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Why a New Association Should Serve the USA

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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As promised last month, this new Hot Topic will discuss why I believe it's important for a professional association to start with (and usually maintain) a single-nation focus rather than an international one. Because of the sudden dissolution of AVA (see the [March Hot Topic](#)), I'm going to talk about the situation in the United States, but the points I hope to make are applicable to any country – just change the specifics!

News/Update as of August 3, 2006: Announcement of the [Congress of Volunteer Administrator Associations](#) for the US (the next step in planning the future of our profession).

The Incredibly Difficult Challenge of Being an “International” Association

Energize, Inc. provides services and publications internationally and has tried to build this Web site and our journal, *e-Volunteerism*, to be of help to colleagues anywhere. But we know our limits. For one thing, this is obviously and realistically an English-language site. For another, we know enough about the diversity of the world to know that we simply cannot speak with authority about what might work or not in other countries. We offer information and encourage site visitors and clients to adapt it as needed.

So, when I think about a professional association for volunteer program leaders, I conclude that it is incredibly difficult to be an international association – just look at the United Nations if you don't believe me! The obstacles to success are enormous and include:

- **Language** – A truly international organization cannot provide service in only the English language. Even with a half-dozen languages in use, many countries will feel left out. Besides, there is a huge difference between *translation* and *interpretation*, the latter being what is really needed to convey the same message to different cultures.
- **Distance for communication and meetings** – Even the smallest state will find that residents complain about “how far” it is to travel to an event in another city; this is multiplied many-fold when a conference is in another part of the country; and it becomes monumental when people

need to cross national borders. Also, while it difficult to have “a presence on the ground” locally with a national organization, it’s impossible internationally.

- **Cost** – Many languages and long distances greatly raise the costs of running an association.
- **Membership imbalance** – No matter how sincere the recruitment, the country hosting the office of the association, and/or whose language is the primary one used, will always have the greatest number of members from that country. This leads to yet another real problem: in an attempt to be “fair” to all the countries in the membership, the majority group is treated as equal to the minority membership. This effectively leaves the majority with less services than they deserve.
- **Credibility/legitimacy** – An international group cannot claim to represent all colleagues in a single country and therefore cannot expect to be accepted as the profession’s “voice” to any national government.
- **Competition with existing national associations** – As I said last month, a growing number of countries today have their own national volunteerism associations, many of which are doing fine work. A self-proclaimed international body seeking individual practitioners as members is therefore competing with the local group. For that matter, there are already some international groups, notably IAVE (International Association for Volunteer Effort, www.iave.org) and UNV (United Nations Volunteers, <https://www.unv.org/>). Such national and international organizations ought to collaborate with one another by coming together as equal partners.
- **Scattered and non-accountable board of directors** – Again, in an attempt to prove its international intentions, a global association will try to name board members from a variety of countries, thereby not representing the bulk of their members (who, remember, come from only a few countries). This sets up a situation in which the board cannot function easily as a group, and cannot give needed oversight to the association’s staff and work.

Depending on where in the world an association is operating, these issues may also affect the success of a *regional* organization – an issue affecting colleagues in the existing Australasian Association of Volunteer Administrators or those considering forming a Southeast Asia group. Just look at how hard it might be to have a *North American* group: some Americans are forbidden by their funding to travel to events in Canada, we have different holidays, Canadians have more labor unions and government-run facilities, and other substantive differences. And, by the way, there is an existing Canadian Administrators of Volunteer Resources (CAVR). Meanwhile, what about Mexico? It’s been ignored by volunteer management folks in both the US and Canada (there’s that language thing again).

I should note, however, that it might be possible to have a viable regional association, providing that there are separate national divisions that allow colleagues in the same country to work together when necessary on issues affecting only their country and not the whole region.

The Role of a National Professional Association

Now, let's look at what is good about forming a strong national association. Again this is particularly pertinent in the United States where we have been without one for some time, but the concepts apply anywhere.

