

VOLUNTEERISM TREND WATCH

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What are the current "hot" issues in the field of volunteerism? How will they affect how we do our jobs? Each year, as the "Volunteer Energy Resource Catalog" goes to press at the end of the summer, I ask myself these questions. Why? Because our ability to be effective in what we do depends, in part, upon our ability to recognize change and to respond to it quickly.

The following are my picks for the eight top trends percolating in September 1995 that I think every leader of volunteers should be aware of, understand, and plan around. How can you do this? In each case, ask yourself the following questions:

- ✓ Have I seen any indication that this trend has begun in my community? How is it manifesting itself here? Who is most affected right now? Can I gain some insight by talking to other leaders of volunteers about how they are responding?
- ✓ Is this a trend that I feel has potential to be of help to volunteer services in our organization? How do I make sure we're part of it in our community?
- ✓ Is this a trend that worries me in its negative implications for our volunteer effort? What can I do to prepare for it or even to prevent it?
- ✓ I don't see this trend having an effect yet here—why not? Do I expect it to pass us by or to start later?

For each of the following trends I've given you a brief explanation and then have outlined the potential positives and negatives—from my perspective—for volunteer efforts.

These are my top trend picks—what are yours?



#1

The success of one-day, group volunteer projects that give busy people (including some who have not volunteered before) a way to serve their communities in brief but intense bursts of activity.

For many years now, the volunteer field has recognized that a growing number of people are reluctant to make a long-term commitment to a regularly-scheduled, ongoing volunteer assignment. Many factors, including long working hours, single-headed households, and general uncertainty about even the near-term future, make it difficult for prospective volunteers to promise time-consuming involvement to charitable causes. Also, with so many social concerns in the headlines, people find it hard to choose one cause over another, preferring instead to have an impact on a variety of issues. Finally, corporate employee volunteer programs gravitate towards "quick results" projects requiring team effort.

Into this situation have come several quite exciting new projects:

- "City Cares" organizations, located in major cities, coordinate volunteer projects targeted at very busy people who want to give a few hours at a time to specific tasks. These groups vary in format and name, often calling themselves "Philadelphia (or your city) Cares" or "Hands On Atlanta (or your city)." Contact City Cares of America, 1737 H Street, NW, Washington, DC 20006, (202) 887-0500.
- "Day of Caring" is what many local United Ways call a new initiative aimed at showing corporate donors what agencies do with the money they receive by asking employees to do one day of volunteering (usually in the fall). Contact your United Way to get involved.
- "Into the Streets" is a student community awareness project spearheaded by the Campus Opportunity Outreach League but operated by local colleges and universities. Although designed as a one-day volunteer activity, "Into the Streets" aims to encourage students to continue doing

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more intensive volunteer work. Contact your local college.

- A number of Volunteer Centers and individual agencies have started to publish "giving catalogs" that focus on special needs over the December holiday period. These publications list needs for money, in-kind donations, and volunteer help. Groups and individuals can adopt projects to complete by the new year.

Potential Positives:

- More people will do at least some volunteer work, even if in less quantity than before.
- This is a way for people to get their feet wet testing whether a volunteer activity is for them.
- Agencies will develop greater creativity in making use of skills offered by volunteers in short bursts.
- People who learn about many different community agencies while doing a variety of one-time projects are better advocates for legislation and funding affecting the whole community.

Potential Negatives:

- The implication that community service can always be accomplished in quick, fun ways tends to oversimplify social problems.
- One-time projects may satisfy people's desire to "do something good" without consideration of a longer commitment.
- There may be fewer referrals to those organizations in real need of continuing, intensive volunteer commitment.

#2

Disenchantment with the traditional model of volunteer "management" in favor of more flexible models of encouraging participation by a wider spectrum of volunteers.

This is a backlash trend. As the literature and academic coursework on volunteer management proliferates, some see a danger in locking our field into an "accepted standard" of institutionalized volunteer programs. This model is patterned on paid personnel management, in which candidates are recruited to fill a written job description, are carefully screened and trained, and work under close staff supervision. I ac-

knowledge that I preach this model frequently.

However, this is not the *only* model possible, or even desirable in all cases. This type of agency-based volunteer involvement is only one corner of the larger picture of "volunteerism," which includes such important segments as all-volunteer organizations, community organizing, self-help groups, and lone mavericks!

