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What's in a Name or a Title?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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A long-unresolved topic has resurfaced in several ways this past month: What's the best title for the person who is designated as the leader of volunteers? Even more important, is there a name/term on which we can all agree as a label for our profession? Just two of the situations that have elevated this into a current "hot" topic are the publicity surrounding IVMD – International *Volunteer Managers Day* (November 5, <https://volunteermanagersday.org/>) – and all the discussions about what to name any organization seeking to "replace" the former AVA – Association for *Volunteer Administration*.

What should we call ourselves? [Alert: I'm asking everyone to weigh in on this question at the end of the Hot Topic.]

Evidently there is no right answer, since we've been having this debate for decades and are no closer to agreement than before. If anything, we've seen titles go in and out of vogue for various reasons.

Right now the following are the titles seen most often in English-speaking countries:

- Volunteer Program Manager (*adopted by several of the online communities, such as CyberVPM, OzVPM, UKVPMs*)
- Volunteer Coordinator
- Director of Volunteers
- Director of Volunteer Services (*very common in hospital setting*)
- Director of Volunteer Resources
- Volunteer Resources Manager (*gaining ground just recently*)
- Volunteers Manager (*has some popularity in the UK*)

We also use "Volunteer Administration" and "Volunteer Leadership" as umbrella terms for the profession, although very few people hold the title "Volunteer Administrator" or "Leader of Volunteers" – and I doubt anyone would want to!

Let's look at some of the issues causing concern.

Is “Volunteer” a Noun, an Adjective, or a Limitation?

Since *volunteer* is both a noun and an adjective, depending on context, it has long been understood that it is less confusing to use it as a noun in our title, as in Coordinator or Manager of Volunteers, rather than Volunteer Coordinator. The latter continually raises the question “are you paid?” (It’s another Hot Topic to consider why we react so negatively to being perceived like the people we claim to care about.) I suspect that’s why our British colleagues have tried Volunteers Manager – it’s short and sweet, yet avoids the implication of the first word as a modifier. On the other hand, it causes a double take – did I hear that right? Is it misspelled?

More crucial is the “problem” of having to deal with the general public’s (and our agencies’) stereotypes about what the word volunteer describes. For those who still think little-old-lady-stuffing-envelopes, any title including the word volunteer is self-evidently low level. Now *that* makes us mad! Besides, the majority of people running volunteer programs are also responsible for a much wider spectrum of unpaid workers, including student interns, loaned executives, court-ordered, and so on, and there are times that a title “limited” to “volunteers” confuses them, too. That’s the rationale behind efforts to find broader terms more reflective of the scope of our work:

- Community Resource Manager
- Director of Community Outreach

Are We Running a “Program”?

Newcomers are sometimes surprised at the lack of agreement about this, because the term “volunteer program” is so accepted in general conversation. As a publisher and author, I have found no way around having to discuss volunteer program development and management for the simple and good reason that it *communicates* something the reader can picture.

However, the problem with referring to *volunteer involvement* or *engagement* (two excellent alternative terms) as a “volunteer program” is really inaccurate. Here’s how to understand the issue. Do we talk about the “employee program”? Of course not. Employees staff the agency and *deliver* programs. Similarly, volunteers are not a client service, they are part of the staffing of the organization and also deliver services within existing programs. Changing the “volunteer program” language is another way of demonstrating that volunteers are integral to the agency and not a possibly temporary activity.

Do We Manage? Direct? Lead? Coordinate? Facilitate?

Whew, here’s how to get your head spinning. Some folks will tell you in no uncertain terms that one “manages *things*, not people” – despite the universality of the word management in most executive training programs, whether in for- or not-for-profit settings. “Directing” also makes some people uncomfortable. Especially today, with all the talk about Baby Boomers and their desire for more

entrepreneurial volunteer roles, the concept of “telling ‘em what to do” seems out of place. (Of course, our *agencies* might want us to be in control, which is a different, but related matter!)

