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# The Division of Labor between Volunteer Centers and Volunteer-Involving Organizations

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

June  
2016

In January, the director of a volunteer center in England posted a message to [UKVPMs](#) (an online discussion forum for volunteer managers in the UK, but open to colleagues everywhere), attempting to neatly summarize the importance of his organization to his community. He wrote:

*Our system automatically follows up Do-It [the British equivalent of the American site VolunteerMatch] applications by emailing recruiters and volunteers 4 months after referral. We now have some figures on placement rates and have worked out our annual "value" in cash terms:*

- *Numbers of applications via Do-It: 1473*
- *Placement rate: 19%*
- *Volunteers placed: 280*
- *Assumed hours/week: 3*
- *Assumed weeks volunteered: 52*
- *Total volunteer hours: 43660*
- *Nominal hourly rate: £11.51*
- *VALUE: £502,523*

*I'm sure other VCs are quite valuable too :)*

This sparked an interesting online discussion, especially when I suggested that this particular calculation was based on shaky assumptions, not facts. Further, this director seemed unaware that the members of UKVPMs might resent the volunteer center “taking credit” for the full-wage replacement cost of volunteers with whom it had no further contact beyond a referral!

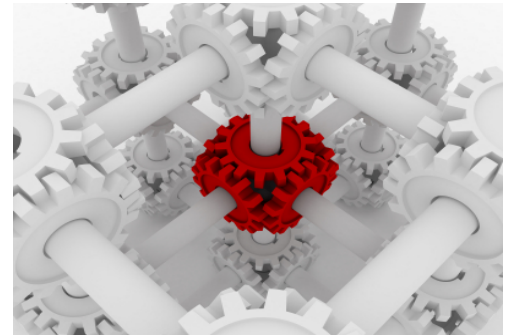
For as long as I have been in the volunteering field, those who run organizations created to increase volunteering in a community have struggled to find funding and even to get vocal support from those they exist to help. Such “connector” services include what we generically call “volunteer centers” and

also government agencies at all levels tasked with stimulating civic participation in their region. In theory, there should be a direct and mutually supportive relationship between those working to engage volunteers in individual organizations (of any type) and the people working to stimulate community-wide volunteering. In practice, however, there can be more competition than partnership.

In this Hot Topic, I want to make the case for clearly delineating the role of individual volunteer-involving agencies and the role of connector agencies. While both deal with trends and issues in volunteering, each side has – or should have – a very different perspective, including different measures of success.

## Focus on One – Focus on All

Each volunteer-involving organization must prioritize its own specific mission and goals. While it naturally has a stake in the well-being of the community in which it operates, its focus is on the needs or interests of its service recipients. Each agency determines what volunteers will do within its services, finds/selects the right applicants, trains and supports them, and makes the relationship work. Volunteers therefore become part of the organization to which they give their time and success is measured by whether service goals are reached.



In contrast, volunteer centers and other connectors think community wide, support all the causes that matter in their geographic area, and generally do not deliver direct services. They may *refer* members of the public to individual agencies to become volunteers at those sites, but most volunteers have no continuing relationship with the volunteer center after that.

In the United States, the merger of Points of Light and HandsOn Network has created a hybrid organization in which the role of former volunteer centers operating as connectors melded with HandsOn affiliates that recruit *their own* volunteers and then deploy them into direct-service activities run on-site by different agencies. Whose volunteers are these? It's not that the "temp agency" concept doesn't work, it's just that most often the local HandsOn organization puts greater emphasis on growing its own volunteer corps, with far less attention to strengthening all kinds of volunteering no matter where the volunteers' loyalties lie.

Connector agencies should be about much more than mobilizing volunteers to do direct service. They exist to expand the amount and diversity of volunteer participation throughout the community. To do this, volunteer centers must reach out to organizations *that do not already have a volunteer engagement strategy*, not just those that already do. Specifically, connector agencies should:

- Identify organizations that presently do not welcome volunteers and advocate for them to open their doors. This includes helping government services (local and beyond) to be more

effective in integrating citizen participation, as volunteering is so much more than service in nonprofit agencies. The goal: develop more solid volunteer opportunities for more people.

