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after 35 Years -- Or Not?

How Serving the Volunteer Field Has Changed after 35 Years -- Or Not?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

March
2012

This month marks the 35th birthday of Energize, Inc. Just like any mother, I am proud and excited – and in disbelief. It's been an amazing ride. In 2007, we did a bit of hoopla for our 30th birthday and you can still see the [much-appreciated wishes](#) of over 200 colleagues around the world at that time and read my "[Marking a Special Birthday](#)" [Hot Topic](#) re-articulating our mission statement.

Now this new milestone gives me a chance to reflect. What has changed since 1977 in how we do business, and also in the volunteer world? On the surface, a lot.

COMMUNICATION

Then

In 1977, if I wanted to create a newsletter or handouts for a workshop, I "cut a stencil" on a typewriter and ran it off on a [mimeograph machine](#). In fact, my proudest and most expensive (\$1,000) purchase for my new company was an [IBM Selectric typewriter](#) – the one without a moving carriage and with that typeball. Suddenly, my correspondence looked professional!

Mimeographs gave way to photocopiers, just as typewriters were replaced by word processors and eventually personal computers. Long-distance telephone calls were expensive. Then the fax machine was produced for personal use. I bought my first one in 1991, when I was asked to speak in England for the first time. My client, Elisabeth Hoodless, at Community Service Volunteers, telephoned to invite me and strongly urged me to get a fax so we could plan together more easily. I bought one immediately and faxed Elisabeth to tell her. The next morning, I found this message from her in my fax machine tray: "Congratulations. You will find that faxes, like volunteers, light up the world!"

That same year, 1991, the World Wide Web was born and transformed the Internet into a communication space accessible to everyone. My friend Bruce Bechtold held my hand as I joined AOL and obtained an e-mail address. He suggested we send an e-mail to our mutual friend in the

Netherlands, Lucas Meijs. Intimidated, I asked to wait. Later that day I went to an online discussion board and saw a posting that was volunteer related. With bated breath I replied, hit “submit,” and went home. The next day AOL told me, “You have mail!” I opened the e-mail to find it was from Lucas in Rotterdam, welcoming me to cyberspace! He had seen my posting to the discussion group. My knees literally went weak, and I *got it*. The world was at my fingertips.

Now

I do not have to tell you about the power of the Web, since you are reading this Hot Topic right now. But who could have foretold things such as cheap or free long distance phone calls via VOIP programs like Skype? Not to mention smart phones or tablet computers. Or the ability to talk both via audio and webcam! Don’t forget YouTube. Even a company as small as Energize can work globally with ease, as our international journal *e-Volunteerism* proves. The only real question is what will come next.

Personally, I am most excited about Web-based training. Not only have we been providing *Everyone Ready*® totally online for 8 years, but increasingly I am speaking “face to face” with audiences large and small around the world via platforms such as Skype and WebEx. (For example, I have presented several live workshops via webcam for colleagues in Anchorage and am currently consulting with groups of three people at a time at five offices in the UK.) The reduction in cost and effort of such live, but virtual interaction is pretty amazing and has truly made the world smaller.

PUBLISHING

Then

The first book Energize published was *By the People: A History of Americans as*

Volunteers (now in its *3rd edition*). That was in 1978, when it was only the *third* book ever written specifically about volunteers (Harriet Naylor and Marlene Wilson authored the first two). What seems incredible in hindsight was the physical work it took to create a book back then. Katie Campbell (then Noyes -- see the picture of us to the right, from the back of the original edition) and I spent three years researching and writing, *by hand, on paper*. My mother, rest her soul, then typed up our handwritten notes, which we then literally cut and pasted (yes, boys and girls, those common computer commands have a real-world meaning) the pages, added more handwriting, and returned it to my mom for another round. She typed three complete versions before we had the one that would be prepared for press (I won’t regale you with *that* outdated process).

The only way to print a book that could be sold at a reasonable per-copy price was to order a print run of at least 5,000 copies. I needed a lot of up-front money, storage space, and patience over many years hoping to make back my investment. (Volunteerism books rarely fly off the shelves.)

The publication of a printed journal wasn’t any easier! From 1981 to 1987, I served as the volunteer editor-in-chief of *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*, published by the Association for Volunteer

Administration. In addition to my interaction with authors and editing the text, I also modernized the journal's production by hiring a "word processing company" to provide formatted pages that could be photographed for offset printing. However, at that time, it was not possible to position such things as headers, footers, or illustrations automatically. So, using hot wax, I pasted everything down manually *onto graph paper* to create what was called a "mechanical." It took two full days, four times a year (for six years).