In truth, the words *coordinate* and *facilitate* seem much more appropriate to what we do. Ivan Scheier calls us “[Dream-Catchers](#),” in recognition of our unique ability to listen fully to each volunteer and support them in finding what matters most to them to accomplish.

Where Do We Fit on the Organizational Chart and What Are We Paid?

I think that a major reason why we shy away from being called Coordinators or Facilitators is *pay scale*. In the 1960s, Harriet Naylor fought for our profession to be recognized in the American government’s *Dictionary of Occupational Titles*. She wanted to show that this was more than a job and deserved a career ladder. Her three ascending levels were:

- Lowest level: Supervisor of Volunteers
- Middle level: Coordinator of Volunteers
- Highest level: Director of Volunteers

These make sense from a paid personnel perspective. And if you work in an organization in which department heads are called Director of ____, it’s legitimate to want parallel acknowledgment as the head of volunteer involvement.

So sometimes we need to take a title for what it implies in status and often for what it brings in salary. Not only do both these benefits matter to us as individuals, but they demonstrate to volunteers exactly how much the organization does or does not value their contributions.

Rearing its ugly head again (I thought we’d beaten it to death 30 years ago) is whether or not someone has to be paid to be considered a member of the profession. But there are indeed *volunteer* volunteer coordinators out there, too (return to the first section above)!

The Problem of Multi-tasking

It’s entirely possible that the majority of people who lead volunteer efforts are totally invisible even to those of us actively committed to our field. That’s because so many people responsible for volunteers have absolutely no mention of it at all in their work title! They do this work as an add-on to a busy job, finding or stealing hours from other tasks to be, for a few hours at a time, the agency’s *de facto* volunteer program manager. So the question is: when these people (colleagues all) want to educate themselves to work more effectively with volunteers, just what phrase do they type into Google?

What Do We Want? What Do You Want?

I've tried to frame the discussion a bit here but am not proposing an answer to what we "should" call ourselves. But I feel some urgency right now because we are working on so many fronts to build the profession, from efforts in the USA to replace AVA, to the formation of a new professional association in Singapore, to similar efforts in several other countries.

- What title do you like best and why? Which do you dislike most and why?
- Have you fought for a specific title? Tell us about it.
- What name do you recommend for our profession or field of study, if different from what we call its practitioners?

Related Topics: [Volunteer Resources Manager, Role of](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#) | [Profession of Volunteer Management](#)

Submitted on 14 Aug 2008 by Charlene, Volunteer Program Coordinator, Vancouver Canada

I currently hold the title Volunteer Program Coordinator, but only because it's a unionized "environment" and this full-time position was only just created about 2 years ago. I'm still struggling to show staff that I'm not just here to "go get us some volunteers" but to do more with the "program", particularly develop volunteers' experiences and skills and advocate on their behalf.

I personally prefer the term, "Manager, Volunteer Services/Resources" because it lends more weight to the work we do and the respect we SHOULD be getting regardless of title. Unfortunately, in this unionized environment, the only areas that get money are those that are deemed to be "programs" and "managers" that run them and right now, I'm seen as NEITHER. Oh well...

The struggle continues...

How can we celebrate IVMD and support each other in Canada?

Submitted on 31 October by N Wood, Department of Social Services, Virginia, USA

What do people think about a government agency linking its employees' volunteer activity to their performance standards/pay?

Submitted on 2 October by Sandra Millard, Youth for Christ of KC, Staff Development Director, California USA

I have a different take on this discussion and it may or may not fit completely. Currently my title is Staff Development Director. This title includes paid employee and volunteer management and development. Just another level on the chart perhaps?

