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Limited Volunteer Involvement

Part-time Volunteer Management Means Equally Limited Volunteer Involvement

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

November

2011

It is hardly news that the majority of people who lead volunteer involvement are expected to do so part-time. This means they may be full-time employees, but they are tasked with one or more major responsibilities in addition to volunteer management. This was the situation 40 years ago when I started in the field; unfortunately, it seems to be getting worse rather than better.

The struggle to devote undivided attention to volunteers is worldwide. The problem is being discussed across North America and in every country I've visited this year, including last month's European Conference on Volunteering. Although there is a general calling for greater engagement of volunteers – especially by politicians – we are moving backwards in terms of allocating resources for staff leadership of volunteers. It is getting close to a professional crisis.

Why this Is Happening

There is a serious disconnect between an organization's desire to engage volunteers and an understanding of how much expertise and *time* are needed to assure success. Even in the best economy, what a volunteer services manager actually does is only vaguely understood by colleagues and executives – and rarely valued. So when budgets are cut back, this position is quickly on the list of less "essential" staff, more of a luxury than a necessity.

This attitude was illustrated for me years ago when I was scheduled to speak at a volunteer recognition luncheon for a large hospital. About a week before the event, the DVS called me to say that she had been laid off in a general staff cutting action, but had been forbidden from telling anyone of her imminent departure. During the luncheon, she was expected to be bright and cheerful in front of the volunteers, although the hospital had not yet decided on who would be assigned the responsibility for the volunteer corps! I called her boss to express my concern, she responded with some irritation: "I don't understand why you think there is a problem; clearly we *have* the volunteers

already." (And clearly, I decided not to speak at this event!) It goes without saying that they laid off no one in their HR department, as they did not apply the same logic to paid staff.

Executives frequently draw wrong conclusions from too few facts. Here are some examples of what they think:

- *Because most volunteers only work a few hours a week or less, managing a workforce of even several hundred "sporadic" volunteers is seen mainly as a scheduling task, not genuine leadership.* Of course, the fact that every one of the several hundred volunteers needs to be brought on board, oriented, trained, kept motivated, thanked, evaluated, and more is overlooked. Not to mention that the person in charge of volunteers cannot decide simply to do this work on Thursdays. *Because they give several hours on widely varying schedules, volunteers must be attended to when they are on duty.* The volunteer resources manager works in a fishbowl of constant availability.
- *Volunteers are thought of as "interchangeable parts," who can be welcomed and assigned in a uniform manner.* Not so. Although most organizations want a diverse volunteer force, the effort needed to create effective roles for individual volunteers (teenagers, people over 80, graduate students, corporate employees serving in groups, etc., etc.) is simply underestimated.
- *Volunteer resources managers are perceived as support staff, not strategic planning staff.* This misconception stems from seeing the volunteer office as on stand-by to "help" when asked (which, in turn, means that even requesting volunteers takes up limited staff time). It is seldom understood that an energetic and creative volunteer resources manager can proactively determine agency needs and innovate a wide range of solutions with highly expert volunteers.
- *Most organizations prefer gifts of money over donated skills.* So all attention focuses on fundraising efforts, while volunteers are seen as "nice" but secondary. The connection between money donors and time donors is rarely recognized, nor are volunteers placed centrally on the continuum of an organization's *supporters* (friends, members, advocates) in the community. In other words, if the consequence of limited staff attention to volunteers is to have fewer volunteers, that is more acceptable than having less money.
- *While volunteers may provide direct service to clients and consumers, the volunteer office is thought of as an indirect service.* Reducing or refocusing its staff therefore seems as if it is not hurting clients or the public. Except, of course, that it inevitably leads to minimal volunteer contributions.
- *Other professional offices seem to have a similar mandate, so it is assumed that there is already staff having sufficient expertise to manage volunteers.* Public relations and marketing people can surely do recruitment, right? Human resources personnel know all about job descriptions and personnel policies, right? The development office raises financial support from the same

community, right? Yes, but the special skills required to attract, screen, and motivate unpaid workers are not considered. Let alone the skills to encourage smooth collaboration between paid and unpaid staff.

So, are we surprised that decision makers cut back on volunteer management when trying to trim the budget of anything nice but not essential?

All of this faulty thinking applies whether the leader of volunteers role is eliminated, cut back to a part-time role, added as a secondary assignment to someone's existing job, or divided up among several staff positions. None of these options gives the professional courtesy of enough time to develop and implement a volunteer engagement strategy effectively. Inadequate staffing reveals a lack of organizational vision of volunteer participation as a powerful resource, leveraging focused leadership attention into far-reaching results.

Accept or Challenge?

A frequent theme of these Hot Topics is to advocate for common sense when faced with wrong-headed executive actions. Quietly accepting a cut in time devoted to managing volunteer resources (whether all or part) is the worst response! Acquiescence can easily be interpreted as agreement. Always remember that the main reason to stand up to a bad decision is on behalf of the volunteers who will ultimately be affected (rather than fighting a battle for yourself personally).

