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Report

My Personal "State of the World's Volunteering" Report

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

December

2011

On December 5th, International Volunteer Day, United Nations Volunteers (UNV) is set to issue its [State of the World's Volunteering Report](#), officially bringing to a close the 2011 International Year of Volunteers + 10. At the same time, the [European Year of Volunteering](#) is ending with a flurry of country-by-country summaries to funders and governments. In this spirit of celebration and reflection, I also thought about all that has happened professionally (won't even touch personally!) in our field – things we have done or were done to us.

2001, the original United Nations-declared Year of Volunteers, was remarkable in many ways. While key volunteerism bodies in the United States essentially ignored this chance to focus attention on volunteers, other countries seized the opportunity. Many national centers for volunteering, most government sponsored, were started in countries ranging from Singapore to Peru to Lesotho, and an array of first-ever national conferences were held (here's a [snapshot of IYV 2001](#)).

But on September 11, 2001, the world changed dramatically. Suddenly the United States became aware of the determination of volunteers to act in response to need. I have often commented that “volunteers are the silver lining in the cloud of disaster.” The horrifying news reports in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks were brightened by stories of lines of would-be blood donors outside hospitals, hundreds bringing water bottles and meals to the perimeter of Ground Zero for the emergency responders, volunteer pet rescuers, and those who created spontaneous walls of photographs of the missing and provided comfort to the distraught.

As I look back over this decade, I am struck by both achievement and disconnect; the volunteer world that I see has evolved in many ways, with volunteers themselves often bypassing the professional infrastructure of our field. Here are some of my observations, positive and negative, during 2001-2011, and I hope you will share **your** perspective on this time period with the rest of us, too.

Positive:

The Web opened up incredible new ways for people interested in a cause to find one another anywhere on the globe and exchange information, offer support, and join forces. Leaders of volunteers, too, discovered/created online discussion forums, blogs, and an array of online learning opportunities. Volunteer recruitment moved into cyberspace in a big way.

Negative:

The Web's greatest strength is in *linking* information, allowing people to share existing information without guarding access. Yet we have seen a proliferation of more and more Web sites begun mainly to promote the sponsoring organization's "brand" than to serve volunteering. No one site can ever provide every single volunteer assignment available or every single volunteer management resource. Potential volunteers would be helped so much more if each online registry clearly stated its focus and limitations and urged people to continue searching – even on other sites – to find the best form of service for them.

Similarly, too many national organizations want to "own" exclusive volunteer management information provided only to their inner circles or insist that only their vocabulary and jargon can truly teach their leaders of volunteers. They end up wasting time duplicating (often poorly) what already exists and keeping their networks in the dark about the knowledge available elsewhere.

None of this fragmentation strengthens volunteering community-wide.

Positive:

Interest in corporate employee volunteering, in which a company supports community service by its employees through release or flex time and creates a culture of volunteer involvement has steadily risen throughout the decade – and across the world. The newest [Volunteering in America](#) statistics for 2010 show a rise in volunteering by Generation X (those in their 30s and 40s), attributed in large part to being able to engage in the community through their places of work. While single day of service team activities are still the most popular form of business volunteering, we can see new interest in longer-term commitments, particularly through pro bono consulting to share business acumen with nonprofits seeking future growth.

Negative:

We remain enamored of "business acumen," despite the worldwide financial crisis brought about by poor business practices. Too many boards of directors, commissions, and special projects are led by corporate executives, frequently clueless about the realities of life on the street in the nonprofit and government arenas and, worse, certain that corporate thinking will save anything to which it is applied. And we pander to such leadership in the hope of getting more money and influence.

Positive:

The volunteer response to every major natural disaster this decade, and we have had many. How young volunteers have grabbed the potential of social media to mobilize quickly, epitomized in the [Student Volunteer Army](#) after the New Zealand earthquakes. Social media also allowed activists to connect and mobilize citizen action that toppled corrupt governments around the world.

Positive:

The call for civic engagement by most democratic governments, perhaps epitomized by the Barack Obama presidential election and the concept of the “Big Society” in the UK. Because volunteering is neutral, in that it is a strategy used by all sides of a controversy, we also need to acknowledge that reactionary, conservative, and liberal activists alike all mobilized their volunteers to protest government actions and to vote their opinions.

Negative:

Misguided follow through in the cutting of funding for the infrastructure to support and enlarge volunteering. Overnight gutting of once-strong national bodies such as Volunteer Canada and Volunteering England. Removing representation of the American volunteer field from Washington, DC. Seeking resources to aid nonprofit fundraising while decreasing or totally neglecting resources to enable greater volunteer involvement.

It's been a long 10 years and I could go on. But I won't (actually, you can follow the ups and downs of the decade in the [archive of these monthly Hot Topics](#)). Now I want to hear your reflections please.

To conclude, however, I offer this important observation. Volunteering survives. No matter what government does. Whether or not leaders of volunteers create strong professional networks. Despite superficial media attention to the glitzy things. People will always come forward when they are moved by strong personal conviction to do so. Margaret Mead's famous words about not underestimating the power of a small group of people to change the world remain true. No matter what any of us do, we cannot kill the volunteer spirit.

