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That Pesky Word “Volunteer”

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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2017

As I write this month’s Hot Topic, it is National Volunteer Week 2017 in the United States and Canada. So my inbox and social media accounts are busy with stories about volunteering and praise for those who are volunteers – in the ways that are “traditional” to most of us. But there are other things going on in the world that could also be considered stories of “volunteering,” many without the halo effect most associate with the term.

For example, if you pay close attention to the news coverage of Ivanka Trump’s and her husband, Jared Kushner’s roles in the Trump White House, you will learn that they are both – yes – *volunteers*. Not that you will ever see or hear that word. For example, the *Washington Post* said in a [January 2017 article](#):

Kushner, who will not take a salary, is expected to have a broad portfolio that includes government operations, trade deals and Middle East policy, according to a member of Trump’s transition team. In a statement, the transition office said Kushner would work closely with White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus and chief strategist Stephen K. Bannon to execute Trump’s agenda.

Note the low-key phrase, “who will not take a salary.” Even more interesting is the next paragraph in the article:

Some ethics experts question whether a Kushner’s appointment would violate the 1967 federal anti-nepotism statute, which came about after President John F. Kennedy named his brother as attorney general. It forbids public officials from hiring family members in agencies or offices they oversee, and explicitly lists sons-in-law as prohibited employees.

Richard Painter and Norman Eisen, who served as chief White House ethics lawyers under Presidents George W. Bush and Obama, respectively, say they counseled senior White House officials to avoid appointing relatives to West Wing jobs.

In this case, everyone still seems to accept that Kushner has been given a “job” (although, of course, the Trump administration sees nothing ethically wrong with this or with Ivanka’s same situation). So, the next time someone in your organization says something like “we just can’t let *volunteers* do something as important as this,” you have the perfect model for a retort!

This centers on the question of what’s most important to the definition of a *volunteer*: the level of pay or the degree of voluntary-ness? Choice, obligation, or coercion? And from whose perspective – that of the person giving the service or of the people and organizations accepting it?

One more current news item is relevant. Undoubtedly you’ve seen those pictures of the man being dragged off the United Airlines plane after he wouldn’t “volunteer” to give up his seat? Fewer people saw the follow-up interview with another passenger who *did* respond to that call, noting gleefully that she had scored more than \$10,000 in future airline travel and cash for her family simply by “volunteering” to take a later flight.

As leaders of volunteers, we need to acknowledge and understand that we cannot assume the word *volunteer* means the same thing to everyone – and have to communicate effectively exactly what we mean when we use it.



Alternative Facts; Alternative Vocabulary

As we all know, another issue with the word “volunteer” is that it is laden with baggage and unfortunate stereotypes, both about the people who do volunteer work (women, retired people, unemployable people, wealthy people) and the work they do (low-level). In response, over the last two decades more and more of the field has divested itself of the word. To illustrate this, I am happy to share a handout that I’ve kept updated for many years, called [“What’s in a Name?”](#)

The Corporation for National and Community Service (the Corporation) is a pertinent example. It is currently in danger of being defunded, which I hope does not happen, but I also have to say that it has undergone great mission drift from its original volunteer-focused mandate. A quick review of its history shows how the emphasis moved from volunteering to the language of “community service”:

- 1961: The Peace Corps required full-time volunteering overseas with only enough reimbursement for living expenses.
- 1966: VISTA (*Volunteers in Service to America*) was created specifically to duplicate the Peace Corps international model here in the United States. At one time VISTAs were not permitted to do anything other than their committed service, even if it meant working many more hours than a regular “job.” Again their stipend was to cover living expenses only.
- 1971: The federal agency ACTION (not an acronym) also administered the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), the National School Volunteer Program, and a special project to

create “State Offices of Volunteer Services.” Note the many uses of the “V” word. (The Peace Corps left ACTION in 1979.)