So, what can you do?

1. Write your own detailed position description that goes beyond the terse overview you were given when hired. This should go into detail about the activities involved in each area. For example, "recruit new volunteers" may sound like a single task! In reality, it includes a long list of actions from developing community contacts to giving speeches at very different places to maintaining current postings on online registries. (Katie Campbell and I developed a *generic* "task analysis" of the role of volunteer resources manager in our book, *The (Help!) I-Don't-Have-Enough-Time Guide to Volunteer Management*. It is 13 printed pages long!) By the way, if you are willing to share your own task analysis, please also submit it to www.oursharedresources.com, the growing repository sponsored by Volunteer2 of these sorts of real-life documents others can use as templates. [This is something *everyone* should do right away! First, you'll learn why you are so tired all the time! You will also begin to see how you can share your work with qualified volunteers, how you might make the case for a raise or an assistant, and also have started to prepare for a successor some day. It's an invaluable tool if you are asked to report to someone new who really has no idea what the scope of your role is.]
2. Report *your* activities, not just those of volunteers. For example, a monthly report should include a list of speaking engagements, explanation of meetings to form collaboration agreements with community organizations, the number of screening interviews in the time

period (which should be a larger number than how many new volunteers came on board), etc. In other words, explain what you do all day!

3. Get your local network of volunteer administrators (whether a DOVIA, a state association, or other professional society) to develop a "position statement" on the limitations of part-time volunteer management. Do this in collaboration with your volunteer center or Hands On affiliate, if you have either. Bring in any academic who teaches volunteer management classes. The point is to create a public document with some credibility that goes on record about why volunteer management requires both a professional skill set and undivided attention by a designated staff person.

- *Have you faced an attempt to reduce the time you spend on volunteer management? How did you react? Were you able to improve the situation?*
- *What other ideas do you have for making the case that volunteer management deserves full-time attention*

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Submitted on 14 November 2011 by Marcia Hale, Job Search/Outreach Coordinator, AmeriCorps @ Marylhurst University, Marylhurst OR, USA

As always Susan, spot on! I was recently interviewed for a Children's museum publication regarding volunteer management. One of the questions involved the steps to take to ensure success of the part-time volunteer coordinator position. My answer was to the point, "Make it full time!" My interviewer replied by saying "that would be a hard sell, as most of our museums are small and can't afford a full time person for that position".

My answer remains firm. If you are small and really need volunteers to fulfill your mission and you need them everyday, all day...then how can you expect to accomplish this when someone is only there part of the time? I stuck to my guns on this issue. And will always do so. Though I am not currently managing a volunteer program, I still consult and one of the first things I tell an organization that is building a program is to hire a full time, experienced volunteer program director. And the next thing I tell them is to pay them well and make them part of the decision making team (senior level management). That generally raises an eyebrow or two.

It astounds me that nonprofits claim to value their volunteer workforce so much (we couldn't do it without you!), but they are more than willing to do without providing the volunteers the professional support they deserve and require.

You know Susan, after reading your columns and benefiting from your wisdom since I began in volunteer management in 1991, I would have hoped things would have improved, but the struggle continues. I for one, continue to raise my voice high for the profession...it appears if we don't no one else does.

Submitted on 10 November 2011 by Krista B, VolunteerHub, USA

What an excellent article. All too often, the work of a volunteer coordinator is overlooked and undervalued. Sadly, as you mentioned, when the budget becomes tight these positions are sometimes the first to go.

Volunteer coordinators play a vital role in developing meaningful relationships with volunteers. In order to keep volunteers coming back, they must have a positive experience with the organization that they are donating their time (& sometimes money) to. Without a volunteer coordinator to provide some form of direction and carefully match volunteers to appropriate tasks - it's likely that the overall volunteer experience will fall short of expectations, and may even leave participants with a negative opinion of your organization. And, as someone pointed out in a prior comment, an unhappy volunteer can do great damage to an organization's reputation.

Thanks for the great advice and straightforward ideas for taking action.

Submitted on 08 November 2011 by Wendy Moore, Volunteer Coordinator, , Brisbane, Australia

Thank you Susan for this very thought provoking hot topic.

I love my job and I am fortunate to work in an organisation where I feel valued and appreciated. However it is very easy to overlook the many diverse tasks we perform in our roles as volunteer managers/coordinators. Too often we take ourselves for granted.

Following your hot topic Susan, I will now have a fresh look at my position description.

Submitted on 07 November 2011 by Sue Hine, Independent Advocate for Managers of Volunteers, Wellington, New Zealand

Your Energize news was posted on IMVDay and I read through your Hot Topic with sinking heart. It surely removed any thoughts of celebration I might have had for the day. All the time I am trying to be a cheerleader for the profession the underside of organisational and political ignorance keeps on churning out the same-old assumptions that volunteers can manage themselves. You have identified some straightforward actions we should all adopt, which should have been standard MV practice for a long time now.