Now

Wow, have computers totally changed the publishing world! No one has found a shortcut around the labor of writing, of course, but the process for production and distribution is enormously different. Versions can be changed with much less effort. Co-authors can collaborate no matter where each is located on the globe. The final document is transmitted to a publisher electronically, as well.

Printing itself has evolved and books emerge in far fewer stages. Digital printing technology has eliminated the need to start with thousands of volumes all at once and small inventories can be affordably stored and quickly replenished.

In addition, we have so many more options now for how to produce the written word. Bound books on paper still matter, but electronic editions are rapidly superseding the old hold-in-your-hand format (last year Amazon sold more e-books for its Kindle than it sold paper books). When Energize committed to electronic book publishing in 2002, we were the first in volunteerism to do so. It allows us to sell books less expensively, offer titles that have specialized audiences, and serve buyers everywhere in the world without shipping costs or time.

Steve McCurley and I actually started our electronic publishing with the launch of the journal, [e-Volunteerism](#), in 2000. It was the field's first and, at the time, only electronic journal. Needless to say, I no longer spend two days with graph paper and hot wax preparing each issue! Over the last five years, every one of the English-language journals in our field (in the UK, Australia, Canada, and the U.S.) has either ceased publishing or moved to an online format.

Most remarkably, today *anyone and everyone* can be a publisher. Blogs are rapidly becoming one of the most important communication tools in the world. In a blog, anyone can express an opinion or share information and, if readers find the writing useful, interesting, or diverting, they will keep reading. Yes, there is a lot of chaff among the wheat but, in terms of word count, there is probably [more valuable material](#) on volunteerism available now than ever before.

WHAT REALLY HAS NOT CHANGED

There are many other changes I could discuss here, but it's equally amazing that some things have actually stayed the same. The ways in which we work may look different, but the core issues are not. For example:

- A continuing misconception is that the biggest problem faced in volunteer management is recruitment of more volunteers. That's why every few years since Energize began someone has started a new "rouse the public" campaign, generally led by politicians and people from large corporations. In the early 1980s the Ad Council gave us the slogan "Lend a Hand," which even made its way onto a postage stamp. Three years ago a glitzy Hollywood-led "iParticipate" promised to insert mentions of volunteering into television shows and movies. That effort disappeared even faster than feared. What's so frustrating, however, is that the *real* problem is that too many *organizations still do not offer really meaningful activities for volunteers to do*.
- Politicians continue to see volunteering as a cost reduction measure and too many of our own colleagues in volunteer management still say "volunteers save us money." For the millionth time: volunteers allow us to spend all the money we have and then do *more*. This is not simply a semantic argument; it is a fundamental belief about the value of volunteering and the resources required to engage volunteers well.
- One hot topic in the 1970s was "pure volunteers." The debate revolved around whether someone who received reimbursement for *out-of-pocket expenses* was truly "pure" or somehow tainted! The issue widened to question whether students who received *academic credit* should be considered volunteers, too. (Personally, I always had more fun with *impure* volunteers, but that's another essay.) Today, we are still debating whether mandated service or paid leave from an employer is "volunteering."
- The feminist movement of the '70s made volunteering controversial, but in a contradictory way. On one hand, volunteer service was disdained because it was perceived as exploitation: the premise that nonprofit organizations put women into menial, unpaid roles. On the other hand, feminist organizations needed volunteers to provide the labor for their advocacy, lobbying and protesting activities. Gender stereotyping was a real problem, of course, since volunteering always reflects the society of the day and men held most positions of authority. Perhaps the biggest effect of feminism on volunteering was questioning why there were so few women on boards of directors – a question still unresolved today. We continue to label donated time by women as "volunteering," while gravitating to terms such as "unpaid work" or "pro bono consulting" for voluntary service by men.
- I conducted my first workshop on recruiting volunteers in Allentown, Pennsylvania in my first year of business – and my most recent one in Germany six months ago. As you can imagine, many of the techniques I talk about today were unimaginable 35 years ago, especially online volunteer recruitment sites and social media. But the *principles* of successfully attracting the right people into the right assignments are exactly the same. In fact, some of the group exercises I developed in 1977 still help modern audiences to consider what motivates people to volunteer and what turns them off. The *how-to's* change, but the *whys* remain constant.

