

[News and Hot Topics](#) » Is Volunteer Management Really a Profession?

Is Volunteer Management Really a Profession?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

February
2018

For the past five years, Energize President Susan J. Ellis has been successfully living with cancer. She recently experienced a setback and is taking some time off from her consulting, training, and writing responsibilities. For this month, let's revisit an intriguing Hot Topic that Susan wrote in 1997. You'll notice in the Readers' Comments that the discussion has continued over 20 years. What about now in 2018? Can we identify our work in volunteer management as a "profession?" Please join the conversation.

I've been in the field of volunteer administration for over 25 years and have seen many changes--most are positive ones. But some questions are still unanswered, particularly whether or not we can identify our work as a "profession."

Too many of us still "fall" into volunteer management positions, either as a stepping stone towards another career goal or by the unexpected addition of the tasks of volunteer program development to existing job descriptions. Some of us then discover we really love this work and have an affinity for it. We wind up making a long-term commitment to volunteerism. But at any given time, our field is dominated by people who view volunteer management as a job and not as a career--certainly not as an identity. They will move on (and often up) as soon as a better job opens to them.



So what makes a line of work a "profession"? The literature about professions in general provides some guidelines. All professions have:

- a clear educational path into the practice.
- an agreed upon vocabulary and set of principles.
- expectations of those both inside and outside the profession as to standards of competence.

I'd add that when one is a "professional," membership in that profession is an identity that moves with one regardless of the settings in which one works at any time. So a lawyer is a lawyer whether employed in a law firm or as legal counsel in a hospital. A social worker is a social worker whether in direct client service or in administration. A teacher is a teacher in school and at a summer camp.

Is a volunteer services director a volunteer services director in her or his own mind regardless of job held? regardless of setting? Do you affiliate more with health care, justice, or cultural arts than with volunteerism? Is your goal to move up the ladder in your setting even if it removes you from working with volunteers--or do you envision yourself in a bigger and better volunteer management position regardless of the agency?

This issue takes on very real dimensions for the support mechanisms common to professions:

1. Professional Societies

In other professions individuals expect--as a matter of course--to affiliate with their professional society at every level--local, regional, national, international. And the cost of annual dues--often high by our standards--is a cost of being in the profession--paid by the individual if necessary. In volunteerism, we struggle to "convince" colleagues that joining a DOVIA, state association, or national association is "worth the money." If you need to ask "how will this help me in my job?," you don't get it.

2. Collective Action

Professionals recognize issues confronting all practitioners and understand the value of concerted action. Through professional societies and special interest groups, they position themselves as experts and tackle legislators, funders, the media, and anyone in a position to make decisions necessary to their field. No other profession would have allowed something like the Presidents Summit to ignore its central role without a fight or even a murmur! Clout is won, not bestowed.

3. Literature

Professionals expect to engage in continuing education. Education puts them into the profession and they take pride in keeping up with current issues. Books and periodicals are bought (often using a home address and personal funds) because maintaining a reference library is considered important. Also, professionals want to gain peer recognition and to share their own ideas by being published. In volunteerism, too few people purchase books and even fewer write them.

4. Education

All around the country, colleges and universities have tried to offer coursework on volunteer management. With very few exceptions, courses for academic credit have failed for lack of enrollment. Only continuing education courses have an audience but rarely for subjects other than "nuts and bolts." Someone in a job wants to know "how to"; someone in a profession also wants to know "why."

No one will buy you professional status. You either have it or you don't. But it is different from competence on the job. It means affiliation with a field and a willingness to work together to build that field.

So...what are we? Do you think volunteer management is a profession? Why or why not? Does it matter?

Related Topics: [Volunteer Resources Manager, Role of](#) | [Profession of Volunteer Management](#)

Posted on 25 November 2007 by Steve Moreton, Attend, Education & Development, Manager, London England

I just came across this thread ten years after it was written! The reason I came across it was I was Google-searching for a definition of volunteer management. There appear to be none available in the entire known world! Maybe this is a significant issue in the context of this discussion?!

Here are some other common functions of professional bodies:

- They have entry level qualifications.
- Members are regulated by the professional body.
- A member can be 'thrown out' of a professional body for unprofessional conduct.

Submitted anonymously on 29Jan2004 from New York

You are right, Volunteer Management is a profession and should be seen as such. My organization does not even have a budget for the volunteer department and they do not see the need for one. I would be interested in knowing of colleges or organization in upstate New York who offer Volunteer Management Certification Programs.

