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Why Can't We Make Progress on Public Perceptions about Volunteering?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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2005

Last week I was listening to a National Public Radio interview with the artist Christo who, with his wife and collaborator Jeanne-Claude, is in the midst of erecting “The Gates” project this month in New York City’s Central Park (<http://www.christojeanneclaude.net>). When the interviewer heard that the artists had hired 1100 workers to complete the installation and then to remove it after 16 days, she asked whether volunteers would be involved, too. Christo answered, “of course not, because there is no way to insure volunteers.” This outlandish statement was not challenged and the interview moved on.

Now there are many reasons why Christo might want to pay his workers and certainly the burst of employment is good for New York. So I did not react to the fact that he did not want volunteers (in this case, the artists do not accept donations of money either). But why did he think that volunteers could not be insured and why did the interviewer accept his statement as reasonable?

There are two things that might have occurred: Christo may have simply assumed that volunteers could not be insured and never checked it out, or he did contact an insurer with no previous history in this area who turned him down without knowing – or without bothering to research – that there are indeed many types of insurance policies available to cover volunteers who are appropriately recruited, trained and managed. [If you want to learn more about this important topic, start at Volunteers Insurance Service (for the U.S.) <http://www.cimaworld.com/htdocs/volunteers.cfm> and also use Google to search on volunteers + insurance, which gives international resources, too.

Regardless of the source of Christo’s information, I am convinced that the statement “volunteers can’t be insured” is based largely on the persistent stereotype that “volunteer” means “unskilled.” Followed in this example by the assumption that volunteers, by definition, would be incapable of doing the work properly or would vastly increase the risks.

I've encountered this infuriating problem hundreds of times in my career, as undoubtedly has everyone reading this essay. Yet I never get used to it. What is it about volunteering that causes such thinking – even now, despite decades of serious attempts by our field to alter the public's perceptions?

When the word volunteer is heard, why don't the following images come to mind:

- Doctors and nurses giving up personal vacation time to travel to the poorest parts of the world to do life-altering surgeries?
- First responders to emergencies, from tsunami recovery efforts to avalanche search and rescue, not to mention most local ambulance services?
- Literacy tutors?
- Members of the school board?
- The people who maintain the Appalachian Mountain Trail?
- Habit for Humanity home builders?

I don't need to preach to the choir here, but there are so many examples of highly-skilled volunteering out there that it is increasingly irritating to see the world continue to think only about "envelope stuffing" and "Candy Stripers." Thirty or forty years ago people could get away with hearing the word "doctor" and assume a male would appear, or could humorously denigrate women's abilities without consequence. We've made progress. We've managed to educate ourselves and others to change our assumptions (generally) and respect both genders. So why are we still living in the 1950's when it comes to volunteers?

Volunteers are as skilled and as unskilled as are paid workers. In fact, they are frequently the *same* paid workers, giving their time outside of their jobs to other organizations. In Christo's case, what would have happened if he had asked the various craftspeople and construction workers to volunteer the exact same skills to his art project as they normally are paid to use on building jobs? In principle, would this not have resulted in the same workforce that he was "able to insure"? What made the difference if they were paid or not? [Again, I am not making the case that he was wrong to pay them, just that he or his insurance company was wrong to assume he could only recruit volunteers who would be unable to do the job right.]

On the other side of the coin, there is so much incompetence out there in the employment world that it sometimes makes me laugh to hear people put faith in someone simply because he or she is paid. The old joke that the Titanic was built by "professionals" and Noah's Ark by an "amateur" does ring true.

It could be argued that volunteering often involves the young and the old, both groups outside the standard age of paid employment, and therefore attitudes about volunteering reflect this wide pool of workers. But "employment" in and of itself does not automatically imply "skilled," either – after all, it encompasses nuclear physicists *and* street cleaners. There are volunteers who excel and, yes, there

are volunteers who are witless. Just like employees! (And in both cases it might be fair to blame the people who recruited/hired them for not doing a better job.)

Unlike other Hot Topics, I have few suggestions to offer here nor good answers to the questions I've raised. But I believe it is absolutely central to the challenges of our field. Until someone who makes a silly public statement about volunteers is corrected by the media or by a political leader, the misinformation will continue. Until it becomes important for any sort of application to list and describe one's community service as well as one's employment history, the public will continue to think these are done by two separate groups. Until organizations feel compelled to record and report the contributions of time and talent with the same attention as they report the contributions of cash, volunteering will be seen as "nice" but marginal.

Why do you think the stereotypes persist?

Why do you think our past efforts have failed to change the misperceptions?

Is there something we can do about it?