- Uncover and work with *potential sources of prospective volunteers* with potential to help many community groups. This can be for-profit businesses of all sizes, colleges and universities, faith communities, and more. It can also mean focusing on under-engaged populations such as the unemployed, those with disabilities, new immigrants, and more. The goal: increase the pool of available volunteers.
- Engage *all-volunteer groups* in collaboration with nonprofit and public agencies (and vice versa). Too often attention is only directed at how volunteers can “help” paid workers. A huge part of the volunteerism world often overlooked by those of us in formal volunteer management roles are the literally thousands of civic clubs, social/hobby associations, sports leagues, faith communities, and other membership groups that often have no idea our two worlds exist side by side. The goal: recognize the entire spectrum of volunteering and enable alliances for the greater good.

Individual volunteer-involving agencies, deeply involved in working for their cause, cannot affect public attitudes about volunteering *in general*. Yet they need such public awareness and understanding in order to mobilize volunteers. They cannot – one agency at a time – increase the willingness of a university or a corporation to promote volunteering by its students or employees or convince a major funder to pay for what it really costs to support unpaid staff. That’s far more effectively done by a single, community-focused organization speaking on behalf of all the unfilled volunteer opportunities in the area.

This is also reflected in the role of volunteer centers in offering volunteer management training – currently termed “capacity building” – as a way to help organizations to be more effective with volunteers. Not because the center staff knows more about volunteer management than those on the front line do, but because they can connect their community to information and resources available in the wider field. And, capacity building means educating more than volunteer resources managers who already have access to professional development in various ways. It might include executive seminars for decision makers and funders, separating myth from fact about volunteer engagement. Or urging university professors to include mention of volunteerism in the professional education of students in fields as diverse as nursing, teaching, and public administration.

## Demonstrating Worth

Our colleague in the British volunteer center shortsightedly promotes the importance of his agency by the effort accomplished by others. But connector organizations gain their strength when they promote the *collective* – never themselves. It may seem harder to quantify or prove how connector organizations are making a difference through their own efforts, but there is potential in thinking about the way that highly-compensated **advertising firms** provide value. Advertising companies:

- Never claim to make the product, deliver the services, or handle the sales for what they promote.
- Determine what information or feeling will lead consumers to make a purchase (awareness, status, feeling of want or need).
- Craft the message and figure out where to *place* it so that the most potential buyers will see it.
- Measure their success in the *growth and depth of sales*.

Advertising companies do, however, need to start with a product or service that will be attractive to consumers once the ad firm has made them aware of it – and to stick with the product for continuing purchases. Even the best ad agency in the world ultimately cannot sustain a product that does not deliver the result or satisfaction promised.

It may help to look at volunteer recognition as an example. It is the role of each volunteer-involving organization to thank its own volunteers, while connecting agencies should be shining a light on the cumulative effect of many successful volunteer activities in the area. So bestowing a city (or state or national) “volunteer of the year” award simply duplicates – even creates a hierarchy – of recognition. Why not instead organize a parade down Main Street in which the volunteer center shows the public, the media, government officials, and funders how large and diverse a combined force local volunteers really are?

The connector deserves and should take credit for such accomplishments as:

- The amount of publicity and media stories showing the diversity and power of volunteering
- The number of consultations with organizations, businesses, schools and other entities that resulted in new efforts to create volunteer opportunities or to inform new audiences about volunteering
- Advocacy with legislators and funding sources to increase tangible support for all volunteers in the community (expense reimbursement, tax credits, etc.)
- Collaborative projects that began with invitations from the volunteer center to community groups who would otherwise not have met one another
- The evaluations and outcomes of volunteer management training delivered

The worth of connector agencies is in softening the playing field: making it easier for organizations and volunteers to find one another, stimulating more types of players to join the game, and getting the crowd to cheer.

- *If you are in a volunteer-involving organization, how are you helped by a volunteer center or other connector agency? What can such resources do for many organizations together that you cannot do alone? When you do feel they instead compete with your individual efforts?*
- *If you are in a volunteer center or other connector agency, how do you demonstrate the value of your services? How do you know you are helping your stakeholders? What frustrates you about being “in*

the middle”?

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For more information:

In April 2014, *e-Volunteerism: The Electronic Journal of the Volunteer Community* devoted its [entire issue to the subject of volunteer centers](#). To my knowledge, no other publication in our field has even done this and we had contributors from around the world, since the situation seems to reinvent itself all over. For that issue, Rob Jackson and I wrote a *Points of View* essay, [The Competitive Edge: Tension between Volunteer Centers and Volunteer Resources Managers and How to Change It](#) [click for free access], in which we spoke honestly about this problem.