In New Zealand we will have a general election in a few weeks. I have been doing the rounds of politicians in my electorate to raise a flag for the importance of managers of volunteers to community and voluntary sector programmes. While I get a polite hearing I notice how the eyes slide away from management to focus on volunteers and volunteering. That's the pity - praise and support for volunteering is much more vote-catching than recognising how good management can create a great volunteer programme.

Submitted on 07 November 2011 by anonymous, RSVP, Michigan, USA

I could not agree more with the article. So much goes into coordinating and putting it all together. Just getting the right volunteer personalities to work together on a project is crucial and could make or break it.

RSVP places volunteers in numerous agencies that do not have a designated volunteer manager. And it shows. Volunteers have no direction/leadership. A dedicated volunteer manager has to be constantly available and ready to put out fires and make sure volunteers are being utilized to their best ability.

An unhappy volunteer is a volunteer who WILL NOT DONATE and often will make sure everyone knows about how unorganized and inadequate an organization is.

Submitted on 07 November 2011 by Wendy Walters, Manager of Volunteer Services, Volunteering WA, Perth, Australia

I read this article with interest as my experience whilst working with Australian Red Cross WA mirrored what you were saying.

I had been employed as Coordinator of Volunteer Management, which included the support of the Coordinators of Volunteers for about 22 services, delivering Information sessions, developing and facilitating an in house Coordinator Network Group, this combined with a multitude of other related duties.

I was passionate about what I did and the organization and would have loved to have been there for the rest of my working life.

This was not to be as after an organizational restructure, my position, as well as those of my colleagues in the same role in the other states, were to be looked at and in the words of a senior manager, would be given to the HR people, who after all, had the necessary skills.

It was with a heavy heart that I then realized that this wonderful organization did not understand the differences in managing staff/volunteers and that no matter what I said or did, I would never be taken seriously there.

I have watched with interest over the past few years the management of volunteers going downhill and changing hands many times, whilst they try to work out what to do with the role next!!

I do hope that they work it out, but it does prove the point I was trying to make at the time, that a specific skill set needs to be held by the person looking after the volunteers - a Volunteer Manager/Coordinator, not a Human Resources staff member.

I continue to hope that newcomers to the sector and the role are finally given the acknowledgement they deserve, I will continue to share my knowledge with others and be very pleased that I now work in an organization that values me and what I bring. Volunteering WA.

Submitted on 04 November 2011 by Tobi Johnson, President, Tobi Johnson & Associates, Knoxville, TN, USA

I wholeheartedly agree with the premise that folks are making a false distinction between volunteers and donors. Volunteers ARE donors! In fact, volunteers are 10 times as likely to donate to an organization than non-volunteers. So, when organizations under-resource their volunteer engagement function, they'll also likely see a reduction in their volunteer corps and a hit on their individual giving goals. Executives need to be shown what they are losing in both in-kind AND cash donations.

Submitted on 04 November 2011 by Manager, Volunteer Resources, BC, Canada

Part of this issue is being asked to take on added roles, that really are not within our parameters.

In our health region, our Spiritual Care positions were eliminated and we were asked to take on this role. We refused, as a group, clearly identifying the role we were willing to play, i.e. coordinating spiritual care volunteers, but insisted that we were not qualified to train, do the final screening, or supervise the day-to-day work of these volunteers. It has been very difficult for all of us MVRs to remain on the same page with this. In many ways we are our own worst enemies, as we continually say "Yes" when we should be saying "no" to requests that are not within our scope of practice. It is very difficult to say "no" and do it in a way that communicates the professional reasoning behind it. The perceived risk to not taking on additional roles outside our scope, is that we will also be considered dispensable, and let go. And unfortunately, this is what often happens.

Submitted on 04 November 2011 by Julie Weisenhorn, State Director, Univ of MN Extension, St. Paul MN, USA

As the state director of the UMN Extension Master Gardener Program, quality volunteer management plays a huge role in the success of our program. With almost 2300 Master Gardeners across 87 counties and budgets for support staff for these volunteers being threatened, we are working on a new model of volunteer management. We are fortunate that Extension values volunteers here in Minnesota and has invested in this process to help our program continue to grow and thrive, and provide a rewarding (and fun) experience for our great volunteers.

Submitted on 04 November 2011 by Joana, Intern, IRC, Dublin, Ireland

This is a brilliant article! Thank you. Spot on..!! I'm writing my MSc. Thesis on volunteer management and a lot of the points you've raised, Susan, are going in the direction of my findings!! Thanks!

Submitted on 02 November 2011 by Diane Klebanow, Volunteer & Bereavement Manager,
Samaritan Care Hospice of Florida, Orlando, FL USA

This is so very right-on and timely! I have taken on a second "hat" in my work and I struggle to find the time to do it all as well as to balance priorities when I feel as though I am constantly juggling! The best consolation is that I hear from so many of my VM peers that this is the norm...though it's hard to find the time to even make that connection with them. Thanks for addressing such a relevant topic, Susan!

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