Related Topics: [Definitions of "Volunteer"](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#) | [Philosophy](#)

Posted on 18 August 2005 by Carolyn, HFHGI, Asst. Volunteer Coordinator, Indianapolis IN USA

Having heard this NPR segment I thought the statement was you "could not ensure volunteers" meaning that for the length and work that was to take place for his display he did not believe that they could secure dedicated volunteers that they could rely on.

As to insurance we all know from the previous response that this is a flawed statement. I however took the statement to mean that volunteers were generally unreliable and not capable of committing to the task, which of course is ludicrous.

Submitted on 18 March 2005 by Mary Williams, Suncoast Communities Blood Bank, Volunteer Coordinator, Sarasota, FL USA

Habitat for Humanity insures its volunteers and they are the third largest home builder in the world! Accordia and Chubb are the names of the Habitat insurance carriers.

Submitted on 28 February 2005 by Gerald (Jerry) Pannozzo, CVA, Lutheran Medical Center, New York Methodist Hospital, Grant Coordinator, Program Coordinator, New York, NY

Your hot topic got me thinking on this sunny Sunday afternoon last day for the "Gates" installation in our Central Park. The perception of "volunteer" is a gray area due to a number of factors. There are great programs with volunteers trained to staff suicide hotlines, rape centers, hospices, etc. - challenging assignments. However, the message the public hears includes alternative sentencing (instead of incarceration or a fine); schools mandating students to complete community service hours (that sometimes don't even cover the hours required for the interview, orientation and training process); or the stipends issue (AmeriCorp, etc. -- which can be perceived as "cheap labor"). Don't get me wrong, I'm not diminishing the value of any of these volunteers I'm talking about the politicians,

corporations and public perception. This "perception issue" might have contributed to the statement made by the artists related to the insurance issue.

Layer this with the associations/organizations that we have charged with representing us. I think the health care model ADVS might be more effective when "speaking with one voice" -- since it is based on a local, state and national model. Expecting the international model of associations (such as AVA) to customize a response is problematic. Some local affiliates/DOVIA's connect to a state model here in NYC that is not the case. POLF is more of a national model; however, I don't see them speaking for volunteerism and volunteer administration despite their connection to Volunteer Centers. This leads to the question, "Are we the only ones who should be advocating for who is a volunteer and what he/she is capable of accomplishing in collaboration with effective volunteer management?" (Linda Graff has addressed this with her "the day volunteers went on strike" idea.) What about this collaboration as it relates to addressing the "perception issue"?

Finally, as volunteer resource managers we can make sure we aren't perceived as what I call "baby sitters". When we set the bar low for volunteers the staff knows it and this can lead to reducing the potential of volunteers. We do this when we avoid confronting a problem volunteer (because we don't have a fair performance evaluation process in place) or addressing the fact that someone no longer has the skills (and we are uncomfortable with addressing the situation). I say let's continue changing one mind at a time within our agencies/organizations and seek leaders who will build coalitions / collaborations that result in a stronger (in numbers) voice!

Submitted on 21 February 2005 by Robert Leigh, United Nations Volunteers, Senior Policy Specialist, Bonn Germany

I have in front of me the front page of the New York Times Arts Section dated February 10 which highlights "...the 600-odd paid volunteers.." in the text and again "Paid volunteers" appears as the caption to the accompanying photograph of people enlisted to help install Christo and Jean-Claude's art project. This linguistic muddle surely makes the task of promoting better understanding as to what volunteering is about, and tackling perception issues, that much more of a challenge.

Submitted on 15 February 2005 by D. Farkas, GIVS, President, Easton CT

During an interview he did change his quote to say they were PAID VOLUNTEERS...a contradiction in terms but it came out in the NY Times as just that.

Submitted on 11 February 2005 by Hillary Roberts, Project Linus NJ, Inc., President, Keyport/NJ USA

In response to this month's Hot Topic, I wanted to add that I believe perceptions in this specialized field are also derived by what we believe quantifies knowledge and experience. Are we qualified because of years working in the field, years behind a desk, years studying the profession? When we recruit and hire do we lean on our own qualifications as a guidepost or realize that individuals with superior qualifications to our own will knock on our door. Do perceptions about the basis for calling this field a profession rely solely on those who report about it? Who keeps perceptions at a minimum level and why. What can we learn from newcomers? Do we allow old ideals to be challenged by innovative candidates? Perceptions indicate a chance for change...do we welcome curiosity?

Submitted on 8 February 2005 by Kelly Callahan, Brookgreen Gardens, ***Manager of Volunteer Services, Pawleys Island, SC USA***

The lack of knowledge involving insuring volunteers is frustrating. In reference to Susan's piece, my volunteers are trained to work with highly valuable sculpture and work very closely with our curator to keep the sculpture in it's best condition. And yes, they are fully insured by my employers, Brookgreen Gardens.