Submitted by Diane Lieper, Leipper Management Group at TechComm Labs

How can this attitude be changed? I sure hope Susan continues to work on this as I feel it is vital to the future of volunteerism and volunteer management.

I have some information on a small (100) group of DVS's that to me is representative and clearly indicates the issues related to defining volunteer management as a profession. There are 3 particular elements that seem to define people currently employed as volunteer managers. They are:

1. Anyone who wants the job can probably get the job regardless of background and education.
2. Having been a volunteer seems to be one of the most common criteria for getting a job as a volunteer manager.
3. Membership in a professional association does not seem to be a priority and is usually conditional based on whether or not the employer will pay expenses (dues and conference attendance). Membership seems to terminate when the job terminates.

These premises are based on the data I have and personal knowledge over the last 20 years. Here are some of the data I have that illustrates the above points. ASDVS has done a survey recently that is a new version of one they did in 1993 that I believe, also provides some great insights into this issue.

The education level of volunteer managers includes everything from high school graduate to masters in fields as diverse as Recreation Administration, Massage Therapist, Real Estate and Pharmacy Technician. Previous job experiences include secretary, tax preparer, social worker, and boutique manager.

Submitted by *Bruce Glasrud, The Volunteer Center, St. Paul, Minnesota*

Susan hits the nail squarely on the head when she writes "Clout is won, not bestowed". This is CENTRAL to the issue of IF volunteer program management will ever become a recognized profession. Perhaps I should better say: recognized outside of the profession! For ages, AVA as well as the state and local associations have been harping about the poor status of the "profession." The recurring remedy however, is to always look inward: "If only the "powers-that-be" can see how hard I am trying to act and look professional, then they'd surely have to give me some clout! I know, I'll take a course or two, and read a book as long as it doesn't have too many pages - I am really busy you know - and maybe I'll get certified through AVA - that's certain to get their attention if I hang something on my wall!

All the education and certification in the world will not buy you a cup of cold coffee unless considerable effort is made to educate agency executives and boards as to the value of what you do. I know, I see very well educated volunteer directors come and go on a much more regular basis than most. The only person in the field who regularly stands up and sticks her neck out IN PUBLIC to tell agencies they are real bad actors in their lack of understanding and support of volunteer management is Susan Ellis! I will not hold my breath for AVA or the state and local associations to truly stand up and stand out to join her. Too confrontive . . . and we don't want to appear pushy do we. "I know, maybe if I go to that conference - then I'll get some clout, from somebody, somehow. . ."

Response from Sue Ritz, Director of Volunteer Services, Boone County Senior Services, Inc.

I have been a member of the Volunteer Management profession for 9 1/2 years. Most of the people that I have been involved with in the field are very dedicated to both the profession of volunteer management as well as to their agency. Becoming a member of the local groups is definitely the best way to keep informed on new topics, keep updated on the "nuts and bolts", and networking with other people involved in the field.

Often times money is a critical issue for individuals as well as agencies. Most volunteer management people are not compensated to the same degree financially as members of other professions - doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc. I would like to attend more conferences, trainings, etc., but money is very tight with any non profit. Would I leave my job for a promotion? NO WAY! I love what I do and with whom I am working. Isn't that what having a JOB/PROFESSION is all about anyway?

Response from Diane Leipper, Leipper Management Group, USA

I have been involved in volunteer management for about twenty years and have belonged to a variety of volunteer management associations (local to international). I have found that there are many dedicated volunteer directors, the majority of whom had fallen into the job and found they really liked it. On the other hand, I have run across quite a number of people who manage volunteers who are not looking at it as a profession, it is just an entry level job until a "real" job comes along, or it was added to their current responsibilities because somebody had to do it.

To me the whole "profession" issue is a chicken and egg situation. Like you say "clout is won, not bestowed." On the one hand, volunteer management is not seen as a profession deserving of equitable salary and respect which attracts and keeps people with specific education and experience. On the other "we" haven't really done anything to develop a profession which advocates for defined standards, adheres to the principals you outlined, or which holds it's practitioners accountable for meeting those standards.

There have been some good moves in the direction of professionalizing volunteer management. Efforts such as the AVA Journal, Code of Ethics, and Certification, and a variety of college level programs (many, as you say, that have not been able to continue), but unless these types of efforts can be developed, advocated for, and validated by not only volunteer managers but also by those outside the profession where does that leave us? How many people outside volunteer managers know what CVA stands for? How many volunteer managers outside AVA know what it means? How many people who have applied for a job as a volunteer manager have been asked if they have earned CVA certification? How often are people asked if they had specific education in volunteer management and not just related fields? Does having certification or specific education make any difference in salary or other job related issues? What do the associations for volunteer managers do to advocate for the professionalism of the field to the world at large? What do they do to enhance "collective action" of ALL volunteer managers? What have we done to encourage and support volunteer management associations efforts at professionalizing the field?

