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## Speaking Out: Fear of Volunteering

*Volunteer activities are missing from the resumes of many career women today. Here's why it will hinder their climb to the top of the corporate power structure.*

By Rhoda M. Dorsey

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—and that will, over the long term, help her to advance personal-

ly and professionally.

Her problem is, unfortunately, one that I see all too often among young women today. It's fear of voluntarism—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 more sad, 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

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Minnesota. Like this busy young woman, I had little time, and I was ambitious. But I knew there was more to life than a career and a paycheck—and I set out to find a way to have fun and make friends. As a graduate of Smith College, where I had many fond memories of hard work and close friendships, I decided to join my local alumnae club. I sold books at the annual book sale, I made telephone calls, and I made a lot of friends. In today's parlance, I "networked." The benefits were both personal and professional. One of the women who headed the book sale later came to work for me as an assistant dean.

I'd caught the voluntarism bug. I became involved with our regional education accreditation association, with a local church-run home for troubled young women, and with the state historical society. As my professional commitments increased, so did my volunteer efforts—and so did my visibility in the community. My work with the historical society led to an appointment on the city's commission for historical and architectural preservation and later to the governor's committee on the same topic.

From Smith book sales I moved on to the board of the alumnae association. And from subcommittee work with the accreditation association, I worked myself up to the presidency. In fact, I'm sure my volunteer activities played a key role in my appointments to the four corporate boards on which I now serve.

My story's not an unusual one. Examine the backgrounds of the handful of women who sit on corporate boards today and you will find that each one made the time to volunteer. A recent article in the *Harvard Business Review* notes that women selected for corporate boards were chosen, according to the corporations, for their high visibility in government, education, and non-profit circles.

More and more corporations are becoming aware of the added value that employees who volunteer bring to their jobs. In marked contrast to

twenty years ago, the majority of America's volunteers now also hold full-time jobs. The Bank of America even evaluates its employees for promotion based in part on their community involvement.

There's a reason that corporations encourage their employees to volunteer. They know that volunteer work can break the routine of daily life and perk up interest and enthusiasm on and off the job. The fact is that a person without outside interests is a very flat individual indeed. He or she is not the kind of person I'm interested in spending much time with in or out of the office.

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."

I enjoy, benefit by, and, I hope, add to the corporate boards on which I serve. My long-term commitment to our local facility for troubled young women is just as vital to me, however. All of these things make my life a fuller one—and a lot more fun.

Forget the advice that old Army hands used to give new recruits. Do volunteer—and keep on volunteering. Society needs more than a few good women.

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## Volunteering

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with slave labor in the eyes of many feminists. Indeed, in 1971, the National Organization for Women, at its fifth national conference, took a position against service-oriented voluntarism—although "political or change-oriented" volunteer activities were deemed acceptable.

The number of volunteers available to the Junior League, the Red Cross, and numerous other 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 those 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 non-profit agencies and groups—and enhanced their careers in the process.

I asked the young woman in the interview this morning why she had not become involved in any outside activities. "I just don't have the time—my current job is too demanding," she explained. There was a hint of impatience in her tone—as though civic responsibility and corporate womanhood were mutually exclusive.

I thought back to my own arrival at Goucher, back in 1954, fresh from graduate school at the University of