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## **Sending Volunteer Talent Down the Drain**

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

April

2016

This month's Hot Topic comes directly from a conversation I had with a friend last week. She's a professional photographer who was recruited into a volunteer project a few years ago by another photographer. Without naming names, a major horticultural site is trying to compile a digital photo library of every plant on its property in all four seasons of the year. It's a massive undertaking that will eventually include thousands of shots. My friend was very interested and signed up, attracted by the importance of the goal and the opportunity to capture many beautiful photographs beyond the ones required.

From the beginning it was evident that this project was not integrated into an overall volunteer engagement plan. The staff member assigning the work is part of the team overseeing the gardens, with very little experience in dealing with volunteers of any type, let alone those donating their professional skills. The problem begins there.

While the purpose of this project is to get excellent photographs for the digital library, there is another important component of the task that is eroding the volunteers' enthusiasm. When planting new seedlings, the horticulturists tag each with a documenting label recording its Latin and English names, basic data about the plant, where it is placed in the garden, and the date of planting. So the photographers must take a picture of each tag to accompany the shots of the flora. This is a reasonable request and easy to do.

However, in addition to transmitting the photos taken on any day on site, the photographers have been asked to upload their pictures accompanied by a "metadata" form that needs to be completed separately. This requires the volunteers to sit at a computer and copy information from the photo to the form. As you can imagine, the tags are not always easy to read (some of the plants have been out in the garden for decades) or were not completely filled in by the gardener in the first place. Yet the volunteers are expected to complete the missing areas, even though their expertise is photography, not horticulture.

My friend remembers one conversation that went like this. Supervisor: “You neglected to include whether this plant is deciduous or not.” Friend: “I don’t know how to tell and the information was not on the label.” Supervisor: “If it has leaves, it’s deciduous.” Friend: “How would I know that in a winter shot?”

Over time, all of the photographers have become more sporadic in visiting the property and later and later in submitting their work. Their pleasure in doing what they promised – taking the photographs – has diminished as they toil for almost the same amount of hours at home on entering metadata, which they really dislike, sending their passion for the job, productivity, and valuable expertise down the drain.

What it takes to solve this problem is a *volunteer involvement mindset*. How can the organization get the most pictures from talented photographers and also accomplish the cataloging requirements equally necessary to the project? Readers here already know the answer: recruit some non-photographer volunteers who *like* to work with data and who can complete the metadata forms for any and all photographers taking the pictures. (Maybe find those avid botanists who like to spout off the name of any tree or living thing when you’re trying to take a nice, peaceful hike?) This will result in more photographs *and* more complete metadata – and make both sets of volunteers feel useful and pleased.

So why isn’t this obvious idea so obvious to my friend’s supervisor? Because she is thinking of “get the work done and the metadata is part of the work,” not “how do we get the largest donation of photographic talent without wasting the time of these volunteers with tasks they are not suited to do?” I don’t know whether she has asked for help from anyone in the volunteer office or just assumes that this is the burden of undependable volunteers.

## Whose Talents Might You Be Wasting?

As always, stories that initiate a Hot Topic musing are more universal than they may seem at first. Unfortunately, there are abundant examples of key talent going down the drain while we divert skilled volunteers with other tasks. It’s one of the things that makes designing volunteer work a specialty quite different from delegating responsibilities to employees.



A member of staff is on the job for a set number of hours every week and, since we pay for their time, we can require some activities simply because they need to be done. Of course we want to focus staff talents on their priority responsibilities, but diversions will materialize.

The majority of volunteers, however, carve out a few hours of their limited free time to do whatever attracted them to the assignment in the first place – or what we described as we recruited them for their specific skills. Did we tell the truth or practice bait-and-switch? Or are we so relieved to get a

volunteer that we simply stop recruiting additional help and start piling on more work to those already on board?

Consider a few examples:

- Youth sports coaches who are needed to teach the game and develop winning strategies...but who also are expected to transport all the sports equipment to and from practices (and keep it in good condition).
- Committee chairs who are expected to lead productive group meetings...but who also must send meeting invitations and follow up on no-shows, or even find the meeting site and bring refreshments.
- Writers ready to produce reports, newsletter articles, press releases, and more...but discover that they also need to track down the core information not prepared for them in advance.
- Speaker bureau volunteers who give great presentations...but who are expected to create their own slides and other support material (which also means no consistency in content).
- Volunteers working one-to-one with all sorts of clients, requiring personal commitment and regular contact...but who are then asked to spend several hours at a group meeting with little benefit to them (often to hear information from staff that could be transmitted in other ways).

Let me be clear: Volunteers want to help and we should always ask for their help, especially in unexpected situations or a crisis. In fact, it is great recognition to be included in something that needs to be done, no matter what the work is. But if we continually divert volunteer energy into secondary tasks, we misuse their time and skills. It is disrespectful to them and diminishes the potential of what they bring to our mission.