- 1993: Things changed course when ACTION morphed into the Corporation and launched AmeriCorps, which added a variety of financial awards such as end-of-service education grants to the living allowances, and also removed the restrictions against doing anything other than serving in AmeriCorps during the committed time.
- Although the Corporation still administers RSVP, it has merged its vocabulary to include it and other senior programs under the term “SeniorCorps.” Also in the 90s, the Governors’ Offices of Volunteer Services changed into Commissions for National Service.

As these changes occurred, we all began talking about “community service” rather than “volunteering” – as a convenient way to skirt the issue of when does reimbursement of expenses become a very low wage? Note, too, that today the Corporation does not participate in National Volunteer Week, preferring instead to promote AmeriCorps Week held in March.

So, should/do we give volunteer recognition to AmeriCorps members? How about student interns receiving academic credit (which doesn’t buy bread) or business people who prefer to do “pro bono work”? What about all those people who go above and beyond the requirements of their paying jobs? And why don’t we equally thank the volunteer board members of a nonprofit organization at the same time we thank more hands-on volunteers?

An Old Problem

This is far from the first time I have written about this subject, nor is it likely to be the last. As early as 1978, Katherine Campbell and I laid out a number of issues regarding vocabulary in our field in the introduction to our book, [By the People: A History of Americans as Volunteers](#). Among other things, we were trying to explain the issues involved in why it was acceptable to include civil rights “freedom riders” in our history (even though they were breaking the law), but why we only included the earliest history of the Ku Klux Klan right after the Civil War when they served a purpose, but not once they began committing indefensible crimes.

Andy Fryar once wrote a wonderfully controversial *e-Volunteerism* article, “[Volunterrorism?](#)”, in which he asked whether we are to accept without question the 2003 headline in the *Adelaide Advertiser*, “Saddam’s Volunteer Suicide Bombers.” Sarah Jane Rehnborg contributed a guest Hot Topic back in 1998 on “[The Limits of the ‘V’ Word](#),” with special concern about the lack of clarity in academic research.

I feel strongly enough about this whole issue to have created a special page on the Energize Web site called “[How We Define 'Volunteer' for Energize...and What Is Not Volunteering to Us](#)” and there is an entire section in our A-Z Volunteer Management Library on [Definitions of "Volunteer."](#) I encourage you to spend some time thinking about the issues – and maybe consider using National Volunteer Week to discuss the word with others.

There is no easy answer to any of this. And I am not ranting or wringing my hands. I would like to recognize all actions taken on behalf of the community or important causes, no matter the label assigned. Especially if they are done truly by choice and without monetary profit. And let's not rule out the people who do not embrace the word *volunteer*.

What I want is for us to be thoughtful and reasoned in our decisions for what vocabulary we use and when we apply it. And happy National Volunteer Week whenever it occurs in your country!

What is your definition of a volunteer? Where do you draw the line as to who is or is not a volunteer?

Related Topics: [Recognition](#) | [Definitions of "Volunteer"](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#)

Comments from Readers

Submitted on May 1st, 2017

Rob Jackson, Director, Rob Jackson Consulting Ltd, Grantham, England

Great article as always Susan, thank you.

Personally, my favourite definition of a volunteer is the only one I have come across that is written from the perspective of the volunteer. That is Ivan Scheier's: doing more than you have to, because you want to, in a cause you consider good.

Submitted on May 1st, 2017

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

Thanks, Rob. Even after all these years, Ivan is still the one we quote the most! And I'm glad you reminded all of us of this definition, too.

- Susan

Submitted on May 4th, 2017

Patricia, Reiki Master Practitioner, Fremont, OH., United States

Thank you so very much. I read as many of your articles as I can but this one really came at the perfect time for me and my Reiki Circle group. We have been trying to convince the hospital that Reiki services could be an asset to the wellness programs but unless we do it as a volunteer we have nothing. So it goes on as our own reward of showing love and kindness to our community by providing them with free Reiki services.