So, for me, the question is: How much more effective could volunteering be if we stopped reinventing the wheel for every single cause, recognized that there are basic skills of volunteer leadership that can be learned and practiced, and acknowledged the vital role of strong coordination of volunteer efforts?

Maybe in the next 10 years.

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Submitted on 02 May 2012 by Sheryl Luebke, Coordinator of Volunteer Resources, Jewish Family Services, Richmond, VA, USA

I was just catching up on my e-reading and am glad I checked your blog. I found some wonderful talking points for our Spring Volunteer Celebration on Friday. Your state of the union heartens me, and yet we still fight the good fight for recognition of volunteer work as real work. Thanks for the good words and this wonderful web site, Susan!

Submitted on 20 December 2011 by Reed Dewey, President, Volunteer Frontier, Chevy Chase, MD, USA

I think one of the big challenges in the US over the last 10 years has been the tension between focusing on volunteers vs. focusing on nonprofits who engage volunteers. While both strategies have their place, I believe there has been too much messaging to the public that they should be essentially volunteer vigilantes and their own thing - which negates the nonprofit network that already exists in our communities. In the next 10 years I hope we invest both in helping prospective volunteers understand how to effectively volunteer and in helping nonprofits move to a more dynamic, flexible, and leveraged use of volunteers.

Submitted on 08 December 2011 by Sue Hine, New Zealand

Hey Susan, you opened your summary acknowledging the volunteer response to the 9/11 tragedy. Ten years on in New Zealand 2011 has been a high and more highs for volunteering. The tragedy of the February earthquake in Christchurch brought out the best of community engagement, and the collective / communal response to disaster, as well as the significant contribution of the Student Army. By contrast, the Rugby World Cup engaged volunteers on a massive scale in a formal programme, to enormous success.

So volunteering survives, and long may it remain so. You have hit the pause button on what may come next. In my future scenario, I want to keep an eye on government interference/takeover of volunteering. There are indicators that cause concern. Volunteering is the life-blood of Civil Society, and should never be usurped as a cheap replacement for a down-sized agency of government.

Submitted on 06 December 2011 by Carol Bloemer, RSVP Director, Volunteer Center of East Central WI, Appleton, WI, USA

Interesting that you point out the fragmenting of volunteer search engines and databases. It has been really irritating to me recently. I can manage the computer and the Internet very well but others cannot. Volunteer organizations feel a need to have a presence wherever they can and it is time consuming to update and manage them. Then the sites update and you have to re-learn their system. Arrrrr!

The thing that I have noticed is that more volunteers want short term, or even one day volunteer activities. The agencies have not altered their "on boarding" practices to be able to respond to this need in a timely manner. "What do you mean that you won't know if you can accept me for another two weeks!?" I do not have the answer. We are still in a litigious society and we are bound to protect

our clients. The process takes long out of necessity. Volunteers will gravitate to that which is easy and I am not sure that in the long run that it is what is best for our communities.

Submitted on 05 December 2011 by Donna Lockhart, Consultant, The RETHINK Group, Ontario, Canada

Thanks again Susan for the opportunity to reflect and consider the changes that occur when we don't even focus on them. One positive I see in Canada: the many "new" younger people entering the field of volunteer engagement; their creative spirit and ideas to move forward in tough times. Negative: they do not necessarily see this as their profession for keeps but rather a stepping stone to something else. As many seasoned managers of volunteers retire ...the field is not capturing their experience. Also younger people are not necessarily seeing the need to "be trained" in this work but rather learn as they go and do not use the materials/resources many have created over the years. I totally agree with you that not only will volunteerism continue but also I am sad to say volunteer coordination will continue in some form or other with or without a paid professional staff as support. CAVR and the HR Council in Canada are working on Occupational Standards for this role of Administrator of Volunteers, and sometimes I feel as part of the advisory team for this project, excitement..and then I feel maybe it has just come too late.

Submitted on 02 December 2011 by Justin Ho, Vancouver, Canada

Thanks Susan for sharing your thoughts. 10 years ago we met at your first Institute of Advanced Volunteer Management in Battle Creek Michigan and I was a bright-eyed newbie in volunteer management (working at Volunteer Canada at the time) and I still think about your key lesson to me at the time -- sometimes the most effective part of volunteer management is to know when volunteers are not the answer. Just some wisdom I thought I'd share again 10 years later, as today I work heavily in the world of community-based experiential learning at the university level and the evolution of my thinking isn't about when volunteering isn't the answer, but when it is part of an overall answer. In my world today, I meet amazingly enthused and passionate young university students looking at volunteering as part of their learning outside the classroom. Volunteering/service in combination with curiosity and opportunities to reflect are becoming very powerful ways to introduce the complexities of community issues than I ever thought of before.

Plus, on another note, I do think about the online matching service I was managing 10 years ago and how far ahead of its time it was compared to how the world connects today. How fast things change, but also how much things also stay the same.

Thanks for helping unpack some of my own thinking of the past 10 years Susan!

Submitted on 01 December 2011 by Michael Dutle, Volunteer Administrator, Catholic Charities, Cincinnati/OH, United States

Worthy of mention are initiatives like Civic Ventures and Coming of Age that encourage civic engagement and volunteer involvement with existing nonprofit organizations. These collaborations and partnerships help individuals realize that their skills can be used in community for the betterment of all.

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