

VOLUNTEER CAREERS AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

By Herta Loeser

This article is on one particular and very utilitarian aspect of voluntarism, namely its usefulness for career and skills development by the volunteer. But in order to maintain perspective, I think it is important first to look at it with a wider-angled lens.

Volunteering's greatest assets are its versatility, flexibility and adaptability.

Many people volunteer out of a desire to serve others. As Albert Schweitzer put it: *"One thing I know; the only ones among you who will really be happy are those who will have sought and found a way to serve."* Nor is "service" in this sense a narrow concept. It includes such activities as advocacy and citizen participation and self-help groups.

Others volunteer to get out of the house, to meet people, to while away time. They may be satisfied to do "busy work".

Still others volunteer to learn, to better themselves, to acquire skills, preparatory to entering or reentering a career, paid or unpaid.

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Volunteering is flexible, in that it allows the accomplishment of one or more of these objectives on a part time basis, or an intermittent basis between other major commitments, and in many different kinds of surroundings - inner city to exurbia, in an institutionalized environment or by solitary field work.

Volunteering is adaptable to the changing needs and moods of society and of individuals in it. It can be used for experimentation with new ideas, where other forms of untried activity might be wasteful. It can accommodate to economic and social cycles.

Volunteering offers virtually unlimited interactions and shadings of all of these (and many more) possibilities. The richness of its offerings is enormous.

I back off in this way from the topic, in order to be sure, first that no one has the idea that volunteering must be skills and career oriented, and secondly, to face the charge that so selfish and utilitarian a use of volunteering as is implied in the topic constitutes a misuse.

I personally believe strongly in Albert Schweitzer's link between happiness and service to others. But I have always recognized that this link is a two-way street: there is altruism in serving, and there is the selfish motive of seeking personal satisfaction through this altruism. Bluntly: the most noble and "unselfish" service volunteer gets a big payoff in personal satisfaction.

I have been asked by volunteer directors what they should do with people who blatantly state that they are volunteering for career purposes of their own. Should they sign them on or send them home? I have no doubt when I respond: "By all means sign them up". In the first place, many of them are simply more honest than those who would rather not mention their selfish purposes. Moreover, they are likely to be motivated people who will perform well, given proper assignment, and good supervision and guidance. Who knows, they may like what they are doing and become veteran volunteers. But if they do not, the odds are the agency will have "gotten its money's worth" anyway.

Just as there are many paid workers whose principal reward comes from serving others, so voluntarism in its vast versatility can - and should without apology - accept the volunteer with purely personal betterment motives. The agency involved, in addition to getting free and competent service, fulfills a needed and useful societal function in training or retraining a person to whom that training is vitally important. We are passing through a phase where people strike more openly for personal goals and satisfaction. The pendulum has swung far from the idealism and radicalism of the 60s. It will swing back again, but in the meantime voluntarism must continue to be adaptable, and that means volunteer directors themselves must adapt to the changing nature of the available volunteer pool. Personal moral judgments are out of place.

With this perspective, I want to look at the use of volunteer activities for the purpose of developing the skills and career objectives of the volunteer. I have in recent years become very interested in this subject for a very practical reason, i.e., the large number of people, particularly women, who for economic or personal reasons must have careers, but who need a bridge experience between their years of homebound lives and the working world. Volunteering, properly structured, can be that bridge.

I will deal with the subject by describing in some detail PROJECT RE-ENTRY, a program which was carefully designed by the directors and the staff of the Civic Center and Clearing House in Boston to facilitate such transitions on the part of mature women, and which has proven its worth in practice. This specific experiment lends itself well to adaptation and it is possible to generalize from it to the many other, related ways of developing career skills by volunteering.

PROJECT RE-ENTRY combines individual and group counseling with field experience, principally volunteer internships. It is a strictly structured program for women over 35. We require a commitment by the participating women for a full academic year and a minimum of 20 hours a week. After two months of counseling, each participant is matched with a carefully selected volunteer internship. The women receive highly individualized attention and they have a rich variety of possible volunteer intern placements to choose from. A legal agreement must be signed between the intern and the "employing agency", to help avoid misunderstandings and possible exploitation.

Of the first 35 women, each of whom started out very uncertain as to her future, all but 6 are presently settled in new lines of endeavor. The majority are working in paid jobs, either part or full time. A surprisingly large number were offered paid jobs in their places of volunteer internship, a pleasant but unforeseen development. Six are volunteer professionals in a field of concentration that PROJECT RE-ENTRY helped them select. Of the 3 women training with hospital volunteer coordinators, one has since changed over to paid staff.

Laura R. had been a secretary, tutor and a librarian before she got married. Now her family is grown and she wondered what other kinds of jobs would be available to her. What could she do? Could she even find a job? When she joined PROJECT RE-ENTRY, she chose an internship handling consumer complaints in a bank regulatory agency. She discovered quickly that she could transfer her skills to an entirely new field with much more growth potential. As her self confidence increased and she proved herself to be an extremely effective ombudswoman, she was offered and accepted a permanent part-time job with the banking commission for whom she worked as a volunteer intern.