Submitted on May 4th, 2017

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, United States

So glad this topic is timely for you. And thanks to you and the other Reiki practitioners for being such devoted volunteers!

- Susan

Submitted on May 5th, 2017

Sue Hine, Wellington, New Zealand

Oh dear Susan, definitions of 'volunteer' and 'volunteering' can be as many as the people who do the defining. A long time ago I came across a sentence that said 'definitions only show the narrowness of the definer'. I think it was from a course in philosophy. I would prefer to keep a big tent approach to 'volunteer'. If we start getting fixed ideas we will curb new ways of volunteering, and diminish recognition of individuals and organisations that contribute to social well-being and Civil Society. And yes, corporate and government endeavours too.

Submitted on May 6th, 2017

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, United States

Hi, Sue -- Thanks for responding. As you know, I am totally with you on the idea of making the word "volunteer" as inclusive as possible. That's why it's important to recognize when it is used and when it is not mentioned -- and by whom and for what reasons. My point here is to remind everyone not to assume we always communicate what we want when we use the word in "our" way.

-- Susan

Submitted on July 25th, 2017

Mei, not applicable, not applicable, Singapore, Republic of Singapore

Dear Ms Ellis,

Your article reminded me of several encounters I've had with Volunteer Managers in my community.

I'm a volunteer, and have never worked in social services. I started out more than 5 years ago like many others - had pockets of free time outside a full-time job and wanted to use them meaningfully, supporting causes which I strongly believed in. I made the rounds of the many organisations, both private and governmental, for-profit and not-for-profit, to gain experience

and to learn new skills. As I became more experienced, expectations of myself grew and I got increasingly selective about the type of work I did, in order to make a more meaningful and lasting impact with my limited free time. I also frequently asked questions which such organisations should, in fact, be asking themselves - e.g.

What is the objective of the activity/program?

How does it contribute to the holistic care of the beneficiaries?

Who is in charge of the program planning and volunteers?

What are your expectations?

What is my role?

Can I do more?

May I have some feedback?

May I give some feedback?

What happens next?

Where else do you need volunteers?

Yes, "volunteer" means very different things to different people, especially in a community where the unfortunate stereotyping of volunteers and volunteer work is still very much alive and thriving, and I definitely would qualify as "pesky" to some home managers and their staff! By the same token, I found out very early on, that the VM job also means very different things to different social service organisations, all the way from their management to the general staff. To mitigate my exasperation with the less-than-desirable standards and frequent misplacement of priorities, I've since abandoned some organisations and their VMs (I especially refuse to help people who refuse to help themselves and are doing more harm than good), paid good money for training in order to do more, to network with sector people for different perspectives and to understand the sector mechanics a little better, and spent hours on the internet.

Another pain point is that many VMs and sector people have never volunteered or do not see the need to. When I asked them why they don't, the usual responses would be "don't have the time", "why yes?", "not a requirement of the job"..... Volunteering is one of the most effective training for a person working with or managing volunteers, and benefits all stakeholders. For one thing, a deeper understanding of the volunteer psyche can help a VM get buy-in from his management and co-workers about the value of a robust VMP. Indeed, social service organisations should mandate volunteer hours for their staff like they do training hours.

I've come a long way as an individual volunteer feeding on mostly mass (group) activities. These days, I also help with workshops and therapeutic activities for targeted beneficiaries, operate as an "unlicensed" VM and activity planner, and frequently look for and share resources with other volunteers and people in the sector. Things are not perfect and others are not up to speed by a mile, but "obsessed" volunteers need to draw energy from somewhere, someone, and so I continue to make the rounds.

Submitted on August 1st, 2017

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, United States

Thank you, Mei, for your thoughtful -- and sometimes painful -- reflections. Volunteers and VMs are as diverse as, well, all people are. Some are extraordinary, some are horrid, but most are doing the best they can. Bravo to you for living your personal philosophy and trying to make progress in our field.

Every good wish --

Susan

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