Submitted on 8 February 2005 by Jean Strating, Volunteer Administrators Network, Chairperson, Gainesville/FI USA

Call us Volunteer Coordinators or Managers of Volunteers, but as long as the trend continues to lump volunteer programs in with the Director of Development (aka fund raisers) we don't have a clear identity to demonstrate how volunteers impact the community, and not just volunteer to give money. We also tend to end up at the bottom of the organizational flow chart viewed as a program to demonstrate good fiscal stewardship with few resources to actually run our programs. We need to continue to be recognized as professionals skilled in volunteerism and not Directors of Development.

Perception is another factor in how volunteers and volunteer organizations are viewed by the community. Maybe this is another key? I know that there are many very good organizations that are very professional in their practices and standards, but when the organization is sloppy with their communication and/or organizational skills it trickles down to the reception of their volunteers. If I don't return someone's call or email promptly are they going to think if she is like that her volunteers probably won't do a good job either.

We need to continue to advocate and promote the very best of our profession and volunteers as well as hold a mirror up to ourselves.

Submitted on 3 February 2005 by Rachael Black, The Nerve Centre, Project Manager, Huddersfield England

In Britain we have much the same problem of course and we're striving to get beyond the stereotype 'voluntary does not mean amateur'. One of the many problems involves funding: in the UK all the money available is split into dozens of pots which in turn are split into hundreds of schemes, programmes, initiatives. They all use fancy jargon, involve copious form filling, too much ticking of boxes to satisfy governmental aims, extremely short time spans and voluntary groups need to practise yoga to fulfill the criteria. In the end, a huge amount of energy is expended for a small amount of money. Don't even mention monitoring and evaluation!

Submitted on 3 February 2005 by Colleen Kelly, Volunteer Vancouver, Executive Director, Vancouver, BC Canada

Yes, this sentiment is alive and well in Canada - and overly frustrating for many of us who work with this every day. However, I believe that managers of volunteer programs have ensured this stereotype continues to exist. They stay traditional and recruit volunteers to roles that are not challenging and do not require specific skill sets. Granted, the manager of the volunteer program often doesn't know

the tasks that could be done by a very skilled volunteer, but it is their job to find that out. I believe we have to ensure the messages about meaningful engagement of skilled volunteers are heard at the ED and Board level. Yes, back to "[From the Top Down](#)." Susan and Linda, I do believe we will eventually get there. However, those of us that want to see this change have to deliver our message to the right people - and that often is not the manager of the volunteer program!

Submitted on 2 February by Linda L. Graff, Linda Graff and Associates Inc., Senior Associate, Dundas, Ontario Canada

You are, of course, totally right in your portrayal, Susan, and completely justified in your frustration. I share it. I just posted my own rant on the same topic on my own website. Where I want to respond is on the "what to do about it" angle. If you, our best known, most experienced, most respected expert in volunteerism, do not have suggestions, we're doomed. So I challenge you to come back with some suggestions. Here, I'll get you started.

1. Managers of volunteers need to look beyond their own programs, develop an awareness that they are part of a larger piece, and take some responsibility for how the world views volunteering. As a famous expert once wrote, it won't happen by spontaneous combustion!
2. Managers of volunteers need to take their white gloves off, stop whining, and get strategic. So you don't like it? Change it. Do your piece. Each and every manager needs to be challenged to play his or her part in making change happen. Stop complaining about not being consulted. Get yourself to the board table by carrying to your admin. an wheelbarrow load of all the things you can do to reduce organizational problems. You are the link to all of the resources in your community as McCurley and Lynch so wisely emphasis. That same famous expert told us 15 years ago it has to happen "from the top down" and she is even more right about that now.
3. Pay attention to language and the meaning we build up about what we do. Start by changing your job title from "Volunteer Coordinator" to something like Manager of Volunteers, Director of Community Resources, etc. Don't use phrases like "mandatory volunteering". We learn about the world by being in the world and language is the most important vehicle for conveying meaning. It's really important and it takes no resources to make the shift. Just the will to do so. Take people up when they are careless in their use of language as well.

There's just a wee start. There are hundreds of ways that every one of us in this field can make a difference to how the "world" views volunteers and volunteering. But it means that we must be strategic. We have to stop complaining and start planning, and we have to follow up the plans with action. I invite all of your readers to submit their ideas of how we can change the perception of volunteering, and I challenge all of the DOVIAs and the local, regional, national and international AVAs to take up the cause. If we all made a commitment, we could make a difference.

