

TRANSFERABILITY OF VOLUNTEER SKILLS: HOW AND WHY

by Carol Truesdell

Carol Truesdell, a former President of the Minneapolis Junior League, initiated and designed the Association's of Junior League's Career Development Program, implemented nationally for the past 3 years. Carol is currently employed as Assistant Director, Training and Program Development Committee of CHART and chairman of the Advisory Committee of the Governor's Office of Volunteer Services.

Consider a woman in her early forties. She graduated from college twenty years ago and worked for a few years after marriage to afford the downpayment on a new home or to help her husband through graduate school. Since then she has been raising children, managing her household, and doing volunteer work. Her volunteer activities have been expansive and often at high levels of responsibility. She has developed competence in several skill and knowledge areas. Now for reasons of economic or psychological need, she wishes to re-enter the job market.

With no recent paid work experience; no advanced or recent academic degrees; and no technical experience, she must now sell herself to an employer for the first time in twenty years. She knows she has been effective in the voluntary sector, but wonders if an employer will recognize the expertise gained there and acknowledge its transferability. Will she be given credit for her volunteer work?

This is an increasingly important question for many women today. As 50% of women are employed or entering the job market; as one out of three marriages end in divorce; and as 50% of families include more than one wage earner, the need to receive employment credit for unpaid work is no longer an academic subject, but one of vital importance.

Consider an employee performing a routine, non-professional job. He is offered an opportunity to participate in his company's new volunteer program. After assessing his interests, skills, and values, the corporation's Volunteer Director places him in an agency serving senior citizens. Through his volunteer work, he gains new lifework satisfactions and develops new communication, program development, and organizational skills. He is a happier, more productive employee, demonstrating new areas of competence. Will his supervisor recognize his skills developed through volunteer experiences, and recommend a promotion?

Increasingly volunteers are asking more of their volunteer work than altruistic feelings. They are demanding meaningful responsibilities, a new professionalism in program management, and opportunities for personal growth and career development. Both re-entry women and corporate employees are asking for transferability — for the recognition by employers of competencies gained through unpaid work experience.

To respond specifically to the needs of re-entry women; to gain access to the paid job market, CHART, a nonprofit training and consulting firm, built a business Internship option into TRANSITIONS, its women's program designed to help women facing life and work decisions.

This program offers women with college degrees, extensive and focused volunteer work, and management potential, opportunities for six-month part/full time, paid Internships at the professional entry level in Twin Cities corporations. Employers are asked to judge candidates' on a functional basis, not on employment histories, recognizing that skills and knowledge developed in unpaid work experiences are as valid as those learned through employment.

As the designers and coordinators of the Business Internship option, Marion Etwiler and I have placed thirteen women in Internships over the last year with significant results:

1. Employers, though initially hesitant, are highly impressed with the quality of work performance, demonstrating the validity of the transferability concept; the commendable work characteristics of volunteers; and the high motivational level of re-entry women.
2. Several Interns have been hired on a permanent basis following completion of their Internship experiences.
3. All Interns feel it would have been difficult, if not impossible to "get in the door" without effective advocacy for their volunteer credentials.

One of the most prominent groups advocating statewide for the transferability of volunteer experience has been the Governor's Office of Volunteer Services (G.O.V.S.). Its research and follow-through action in this area have been nationally recognized. To date, G.O.V.S. has taken the following steps:

1. Employers in both the public and private sectors have been urged to include Volunteer Experience on their job application forms.
2. Through a grant from the Intergovernmental Personnel Act (IPA) and in conjunction with the Minnesota Association of Counties, G.O.V.S. is developing resources for a) Volunteer Directors and leaders; b) Volunteers; and c) State Personnel Directors to assist them in transferring volunteer experience to employment credit. Upon completion of the materials, training sessions will be held for the voluntary and public employment sectors.

The primary finding resulting from research and the IPA project is the need for comprehensive documentation of volunteer experience by the social service agency, the volunteer organization, or by the volunteers themselves. In response to the demands of the voluntary sector asking asking employers to give credit for volunteer experience, employers are reacting with their own demands, requesting that voluntary organizations pattern their record-keeping and personnel systems after employment models. Volunteers and Volunteer Directors are being asked to change their practices to meet the needs of employers, not the other way around.