- I knew from my own experience as a volunteer resources manager that a major downside of our work in the '70s was *isolation*. Most of us were (and still are) the only person within our organizations charged with developing volunteer services and rarely had anyone on staff who could advise, help, or even understand what we did all day. The *volunteers* knew, of course, but they came and went. We needed to find and talk to each other and so, in the United States, formed local and then state and national associations for volunteer administration. We ran conferences and workshops. For a variety of reasons, we Americans have gone backwards. Our associations are struggling and there are fewer quality conferences. There are two hopeful trends today, however: colleagues in other parts of the world are strengthening *their* associations and we are all using Internet communication to find one another online.
- In 1977 there were no university degrees in volunteer management and practically no way to learn the skills of our profession formally. In 2012, there are still no university degrees but many more ways to get training and validation through certificates and other types of recognition. The recent theme issue of [e-Volunteerism on certification](#) demonstrates both the progress we've made in professional development, internationally, and the challenges that remain.
- This is my 168th Hot Topic since 1987! The whole [archive](#) remains available on this site and I encourage you to browse through it. Although my goal each month is to be timely in discussing a current issue or concern, I am struck upon reviewing the essays at how *timeless* they really are. Many of my musings are about misperceptions and undervaluing of volunteers, and about our struggles as what I still refer to as an “emerging” profession. (We've been in our infancy for a startling and dismayingly long time, I'm afraid.)
- Many authors and trainers in volunteer management are individual consultants, but I never liked working alone. So I started Energize as a company and have, over the years, enjoyed the company of many great staff members. I was especially lucky to hire Kristin Floyd in 1991; she evolved into our Web designer and has been responsible for the technical side of all our online services from day one. I literally could not have done any of this without her! She was there then and now. My gratitude to everyone on the Energize team – employees, colleagues who join us for special projects, and the volunteer editors and authors of the journal – is endless.
- Finally, I started Energize because of my belief in the importance of volunteers and those who lead them. That belief remains rock solid. Associations and infrastructure organizations can come and go, but the real action is on the ground, in each and every action volunteers take to improve the world. Energize is still dedicated to illuminating those efforts and preventing the senseless waste of those incredible talents through lack of attention, resources, or basic volunteer management knowledge.

This is already a longer Hot Topic than usual, so thank you for hanging in there with me. I realize that few have been in the field as long as I have, but I would love to hear some of your thoughts from your

experience on how things have evolved in volunteering and in how we do our work today.

A milestone such as this 35th anniversary also leads to rededication (or, for some I suppose, retirement). This nostalgic look backwards does not represent our daily thinking at Energize. We are proud of our reputation of being on the cutting edge and look ahead to what new opportunities lie around the corner. Thank you to everyone who has traveled this road with us! And special personal thanks to those who have joined me at tilting at the windmills of prejudice and stereotypes of both volunteers and those who lead them.

Responses from Readers:

Submitted on 27 March 2012 by Gerald (Jerry) Pannozzo, CVA, Coordinator, Diabetes Health Coach Program, Beth Israel Medical Center, New York, NY, U.S.

We share an anniversary. Energize, Inc. started in 1977, and that was my first year living in NYC. I moved to focus on my first career. When I made my intentional career change in 1993 your workshops (in NYC) and books were there to support my volunteer administration education. I would see you at national conferences over the years, continue to purchase books through Energize, Inc., checkout your website, etc. When I reflect on your contribution I think of you the dreamer/visionary, mentor to new folk in the field (I was hungry for information that would support nonprofits' missions, volunteers and me) and someone who challenges me/us to shake things up.

You touched on so many areas within this Hot Topic: our history; the evolution of "how" we work today; volunteer recruitment and motivation; perception of cost reduction; pure volunteering; feminist movement and gender issues related to volunteerism; the "emerging profession"; evolving education opportunities; isolation of those in the field within their organizations and beyond; evolving local, state and national professional associations; your interest and support of collaborations; and re-dedication to your mission.

Each area had me thinking:

- Do I agree?
- Do I disagree?
- Have I ever looked at it that way?
- What discussion might follow?

THANK YOU for putting it out there for me/us to contemplate and please keep doing what you do!

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Submitted on 21 March 2012 by anonymous, Topeka, KS, United States

I would just be happy with staff that supported volunteers half as much as they complained about needing more!!! As an Ameri VISTA too many of my days are spent fighting a uphill battle! If you are the praying type of person please send them toward the heartland. I want strength not to give up! :}

Submitted on 17 March 2012 by Hillary Roberts, President, Blankie Depot/PLNJ, Inc., Keyport/NJ, USA

Congratulations Susan on another well earned milestone. Energize, Inc. remains a popular guidepost for all the right reasons.

