

Fear of Volunteering Leads To One-Dimensional Personality

A college president takes a hard look at a young woman applying for a major administrative position and gives her reasons for not hiring the candidate.

Her credentials were in order: bachelors and masters degrees from good institutions, relevant on-the-job experience, good references from previous employers. She was dressed for success in a sedate, but stylish manner. But I'm not going to hire the young woman whom I interviewed this morning for a key administrative position.

My reason is a simple one. She belongs to no professional or civic associations; she has no record of contributing her time to her college, to her profession, to her neighborhood or to her favorite charity. She's one-dimensional, lacking in the outside interests that make her an asset to her employer and to the community in which she lives and works.

Her problem is, unfortunately, one that I see all too often among young women today. It's fear of volunteering—and it is going to hold back many young women in their quest for positions in the upper reaches of the corporate structure and on corporate boards. Even sadder, it is going to limit their enjoyment of life in the fullest sense.

In the early days of the women's movement, voluntarism got a bad name. Volunteer work was equated with slave labor in the eyes of many feminists. Indeed, in 1971, the National Organization for Women took a position against service-oriented voluntarism—although "political or change oriented" volunteer activities were deemed acceptable.

The number of volunteers available to agencies that had long relied on volunteer support began to decline, as the women who had formed the volunteer nucleus turned to work-for-pay. Interestingly, many of these women got jobs in large part because they convinced employers that volunteer work had provided valuable experience.

Women took hold of the male formula for success and began to follow it rigidly. But somehow many young women have missed an important ingredient in that formula. They have failed to realize that the most successful corporate executives have always held positions on the boards of nonprofit agencies and groups—and enhanced their careers in the process.

The young women who aspire to the corporate boards of tomorrow need to start establishing their track records today. Volunteer work can provide visibility, experience and confidence. But, more important, it can offer a very special brand of fulfillment not found at work or at home. Networking is just a small part of the story. Paying society back in some small way for all that we receive from it is the real "bottom line."

—Rhoda Dorsey, President Goucher College,
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and IRAC's *Interfraternity Bulletin*.