Submitted on 18 September by Karen Sacke, Toronto Rehab, Coordinator, Volunteer Resources, Toronto, Ontario Canada

I prefer the title **Manager, Volunteer Resources**. I think our profession is in a similar position to the one Human Resources professionals faced 10-15 years ago. They have successfully gained the

recognition they deserve as professionals. Now in our endeavour to do likewise, it makes sense to align our titles with HR titles - Manager, Human Resources or Manager, Volunteer Resources. I also prefer the title "Manager" over "Coordinator" because I think the former connotes more seniority.

Submitted on 16 September from Detroit, MI USA

I feel strongly that Steve McCurley ([see below](#)) has hit this one on the nose. Our positions in a lot of ways mirrors that of our Human Resources department only with our non-paid "staff" or as we know them volunteers. We should be respected as such. There are a few people who touched on the topic of respect from the community but my main concern is respect from my coworkers. I am discouraged by the lack of respect I receive from some of our current upper management. I again agree strongly with Steve when he says that the volunteer program should be viewed as an integral part of the growth and development of the organization and I think stating with a title that demands respect is a great start. Thanks for raising this topic up for discussion.

Submitted on 8 Sept 2006 by Margaret Robertson, Spiritus Care Services, Manager Volunteer Services, Queensland Australia

I use the relevant title levels of the organisation as a whole, as part of my on-going work in educating the organisation about the value of volunteers. I also find it much easier to argue for the position than for myself (I love my job, that's plenty of money thank you... vs. what title and salary do others in positions with similar responsibilities expect?)

My position is predominantly an HR one across the organisation, but including accountability for staff, budget (funding & outputs) etc. The equivalent position elsewhere in the organisation is "Manager" - so mine is **Manager Volunteer Services**. Maybe one day I'll put forward an argument for my position to become a Group Manager....

People coordinating services delivered by volunteers in their local program / facility / branch are **Volunteer Coordinators** (I like the idea of using "Volunteers Coordinator"); they also do local recruitment and orientation etc with support from the central office.

I've a staff member now to support about 20 local community care volunteer coordinators in their work. It's also a 2IC type position to the Manager - and her title is currently Coordinator Volunteer Program - which isn't ideal. Other ideas welcome please!

I don't like the term Administrator at all - to me it has public service connotations (perhaps from the old colonial days?)

Submitted on 7 Sept 2006 by Susan Lebovitz, SAFEHOME, Volunteer Manager, Overland Park, KS USA

After working in the volunteer management field for almost 12 years, I like the title of **Volunteer Manager**. Unfortunately titles do make a difference in perception. "Volunteer Manager" lends credibility to the position, and a person's professional standards, not only in the community, but to the agency's board members, as well as other community professional organizations.

Submitted on 7 Sept 2006 by Roger McFarlane, VolunteeringACT, Education Manager, ACT Australia

Classical Management has included: Planning, Organising, Controlling and Co-ordinating. If you don't do the other three, then "Co-ordinator" would be appropriate.

Submitted on 7 Sept 2006 by Steve McCurley, Olympia, WA USA

For years I've been trying to convince people that a very subtle and fine title would be - **Director of Development for Donated Human Resources**. I think for volunteer involvement to succeed it must be more than just "running a program"; it ought instead be viewed as an integral part of the growth and development of the organization, just as fundraising is approached in most charities.

Submitted on 7 Sept 2006 by Andy Fryar, www.ozvpm.com, Director & Founder, Adelaide Australia

Thanks for such a thought provoking Hot Topic. I am always a little concerned by the fact that I think this is an argument that does actually 'not' have a correct answer and that while the debate is an interesting one, I believe it can deflect our attention from the bigger issue at hand here. That issue is this - "How do we create ways for the role to be appreciated and recognised more broadly regardless of the title?"

While titles are important for some of us, we need to appreciate that it really is not an issue at all for the vast majority of people leading volunteer groups. Instead, what is important to them is the job at hand -- mobilising and supporting volunteer effort.