Submitted on 2 Feb 2005 by Sherry S. Clark, Retired Senior Volunteer Program, Director of Volunteers, Tulsa, OK USA

I believe that Christo's remarks are not about not wanting to utilize volunteers for his project but, rather, more about providing income and encouragement and opportunity to many struggling artists who are among the people hired to install the project. I believe this is an "apples and oranges" conversation. Though volunteers may have been appropriately placed on the project, the artist

wanted it otherwise. Happily, the choice is possible in the USA. There remain, we know, many needs to be met by volunteers and that people resource requires management just as does any other resource. And every opportunity to talk about it helps shed more light on the need for understanding and support. Thanks for the opportunity!

Submitted on 2 Feb 2005 by Steve Barsky, Harrison Promotions, Wyndmoor PA USA

When I first read Susan's comment, I thought that Christo meant that he couldn't be sure that volunteers would show up to work. Thus, to "insure" that the work would be done. This phenomenon is not uncommon for volunteer coordinators. The next comment spoke about payment for workers, which I am sure we all support if they are employees. Now I'm not sure what Christo meant! As usual the NPR interviewer was too superficial to dig in, and it didn't seem to matter to him/her.

Clarification from Susan, 2 Feb 2005

Please let me clarify that this Hot Topic was *not* intended to be a tirade against Christo and Jeanne-Claude! In fact, I went to some length to 1) link to their Gates website which explains their philosophy, and 2) comment that it is ok to decide NOT to use volunteers and instead to pay people -- it may even be honorable and socially-responsible in some situations. My issue is that, when asked by NPR why he doesn't use volunteers, Christo did not refer to any personal philosophy or principle. All he said was, "No, of course not -- we couldn't insure volunteers." Since that particular line of reasoning is false, and since the interviewer just moved on, I felt it reinforced the stereotype of "volunteers are unskilled." And THAT was what motivated the Hot Topic, not a rant against Christo.

Also I am well aware of all the volunteers who help Central Park, the Conservancy, and the City of New York, and acknowledge their contributions!

Submitted on 2 Feb 2005 by Hillary Roberts, Project Linus NJ, Inc., President, Keyport/NJ USA

Below is an excerpt from Christo & Jeanne Claude's website. The "most common errors" page addresses the use of the word "volunteer" as it pertains to their project. It reads:

Error: "Volunteers"

NEVER on any project Except Jeanne-Claude's mother, everyone who works is paid: normal union wages for specialized professional workers, and just above minimum wage for non-skilled workers. One important exception: for the Wrapped Coast, One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Australia, 1968-69 out of 125 paid workers, eleven architecture students refused to be paid. Three of them became artists after the project and are now well known.

After much political debate and delay on this project, Christo and Jeanne Claude offered two gifts to New York: the \$20 million 16-day Gates installation in Central Park, which the artists will pay for entirely from the sale of original works of art by Christo, and the exclusive, world-wide, royalty-free license they donated to Nurture New York's Nature (NNYN) foundation. Not surprisingly, NNYN engages volunteers.

Further CIMA Insurance can provide agency policies for volunteers that are long term or fall under the heading of event-related volunteers for a short term policy. But a CIMA policy for this type of project, for two independent artists would be a challenge to write.

I don't disagree with your concerns that a lack of knowledge can cause stereotypes but I think your choice of subject (Christo & Jean Claude) is a weak example.

On point, the longer I work in non profit the more I fear energy is wasted hashing over old ideals and less tipping the scales towards innovative methods. National and international resources are working hard to bring excitement and clarity to this profession. We MUST learn to use these resources and forge new attitudes from them if we all are to benefit.

Submitted on 1 Feb 2005 by Donna Lockhart, The RETHINK Group, Consultant, Ennismore, Ontario Canada

As I read your new topic "Why can't we make progress..." several thoughts came to mind:

1. The perception continues to exist, rightly or wrongly that paid work is more valuable than unpaid volunteer work. I don't think its so much the skill focus as it is the remuneration. After all we still live in a male dominated society where what you do in your work life is of utmost importance. The voluntary sector is dominated by females.
2. We have pitted on the continuum of types of work, staff at one end and volunteer at the other and all the other in between (community service, cooperative programs etc)
3. Where are the advocates and leaders who would speak out? You didn't call the interviewer and correct them...we all need to be leaders and advocates if we are going to change the perception.

I am writing from Canada and we have the same issue. The sector and staff is undervalued. We have champions few but they can't do it all. We have no national strategy that says We're not going to put up with this anymore...who is waving the flag. Each manager of volunteers is burned out trying to do their job...who has time to advocate? Have to also remember we are a relatively new profession - how many years did it take HR professionals to become recognized? I currently teach volunteer management at the college level and this topic/perception is one of the major issues students bring. thanks for this hot topic I intend to share it tonight in class!

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