The benefits of 35 years clearly outweigh the mud-stuck and nowhere more evident than in the ability to reach and work alongside international comrades in volunteerism and volunteer resource management.

Whatever our collective frustrations, millions of global voices sing louder.

Submitted on 08 March 2012 by Susan Lawton, Dir of Early Literacy Initiatives, United Way of Tampa Bay, Florida, USA

Congratulations and thank you, Susan. 35 years is an impressive number. I wish it were as easy to calculate your impact on all of us in the profession. I first met you in Canada in 1989. I had just started in volunteer management. Your session was great and I have been fortunate to attend more of your workshops since then. You NEVER disappoint. You have stayed current, honest, realistic, encouraging and professional, challenging all of us to challenge others. This has resulted in better service to those we serve – the poor, the sick, the young and old, the earth, the animals and everything in between. Although my primary focus at work is no longer volunteer management, your leadership has been inspirational and contributed to my success. Thanks again.

Submitted on 07 March 2012 by Vida Poole, Director, Community Programs, Mystic Valley Elder Services, Malden, MA, USA

Congratulations on 35 years in the volunteer business, and thanks for the memories. While much hasn't changed in 35 years, except for technology, I remember going to early conferences where the majority of the attendees were directors of volunteers at hospitals or with social service organizations. I worked at an aquarium, and at that time had very few colleagues among the zoo and aquarium network responsible for volunteer management. Over the years I have been pleased to see a much broader range of organizations, both large and small, make a commitment to volunteer administration. I also remember, of course, those early days when other departments had newly purchased equipment, and the volunteer department was expected to use the donated, outdated computer and printer. Why an organization would think it was acceptable for one department to send out letters (yes, letters) that looked so shabby was beyond me. One day I threw a fit and finally got the "modern" pre-Micros

Submitted on 05 March 2012 by Frank Hrabe, Volunteer Database & Compliance Coordinator, Children's of Alabama, Birmingham, AL, USA

Another whole article could be written on telephone landline to answering machine to pager to cell phone to smart phone.

And I am old enough to remember party lines and real people as operators.

Submitted on 3 March 2012 by Kristin Floyd, Energize, Inc, Webmaster

As the webmaster for all four Energize sites for over 20 years, I remember many "expert" opinions that proved to be wrong. Here are a few:

- Buying online will only appeal to a small group of people. Companies will never be able to make money on the Web.
- There just isn't the capacity for videos to be seen on the Web.

- Facebook is only suited for college students.

Clearly, they got it wrong! I think there is an important lesson here for technology (and maybe in life :-). Trying to predict what will happen next is a fortune teller's game. It's more important to experiment with the technology available to you, picking what suits your organization best and then just seeing where it leads you! Of course, monitoring your progress and goals as you go!

Submitted on 03 March 2012 by Gretchen Jordan, Coordinator of Volunteers, Long-Term Care Ombudsman, Oregon, USA

You are right on Susan. I remember with awe the technology behind the fax – and where it's led now is mind boggling that is taken for granted (and lookout the wrath of someone who is denied wi-fi!). Thank you for your insight and knowledge. Congratulations on 35 years!

Submitted on 02 March 2012 by Steve McCurley, Olympia, WA

As one of the few people still tottering around who has been here through the entire 35 years, I'll just say that it really wouldn't have been the same without you. And thinking back through the days of typewriters and by-hand layout of publications reminds me that the world really has progressed. And also inspires me to think that volunteering will keep rolling along, despite our clumsiness and confusion.

Submitted on 02 March 2012 by Andy Fryar, Director, OzVPM, Adelaide, Australia

Thanks for a great trip down memory lane Susan.

You forgot to mention one other thing that has not changed in 35 years – that being your total dedication and commitment to making the field of volunteerism a much better one.

Your development of cutting edge resources, your ability to force critical thinking and your unwavering support of emerging leaders has been phenomenal. The field has been truly blessed to have had you and Energize as a part of it for so long.

So THANK YOU for 35 wonderful years of contributions!

Submitted on 02 March 2012 by Director of Volunteer Services, CA, USA

Thank you for your dedication to Volunteers and their leaders. I have been a Director of Volunteer Services for a little over a year now and your website and insight have helped me tremendously, for which I am grateful.

Energize, a program of Adisa <https://adisagroup.com/>

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