I believe we need to develop better ways, as a movement, to build on the work and recognition that volunteers often receive, in order to help people understand that behind every good volunteer program is a leader of volunteers. I am also brave enough to say that I think in order for us to get to that place, we need to be a little less precious with our titles and a little more embracing of the 'fringes' of the volunteer management movement.

Dare I also put in a plug and say that [International Volunteer Manager Appreciation Day](#) is a great time to both celebrate, but more importantly educate about our roles?

Submitted on 6 Sept 2006 by Tracey Mealing, Sue Ryder Care, National Volunteer Coordinator, London UK

I think Volunteer Coordinator is a good title if you are in direct contact with volunteers out in the field at a local level. However, if you are middle management producing policy and directing strategy, I feel Volunteers Manager is appropriate. Should you be part of a large organisation dealing with thousands of volunteers then Director or Head of Volunteers/ing is appropriate.

I don't think we have to get too twee with the titles making it seem hip and trendy, as baby boomers are more likely to be professionals; they will be used to an appropriate management structure. Not having one, devalues the volunteers contribution in my opinion.

What volunteers want is to be communicated with not to!

I am currently trying to get my title changed from National Volunteer Coordinator to **National Volunteer Manager** with thousands of volunteers then Director or Head of Volunteers/ing is appropriate.

Submitted on 6 Sept 2006 by John Ramsey, Citizens Advice, Head of Volunteer Development, London UK
Individually, we live in a world of competing interests so we need to fit the title to how it best serves the role in that circumstances.

The three tensions that I see are for the person (their value, their pay), for the volunteers (the sense of community) and the internal politics of the organisations (is it easier to be heard/achieve as a 'Head of' or 'Manager' rather than 'Administrator' or 'Co-ordinator').

People inherently see a general hierarchy in Director, Head of, Manager, Co-ordinator, Administrator and will respond accordingly.

In the UK, in setting up a national association we've been using the term **volunteer manager** although have been talking about managing volunteers. The distinction being that volunteer manager is a job title but managing volunteers is a job description.

Submitted on 5 Sept 2006 by a Volunteer Connector, IL

Volunteer Resource Director has that connection with the corporate title of Human Resource Director. That is not to imply that our volunteers are not human, but in today's environment it is sometimes better to let the heavy-lifting definition be borne by another (corporate defining human resources) and then let our profession piggy back on the acceptance of the term.

Submitted on 5 Sept 2006 by Betty Weida, MCPAWS Regional Animal Shelter, Volunteer Coordinator, McCall, Idaho USA

I was recently hired as part-time Volunteer Coordinator of a small non-profit animal shelter, MCPAWS Regional Animal Shelter, in McCall, Idaho. This title explains my responsibilities although many friends and acquaintances often think I serve in a volunteer capacity in this role (makes no difference to me, a volunteer could do the job if committed). As I encourage volunteers to participate, I find myself encouraging them to join our MCPAWS "team" of volunteers. For this purpose perhaps the title **Volunteer Team Leader or Volunteer Team Coordinator** would work to foster a team spirit.

Submitted on 5 Sept 2006 by Nicolette Ryan, United Way's Volunteer Connection, Community Volunteer Liaison, Dayton, OH USA

A title directly indicates a position's status within an organization, which is why I advocate strongly for **Director or Manager of Community Engagement**.

Reflect on the work you do everyday. Is its value any less than that of your Director of Human Resources or other director-level positions? Do you interact any less with the community at large?

A colleague recently alerted me to the fact that having "Volunteer" in our titles can actually imply "free", "worthless" or "less important". While I find it to be sad, I have to say I agree. The word "volunteer" has too many negative synonyms these days. Why not replace it with something more meaningful, such as "community engagement"?