Related Topics: [Community Organizing](#) | [Infrastructure to Support Volunteering](#) | [Volunteer Centers](#)

## Comments from Readers

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*Submitted on June 3rd, 2016*

*Maggie Rogers, Volunteer Program Manager, INterim Hospice, Lubbock, TX, USA*

I'm so glad you acknowledged that not all organizations who have volunteers are non-profits. In the USA, all hospices are required by federal law to have volunteers. If we do not have active volunteers, we do not receive any federal funding. The local connector agency, as well as other organizations will not include my hospice as an acceptable place to volunteer because we are a for-profit hospice.

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*Submitted on June 5th, 2016*

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

Thanks for posting, Maggie. Please continue your fight to have decisions made by connector agencies on the basis of what volunteers *are doing* and *for whom* -- and not solely on the business structure of the host. I discussed this in a Hot Topic years ago:

"[Volunteering in For-Profit Settings: Exploitation or Value Added?](#)" There are some other relevant points in a later Hot Topic, "[Raising Money through Volunteer Labor](#)." Feel free to share either -- and good luck!

- Susan

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*Submitted on June 3rd, 2016*

*Erin Spink, spinktank, Toronto, Canada*

As always, great insight, Susan. I couldn't agree more! Both groups are integral to the overall health, wealth and functioning of a community, but play different roles. I fear too often the overlap is due to chasing limited funding and gaps left from professional groups.

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*Submitted on June 5th, 2016*

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

Hi, Erin -- I also think that too often connector agencies are formed by funders or government officials to help community groups "do more with less." Rarely are direct stakeholders involved in the creation (or governance or staffing) of the connector and so expectations are set by those who do not have to work with the center and the services offered are not necessarily what the volunteer-involving organizations or prospective volunteers asked for. Again, if we tackled this together, collectively we might make a better case to funders.

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*Submitted on June 6th, 2016*

*Laura , Volunteer Coordinator, Ms, Bridgeport, United States*

This is a great article. My agency posts all of its opportunities through Volunteer Match as well as a more local version for our community, Volunteer Square.

The one thing I would add to this discussion is that I always try to follow up on any volunteer referrals ASAP. Usually within 24 hours, I send them an email including our volunteer application. However, I have found that the number of referred volunteers who actually take the next step to complete the application is really pretty low. Having said that, we have gotten some great volunteers through these referral sites. I would just say that the number of people who click an opportunity does not necessarily equate to an ongoing volunteer being placed in that role.

Like many agencies, our volunteers must complete a background screening, so volunteering isn't as simple as just saying...I am interested. I certainly can understand how some applicants would find a lengthy process to be frustrating, but we also have an obligation to protect our clients by doing a complete screening process.

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*Submitted on June 6th, 2016*

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

You make many important points, Laura. I wonder whether you and Volunteer Square (and other organizations using their services) can get together to discuss improving the information prospective volunteers are given along with the basics of how-to-contact-

this-agency. Explaining the process of applying for a volunteer position and possible background screening checks should indeed be information shared when people search for volunteer opportunities. Here's a great way to make sure Volunteer Square is meeting your needs and those of the public seeking volunteer work -- and asking for this indicates that you think Volunteer Square wants to be responsive.

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*Submitted on June 7th, 2016*

*Laura , Ms, Bridgeport, United States*

When we post opportunities on Volunteer Match - we always list that a clearance is required, so ideally, the candidate should know that when they complete the link to express their interest.

In the past 10 years, I have managed several volunteer programs, large and small for several different kinds of organizations and have found that out of those who email or call to make an initial inquiry about volunteering, many don't fill out the application. I have also found that once an application is completed, many applicants don't return my call/email to set up a meeting to talk about our current opportunities. From other volunteer managers I have talked to, this is pretty common. I think it is just something that needs to get factored in when looking at the role of volunteer referral agencies or sites. Some applicants who fill out a form or click a link may just be interested in learning more or may be casually inquiring, which is perfectly fine. We just have to be wary of equating this first step with becoming an active volunteer in that agency.

Volunteer Match also had a really interesting blog a few months ago about the decline in volunteering in the US. I thought the comments and responses to the blog were really interesting and perhaps showed the challenges many of us in volunteer management are faced with. Many responses came from those interested in volunteering who said they contacted agencies who never returned their call or inquiry. A few others said that their primary interest was in virtual volunteering (blogging, etc.) and weren't able to do on-site volunteering that may be required at some agencies. Not every opportunity can be virtual (stocking food pantries, maintaining parks or beaches)

I think that the points raised in this post really connect to the overall state of volunteering and where we are headed as a profession.

