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I Really Want to Know: What's Going on Out There?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

July
2014

Since I write a Hot Topic essay every month, I am always looking for or thinking about what is trending in the volunteer world that would be interesting to discuss. This month I'd like to do a reality check. Innovative volunteer roles or volunteer management techniques sound wonderful when presented, but how many of these new ideas are indeed tested, improved, and assimilated into daily agency operations?

So I genuinely want to know: What's happening in real life? Here are a few of the ideas from the past few years that I really love as *concepts*. Have you (or someone you know) tried any of them? Have they worked or did they turn out to be unworkable? Are they now integrated into your volunteer involvement strategy?



[Note: Several of these trends have generated print and Web resources which we list in our Online Library, so I have linked each topic heading to the page on our site providing those links so you can learn more if you wish.]

Family Volunteering

Clearly many families volunteer together, especially for single days of service – and I doubt that any volunteer resources manager would turn away a multi-generational group offering their time. But despite quite a bit of development funding, national demonstration projects, and written reports, is there much intentional recruitment asking older and younger family members to sign up as a unit to handle some ongoing assignment? For example:

- A family committing to visiting a homebound senior weekly and rotating who visits among themselves each week.

- A family providing hospice respite care specifically designed to allow children or teens in that family to support bereaved children or teens as peers.
- Projects targeted to divorced, non-custodial parents as a positive thing to do together with their kids during their scheduled visits.

What are *you* doing specifically to involve families?

Micro-volunteering by Smartphone

About a year ago the term “micro-volunteering” was popping up everywhere, most often in conjunction with ways to engage volunteers via their smartphones. Lots of ideas were generated as possible examples of click-tavist service that could be done in minutes at a time. For example:

- Engaging people in taking photos of specific things – from potholes in the street to species of moths to fashion trends – and then submitting the images to a central site collecting the information (and possibly acting on it).
- Experts on any subject offering to respond to quick questions by text or e-mail (“pick my brain” projects) while on the go.
- Live tweeting during special events to social media to help generate excitement and publicize the cause.

What are *you* asking volunteers to do in less than 10 minutes at a time and/or via their smartphones?

Live Video Interaction with Clients and Volunteers

To me, one of the most amazing free tools to evolve on the Internet is two-way video. Skype is probably the most popular platform, but Mac and iPhone users swear by FaceTime and Google Hangouts is also growing. The potential of such platforms for volunteer involvement is enormous, particularly as more and more client populations gain access to computers or have lots of experience in using such tools. For example:

- Adding Skype video calling to *any* volunteer home visitation program. Except for the need to deliver a meal in person, most “friendly visits” can be multiplied enormously (and effectively) by webcam. Even the most successful visiting programs hope for one in-person visit a week. With Skype, the same (or different) volunteers can check in daily – or during the night, if both the volunteer and the client are awake. Etc., etc.
- Live video sessions between, say, students studying a foreign language and native speakers of those languages willing to volunteer some time in conversation with them – could be individual or group meetings.
- On-call webcam information services through which volunteers answer questions from the public – or, in a healthcare setting, from patients (no TB tests required!).
- Using a webcam interview to meet and screen volunteer applicants who will work remotely or virtually.

In my experience, too many government and nonprofit organizations still block such online tools from their IT systems, making it difficult to put such ideas into action. On the other hand, the majority of people can access webcam communication through personal computers and smartphones, without going through cumbersome firewalls. ([The Last Virtual Volunteering Guidebook](#) offers practical advice for making all this work.)

How are you using two-way video online?

Entrepreneurial Volunteering

Remember when the buzz was “social entrepreneurs,” or “self-led” or “self-directed” volunteers? The concept is applied to for-profit companies diverting profits to charitable causes, but also to individuals who come up with a new idea to address a community issue and are willing to develop it voluntarily into a full service.

Have you put out the word that your organization would welcome volunteers who want to test new ideas and solutions?

