who understand your work and can therefore be community ambassadors, gaining support for your cause in all sorts of ways. This includes contacting legislators (as private citizens they retain all rights to do so) to protest legal obstacles or apply pressure to make change.
- An endless source of skills, different perspectives, and opinions – limited only by your imagination to seek them out. The reason too many volunteers corps are made up of well-meaning but not very productive workers is entirely due to not believing in the wealth of talent available and therefore never asking different people to volunteer. (I mean a direct invitation, not a Facebook post.)
- Able to do things employees often cannot. Yes, of course volunteers can and should assist staff in many ways. But the beauty of donated time is that it can be directed at anything that needs to be done – whether or not there is money to do it. Think of the power of *that*.

Recognize that volunteer involvement is integral, with potential power to influence the organization and its goals. Therefore it is affected by change as well!

Never Think You Can Replace Employees with Volunteers

Just because I urge decision makers to include creative engagement of volunteers in planning for challenges ahead, I want to be clear that I do **not** mean turning to time donors to replace paid staff!

I went into quite a bit of detail about this in a 2009 Hot Topic, "[When the Ax Falls: Budget Cutting and Volunteers](#)," which I urge you to read and share because it remains totally relevant today.

Don't Assume Loyalty

Organizations assume the loyalty of current volunteers. They believe something along the lines of "these people care about us and they will do whatever we ask, even if we surprise them with big changes." I cannot tell you how often in the last decade I was told about mergers of stand-alone hospitals into big health "systems" without a single thought (or word) to the volunteer corps in each facility. Executives then were surprised to discover the volunteers resented the merger and didn't want to suddenly change their affiliation from local to network. And, of course, it was usually deemed unnecessary to "duplicate" having a director of volunteer services at each site, so on top of everything else, only the volunteers at one central facility felt they had not been abandoned.

I share this story because there is great danger that it will be repeated in new places, especially under the *NPTimes*' prediction of "clustering" – banding together to share resources or determining specialties. And, it's worth noting that unless *financial* donors understand fully why things must change and why they are changing in this way, it will be equally dangerous to assume their continuing loyalty, too!

The Potential of Volunteers in Hard Times

So, with the above principles in mind, let's examine a number of the *NPTimes*' predictions and discover ways volunteers might help surmount the challenges..

- "Funding Instability" – As conservative governments take power around the world, public funds are sure to be redirected away from many of the issues nonprofits want to focus on. Volunteers who are given the chance to articulate why more money is needed can be powerful advocates, lobbyists, writers of letters-to-the-editor, and anything else to beat the drum enlarging your circle of friends. To do this they will need to be informed of the negative changes occurring and your organization's hopes and plans for the future. Recruit writers, videographers, speech makers to get out there and spread the word. The *NPTimes* also predicts funders will be looking to support prevention rather than "bandages." Point funders to volunteer work that brings about change and the finances needed to grow that work.
- "Structural Staffing Changes" – The predictions here center on the Fair Labor Standards Act and changes to overtime rules, even for charities. Again, beware the inclination to simply "use" volunteers to skirt labor laws or to provide "free labor." On the other hand, carefully assess the job descriptions of employees and ask: "Have these jobs become unwieldy because of things we've added over time that actually are not a good match to employees' skills?" Separate *tasks* that can legitimately be delegated to competent volunteers as their only role and let the paid staff do the job you hired them to do in the first place!
- "Clustering" – Be sure that volunteers who are already active in all organizations concerned are consulted and have input into proposed collaborations. (Of course, this implies that the same is being done with employees.) They may be more informed of the unintended consequences of something being planned at the top
- "For-Profit CFOs Moving to Nonprofits" – The flow of job applicants might increase as for-profit businesses downsize, but why not screen applicants with experience solely in the corporate world for whether or not they also have a history of charitable giving and volunteering? Do they truly understand that a nonprofit is *not* a for-profit, and what that means? Also, recruit more business people as volunteers now, including accountants and other financial experts. They don't have to be on your staff to make a contribution. (And you might be giving them relevant training for a future job application as a bonus.)

If, as *NPTimes* suggests, organizations will likely be much more data- and ROI-driven, leaders of volunteer involvement could be asked to prove performance with data and reports as well. This could work in your favor. Start learning how to measure and report the *impact* of volunteers (and not just their hours served) NOW!

- “Education as a Focal Point” – *NPTimes* foresees a surge in new training programs and certification opportunities, as well as nonprofits moving towards offering education to the general public to generate revenue. This takes the old-fashioned “speakers bureau” to giddy heights. Skilled volunteers can be integral to these developments, both to guide the learning management systems necessary and to present a wide array of professional development and public education programs. What a great opportunity to invite experts and community leaders of all sorts to donate their brains and voices (not just their hearts and hands)!
- “Advocacy as a Powerful Tool” – Paid staff are always *spokespeople*. No matter how sincerely they believe in the organization’s cause, it’s their job to support it. Volunteers, however, can be *advocates*. They can speak out and be heard in more effective ways because (most of the time) they do not personally benefit from the outcome. If your organization is not doing everything possible to, first, make sure that all current volunteers are your well-informed ambassadors and, then, recruit activists who want to fight the good fight, you’re simply missing the boat.

My Prediction

As I write this Hot Topic, I am deeply concerned at what is going on politically and socially in the United States right now. Overnight we have changed direction in a way that threatens many of the causes I consider fundamental. Marching and public protest are core activist tactics. But, the true potential for volunteerism is that many people are looking for *how* they can have a voice and affect decisions to come. Organizations that can capture this desire to make a difference will come through the next four years with strength and support beyond anything they’ve seen before.

What are your predictions? What do you feel are the most likely changes we’ll see this year and where do volunteers fit in?

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Comments from Readers

Submitted on February 2nd, 2017

Christine Balle, Volunteer coordinator, Ihc, Auckland, New Zealand

Well written with very real challenges for us to, take advantage of the opportunities that lie in front of us within our volunteer pool. The potential to grow our programmes is very often

internal not necessarily some external pool we need to hunt high and low for.

As I start 2017 I am going to seek advice from within. First by starting a small group of current volunteers to be my "think tank". I am hopeful they will come up with different solutions to some of the challenges I find within our programme.

Submitted on February 2nd, 2017

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

Thanks, Christine! Glad that the post made you think in this direction. We can never have too many good minds thinking about important issues and volunteers do have a range of perspectives that are different from the paid staff.

- Susan

Submitted on June 1st, 2017

Mary Stokes, hotel frankfurt-oder, ca, usa

Very interesting points you have noted , thankyou for posting . "I've made a couple of mistakes I'd like to do over." by Jerry Coleman.

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