Volunteer programs are finding creative, sometimes unorthodox, approaches to meeting needs and welcoming participation by a wider spectrum of volunteers. For example, various Big Brother/Big Sister programs are encouraging their matched adult/youth pairs to, in turn, do some volunteer work together as a shared activity. This type of "doubling up" lets the adult volunteer help his or her assigned youngster while doing even more to help the community. But the recipient agency needs to understand the special dynamics—and occasional priority—of the original mentorship arrangement.

If you focus on the wishes of the client group, new ways to offer help present themselves. At-risk teenagers may respond to the advice of ex-gang members, but these volunteers may not be comfortable with lengthy screening or "training" by you. The same reluctance to formal "registration" as a volunteer may be true of others who have something important to share with those in need: recovering addicts, former welfare recipients, male senior citizens.

Recent immigrants from cultures that protect young single women may only allow their teenage daughters to attend group activities led by mature female volunteers, even if your program usually stresses one-to-one services. The ideal way to staff a seven-day-a-week food bank may be to allow volunteers to "drop in" as well as to schedule in advance.

The point is to structure or adapt volunteer activities so that the most qualified volunteers work productively in ways that serve clients best—without limiting yourself and them to any "professionally prescribed" program design.

Potential Positives:

- Focus is placed on those needing help, rather than on agency traditions or procedures.
- This may be a way to reach out to people who rarely "volunteer" in the formal sense of the word.

Potential Negatives:

- There may be greater liability risks because there is less screening and less emphasis on formal training.

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- Volunteers in more traditional assignments may question why they are asked to meet the formal requirements of the volunteer program while others are not.

#3

For-profit endeavors blurring the boundaries of not-for-profit services but still legitimately involving volunteers in direct patient/resident care.

It is no longer a given that health and human service organizations are either not-for-profit entities or government agencies. In fact, today it may take some research to learn who administers or owns a service-delivery program. Hospitals and nursing homes across the country are merging into or opening as for-profit businesses. "Privatization" of formerly-government programs has opened the door to everything from for-profit child care to prison systems.

Caught in this evolution are volunteers. In some cases, volunteers who began their service under a previous 501(c)(3) organization now find themselves working for a business. In other cases, for-profit services are recruiting new volunteers. Is it wrong to expect volunteers to help a money-making venture? On the surface, the answer may seem an obvious "yes." But there are valid and important reasons why it is legitimate for volunteers to be active in for-profit service delivery.

The key is to distinguish between volunteer assignments that assist "the company" from those that assist the *recipients of service*. Just as a nonprofit agency should not recruit volunteers as a substitute for adequate staffing, a business should not see volunteers as an opportunity to save money on fewer employees. But no organization—whether a business or a nonprofit—can ever have the resources to provide the special touch volunteers offer to individual patients or clients. While employees must equitably divide their time among all who need assistance, personalized attention is the hallmark of the volunteer. Further, frequently clients or patients have no choice about where they receive care. Should they be deprived of volunteers simply because of the ownership of the facility?

Keep in mind, too, that student interns—most often unpaid—expect to find placements even with outright commercial businesses. If it is acceptable for a student to learn advertising, computers, or accounting as desirable "experiential education" in a corporation, how can it be unethical to learn social work, geriatric

care, or other human service delivery in a for-profit setting?

Potential Positives:

- For-profits that welcome volunteers will provide better service to those in need.
- Volunteers who choose to work in proprietary settings can act as consumer advocates within those settings.

Potential Negatives:

- Businesses may be able to provide their volunteers with more competitive "perks" (meals, parking) than their nonprofit counterparts.
- Volunteers may be assigned to inappropriate tasks that do not focus on the recipients of service.

#4

Cyberspace! The proliferation of opportunities to use electronic communication to reach new prospective volunteers as well as our colleagues around the globe.

#5

Cyberspace, again! The really exciting thing is the discovery of completely new ways for people to do "virtual volunteering" through their computers—thereby adding to the sum total of volunteer activity.

Computer hackers have been savvy to the potential of online computer interaction for some time, but in the last year or so the rest of us have caught on that something important is going on out there. Those organizations that have jumped into the electronic arena are eager to use the potential of this new communication medium, but many nonprofits wonder if there will be a worthwhile payback for the work and money it takes to go online.