Submitted on 5 Sept 2006 by Diane McKinna, Memphis Museums, Inc., Coordinator of Volunteers, Memphis, TN USA I have been in the field for over 20 years and most agencies I have worked for have given me the title of *Volunteer Coordinator*, which I hated. I always changed it to *Coordinator of Volunteers* so people understood that I had a staff position working with volunteers. However, I hate the term coordinator as well. I feel it is the lowest on the totem pole. I like the title **Volunteer Services Manager**. I have aspired to be a **Director of Volunteers**, but none of the agencies I have worked for would consider using the term Director. Even the word manager is hard for them to swallow. A lot of it is related to pay. With the word Manager or Director, they would be required to pay you more.

As a middle ground, for the small vs. the large agencies, I go for *Volunteer Services Manager, Community Resources Manager, or Volunteer Resources Manager*. When I worked at Volunteer Memphis for 11 years, my last title was Community Resources Manager. However, in working at individual agencies, often they don't see the big picture of Community as part of the role of management of volunteers. Thanks for bringing up the topic.

Submitted on 5 Sept 2006 by Jessica, Volunteer Coordinator, Minneapolis, MN USA

Thank you for addressing this topic. The longer I am in this field, the more I realize how the work I do affects every aspect of our organization. My title is *Volunteer Coordinator*, and I have thought a lot about what this means to me, to others in my organization, and to the larger community. In one sense, I like the term "coordinator" because I feel it encompasses the whole process, from recruitment to review.

However, in my organization, titles fit in to a fairly rigid hierarchy. Coordinators are at the bottom of the organization chart (and the pay scale). Managers are the next step, and these people always manage at least one paid staff member. Directors are the highest level. I would love to reposition my job within the agency, not just for me but also for those who will fill this position after me. I think making this position a **Manager** position would help me in my efforts to advocate for volunteers within the agency, and help my organization attract well-qualified professionals to fill this position when I am gone. The truth is, I directly manage 1300 people. If one of these people were a paid staff member, my position would be that of a Manager. Does this devalue the contributions of our volunteer base?

Submitted on 5 Sept 2006 by Crystal Hickerson, Hospice of Michigan, Manager, Volunteer Services, Clinton Township, MI USA

I believe we are directing a program. A program which consists of managing a group of non paid employees and running that program. So I believe **Director of Volunteer Services or Program** should

be the standard title. The very least manager of volunteer services. I think the title coordinator just doesn't quite capture the level of work that we do.

Submitted on 5 Sept 2006 anonymously

What's is a title? Everything! I am the **Director of Volunteers** at a large health system. When I found out that I was being paid at a staff rate, rather than a director rate, a 2 year battle ensued in which I fought to have my position properly recognized and compensated.

When brought it to the attention of Administration, I was told that, while the position was not considered to be at the same level as other director's positions, they had wanted to retain the title for appearances sake. I insisted that, if they wanted a coordinator, they should have hired one. But they didn't, they hired a director and I was entitled to be on the same pay scale as any other director in the organization. Challenging our human resources department was a gamble. They could have chosen to change my title rather than adjust my pay. In the end, my argument prevailed and I was awarded not only a pay grade increase, but back pay as well.

It is sad to think that the organization placed so little value on my position. I am grateful that I was able to open their eyes to the importance of titles.

Submitted on 5 Sept 2006 by Lorna Diehl, Hospital Long Term Care Volunteer Coordinator, Harbor Beach, MI USA

I have and like the title of **Volunteer Coordinator**. Not only do we volunteer a lot of time ourselves but we assist and coordinate functions, activities and schedules as well. We lead by example and many of our volunteers are leaders as well. As a Volunteer Coordinator I don't be live most of us are looking for any fame or glory we are just born of a servanthood nature. If you have the same servanthood nature as your volunteers you are equal to them not above them and we create a team effort to be successful in our environment.

Submitted on 5 Sept 2006 by Joy Bales, Palm Beach County Animal Care and Control Animal Services Coordinator, West Palm Bch, FL USA

I think that **Coordinator of Volunteers** is a great way to sum up the way I do my job. I also coordinate the high school students and youth groups that do projects for the shelter.