An effective national association could/should:

- **Aim for high membership numbers representing the full scope of our field.** Conservatively there are over 100,000 people working in volunteer leadership today in the United States (that's only 2,000 per State, which is realistic considering the number of hospitals, school districts, Girl Scout Councils, soccer leagues, nursing homes, and fire companies – just to name some sites – that have someone designated to recruit and work with volunteers). It's time to communicate with them and invite them to join together to benefit themselves and the volunteers they lead.
- **Support regional and state associations** who, in turn, should support local DOVIAs and other networks. This can be a two-way street, of course, since right now I believe that those existing networks strong enough to take on the task ought to become the foundation of any new American association. It's time to talk about "chapters" – something that was seen in the past as politically incorrect for some possibly legitimate reasons. But in 2006, if existing local and state groups band together voluntarily, everyone would win, without having to give up much independence to serve the needs of their geographic location plus be part of a national association.
- **Advocate with national politicians and the federal government** – Over time, issues arise that need national attention, from the income tax deduction for volunteer mileage to the Volunteer Immunity Act to including volunteer management professionals in Department of Homeland Security planning teams. An American association can be at the table, credibly representing us. [Note that one reason the US effectively wasted the opportunities of 2001's International Year of Volunteers was that we had no professional association attempting to organize efforts in our country (see my [Hot Topics from 2000 on this](#)).]
- **Interact with parallel national professional associations and organizations** – An American association could collaborate with other existing national groups such as ASDVS (American Society of Directors of Volunteer Services, focused on healthcare, www.asdvs.org), Youth Service America (YSA, www.servenet.org), etc, etc. Further, it could advocate for our profession with associations representing those who affect us, such as the National Council of

Nonprofit Associations (www.ncna.org), or associations of social workers, museums, or court administrators, etc., etc.

This is where a relationship with the Points of Light Foundation (www.pointsoflight.org) must be forged. Just as a local DOVIA or network of volunteer resource managers needs to collaborate with its local Volunteer Center (share resources, support each other, co-sponsor events, etc.), a national network needs to collaborate with The Foundation openly and continually. Both organizations are stronger independently, but with clearly-defined, compatible missions.

Volunteer Centers and Workplace Volunteer Programs focus on their *settings* and therefore, as *organizations themselves*, are legitimately part of Points of Light's mission to promote and strengthen all sorts of volunteering in this country. Any replacement for AVA, however, is *for individuals* concerned with promoting and strengthening *the profession of leadership of volunteers*. The staff who run a workplace program or the directors of volunteer centers might want to join this new association for themselves personally, but that doesn't change their company or center membership in The Foundation.

- **Fill the gaps with a great conference** – There was a time that training in how to be an effective volunteer program manager was rare, if non-existent in some areas. So the national conferences of the past provided a critical service for many years. Today, however, a national conference does not have to be a state conference on steroids! Rather than be limited to the same topics and presenters available throughout the year at other venues, a new national association might:
 - Really work to publicize state and big city volunteer management training events around the country and encourage members to travel to those.
 - Continue an annual introduction to the basics, thereby filling a need for those practitioners from geographic areas without such training.
 - Focus its annual conference on issues, both to inform practitioners about what is or will be affecting their work, but also how to respond to these. There's an attitude by some that issues are boring, impractical, and won't generate conference attendance. It CAN be done in a very exciting way.
 - Invite audiences to the conference for substantive interaction with members about mutual needs: executive directors, union reps, officers of all-volunteer associations, etc.
 - Provide career development sessions, such as trainer training, writing retreats, etc., that are not cost-effective for smaller, local events to offer.
 - Welcome international participation of all sorts, both attendees and presenters, but not simply to announce "X number of countries are here." The event should *do something* to foster true exchange of ideas and perspectives among colleagues from different cultures.

I'm not suggesting that there should be no workshops on "how-to's," just that this is a limited perspective on what's possible when we convene colleagues in one large group.

- **Represent the USA** at international gatherings, to international volunteerism organizations, and to any “congress” of national associations – thereby participating in building our profession internationally (to this end, I’d recommend a designated board position for international relations). Conversely, the association should be reporting back to Americans what is going on in other countries and encourage such things as group study tours abroad, job exchanges, etc.
- **Obtain grant funds** for American projects – much easier to do for one country than internationally, as more foundations are geographically-based.
- **Respond to major internal crises** – When all members come from the same country, they can respond collectively – and unapologetically – to their own national issues. For example, American colleagues had no opportunity to discuss (or strategize about) the implications on volunteering of September 11, 2001 on our work, nor the formation of the USA Freedom Corps, nor the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. We need a forum in which we can talk as Americans to Americans, and take united action. Further, a national group can *coordinate* the efforts of colleagues in its country to help volunteer resource managers in other countries during times of need, such as responding to the tsunami disaster.
- **Capture mass media attention** – Television and radio are still nationally oriented, so there are more chances for a national association to shine the light on the profession.
- **Develop credentialing within one country’s professional standards** – While there are clearly universal good practices in volunteer management, there are enough differences country to country (in service provision, government regulations, legal limits, and so forth) that one credential cannot possibly “fit all.”
- **Meaningful recognition and awards** – It takes one to know one. A panel of judges that understands what a practitioner or volunteer effort had to go through to accomplish whatever is being submitted for an award can provide far more substantive recognition than a panel determining “this sounds interesting.”