The most important thing to consider is that cyberspace is much more than an electronic version of print media. There are already dozens of sites on which a volunteer program can "post" volunteer opportunities for prospective volunteers to see. Too many World Wide Web home pages are also largely static "pages" of text presentation.

The main value of electronic communication is

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instant information. You have the chance to post weekly—even daily or hourly—updates of critical issues. The whole concept of a “newsletter” takes on exciting dimensions when the cost of printing and mailing is removed. A virtual newsletter can be short and sweet, yet contain the most current, “hot” information available. In cyberspace, the invitation to your big event can show a running tally of registration figures, which famous people have agreed to appear, and any last-minute changes due to weather.

Volunteers who are in love with cyberspace are clear candidates for becoming virtual news alert editors, electronic marketers for special events, and creative thinkers about how to make a Web site more interactive. Such people can even do much of the work at home on their own computers. Further, volunteers who are comfortable with the Internet can spend their time online doing research on any subject under the sun, finding those newsgroups, databases, and electronic sites of greatest value to your organization.

In terms of volunteer recruitment, a growing number of Volunteer Centers are going online with their database of volunteer opportunities, either through community “freenets” or with their own Web homepages. Agencies that are using the Internet for public education are creating “hot links” to allow readers to select “how I can volunteer to help.” Commercial services like America Online and CompuServe have started nonprofit areas in which you can already post volunteer openings. The real value of such electronic postings is their ability to do “needle-in-a-haystack” searches. The more *specific* a volunteer need, the more the computer becomes a tool to find the one-in-a-thousand person best suited for that need.

Most studies say that the profile of the Internet and commercial services user is largely male, between 20 and 35, well-educated, and employed in a technical job. There are indicators that this is changing rapidly, but mostly to connect women who are well-educated. There are also a great many teenage boys at the computer screen. Since the volunteer world is hungry to recruit “Generation X” males, isn’t this a wonderful chance to design new volunteer assignments tapping the special skills and interests of this target audience, and then use the electronic medium as a way to spread the word specifically to them?

The ways in which people can engage in “virtual volunteering” are only now being imagined. These are assignments in which the volunteer contributes time and expertise *via* computer. The technical assistance possibilities are obvious—and transcend geographical boundaries. Education and training will also change dramatically once the expert no longer has to be in

physical contact with the student. Even more exciting are the ways people can reach out to one another to offer support and even caring by computer contact. Already underway are projects matching corporate volunteers to latch-key children in the late afternoon hours, homebound senior-to-senior cyberspace “visiting,” and interactive computer game playing with teenagers in hospital care.

Both *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* and *The NonProfit Times* regularly publish information about new Internet sites of value to nonprofits. Check out the “Civic Involvement System” on America Online (free trial disks are available from ENERGIZE)—as the new Forum Manager of the volunteerism area, we want to work with you to make this service of real value to volunteer programs.

Potential Positives:

- This is a way to reach well-educated, young professionals, especially men.
- It is also a way to reach teenagers, especially boys.
- Cyberspace can help you seek out extremely specialized interests and skills.
- It offers potential new ways to serve those who are physically isolated.
- Use of online technology teaches literacy skills.

Potential Negatives:

- The cost and inaccessibility of equipment make cyberspace unreachable for many.
- It is currently extremely difficult and time-consuming to find the right data quickly.
- Static and uninteresting volunteer postings on the Internet may play into people’s negative stereotypes about “old-fashioned” volunteering.
- There may be tension between high-tech and high-touch volunteering.

#6

Welfare reform. Stay tuned as more and more states incorporate some sort of required community service by recipients of public assistance.

In New Jersey they call it “workfare.” In Michigan it’s the “social contract.” Virginia is signing on. Pennsylvania is exploring it. What’s happening in your state? As part of the effort to reform welfare, state

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governments are requiring public assistance recipients to demonstrate a willingness to work. This means attending school or a training program, working at a part-time job, or doing volunteering—in some states as much as twenty hours a week. Ironically, there are still states that view volunteer activity as interference with an active job hunt and therefore do not permit more than only a few hours a week.