Response from Sarah H. Elliston, Professional Development Associate, United Way Volunteer Resource Center, USA

I agree about the Summit, we should have been represented as a sponsoring organization. I believe the POLF let us down there by not including AVA as a sponsor and requiring that there be one in every group of people from a community.

You suggest that there are few academic credit classes in Vol Mgmt and I know that in Ohio there are at least three: one in Akron, taught by Maureen Watkins, another with Ohio State taught by Mary Merrill and then we teach a series of classes here in Cincinnati through The Union Institute (often known as the University without Walls) which can be taken for academic or CEU credit .

I will agree that many organizations don't value the position of coordinator and that many folks do move on but I am an example of someone who started as a coordinator of volunteers (13 years) and a

trainer in the field and I am now coordinating two programs that are staffed by volunteers (Paradigm Consulting and BoardWALK training) as well as continuing the training we do for coordinators of volunteers locally.

I am in the process of mailing my application for CVA and I must admit that the process of introspection that it requires definitely made me wonder if I am a member of a profession or not and do I want it to be or not. My conclusion is that I am and I do. While the CVA process is tiring and difficult (we had 12 people start the process and only 2 of us are still here a year later), it has forced me to examine what I value about volunteering and what I believe about volunteer administration. This is certainly the criteria of a professional.

Response from Terry Dunn, Volunteer Training Coordinator, statewide Fla. HIV/AIDS Hotline, USA

I have been involved as a trainer and manager of volunteers for almost 11 years with my agency. The reality of it being a true and separate profession has really sunk in since the founding of a local Directors of Volunteers Association. Just hearing the issues that other volunteer managers face, processing with the group about challenges and successes we experience and building support has gone a long way toward helping me develop a clear picture of what the role of Volunteer Manager encompasses.

I think the field will continue to grow and evolve. I have noticed that we have new organizations joining our local Association at a rapid pace as both the public and private sector discover what non-profits have known for quite a while: the value of volunteers.

Response from Keith Seel, M4i Information Industries Inc., Alberta, Canada

I agree with most of what you put forward for folks to consider regarding whether or not volunteer management is a profession. I would add that a profession has a discrete body of knowledge to your list of what makes a profession... and this is our problem - what is it that we know that IS discrete?

In Calgary, as a now past-president of our professional association for managers of volunteers, ADVOR, I have advocated for a close alliance and partnership between the Human Resources professionals and Volunteer Resources professionals. In effect, we both work with the "human" resources of a nonprofit organization. Curiously, but not surprisingly, both the sets of professionals face the same problem - effectively recruiting, placing, supervising, evaluating people is too general a skill set to be appreciated by the outside world as "a body of knowledge." For example, if we were to take lawyers, doctors, accountants and ask each what their body of knowledge was, we would probably get back binders of legislation that governs their actions. What would a volunteer manager give us?

As the author of the AVA Statement of Professional Ethics, I find Susan's question at the core of everything people in the field of volunteer administration do. If we do not see ourselves as professionals, and know WHY and WHAT makes us professionals, we are NOT professionals.

Comments from Readers

Submitted on February 5th, 2018

Laura, Volunteer Coordinator, LifeBridge Community Services, Bridgeport, United States

Hello Susan - Thank you for such a great discussion. Of course I think volunteer management is a profession. I just think we aren't as good at letting key stakeholders at our agencies and across the country know that it is a profession...and some of that is on us as a group.

Like many I did stumble on this as a profession and then really fell in love with it. Now, I wouldn't want to do anything else for a living. However, I think there is a lot of room to "move the needle" in terms of how we are regarded. I say many times in many responses to blogs, that we deserve the same level of respect and recognition as fundraising professionals, but that won't come on it's own. We have to do a better job of documenting all the skills that are required to be a good volunteer manager as well as documenting the impact of a really well run volunteer program.

After moving to CT from PA, I was doing some job searching and had an appointment with a job search firm. The woman who ran the firm looked at my resume and asked me....you can't make this stuff up "Have you ever had a REAL job?".

I am so glad to see that these important discussions are being held, but hope we as a group can come up with some collective responses so in future we don't even have to ask this question.

Submitted on February 5th, 2018

Anonymous, New York, NY

Best wishes for quick recovery, my thoughts and prayers are with you Susan J. Ellis!

PRIVACY STATEMENT

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

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2025