Note that a national association doesn’t have to bar anyone from anywhere who wishes to join and participate. But someone choosing to become a member would know from the start that s/he is outside the geographic scope of the association and cannot expect services to be tailored for another culture.

As always, it’s now your turn to comment, question, or expand on my musings. I’m especially interested in your perspectives on:

- The idea of having state and local “chapters” of a new association, building on the strengths already out there in the field?
- The option for a North American association that provides a way for the US, Canada, and Mexico to thrive both separately and together?

- What a national conference might look like now that we are starting from scratch?

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Submitted on 25 April 2006 by Gretchen Stringer, CVA, long time member of AVA, past International Conference Chair and Founding Chair of VAWNY (Volunteer Administrators of Western New York), a very active organization celebrating its 25th year of existence.

My comments are on two subjects: the profession of volunteer administration, and the professional organization of volunteer administration.

First: on the profession. Whether we have a professional organization or not, WE ARE A PROFESSION. The competencies, the skills, the knowledge have been not only identified for the CVA, but have been used as requirements for anyone working with volunteers. Curricula for college and university courses in nonprofit management have also included these specifications.

People have been working in positions that require the management and administration of volunteers, without having the title, for as long as non-profits have existed. Our field is the glue that holds the third sector together. Our profession is alive and well.

Second, on the professional organization of volunteer administration: Of course, we need one. We have an opportunity to start over. We can take the best of our starter and build on it. Our CVA will survive, as will the Journal. They have been well designed and well managed. Our helpful and pertinent Conferences will grow again. Never would we plan to end our AVA this way, but it creates for us a real imperative toward change.

And we need to include the world. Limiting our membership in any way won't help our profession. First, there are the many people, as I mentioned above, whose work requires volunteer administration within their positions, who can use the resources that we can offer uniquely. We don't want to exclude them

Second, and equally important, we don't want to lose the valuable connections that we have built all over the world that enrich our profession. A different view often illuminates the answer to a problem that can't be seen from one angle. We need these different views.

I will not be in Seattle, but I participated in the first telephone discussion with Jackie Norris thanks to the Points of Light, and will help in any way to build our new organization.

Submitted on 6 April 2006 by Nicolette Ryan, United Way's Volunteer Connection, Community Volunteer Liaison, Dayton, OH USA

An independent national organization is a MUST, and that organization will definitely have to have ties with organizations from other countries. I wholeheartedly agree that there should be chapters of

the new organization at both the state and local levels, complete with a set of basic guiding principles for each chapter.

A national conference is very important, but I'd rather see some stronger focus on more cost-effective training opportunities. A trainers' training is one great way of helping reach those who can't afford to attend a conference. Why not also provide a series of webinars, online tool-kits and more as well? This is the stuff I could use year-round and would love to see more of. And let's make these options free to MEMBERS. Why else do we belong to such groups?

Submitted on 6 April 2006 by Adaire Palmer, SA Fire & Emergency Services Commission, Volunteer Management Consultant, South Australia Australia

I couldn't agree more with your statements about being concerned with serving locally-based members. As a Board member (Vice President) of the Australasian Association of Volunteer Administrators (AAVA), I have struggled with the tyranny of distance in Australia alone in reaching out to and providing an appropriate service to AAVA members. All your points are pertinent to AAVA, as we are still in the 'evolutionary' process, and I would like to see branches or chapters which serve our members locally develop eventually. I think the old adage 'think globally, act locally' is very relevant here.

Submitted on 5 April 2006 by Joan E Thompson, Mayflower RSVP, Inc., Executive Director, Plymouth County, MA USA

Recently I have been approached to join two new associations due to the disbanding or discontent among members of "old" ones.