Fifteen years ago Mrs. D. graduated from the University of Iowa, an education major. Today teaching jobs are scarce. As a PROJECT RE-ENTRY intern in the community relations department of Boston's public transportation system, she gained up-to-date working experience in promotion and production, became an expert on bus scheduling and has since been

hired as a paid consultant in the field of her new expertise. She has been able to make the transition from teaching to business through a successful volunteer internship.

Mrs. J. last worked for a salary 25 years ago. Family circumstances were such that she needed to leave her many volunteer activities and find a paid position. She chose to do a stint in the function department of one of Boston's large hotels. As a direct consequence of her volunteer internship she has been hired by a hotel on Cape Cod for the summer season.

Mrs. G. had been a social worker. She was unclear as to how she could use her special training and skills in the corporate world. As an intern in the personnel department of a large bank, she has been able to adapt her counseling, coordinating and planning skills in a business environment. She, too, has been asked to stay on as a salaried employee to work on an Equal Employment Opportunity Compliance Review. Her new expertise is in great demand today.

Mrs. N. threw in the towel, mop and gourmet knives when she came to PROJECT RE-ENTRY for help. After years of motherhood, broken up with stints of volunteer work and endured with the creative stimulus of freelance writing, she decided she would rather work outside her home and came in search of new avenues in which to employ her writing and organizational skills. Mrs. N. commuted some distance to Boston where she enjoyed an internship in the advertising department of a large department store. She found this was a field in which she could be successful. However, the conflict of commuting and maintaining a home and family has proven very difficult in her case. Mrs. N. is reevaluating her decision to look for paid work at this stage in her life.

Mrs. T. now says she should have listened to her physician husband when he told her she'd be "bored stiff" if she didn't have any interests outside the home. Nearly 15 years later, the 35-year

old Sherborn woman is working in public relations at the Elbanobscot Environmental Center. The mother of two sons ages 8 and 10, Mrs. T. discovered she was "terrified" at the thought of their growing up and not needing her. Mrs. T. grew up in Cleveland and was married a year before she graduated from Western Reserve University with a B.A. in English. Her husband was a medical student at the university. She worked at different clerical jobs, but "there was nothing I liked doing, nothing I even wanted to return to". The birth of her first child in 1966 was followed by moves from Baltimore to Montreal to Boston, so Mrs. T., says she "never had a chance to really get established in one thing". She volunteered in schools for her children, and she played tennis and rode horses. But none of these outside activities really fulfilled her. Her husband and sons help her with meals and the household chores normally reserved for her. Mrs. T. is thinking of attending law school, and her husband has encouraged her to go. Mrs. T. says: "You lose your perspective when you're at home... you don't understand that people change jobs, have different careers and that you can go back to work."

The support which the women give each other is very strong and important. They come to regular PROJECT RE-ENTRY meetings while in volunteer internships, to discuss and evaluate what they are doing. We have hired one of our interns as a volunteer in our office.

"Volunteer Internships" are a very special kind of volunteer work. They require specific goals, careful structure and very close supervision both by the "employing agency" and by PROJECT RE-ENTRY staff.

A detailed 34 page report of the first year of operation of PROJECT RE-ENTRY has been prepared and is available on request (see footnote, p.17). In the report the content of the counseling sessions is discussed in some length, as are evaluations by staff members, supervisors and the interns themselves. It also contains a sample of the contract between intern and "employing agency". At present, no formal contract exists between interns and the Civic Center and Clearing House Inc.

To anticipate some other questions which may arise: 1) to-date we have encountered no problems, whatsoever, with regard to any unions; 2) occasionally interns locate their own internship either by serendipity or through personal connections, and interns sometimes put us in touch with good placements for a fellow-intern; 3) staff time is hard to measure. Both directors of the Civic Center and Clearing House spent considerable time getting the project off the ground and continue to keep in very close touch with its progress. At least two other staff persons spend the major part of their time and energy on PROJECT RE-ENTRY; and, 4) without doubt, non-profit organizations are most responsive to the volunteer internship concept. We often go to the top or to the most flexible person we can identify in a corporate setting. Small firms seem to work well with PROJECT RE-ENTRY interns.

PROJECT RE-ENTRY has been joined by a companion program for men interested in career change. We perceive a fast growing need among men, many of whom are profoundly affected by changes in our society and are consequently reexamining their work, their life-styles and their motivation for doing what they have been doing most of their lives. PROJECT NEW ENTRY is experimental. It remains to be seen whether society or the men themselves are ready to accept the volunteer internship concept as a useful tool to reschool and redirect men. The program is directed by a volunteer, a man who has himself retired early from a full professorship at MIT in order to gain some totally new experiences. We want to work with men who are employed or self-employed or unemployed. Hopefully they in turn - as well as our "re-entered women" - will become catalysts for much needed social change.

Volunteering offers infinite opportunities for enterprising individuals and for society in this time of re-appraisal of work and life-styles. Intelligent anticipation of the shape of things to come requires, in my opinion, that we look ahead to the future and think about opportunities for experimentation and innovation. Volunteerism can and should play a vital part in our efforts to work towards a "Future Without Shock".

NOTE: The report on PROJECT RE-ENTRY may be ordered from the Civic Center and Clearing House In., 14 Beacon St., Boston 02108. \$5.95 ppd. Checks must accompany order.

The report was written in the hope and expectation that others will want to adopt the program and adapt it to the needs of their community and constituents.