Employers, therefore, are beginning to ask for time records, accurate job descriptions with performance standards, supervisory methods, training records, and

periodic performance appraisals. In order for Volunteer Directors to write meaningful letters of recommendation or for volunteers to write effective resumes, volunteer experience will have to be documented the same way paid work is assessed. This expectation — realistic or not — may have far-reaching ramifications for the tenor and direction of future volunteer programming.

Though the rationale supporting employment credit for volunteer experience is philosophically and pragmatically sound, the realities of transferability are not as encouraging. It is easy to be intellectually challenged by the concept and yet naive about the difficulty of its implementa-

tion. Since basic attitudinal changes are involved regarding the definition of work, painstaking advocacy on the part of voluntary organizations and volunteers will be necessary to make this concept a working reality.

Forceful economic and social trends are pushing the voluntary sector to upgrade its programming. The voluntary sector is making new demands of employers. Employers in return are asking for a new professionalism from volunteers and volunteer leaders. Each is asking for accountability from the other. New challenges. New problems. New options. New answers. Yet movement. And a new respect for voluntarism.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO EMPLOYERS

1. Remember that by recognizing the marketability of volunteer work, you are encouraging and supporting citizen participation which improves the quality of life in your community.
2. Don't overlook the significant learning and competence that can come from carefully designed volunteer experiences.
3. Try to distinguish the volunteers who have focused their time and effort in a few significant areas in order to achieve results from those whose service is shallow and fragmented.
4. Learn to think functionally, instead of by title or position. Determine HOW a person did a job as well as WHAT he/she did.
5. Ask the same questions you would ask of a person with a paid work history:

How many hours per week did you work?
What were your responsibilities?
What skills and knowledge did you use?
What training did you have?
What did you accomplish?
How were you evaluated?

6. Recognize that some of these questions may be difficult for volunteers to answer since most volunteer organizations are just beginning to recognize the

need for documentation of volunteer experience and the need for performance appraisals against objective standards.

7. Recognize that volunteers are generally self-starters and usually highly motivated, dependable, and people-oriented — all important work characteristics.
8. Consider that it is usually more cost-effective to train a generalist in technical areas than it is to teach a technical expert how to relate to people.
9. Remember that volunteers know the community well, have many contacts and a highly developed sense of public relations.
10. Realize that re-entry women, trading on their volunteer skills, present your company with an additional, untapped pool of management talent and an opportunity to achieve your EEOC objectives.
11. Recognize that a particular paid job cannot meet all an employee's life-work needs. Volunteer experiences can supplement paid work satisfactions.
12. Consider that well-chosen volunteer placements can help an employee expand on current skills; develop new competencies; or provide opportunities to function in new roles (eg. supervisory), leading to improved job performance or the chance for advancement.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO VOLUNTEERS

1. Choose your volunteer work carefully. Select a program headed by a Volunteer Director who insists on record-keeping and documentation of volunteer experience. Think more about how you will learn from a particular job and less about its title and responsibilities.
2. Focus you volunteer work. Avoid fragmentation of time and effort. Consciously try to develop marketable skills and knowledge.
3. Accept increased responsibilities. Plan these career steps as seriously as a paid employee.
4. Keep accurate time records. Insist on an up-to-date job description and on-going supervision.
5. Request orientation to the agency or program and its clientele: on-the-job training; supplemental skill training; and interaction with staff and Board mem-

bers. Keep records of what you have learned. Consider applying for academic credit.

6. Request periodic job appraisals based on an accurate job description with performance standards or supplemented with personal goals and objectives.
7. Keep you own volunteer career portfolio, including letters of recommendation.
8. Prepare a resume, including a functional component as an addition to any chronological listing of experience.
9. Write cover letter tying your skills to the qualifications for the job. Remember to think functionally.
10. Be prepared to advocate assertively for the validity of transferability of skills.