Odds and Ends

There are lots of other suggested volunteer activities I wonder about that do not necessarily fall into a trend category. A few of them are:

- Designating a volunteer to keep track of all your postings to online volunteer opportunity registries and keep them updated.
- Developing tailored volunteer assignments to meet the needs of department heads and other senior managers and recruiting people with the right expertise to fulfill those roles.
- Scheduling site visit exchanges with colleagues in similar or vastly different settings to share ideas and get new ones – either to do yourself or to send ambassador volunteers out on your behalf.
- Organizing self-help or mutual assistance projects among clients or their families to give them some input and control, such as carpooling, resource sharing, or anything else they all need and can help each other to do.

Please share:

- *Real examples of trends in action*

- *Obstacles to innovation*

- *Other trends you wonder about, too*

Related Topics: [Entrepreneurial and Self-directed Service](#) | [Family and Multi-Generational Volunteering](#) | [Micro-volunteering](#) | [Volunteer Work Design](#) | [Trends and Issues](#)

Submitted on 21 July 2014 by John Cries, Team Social Work, Team Social Work, CA, USA

Very nice post!! Volunteer programs include various activities in Abroad such as community development, educational and health care programs etc.

Submitted on 21 July 2014 by Katy, Volunteer and Mentoring Programs Coordinator, Richland School District One, Columbia, SC

Completed a pilot for a Skype literacy based mentoring project between college students and elementary students in a rural area. Amazing anecdotal results. Expanding next semester from 6 students and two sessions to 20 students and six sessions!

Submitted on 15 July 2014 by Susan Lebovitz, Manager of Volunteers, SAFEHOME, Overland Park KS, USA

My comment involves a question about trending rather than engaging in a new trend, although FaceBook is definitely our agency's new best friend, relating to donors and volunteer recruitment.

Over the last 6-9 months I've noticed it's harder to recruit individuals for episodic volunteer projects. If I need a group, it's fine, but if I put out a CFV (call for volunteers) for individuals, it's become a challenge. Is anyone else experiencing this?

Submitted on 07 July 2014 by Carol Bloemer, RSVP Director, Volunteer Center of East Central WI, Appleton, WI, USA

I have had to use self-directed teams to meet the needs of our community and our agencies. Through Prevent Blindness WI we had vision screeners trained and certified. On their own they coordinate with all the area daycares, complete vision screenings and the required paperwork. Recently this group received the Governor's Service Award.

The second group is a capacity building team of professionals that is providing support to area non-profit agencies. They have been meeting to develop their criteria for service, their process and working on their flyer. Our next step is focus groups to further define what they will offer based on what agencies tell them they need. This group works on their own with parameters/boundaries from the Volunteer Center.

Submitted on 03 July 2014 by Sharilee Griffiths, Director, Cache Valley Volunteer Center, Logan, Utah, USA

We have had 2 new, successful programs developed and become a core part of our volunteer center through entrepreneurial volunteering. Individuals came to me wanting to start a program and we

provided support and guidance for them as they launched their programs. They are now established, core programs experiencing great success!

Submitted on 03 July 2014 by Marty O'Dell, CVA, Volunteer Program Manager, Goodwill Easter Seals Miami Valley, Dayton OH, USA

We are engaging volunteers with smart phones to review public venues for accessibility. I must say the full review does take more like 45 minutes instead of 10. This information is then available on a website to anyone who might need it. We have found we are making people more aware of the needs of those with different abilities and the volunteers are loving this virtual opportunity. The Last Virtual Volunteering Guidebook was invaluable!

Submitted on 02 July 2014 by Conrad Sienkiewicz, Volunteer Manager, Connecticut Community for Addiction Recovery, Hartford CT, USA

I use Skype to meet monthly with my volunteer management mentor: he lives in New York City and I am in Connecticut. It is hard to find good mentors, so Skype is a great way to make this happen!

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