In most of the examples I just listed, all we need to do is a task analysis of the volunteer assignment to identify *all* the components. Which are core tasks that require specific skills or must be done by this volunteer? Can any of the tasks be done in advance by someone else (or as follow up)? Might we create a separate volunteer position – for which we can find someone who actually likes and is good at this type of work – and thereby develop a willing *support team* to free a set of volunteers to do what they most want to do? Now *that's* good volunteer management!

- *What examples have you seen of wasted volunteer talent?*
- *How have you handled the challenge of getting all necessary work done while making sure volunteers are contributing their special talents?*

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## Comments from Readers

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*Submitted on April 5th, 2016*

*Anonymous, Greenfield Ma, Franklyn*

Volunteers that are reviewed at least once or twice a year get the opportunity to express their feelings about their volunteer job. They also get the chance to look at other opportunities they would be interested in.

Some volunteer jobs require several volunteers to participate in many different ways.

Choosing the right volunteer for the right job is always important.

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*Submitted on April 5th, 2016*

*Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA*

Good idea. But note that, in this essay, I am talking about creating *the right job* for each volunteer as well. The key is focus on the skill we most need from that specific person. And of course we should keep checking in with them that all is well. Thanks!

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*Submitted on April 5th, 2016*

*Carol Bloemer, RSVP Director, Volunteer Center of East Central WI, Appleton, WI, USA*

Thank you for the article. I know that volunteer's time is regularly wasted but I had not thought about it as you described. I couldn't help but think that maybe it happens because staff who work in non-profits are working this way also. This is my example: We plan to write a letter to solicit donations, we write the letter, we decide who should get the letter, we create the labels and if we are lucky we find volunteers who will help stuff the envelopes. I have had this played out many times in my career. Do we even realize that someone might feel that they are wasting time?

Now that I am alerted to this as a problem, I am going to what more carefully for wasted time.

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*Submitted on April 5th, 2016*

*Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA*

Glad this helped you see things in a new way, Carol. We certainly can also waste the time of skilled employees! Just wanted to note, too, that in your task list for fundraising, you seem to assume that volunteers come into the picture only at envelope-stuffing time.

Maybe one way to use *everyone's talents*, including those of the paid staff, is to look at all the tasks of a project and ask: who is the best person to do this? Maybe the staff member

isn't such a great writer, for example, but you may have a volunteer (or find one) who is. So delegate that part of the process and let the staffer focus on things like compiling the right list of recipients. Or put together a volunteer task force of key community reps who can meet once or twice to advise on the best ways to do such a solicitation and maybe assess it afterwards. That alone might make the whole project more successful and less wasteful of what people really want and are able to do.

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*Submitted on April 5th, 2016*

*diane, Park Ranger, Casa Grande Ruins National Monument, Coolidge/AZ, USA*

I would also like to point out it is important to check in with the volunteer to see if there is something else they would like to be doing (instead of or in addition to current duties). We had a volunteer that came to do public contact, for example, and we found out he had done technical photography professionally as part of his past work. Never had we expected a photographer of his caliber was hiding under our noses! We were able to transition him into duties he enjoyed even more and to accomplish things we hadn't known were possible.

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*Submitted on April 5th, 2016*

*Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA*

How wonderful for both of you! Thanks for sharing this story. Sometimes we should ask applicants: "Do you have a skill or talent that you enjoy but which we haven't even asked you about?" In fact, this might be a great question to ask at an annual review or even at a volunteer recognition event. Just keep in mind that, if you don't have a way to use that talent, the person might be disappointed. So it's an art, not a science. :-)

A long time ago I was facilitating a board retreat for a group in debt. We asked the members: "What skill do you have that we've never asked you to use for us?" TWO volunteers said, "fundraising." When the board chair picked herself off the floor, she asked, "Why didn't you say anything?" They both sheepishly admitted, "well, I'm not on *that* committee." Interesting, no?

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*Submitted on April 5th, 2016*

*cheryl, volunteer, girl scouts, chevy chase, md, USA*

I'm a girl scout leader and I can't believe how accurate your last example is. My job as a leader is to engage and support a group of girls. I'm asked to go to monthly meetings that are filled with tasks the paid staff want us to take on -- like checking registration forms for accuracy and filling out the same information over and over again on different electronic platforms that

don't speak to each other. I wish the GSCNC would hire you as a consultant. Boy could they use the help!

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*Submitted on April 5th, 2016*

*Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA*

Cheryl, you might show this Hot Topic to the staff member you like most -- and ask if it could be the subject of the next volunteer meeting! Maybe together you can make those meetings useful to everyone -- or even cut down the number held! Hope it works. :-)

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*Submitted on April 10th, 2016*

*Polla eid, I study volunteer management, Volunteer, Canada, Kelowna,bc*

In our hospital we are the biggest team of volunteers.when I started my job,I took my information desk as my own businnessess.i started to be very busy and I am recognize from the patients,they always told me,you are the best volunteer.the most important thing is what ever you do,you should be diplomatic with your brain storm,and be patient,you will be the winner on anything you do

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*Submitted on April 11th, 2016*

*GLENN DAVIS, Scenic designer and director, willow creek church, Barrington , United States*

Engage in new volunter parterships places valve on the relationship.

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