My first response is: Where are the checks and balances in the design of a new association that prevent the new one from falling prey to the inherent weaknesses of the first?

How do we apply "Outcome Measurement" principles to this situation and prevent the same weaknesses from undermining a new endeavor? We need to embrace the lessons of fair checks-and-balances from our own nation's participatory democracy. Yes, a specific lesson from our national "memory" that may also suggest the merits of a national organization.

"Where" is not a rhetorical question as to checks and balances. I don't have the answer - and hope to hear from anyone who thinks they might!

Submitted on 5 April 2006 by Jayne Cravens, Independent Consultant, Bonn Germany

I agree with all of Susan's statements about why this entirely new association/federation (at least I hope it will be entirely new, not just AVA in different "clothes") needs to be focused on the USA. Plus, can you imagine the arrogance of a brand new organization, which is emerging because of the failure of a previous one, trying to claim to be the international leader? (cringe).

On a bit of a different note, is there a way to collaborate somehow with the association(s) of HR professionals? Not sure what that collaboration might look like -- a volunteer management track at

their national conferences? Inclusion of volunteer management classes in HR certificates and diplomas?

**Submitted on 4 April 2006 by Hillary Roberts, PLNJ Inc.
President, Keyport/NJ USA**

Communicating well remains a challenge no matter the proximity....ironically...the tools available to communicate well abound in today's techno, fast-paced mobile work environment. I agree that baby steps are important in restructuring a VMR association...but I'm also in favor of expanded goalsetting.

Perhaps part of the re-education in developing a solid VMR association should include the ability to harness new communication tools. For VM's I train, any given work week includes text messaging, emailing, faxing, meeting in a private chatroom, blogging, studying online and signing up for Internet-based courses.

Dare I suggest we rethink the dreaded 3 o'clock office meeting?!

Submitted on 4 April 2006 by Marty Martin, M & M Consulting, Trainer/Consultant, White Lake, MI USA

Your points for a national association are well taken. Starting a new professional association is a huge undertaking. Focusing on one country would concentrate our goals and energy. Despite the global village language, many folks want and need training and assistance close to home. The issue of regional, state or metro chapters has been in discussions often.

With creative thinking, relationships with Points of Light, other national associations, including Canada could be a win-win for both organizations.

I strongly urge that this national association concept will be part of the present dialogues about "where do we go from here".

Submitted on 4 April 2006 by Christer Leopold, Voluntarius - Voluntary Strategies, Consultant, Uppsala Sweden

I totally agree with Susan, an international association (or rather Federation) for volunteer management has to be based on strong national ones. There are three main reasons: 1) in associations formed by individual members the first priority is always member benefits and these are local and national, not international. This means that a national association must be based on local groups where members interact. 2) Volunteering and volunteer management is culture specific. This means, that the how to must be developed and promoted in each country. 3) Generally speaking, associations have to be financed bottom up. This is true also for international ones. The first step now, therefore, is to build a strong national association in the US. The next step could be for it to join other existing national associations to form an international umbrella. From there the work can be expanded.

**Submitted on 4 April 2006 by Deirdre Araujo, Exploratorium
Manager, Volunteer Services, San Francisco, CA USA**

I'm always glad to visit this site and [e-Volunteerism](#)! I have to admit that I still cringe about the whole *International Volunteer Managers Day* (formerly on 12/5), but the concept of "it takes one to know one" strikes a chord with me. I'd like to see a national organization offer up a practitioner's version of a 'thousand points of light' to highlight best practices or just a good try, if for no other reason than to let people know what's been attempted - even if it wasn't wholly successful. I learn as much if not more from reading about other people's mistakes (and sharing my own) than from the press releases reporting just the accomplishment.

Response from Susan, 4 April: Hi, Joan. The idea of a USA/Canada association may be fine, but I'd still hope for at least the option of two divisions -- for when either country needed to focus on its own issues. Remember the Canadians already have CAVR; what do we have?

Submitted on 3 April 2006 by Joan Brown, County of Marin, Civic Center Volunteers Manager, Volunteer and Employee Programs San Rafael, CA USA

I agree about the difficulties of an international association. However, I'm wondering if it makes sense to consider a USA/Canada Association because of geographical proximity, and other similarities?

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