Thank you for such an interesting dialogue.

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*Submitted on June 7th, 2016*

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

And thank YOU for making it a dialogue!

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*Submitted on June 6th, 2016*

*Candace Gower, Coordinator, Volunteer Services, CNIB, Winnipeg, MB, Canada*

A very interesting article. While reading it, I found myself mentally checking off all that Volunteer Manitoba (our local centre) does to support volunteerism in Manitoba. I am proud to say they seem to be on the right side of this topic!

Volunteer Manitoba hosts and pays for large recruitment fairs at Winnipeg's Universities and Colleges. They have also partnered with one of the local papers and publish a weekly column highlighting upcoming volunteer requests.

They run funders forums and training session on a large variety of topics. As well, through an innovative partnership with an organization supporting new comers, Volunteer Manitoba helps to increase the knowledge of Winnipeg's volunteer culture with these new residents. Small groups of new comers are taken to about 5 different organizations over the course of 1 week to volunteer on a project specific to each organization.

For our part, local organizations are encouraged to post their open positions on the Volunteer Manitoba website. This is a very active site with strong diversity among organizations as well as positions. Currently there are 180 positions from 85 organizations, including government organizations.

I have never heard my colleagues speak of any feelings of competition between their needs and those of Volunteer Manitoba. We all value and appreciate the work this group does for us.

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*Submitted on June 6th, 2016*

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

Very happy to hear that things are going well in Manitoba, Candace. Maybe this Hot Topic and your reply could be a discussion starter at a meeting of MAVA, with Volunteer Manitoba. It's always the best organizations that continually look to get even better. For example, why are there only 180 positions listed from 85 organizations? That's not even 3 from each. (Just asking....)

Thanks for posting,  
Susan

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*Submitted on June 9th, 2016*



*Chris Reed, Head of UK Volunteering and Community Engagement, Barnardo's, London, United Kingdom*

Susan, a great article as always! I have to declare an interest as Chair of the panel that awards Quality Accreditation to Volunteer Centres in England. That said I couldn't agree more with what you have said. There's too often a focus on the role Volunteer Centres play in brokerage alone here in the UK (well in England at least). That's part of the reason we changed the quality accreditation process about two years ago to put brokerage and reporting on it last. Much more important are the factors you talk about which, for us, fall into the category of strategic development of volunteering.

Things like strategic development, campaigning etc are much more difficult to measure but are, for me, some of the most important things that Volunteer Centres can be involved in. Volunteer Centres should be able to measure the quality of the volunteer experience, not simply the number of people volunteering (and their wage replacement value).

Chris

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*Submitted on June 12th, 2016*

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

Thanks, Chris. I can only be thankful for all that you are chairing this accreditation process! :-)

- Susan

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*Submitted on September 26th, 2016*

*Sami Smyth, Volunteer Coordinator, New Hope Housing, Alexandria, VA, USA*

I know I am a bit late on this hot topic, but I really enjoyed your perspective on this! I recently worked for 2 1/2 years at a local volunteer center and recently decided to switch jobs and was lucky enough to be hired at a local nonprofit as their Volunteer Coordinator. I think you accurately highlighted some of the issues that I thought were most frustrating when I was at the volunteer center. It seemed more like we were hindering local organizations that utilized volunteers rather than working to build capacity in those organizations. When we needed volunteers for our events, we would publicize those first instead of referring, or we would push agencies to use our online system, which was difficult to use and not what most organizations needed. We also would routinely use statistics similar to the ones at the beginning of the article, which never truly captured our impact in the community. For an area that is scarce in resources for all nonprofits, I really felt that the volunteer center was tying up resources that could be more effectively allocated in the community.

I truly believe that volunteer centers are an integral part of the community, but should be strategic about what they offer. In my new role, I plan on utilizing many of the services that the local volunteer centers have, such as volunteer service days, posting opportunities online, and volunteer management training. However, I know that I will not spend a large amount of time dedicated to these resources.

Sami

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*Submitted on September 29th, 2016*

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

Thank you, Sami, for sharing your first-hand experiences on this subject. Perhaps -- as a "customer" -- you will be able to have an influence on your local center for the better.

Susan

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