As with all other forms of “mandated” volunteering or “community service,” this manner of welfare reform puts volunteer program leaders in the middle of controversy. Issues still being resolved include whether such volunteers genuinely want to participate, whether any and all forms of volunteering meet the criteria, who has ultimate legal liability for work performed, and other important questions.

But as with court-ordered service or students fulfilling graduation requirements, people who are introduced to volunteer work through the avenue of workfare often become devoted to their community involvement and remain volunteers for a long time after they “have” to do so.

Potential Positives:

- New pools of talent will be available during weekday hours.
- These volunteers can give us personal insight into the needs of service recipients that can help us improve our agencies.
- Volunteering will be seen as a training ground and stepping stone into desirable paying work.
- Volunteers who develop a commitment to our agencies will continue volunteering after they find full-time employment.

Potential Negatives:

- The public will connect volunteering with “being on welfare” and therefore this will lower respect for and the esteem of all volunteers.
- Participants will feel coerced into doing the work and so will not continue voluntarily after the requirement ends.
- Lack of creativity in designing volunteer assignments will make poor use of the talent available.
- Women (the majority of those on public assistance) will be pushed into low-level “caregiving” volunteer roles that do not produce high-paying jobs.

#7

The growing search for spiritual meaning and the role of religious organizations in providing opportunities to give service to others.

Membership in religious bodies has been growing annually. But the sharpest increase has not been in traditional churches and synagogues. Instead, people are seeking out those houses of worship that have adapted to changing needs, often offering an array of services for single-parent families, different sexual orientations, bilingual and multicultural programming. Alternative spiritual settings, often ecumenical or non-denominational, are also experiencing growth.

Something that congregations have found to be of importance to membership development is giving members the opportunity to do service in the community. Whether called “lay ministry,” “social concern,” or “volunteering,” asking church members to join together in a service project builds unity of purpose while expressing faith. This is especially true when congregations tackle social problems usually seen as long-term and difficult, such as homelessness.

Potential Positives:

- Common ground--and therefore greater community impact--will be found between secular organizations doing valuable social work and religious ones seeking ways to express their beliefs.
- Religious groups are often willing to tackle long-term problems that are too often neglected or even feared by other groups. (There is a reason that Mother Theresa works in the slums of India!)

Potential Negatives:

- Some religious groups may desire to proselytize or preach their value system while giving help to non-believers.
- There is potential for discrimination against clients based on differing religious beliefs.

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#8

Visible interest by colleges, especially community colleges, in offering workshops, non-credit courses, and certificate courses in volunteer management.

Hardly a month goes by in which I do not receive a brochure announcing an education program on some nonprofit management subject offered at a college or university—most often some variation on the theme of fundraising. Sometimes conspicuously absent is any mention of volunteers. But increasingly there are programs especially for volunteer program leaders, either as stand-alone workshops or integrated into more extensive curricula.

The best academic programs have reached out to professional organizations in our field and have advisory committees that include volunteer administrators. Faculty for the college-related programs runs the gamut from scholars with lots of theoretical knowledge and no field experience to practitioners with narrow frames of reference. Again, the best programs balance the qualifications of their faculty, mixing academic credentials with real-life understanding of volunteer program issues.

The Association for Volunteer Administration is maintaining a database of academic programs in volunteer administration. Contact AVA, P.O. Box 4584, Boulder, CO 80306. (303) 541-0238.

Potential Positives:

- There will be more consistent quality in volunteer program management to support the work of volunteers—less “reinventing the square wheel” by each agency for itself.
- Attention by higher education will lead to increased respect for volunteer administration as a profession and a career: when there is something to teach, it must be real.
- Pay scales for volunteer managers will increase as the profession gains recognition.
- People who spend time and money on these courses will make a long-term commitment to volunteer management as a career, rather than a job.

Potential Negatives:

- Some employers will rely on successful completion of coursework as the primary indicator of professional competence with diminishing respect for field experience.
- Faculty selection will be based more on academic credentials and less on real-life experience.
- There will be a narrowing of “accepted practices” to those “taught” rather than those creatively developed to adapt to unique situations.



About the Author

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Her company works with all types of organizations to provide workshops or technical assistance on volunteer management to help a volunteer effort get on the right track. ENERGIZE is also committed to locating and creating the very best resources in the field of volunteerism. For a free catalog containing 55 books, videos, and computer software from 38 sources and 3 countries, call 1-800-395-9800.

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