Currently my title is *Animal Services Coordinator* at the county animal shelter. This job description actually states that you will coordinate the volunteer program. This has been unusual that in my other positions if you have a few extra hours they add on the responsibilities for a volunteer program. For those of us who have been in the field for many years (30 plus for me), we know that it is a full time position that is needed to make a program successful. I think in order to gain respect among staff you need to be in at least the middle of the organizational chart.

Submitted on 5 Sept 2006 anonymously

I represent Volunteers and Board Members in a national arts support organization and my title is

Volunteer and Board Services Manager. This title works well for my job because I "guide a volunteer effort" as well as create programming to support volunteers across the country. I think that specifying that the "volunteer staff member" manages a service and not people is a good distinction.

Submitted on 5 Sept 2006 by Donna Lockhart, The RETHINK Group, Consultant, Ontario Canada

What's in a name or title? EVERYTHING! I believe that this is part of our problem as a profession...we are too nebulous. Think about the differences between Bistro, Cafe and Greasy Spoon. Each one provides an image...and perception and image are everything. When someone asks "What do you do?", we have to answer clearly and create this image.

I believe that the hospitals (in Canada) who use Director have got it right...We need to find a title that: a) positions within the profession; and then, b) positions within the organization we work in. I like **Director** or **Manager** and encourage my students (I teach Certificate Course in Volunteer Management)to use manager of volunteers, not volunteer manager. Ever heard of the Director of Personnel/Director of Human Resources being called the People Manager or People Administrator??

A title 'positions' us and until we have some degree of consistency we will not get the attention or recognition we desire. I believe putting volunteer before manager is a limitation...it is seen and perceived as an adjective and causes confusion. This may be partly due to the transition or movement (which many are still in and will continue to be without funding for paid staffing) between having volunteers manage volunteers to having a paid professional manage volunteers.

Submitted on 4 Sept 2005 by a SVP (Retired), Atlanta, GA USA

Before retiring from a career of 25_ years I managed a program with 250+ volunteers from middle managers to CEOs of large corporations. This was definitely managing a critical resource for the success of our association and the volunteers recognized the fact that they were being managed. It was not coordinating or administering. Furthermore, they appreciated that someone was making managerial judgments about the value of their time.

Whoever says you manage things not people needs to talk with successful managers, read any book on management, or take some management courses. This assertion is just plain incorrect.

In choosing a name, think laterally and consider possibilities like the Academy of Volunteer Resources Management. A designation could be **F(ellow)AVRM** or **C(hartered)VRM**. Titles in an organization that uses volunteers should parallel those in the private sector: CEO, SVP, VP, Manager, etc.

Submitted on 4 Sept 2006 by Hillary Roberts, Project Linus NJ, Inc., President, Keyport/NJ USA

This topic is just aching to be addressed! Whether we are considering professionals who manage volunteers (paid or unpaid), coordinate and deliver volunteer programs and/or contribute to the betterment of the entire sector, finding a one title fits all might be too large a landscape. Can we

identify how current trends were adopted and by whom? Are we inheriting good identifiers or do we need to formulize new job-specific titles? I have more questions, than comments.

Can we start with a much needed text on the subject? An outline for breaking down non-profit disciplines would go a long way in answering these timely questions. The handbook could include position criteria, industry terminology and not-for-profit models in one concise place, distributed to every professional working in the industry.

Under the broad heading "managing volunteers" we need to first examine which model we are referring to -- for example, government, medical, national organizations, grassroots efforts -- and from there identify the many job requirements that fall under a specific position. Plenty of workforce templates exist to help us create such an outline. How do we begin to adopt an industry-wide template?

Since publications are available to address the how, when and where we collectively come together and stand alone as not-for-profit colleagues, I would love to see one literary milestone--a definitive guidepost that defines the 21st Century profession and the global talent pool working in it. How does the not-for-profit professional come together to build this resource?

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